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# Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change, by David Brown

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## Peer Reviewed

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cause it stands in pathetic relation to a language and practice that is effective and clear. Theology can debate fruitfully and undertake creative inquiry (“poetic pathos,” to use Hütter’s terminology) under the discipline of common standards of good argument because the church is a public entity able to sustain a community of inquiry ordered toward a supernatural end.

Assessing the cogency of the ambitious argument of *Suffering Divine Things* is difficult. So many themes and foci are analyzed, and so many different layers of technical formulations are adopted, that it is difficult to see just how and why theology must be characterized by pathos and the church by dogma. Nonetheless, the success of Hütter’s project does not only rest in the many turns of his argument—or perhaps more accurately, the maze of terminology and themes reflects a deeper problem that Hütter suggests but does not analyze. As Harnack wrote in his correspondence to Peterson, “we are still living to a considerable extent from the remnants of the institution of the Catholic church around us, as it were from the aroma of an empty bottle” (p. 8). Not surprisingly, then, *Suffering Divine Things* is a patchwork; pieces from Lindbeck and Bayer, Luther and Barth, Peterson and others, are brought together by Hütter in the interests of rendering visible an underlying common vision of theology. Yet, can such a common vision be visible? Where is the ecclesiastical public, catechized and unified with sufficient confidence to recognize the import and implications of Hütter’s proposal and to impose a disciplined judgment on Hütter’s own valiant (and ambitious) attempt of synthesis?

Precisely because Hütter so consistently places theology within the context of the church and convinces me of the properly pathetic character of theology, such questions push *Suffering Divine Things* in a speculative, synthetic direction. Thus, his defense of the pathetic discipline of theology has a strongly poetic dimension. This is hardly surprising. Even passing acquaintance with contemporary western ecclesiastical reality may make one wonder whether theology can be a church practice, even if it should. In the American context, many churches are unable or unwilling to advance authoritative teaching, and as a consequence, theologians who adopt Hütter’s approach do so as an ideal or hope rather than as a program and discipline. This raises an important question for the theological program Hütter commends. How does one suffer a theological vocation in churches that cannot teach doctrine? What is the pathos proper to the aroma of an empty bottle?

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BROWN, DAVID. *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. viii+402 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

This is the first installment of a two-volume work on the theme of tradition, the second of which will appear under the title *Discipleship and Imagination*. David Brown’s thesis is that one errs in regarding the biblical text itself as revelation in all its fullness. Rather, the interpretive appropriation of the bible in history and culture—“tradition,” in Brown’s terminology—amounts to an ongoing revelation that makes the meaning of the Bible dynamic in all sorts of ways in time and place. Imagination, he claims, “is absolutely integral to the flourishing of any religion, Christianity included” (p. 366), and it is the imagination that appropriates and inevitably transforms the biblical text, rewriting its meaning in the

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interpretive process. This imaginative re-writing—whether it occurs on the page, the canvas, or in the life of discipleship—is not simply an ancillary supplement to revelation but revelation's very site.

The lion's share of Brown's volume illustrates this position in finely detailed studies that show how biblical interpretation sparked new meaning in particular historical moments. The various New Testament negotiations of the meaning of Pentecost; medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and contemporary readings and artistic portrayals of the infancy narratives; literary reconfigurations of the Genesis characters of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph; christological pluralism from earliest Christian belief to the present; and late medieval and early modern visual art, all serve as thematic demonstrations of how the imaginative grasp of past meaning produces meaning anew. These illustrations, mainly drawn from Christian history, are filled out by examples from Jewish, Islamic, and classical exegesis that show at least a cross-cultural consistency in the workings of hermeneutics and at most a cross-cultural consistency in the way God reveals.

One can only be impressed by Brown's erudition and meticulous scholarship in detailing each of these examples of "re-writing," even if all are invoked to illustrate what has certainly become an exegetical truism: "The life of the text lay not solely in the past, but also in its current reshaping in the community's life" (p. 268).

