

Books and Resources

The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics by *Kelly S. Johnson*

William B. Eerdmans Publishing (Grand Rapids, 2007). ISBN: 978-8028-037-8. 236 pp.

There is something amiss in the church's economy. The church is paralyzed by the existence and needs of beggars. Kelly S. Johnson maintains this problem arises from a dependence on the theology of stewardship. She claims stewardship avoids the self-abdicating economy and does not count as "success" Christ's economy of gift-giving. *The Fear of Beggars* undertakes to analyze this problem by examining the Christian tradition of voluntary begging. Johnson uses begging to illustrate possible solutions through the creation of a countercultural love of our neighbor.

Johnson narrates her argument in a fluid and accessible manner. Her emphases are illustrated by the lives of prominent voluntary beggars: St. Alexis, Francis of Assisi and Benoît-Joseph Labre. Voluntary begging was considered, by some, to be the disciple's *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ). Begging was, therefore, an attempt to embody Christ's humility and selfless giving via penitent living. This challenged societal and economic systems that refused to maintain deep relationships with others and denied gift-giving as vital to discipleship. Voluntary begging, however, is dependent upon a community that embodies a particular type of economics, one that is willing to give gifts without thought of return.

Equally important for Johnson's argument is her analysis of the growth of



"stewardship theology" along with the rise of modern economic philosophies that radically marginalize beggars. Stewardship, an idea that played no significant role in early Christian thought, originally connoted concrete domestic service, like a servant carrying dinner to a master's table. Stewardship was the proper service given to a master in the master's household. However, as economic stability became more prevalent in Europe, stewardship quickly changed to suggest financial oversight done in a spiritually appropriate manner. Now stewardship "signifies a turn from the material and political presence of the church as an economic community capable of material sharing towards the church as a spiritual association of individual property holders with primarily motivational rather than organizational impact." (73)

Johnson contends that this theological trajectory, filtered through economic thinkers like Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus, began to imply that proper management of societal production is the true good, thus turning beggars into anomalies. "Non-producers" can only be viewed as lazy within these systems. These developments removed the Christian reticence toward approving of private possessions and fostered the dissolution of communities of care and gift-giving.

Johnson maintains that the self-sustaining and spiritualizing nature of stewardship led the church to fail to maintain a distinctly Christian sacrificial gift-giving economy. This failure necessitates an alternative economic approach. Peter Maurin, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, is a shining example of a modern and distinctly Christian economy of relationship and gift-giving. His movement attempted to create agricultural communities of care centered on relationship and service. These

communities functioned as alternate economic centers of mutual gift-giving. Maurin's life illustrates that the legacy of voluntary begging as a challenge to impersonal and abstract economic/social theory can be undertaken, even if it will be seen as a failure by modern society.

The Fear of Beggars should be read by everyone because we live in a world dominated by the economics of self-interest. The church would become a witness to Christ if it accepted Johnson's critique of social systems that marginalize the poor. All humanity would benefit from the church's acceptance of Johnson's challenge to become a community where relationships between the poor and the rich are common, and the economy of grace and gift-giving supersede the economy of usury. The book does not propose the way to interact with beggars, but instead challenges the church toward faithfulness.

Despite the book's value, it fails to explain Johnson's intended focus, "the fear of beggars." (8) Economic considerations and stewardship's rejection of the "unproductive" explain why the poor are alienated, but not why we fear beggars. It would appear that the fear of beggars is increased by, but does not arise from, economics. Rather we fear the "other," the "corrupt," the "different," because they unsettle the "pure" and the "propertied." Because of this fact, the book and the reader could greatly benefit from engaging Miraslov Volf's, *Exclusion and Embrace*, which addresses the fear of "otherness" and the necessity of gift-giving involved with reconciliation with the "other."

Reviewed by Chris Moore, who is completing his MDiv with a concentration in Mission and World Christianity at George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, TX. Upon completion of his MDiv, he hopes to pursue a PhD in historical theology. He and his wife, Natalie, are members of Waco's Calvary Baptist Church.



Like Trees Walking: In the Second Half of Life **by Jane Sigloh**

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (New York, 2007). ISBN: 10-1-56101-290-4. 173 pp.



