

1997

Book review: After Christianity by Hampson, Daphne

Nancy Dallavalle

Fairfield University, ndallavalle@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs>
Copyright 1997 Theological Studies

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Dallavalle, Nancy, "Book review: After Christianity by Hampson, Daphne" (1997). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 85.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/85>

Published Citation

Dallavalle, Nancy. (1997). Book review: After Christianity by Hampson, Daphne. In *Theological Studies* 58 (4), pp. 745-747.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

middle-class, Western women" (xiii). The complexity of the issue extends to a problem with locating individual entries. Thus, e.g., African, Indigenous Women's, Latin American, Mujerista, and Womanist theology are listed under "Theology," but Asian, European, Jewish, North American, Pacific Island, and South Asian theologies are listed under "feminist theologies." Similarly, although the entire volume carries the title "feminist," some entries are listed under the category "feminist" while others are not (e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's "feminist hermeneutics" rather than "hermeneutics, biblical" or "biblical hermeneutics"). In a second printing, the addition of a table of contents or some sort of list of entries (preferably with cross-listings) would make the dictionary more accessible.

The basic format of the entries was designed to "[give] attention to the traditional meaning of a term" (xiv) and then to expand on its meaning from a feminist perspective. Numerous entries also pose questions and issues for further study and reflection, another helpful teaching resource. The challenge of that format especially for the briefer entries is considerable since dealing with "the traditional meaning of a term" requires that one deal with issues of what tradition one is operating within, boundaries of that tradition, and plural voices within the history of the tradition as well as with plural contemporary perspectives. In the majority of entries the treatment of "the traditional meaning of the term" is quite brief and thus does not allow for a great deal of nuance or exploration of diverse strands of the Christian tradition.

This volume makes a unique and valuable contribution to contemporary scholarship in the fields of both religious studies and feminist studies. Given its extensive bibliography and its reasonable price, it provides not only an important library resource, but also a creative text for classroom use.

University of Notre Dame

MARY CATHERINE HILKERT, O.P.

AFTER CHRISTIANITY. By Daphne Hampson. Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity International, 1996. Pp. x + 326. \$25.00.

In *Theology and Feminism* (1990), Hampson first leveled her charge that Christianity is both untrue, since it claims as true events that could not naturally have occurred, and immoral, as it subordinates women in symbol and in fact. Her charge that Christianity is a "profoundly harmful myth" is continued in the present volume targeted explicitly now at those who claim to be both Christian and feminist. H. develops this charge here by pursuing the notion that Christianity is inherently "heteronomous" and that such a system is particularly antithetical to feminists as it geometrically exacerbates the subordination of women in patriarchy.

Successive chapters develop a post-Christian feminist anthropology as they detail the continuities and discontinuities implied by the term

“post-Christian,” examine the paradigm shift found in feminist ethics as this entails a rethinking of both self-fulfillment and relationality, and correlate the idolatrous androcentrism of Christian God-talk with the androcentric story Christianity has told to and about women. H.’s constructive proposal is a theism that draws upon Schleiermacher for a discussion of God based on human experience. Schleiermacher’s understanding of the human intuition of dependence is incompatible with the notion of God as an object vis-à-vis humanity, according to H., who employs this intuition as the basis for a theism without heteronomy. In this, God is viewed “not as set over against us, but as one with our self-realization . . . a dimension of reality [in other words, not an exception to reality] which has always been the case” (284).

This theism is well integrated with H.’s feminist anthropology, which proposes the human as the center of its own attention. Her model is that of the self-in-relation, but this is a sturdy Enlightenment self that retains its centeredness through the practice of Quaker-inspired virtues such as “attending, honesty, and ordering” rather than “self-sacrifice, humility, and obedience.” Like Kant, who has the first word in this work, H. finds little divergence between religion and ethics. Indeed, early in this work she claims that to be feminist is to reject the act of worship completely, as it indicates a stance in which one is turned away from oneself and toward God (the story of Martha and Mary will presumably get short shrift here). Yet this is also not a work in the prophetic tradition of feminist theology, for H. rejects the critical retrieval of female figures from Scripture or Christian tradition (*contra* Ruether or Schüssler Fiorenza) as “necessarily a solidarity with women in their disadvantage” (73). Nor, for that matter, do oppressed women of today seem to serve as interesting conversation partners, other than as needful of the advantages feminism offers and therefore as exerting an ethical claim.

The fault with H.’s approach is that the genuinely theological is not possible in her worldview, as there is no differentiation between other creatures as “other” and God as “other.” Not only does this rule out the Christian God, it also rules out the possibility of seeing creation as revelatory. (H. does not utilize Tillich’s distinction between heteronomy and theonomy). Nevertheless, H. is intensely interested in religious “experience” and “the spiritual,” but rejects Christian talk of miracles, preferring the language of “another dimension of reality,” but only as such is expressed in the nexus of ordinary causality. The world has a certain resonance for H., but her certainty that the contemporary (Western, intellectual) account of reality is definitive renders all previous religious experience invalid. Thus, her testimony to “the presence of power and love in the world” is exemplified by a story that features the fortuitous arrival of a taxi. After Christianity’s promise of the mighty brought low and every tear wiped away, this seems like rather small potatoes. Moreover, such an experience can confirm, but

never genuinely confront, much less confound, the "reality" of the believer.

Why, then, would I include this as required reading in a course in feminist theology? Because, not unlike the early Mary Daly, H. gives a rigorous and accurate account of the pervasive sexism of Christianity, reflecting her formation as a systematic theologian and her more recent study of psychoanalytic feminism. High marks must be given in particular for the way in which she brings a strong command of feminist theory into genuine dialogue with major Christian thinkers (Barth, Bultmann, Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher), rather than supposing, as so many seem to, that feminists can or should think only among themselves. And, unlike Daly, H. (drawing on sources such as Murdoch, Nussbaum, Heidegger and, of course, Kant) offers a coherent and ethically sound alternate vision, one that will be attractive to many and is already operative, to some extent, in much contemporary spirituality. It is increasingly to such a perspective that Christian feminist theologians must make their case, if such can be made.

Fairfield University, Conn.

NANCY A. DALLAVALLE

EARTH COMMUNITY, EARTH ETHICS. By Larry L. Rasmussen. Ecology and Justice Series. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996. Pp. xvi + 366.

Rasmussen rejects "environmental ethics" as a label for his task, since it implies humanity dealing with an external environment. His subject is instead "earth and its distress," earth understood as inclusive of human being. He also shies away from characterizing his work as religious ethics, except in "some curious sense," though he does move "within the open circle of ethical monotheism" (xii-xiii). The book might best be characterized as an ethically grounded, religiously interactive sociopolitical analysis. R. works out from a complex ethical insight against which all else (including religion) is judged. His core requirement is "a dedication to earth in the manner of the sacred and sacramental" (xii).

R.'s major academic contributions here are at least three. First, he brings us up to date on many things eco-related, gathering up the latest insights from UN meetings, WCC statements, recent work in Christian eco-theology and ethics, political events, contemporary literature and poetry, global economic analysis, and scientific research. Second, R.'s distinction between sustainable development and sustainable community is a real contribution in a time when the label "sustainable" is bandied about so often as to lose meaning. R.'s vision of sustainable community can be understood as an exercise in utopian thinking, in the constructive sense Paul VI advocated in *Octagesima adveniens*. Third, R. weaves together a wide array of cutting-edge concerns into a powerfully diversified yet integrated vision of human life, including culture, as an intrinsic expression of earth. The scale of the project is holistic and vast while simultaneously committed to local texture and meaning.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.