

As we consider both these senses of the structure of faith, Niebuhr calls us to recognize that behind, beyond, or as the ground of our fiduciary living, there is an awareness of a Cause, a Power of Being, a Reality on whom we are dependent, by whom we are "thrown into existence," and whom we experience first as inscrutable source and definitive limit of our lives. The sense of distrust directed toward this power by which we are gives rise to our defensive suspicion of all our companions and of the conditions of our lives. In "broken faith" we live lives of selective trust and defensive loyalty. We live with the fearful recognition that societies and nations could break down into atomized units of desperate and lying self-preservation, and the hell on earth constituted by the erosion of all common trust and fidelity.

The most remarkable section of this book centers in Niebuhr's description of the reconstruction of faith through our meeting Jesus the Christ as the mediator of faith and as the faithful, suffering, and resurrected one by whom the question of the goodness of Power and the power of Goodness is answered. In a passionate evocation of the Christ as contemporary Niebuhr describes the transformation of our seeing and trusting in the direction of an ability to trust the Transcendent as Companion.

Faith on Earth offers a unique window into Niebuhr's christology. In brief compass its last chapter etches the directions of a rich ecclesiology, including his struggle with Trinitarian thought and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Taken all in all, it gives a passionate and deeply thoughtful exposition of that way of seeing and being, of trusting and committing, and of being loyal to the whole community of God's creation which is shaped in the companionship of Jesus the Christ. As such it is both an indispensable source for understanding Niebuhr, and, more importantly, for a felt sense of the texture, the breadth, and the depth of the Christian pattern of life and faith.

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How Faith Matures. By C. Ellis Nelson. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989. 252 pages. \$13.95 (paper).

How Faith Matures is a successor to Ellis Nelson's seminal work in Christian education, *Where Faith Begins*, published twenty-five years ago. The basic thesis and insights of the earlier volume are affirmed and developed in greater detail here. The work is proposed as an essay in practical theology. That is, operationally, it concerns the basis on which all forms of church ministry function. The work is written for mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States, namely, ministers, Christian educators, lay leaders, church school teachers, and administrators. What is proposed, he notes, may also fit some Catholic and Orthodox congregations, and middle-class areas in other Western countries.

Nelson's thesis is simple and significant: A person's faith matures when he or she interprets life-experience in light of the Christian tradition (Bible) in order to discern the will of God. Attention is focused on the situational experience as the arena in which faith matures. And what is the best location for this discernment and educational focusing? The center of congregational life. It is in the midst of a "community of faith" that one receives guidance and support for

creating meaning and fostering maturation in faith. For Nelson, the congregation, as a dynamic spiritual center, is the key to the development of a proper piety.

Nelson explicates his “critical social method” in the three main sections of the book. Part One (“The Social Construction of Beliefs”) examines the social and historical factors that have shaped our religious outlook. In the late twentieth century we have increasingly come under the spell of secularism (chap. 2). We are born into a stream of tradition that contains a mixture of social values and religious beliefs (chap. 3). Both are colored by secularism. We must identify and monitor our inherited religion and worldviews in our quest for truth. The Bible, as interpreted in the midst of congregational life, will be our guide in this critical appraisal—sorting out truth from false conceptions of God.

Nelson proceeds to place religious experience (theophany) at the center of the community of faith (Part Two). It is authentic religious experience that opens the congregation to truth about God. Nelson structures a pattern to help us understand religious experience and analyzes the three main elements involved, namely, the religious *situation*, the *person or group* engaged in the experience and the *work or mission* proceeding from it (chaps. 5-7). Biblical stories confirm these elements as integral to the nature of religious experience. Chapter Eight concludes Part Two by broadening the biblical inquiry to formulate a general understanding of mature faith. For Nelson, mature faith is not the faith of structural developmental psychology. Rather, it is a deeply rooted trust in God, who was in Jesus. It is a gift, with a relational character and a dynamic force for recreation.