Before a vacation to an unknown area, we often consult a few guidebooks that prepare us for our visit. How do we prepare, though, for the trip we have no choice about taking – aging? Jane Sigloh, a retired Episcopalian minister, offers a

surprisingly palatable guidebook that combines Scripture, personal anecdotes and reflections, and a wealth of quotations from authors as diverse as Hermann Hesse and Dylan Thomas, T. S. Eliot and Walter Brueggemann, Emily Dickinson and Paul Tournier.

Like a good tour guide, Sigloh warns us of the nasty creatures that inhabit the terrain of aging, such as bitterness, loneliness, diminishment, loss of friends, and declining energy and health, to name a few. Her wise counsel to those in the "second half of life" is to accept the journey while remaining open to the many choices one can make in this stage of life.

The book's title is drawn from her reflections on Mark's account of Jesus' healing the blind man from Bethsaida. After Jesus has anointed the man's eyes, Jesus asks him if he can see anything. "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking," he replies (Mark 8:24). Jesus clears up the problem quickly, but the author extols the point that the trees' walking speaks to life beyond retirement, i.e., that one should continue to walk, perhaps more slowly, but not so slowly that they become root-bound.

Sigloh speaks critically of books that are filled with glowing testimonies such as "We're not getting older, we're getting better." This cheerful, determined optimism just doesn't ring true for her, Sigloh says. And, thus the book's final sections are "The Last Few Miles," "Heading Home" and

“Crossing the Jordan,” with the last chapter titled “It is Finished.” Sigloh is unflinching about the inevitability of death.

This is not “escape” reading; it plunges the reader into one of life’s most difficult realities – growing older. The book’s value may be greatest to those who would prefer to sidestep their own mortality but who are willing to be led toward reality with the author’s gentle help.

Tracking this book from beginning to end may be stronger medicine than many can or choose to take. Fortunately, its structure allows the reader to dip into the sections and, like one dipping a toe into icy waters, to acclimate, until he or she can begin to trust that Sigloh will be a wise, kind and even humorous companion.

In a beautiful and heartening story she offers as a harbinger of the afterlife, she recalls a terrible drought in her native Virginia several years ago: “Leaves on the dogwood trees curled up like paper, the fields were scorched, animals in the barn nipped at each other’s flanks.” (pg. 155) Then at last the rains came and the fields again turned green. Her Aunt Kate opened the barn doors and loosed the calf, the cattle dog, the cat and the rabbit. Freed, they were neither predator nor prey to one another. “They kicked up their heels in boundless, runaway gratitude, chasing circles in the wet grass ... It made you wonder, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the gate of heaven.’ (Genesis 28:17).” (pg. 155)

The sheer emotional wallop of this topic suggests it will need to be explored in a small covenantal group where members are respectful and sensitive to one another’s pace. It does help readers confront their own fears while gently encouraging them to name their feelings of diminishment. It is a book worth reading for ministers and laypeople alike.

After retiring from 25 years as editor of the Baylor University alumni magazine, reviewer Sherry Castello now coordinates volunteers and supervises the kitchen of her church’s hot meal ministry in an impoverished area of Waco, TX. She and her husband, Don, have four children, seven grandchildren, and one great grandson.



The Mystery of the Child by Martin E. Marty

William B. Eerdmans Publishing (Grand Rapids, 2007).

ISBN: 978-0-8028-1766-2. 257 pp.



A self-disclosure is needed before reading this review. I do not know Martin Marty personally nor have I read any of his numerous books, essays or articles.

Prior to reading this book, my introduction to him has been through his Marty M.E.M.O at the end of each edition of the *Christian Century*. With this minor confession, I was more than interested in reading *The Mystery of the Child*. I wanted to know what Marty, a professor, teacher, scholar, academician and grandfather, had to say about children. As he says himself, this is his first book on children.

The Mystery of the Child is one of many books in the Religion, Marriage and Family series edited by Don Browning and John Witte, which is also published by Eerdmans. The purpose of the series is to bring together scholars and theologians from a variety of scholarly fields in order to focus on the role and inter-relationship of marriage, family and religion. Marty’s book is a fine addition to this series.

His main thesis, which he attends closely, is that historically, philosophically, socially and theologically, child-rearing and child development have been envisioned and discussed in terms of stigma and challenges, i.e., children are seen as a problem to be solved in terms of their behavioral, psychological and social upbringing. Therefore, he contends, one deals with children in terms of controlling their behavior, their ideas about the world around them, about God and the transcendent, as well as about other developmental aspects of life.