The extent of one's admiration for the author's historical scholarship is matched by one's desire for a more refined theoretical structure to the argument. Although most of the book comprises Brown's historical demonstrations, these finally serve a theory of tradition that remains undeveloped. For all his historical sensitivity, Brown never places his own stance within the post-Enlightenment efforts on the part of theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Drey, Möhler, Newman, and Congar to explain how the religious change he documents can yet be claimed in the name of authoritative tradition. Brown's own hermeneutical-reception model of development looks much like David Tracy's theological use of Hans Georg Gadamer in *The Analogical Imagination* (New York, 1987). Brown acknowledges this resemblance but dismisses Tracy summarily on the grounds that "his language is altogether too externalist for my liking" (p. 53). He explains this judgment by observing that "one cannot as easily stand outside a religious tradition as one can a changing scientific perspective" (p. 53), leaving the reader to conclude that Tracy's theology is not situated in a religious tradition. Missing too is an appreciation for the historical situatedness of claims like his own for the role of imagination in theological interpretation.

In arguing for tradition *as* revelation, Brown criticizes a generic biblicism, one that regards tradition as "something secondary or reactionary" (p. 1). He does not consider the Roman Catholic teaching that the divine Word is revealed in both scripture and tradition, nor the more nuanced teachings of the various Reformation churches on the authority of the past. Criteriological issues especially need to be fleshed out. If tradition as revelation unfolds in the "imaginative 'fit'" (p. 7) that characterizes the meaningful re-writing of the biblical text, then how is one to distinguish plain, old interpretation from interpretation that is truly revelation? Could not one say that the *deutsche Christen* found an imaginative "fit" between the biblical story and the Aryan worldview?

Brown's stance on God's revelatory accommodation to the world is a generous one. He notes that "God defies our desire for tidy categories, and so in trying to tell the revelatory story we need to recognize a God at work everywhere in the world in helping to shape our comprehension to his purposes" (p. 374). I wonder,

though, if Brown has not conflated a doctrine of grace with a doctrine of revelation. In any case, Brown must work harder at reconciling his undeniable concern for revelatory breadth with the Church's concern for revelatory continuity. He promises such effort in the second volume (p. 375). One hopes for the same explanatory thoroughness there that distinguishes the rich, historical studies here.  
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GREENE-MCCREIGHT, KATHRYN. *Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine: Narrative Analysis and Appraisal*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. viii+175 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

Feminist theologians and their critics typically speak past one another, often repelled by each other's vocabulary and preoccupations—on the one hand, feminist practices (like women's flourishing and inclusive language for God) and their accompanying theological innovations; on the other, proper Christian doctrine and identity. Hoping to invite dialogue rather than more mutual misunderstanding, Kathryn Greene-McCreight suggests that feminist theologians and their "Yale school" critics might try pinpointing their differences hermeneutically: unlike classical Christian theologians, most feminist theologians practice something other than a "biblical narrative identification of God." In *Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine*, Greene-McCreight analyzes the work of several feminist theologians to demonstrate exactly how they depart from classically Christian forms of scriptural interpretation. The implication may not exactly inspire dialogue: Greene-McCreight concludes that only "biblical feminists" properly reconstruct Christian doctrine through close narrative readings of scripture.

The actual contours of a feminist narrative reading remain elusive—although Greene-McCreight alludes to aspects of the work of Mary Grey, Sarah Coakley, Anne Carr, and Angela West and suggests exploring the implications of Jesus' having been "incarnate of a woman without the physical intervention of a male" (p. 135). Here, however, Greene-McCreight simply establishes criteria for biblical feminism. Based on theories of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and William Christian, those criteria entail practicing a scriptural hermeneutics of trust rather than suspicion and developing doctrines by working with the narrative flow of scripture—not by appealing to "extra-narrative claims" (like women's flourishing). Or rather, the only appropriate "extra-narrative claims" are those prior hermeneutical assumptions established by Christian "consensus" (e.g., the unity of God and scripture, scripture as divine witness, the hermeneutical centrality of Christ). Christian theologians must utilize these "extra-narrative claims" because they function as "governing doctrines"—rules which, by shaping Christian scripture reading, suggest what may count as an authentic "primary" (specific) doctrine.

With such criteria, mute on issues of power, few will be surprised when Greene-McCreight argues that Rita Nakashima Brock, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Delores Williams, Sallie McFague, and Elizabeth Johnson (among others) all constitute "mainline" rather than "biblical" feminists—"mainline" because they follow what Frei calls the modern reversal of the flow of interpretation, making Christian doctrine conform apologetically to the truth of experience rather than identifying authentic Christian doctrines as they emerge through particular character-event interactions in scripture. In this case, utilizing a "governing doctrine" of "feminist consciousness" (p. 54) which critiques patriarchal aspects of scripture, "mainline feminists" reconstruct "primary