

the process of human history, secular and religious, to correct the blindness of Christians to their own responsibilities to reconciliation, but on the *how* question B. is mostly silent.

While B.'s historical examples come from many traditions, the book as a whole leans more toward Catholic problems and Catholic solutions. He rightly points out that the historical problem for Protestants has been that their recognition that the church as a whole is sinful makes it hard to repent for particular concrete historical examples of sinfulness, whereas the Catholic tradition's insistence on the distinction between the sinful members of the church and the holy church itself, the spotless bride of Christ, often leaves those looking for and deserving of historical apologies largely unsatisfied. B. seems more interested in this second issue. The problem for the Catholic position, B. states, is that the result is an abstract church. Theologians as varied as Yves Congar and Hans Urs von Balthasar have questioned whether there can be a church if it has no members. Moreover, if the church claims historical agency, then the agents must be the members, and so, says B., we see a slow movement toward the final recognition that, yes, the church itself is sinful, because you simply cannot separate the church from its members. What makes his argument so helpful is the multiplicity of examples from both Protestant and Catholic traditions that support his own constructive case, without which the trinitarian process he outlines would itself be as abstract as the church without any members.

B. is to be congratulated for a thorough and intelligent contribution to an ongoing debate that rightly looks for a theological explanation for the legitimacy and necessity of ecclesial repentance.

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THE Gnostics: MYTH, RITUAL, AND DIVERSITY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY. By David Brakke. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2010. Pp. xii + 164. \$29.95.

This is an excellent book on a complicated subject. Students of early Christianity have long struggled to understand diverse religious groups, generally labeled "gnostics," from the first two centuries of the Common Era. Although noted in the work of heresiologists such as Irenaeus of Lyons, the actual thoughts and practices of these circles have been difficult to discern so long as we have viewed them through the lenses of their opponents. In principle, the discovery of texts in the 20th century, such as those found at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and more recently the *Gospel of Judas*, give us more direct access to these early "heretics." Even so, scholars necessarily bring to their reading of these texts inherited pictures of the social and intellectual world in question, and the field has been alive with

methodological problems. Recent scholars have argued persuasively that the category “gnosticism” should be dropped altogether because it implies a coherent system or substantive body in conflict with a proto-orthodoxy. Often enough the term replicates Irenaeus’s view of the dangerous other, whereas on closer inspection the history of Christianity is a far more complex story.

In a book of considerable economy and even-handedness, Brakke initially lays out the methodological problems with great precision. Yet he stakes his own claim. The adjective “gnostic” can be retrieved as a social category, “without succumbing to the dangers of rigid boundaries, essentializing, and reification that concern scholars today” (27). In his second and fairly dense chapter, B. argues that “gnostic” does in fact refer to a specific school of thought with which its adherents would have identified. Yet he also urges scholars to use the term only for this self-differentiating group and warns that other ancient Christians (such as the Valentinians) have inappropriately been confused with gnostics. Parsing a range of ancient literature that reflects particular elements leads B. to identify certain works as part of a gnostic school of thought centered on a key myth. He acknowledges that few scholars have agreed with his thesis that only certain texts (such as those he lists on pp. 50–51) may be considered as coming from a gnostic community. In the years to come, presumably, his thesis will therefore be tested in case-by-case studies.

In many respects, the most interesting element of B.’s work is his discussion of “the Gnostic myth” as the criterion for distinguishing this group. This myth “provides a map, so to speak, of the divine intellect, and it explains how, despite our life in the body and opposition by demonic powers, our intellect still provides us with the opportunity to contemplate God” (53). Moreover, the narrative coincides with a ritual activity, including baptism, that provided a basis for mystical ascent to knowledge of God. Such baptism may not have been a single event of initiation but an experience a gnostic may have enjoyed multiple times. B. tries to show that, while modern people may find such beliefs bizarre, in the context of the worldview of many second- and third-century intellectuals, it would have made sense as an attempt to respond to the life and message of Jesus.

B. does not try to normalize the thought and practice of ancient gnostics at the expense of some proto-orthodoxy. Rather, he shows how normal is the immense diversity of early Christian thought and practice itself. In many respects, that is a cause of its health and success. Throughout the book B. reminds us that, historically, we cannot assert a monolithic Christianity against which groups such as the gnostics represent a kind of rebellion. Nor can we say that “the Church rejected Gnosticism” (113) without considerable anachronism, because at the time in question what we call “Christianity” was a pluriform collection of religious movements. Rome in

the early second century, for instance, was a stage where gnostics as well as Justin, Marcion, Valentinus, and others were in vigorous competition against one another. Condemnation of other views was a relatively mutual practice. In his own time, therefore, Justin represented neither an official church nor a mainstream Christianity. Although the rise of Constantine will provide an institutional basis for a normative Christianity throughout the empire, elements dear to the gnostics will reappear—for instance, in the mystical theology of monastic groups clearly identified as belonging within the fold.

B. not only navigates a discussion of very complicated methodological, historical, and literary issues, but also and more importantly he shows how a small religious group contributes to a process by which Christians, “even today, continually reinvent themselves, their ideas, and their communities in light of their experience of Jesus Christ” (137).

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CHURCH MILITANT: BISHOP KUNG AND CATHOLIC RESISTANCE IN COMMUNIST CHINA. By Paul Mariani. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2011. Pp. xv + 282. \$39.95.

Mariani narrates the dramatic events of the crackdown on the Catholic Church by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1950s. Since 1962, these events were known, thanks to Jean Lefevre’s *Les enfants dans la ville: Vie chrétienne à Shanghai et perspectives sur l’Église chinoise (1949–1961)*, but M. has incorporated additional documents from Catholic sources, personal interviews, and even from the Shanghai Municipal Archives.

M.’s title refers to the young Catholics, mostly anonymous, who promised to lay down their lives to defend the Church, who served as bodyguards to the clergy, and who carried secret messages and prevented “progressive Catholics” from having access to the Eucharist. For his subtitle, M. has chosen the emblematic figure of Kung Pinmei (Gong Pinmei), who became bishop of Suzhou in 1949 and then of Shanghai a few months later (and subsequently was made a cardinal *in petto* by John Paul II in the 1980s).

Unlike the rest of China, the Shanghai Catholic Church had a prestigious lineage (starting from the late Ming era), an extensive kinship, and the strong support of the universal church, and by 1949 sponsored some 66 churches, 63 schools, and charitable organizations. However, at the time of a nationalist and patriotic revolution, close ties with the West became a big liability. Under the strong leadership of Kung, the Shanghai diocese experienced a profound revival. Kung believed that the Church needed to stand on its own feet; so he emphasized the spiritual life of the laity and encouraged native priestly and religious vocations. (Indeed, we find