In the final section (Part Three), Nelson reaches the heart of his proposal. Congregational life together (chap. 9) is the place where life and theology blend. An individual’s faith will mature through shared congregational (worship, education, service) experiences. The way a congregation works and worships is a powerful form of education in faith. The problem with mainstream congregations, observes Nelson, is their similarity to society. Religious experience, however, will become integral to congregational life only if it becomes countercultural. But American Protestant congregations continue to employ an inappropriate nineteenth-century strategy, namely, focus on the Sunday school (chap. 10). Nelson proposes a new strategy: the congregation as the agency of education in faith. This strategy is not new but practical plans for edification and cultivation of the community of believers are outlined in the final chapter (11). The key ingredient is the establishment of a leadership cadre with vision and conviction. This “Central Study Group” shapes the congregation’s purpose and mission toward a fellowship from which people can draw the spiritual guidance they need.

Nelson is considered the dean of Protestant Christian education during the latter half of this century. In that role, he has embodied the spirit of the enterprise: careful and cool, rational and systematic, congregational rather than ecumenical. As an exercise in practical theology the book has a value and builds on his previous efforts. It is worth a place in the library or in a graduate seminar. I have reservations, however, with regard to some aspects of the project. I will mention three.

Nelson names his work an exercise in practical theology. He insists on drawing a sharp contrast to the work of Christian education. I fail to see the

distinction. I also disagree with his move. Has he not *again* handed control of educational discourse in the churches over to theologians—who suddenly have acquired an interest in “the practical”? Second: Is Nelson’s method not simply Tillich’s correlational method put to an educational strategy? Has this strategy not been at the heart of the Catholic catechetical enterprise? Finally, Nelson’s choice of the word “faith” as his fundamental religious category seems ill-advised in light of his goals. The word lacks relational, social, sexual, institutional, and ecological meanings. And, these are the precise issues at the center of an individual’s journey to religious maturity.

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Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective. By Thomas F. O’Meara, O.P. New York: Paulist, 1990. iv + 103 pages. \$5.95 (paper).

Recently a good friend shared with me his concerns about his son, a recent college graduate, who had joined a fundamentalist church. He did not know how to engage his son in conversation about his rejection of Catholicity and his embrace of biblical fundamentalism. I suggested that he read Thomas O’Meara’s new book, *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective*. It will not help him to argue his son out of his recently acquired religious convictions (that rarely, if ever, can happen), but it will provide him with a compelling portrait of Catholic Christianity and why it is antithetical to any form of fundamentalism.

O’Meara’s prose is accessible and mercifully free of theological jargon. He offers a stimulating portrayal of religious fundamentalism outside of Catholicity, and within it as well. (He finds the latter particularly infuriating.) The composite of characteristics is deftly delineated; it is elitist and compulsive, preoccupied with miracles and easy certitudes, carrying deeply within it the image of an angry, vindictive God and a despairing humanity distrustful of history and culture. This is as far from an authentic Catholic Christianity as a reductionistic and morally vapid liberalism.

The vision of Catholicity offered by O’Meara is incarnational and sacramental. It sees all of life, especially in its religious dimension, as a real and mysterious interplay between a gracious and loving God and human beings who are free and limited, and yet created in the image of that good God. Thus, God’s loving presence in history and in our lives is seen as being, most of the time, ordinary. Fundamentalism requires the extraordinary. God’s presence is for all women and men, not simply those who can read an English Bible or mutter a biblical formula. This presence suffuses all of human history; fundamentalism has no more powerful enemy than the witness of history. God’s presence comes to visibility in the richness of a variety of cultural forms, and thus invites the believer “to join diversity with fidelity to church life and gospel” (89). The fundamentalist mind is at home only within a monochrome sectarianism, which is incapable of distinguishing between what is central and what is peripheral. O’Meara’s conclusion: “Every fundamentalism (including Catholics who have made a fundamentalism out of a few aspects of their church) will be shocked at the Roman Catholic Church” (92).

O’Meara’s is an artful construct, often more suggestive than rigorously argued. One short chapter on Catholic critics of fundamentalism should have



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