Marty, however, delves into this once-accepted notion of “child as problem” and shares his own insights into the situation by asking whether or not a child is not so much a problem to be solved as a mystery that unfolds. In order to address this question, he

draws upon a diverse group of theologians and philosophers, people such as George Bernanos, Karl Rahner and Gabriel Marcel. Also included are voices from educational development, social and cultural studies, and experts in the field of child development. The breadth of voices included in the book is tremendous but there were times when I wanted more depth. There also were times when I found myself lost in a sea of citations and quotations.

The book is divided into nine chapters that include topics such as care and caregiving, the notion of mystery in terms of child-rearing, and the subject of wonder.

Marty also includes a postscript that he titles “Abyss of Mystery,” which serves as a conclusion but also a prophetic word for the reader. In it, he addresses the topic of childhood from the vantage point of the elderly, a category that includes himself, he says.

I found his conclusion thought-provoking. He considers how being child-like, fully present to the moment, wondrous and playful can be vital and integral to the aging process. Jesus told his disciples that unless we turn and become like children we will never enter the kingdom of heaven, a verse that Marty uses as a mantra throughout his monograph. I wish, however, that Marty had included more personal vignettes from his own childhood, which I think would have provided even more insights.

The Mystery of the Child is not a quick read. The sheer amount of scholarship cited, in addition to Marty’s theological insight and critique, forced me to stop and often re-read several pages. This criticism should not deter one from reading the book, however. I recommend it to pastors, teachers, seminarians and anyone working in the field of child care and development. It is a welcome contribution to the theological discussion about children, and more important, about humanity in general.

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Outside-In: Theological Reflections on Life by John Weaver

Regent's Park College, Oxford with Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. (Macon, GA, 2006). ISBN: 1-57312-472-9. 246 pp.

Many Christians live in two separate worlds: the private world of faith where they meet with God, participate in church programs and escape their everyday problems; and the public world of daily living and work where they face, for example, stress, injustices, suffering and despair.

The challenge John Weaver addresses centers on the issue of one’s Christian faith

touching every aspect of one’s life which, he proposes, requires a change in the direction of our thinking. As he writes, “the direction of our thinking should be ‘from the outside to the inside,’ from mission out in

the world to reflection upon it within the church: in short, ‘outside-in,’ not ‘inside-out’” (16).

This change can be accomplished through theological reflection that results in a different way of being church, he writes. It will entail reflection on how the stories of people and church communities fit with the story of the Bible, and how that story fits with the Christian tradition through the ages, all the while acknowledging that the story is open and ongoing.

The task set forth is first and foremost directed at church leaders as facilitators of small discussion groups, utilizing Weaver’s action-reflection model, which he describes as: (1) the examination of one’s experience and context; (2) a sociological, psychological, historical and theological analysis of one’s experience; (3) the integration of one’s faith and biblical beliefs with the practical experience of daily living that is being examined; and (4) a response through action that makes a difference in one’s life and the lives of others. This response leads one into new experiences that start the cycle of reflection over again and leads to new



responses. Weaver's model is not a closed circle but an ongoing spiral.

As each chapter examines a particular aspect of Weaver's model, he interweaves examples, stories, diagrams, questions and exercises to facilitate theological reflection and action in small groups. This process leads groups into reflection on who God is, where and how God is present and working in one's daily life, what it means to be the church/community of faith, and how that translates into the world. Through this process, trust, openness, honesty and respect develop in the small groups as the members' stories become opportunities for shared experiences of learning and empowerment for living outside of the church community. In this way, God's story becomes their story. Weaver believes that the story then will "transform the stories we live out in our living and in our work Monday through Saturday" (215).

I recommend highly *Outside-In* to church leaders. Webster's approach to theological reflection is one that can touch all aspects of a person's life, including one's relationships with family, friends and

community, and one's daily living at work, at home, in service to others or in leisure activities. All of these are starting points for theological reflection. These relationships and experiences are brought from the outside into small groups in the church community. As the members of small groups reflect on the ways in which God is at work in these situations, their relationships are strengthened and their experiences transformed. The divide between the private world of faith and the public world of daily living and work begins to dissolve. Weaver's vision of a different way of being church, that is, a community in which one's faith becomes fully engaged in one's daily experiences, is biblical, powerful and attainable.

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Section edited by Amy Castello

The Church as Conscience

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.

It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.

If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.

Source: Strength to Love