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Review: Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (eds), *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism* (Eerdman's, 1995)

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ARC

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chapters round out the ecumenical impetus of Baum's work and place him clearly in line with Vatican II's fundamental respect for other religions as well as the Canadian Catholic bishops' unique left-wing perspective on the economy and social structures.

Donald Stoesz

Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism. Ed. by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995. ISBN 0-8028-0840-9. Pp. vi+125.

I must confess that I began to read this book with a sceptical eye, given the provocatively 'conservative' title, which suggests a return to a pristine (and mythical?) orthodoxy in the face of a transforming ("pagan") world. Indeed, in the opening remarks and the first essay of this volume, my suspicions were anything but allayed. In the end, however, there is no escaping it: this is a timely book, a book not fit for weak-stomached liberals, but precisely for this reason, one that demands attention.

The articles which make up *Either/Or* are taken from papers delivered at a 1993 conference sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. The title of the conference is that of the book, and the tone of the participant speakers echoes strongly in these pages, which fairly shout at the declining church and the secular culture to which (in the eyes of the contributors) it bows down. The authors (or, rather, the editors, who are the most vociferous of the voices found here) frankly admit their "partisanship," going so far as to attack not only lukewarm attempts at religious "pluralism," but also "multiculturalism," "feminism," and "hospitality" (!). These are viewed as nothing short of "acts of betrayal" when integrated into the church's vision.

Strongly "kerygmatic" in approach, this book does not flinch in its counter-offensive against the temptations of modern humanistic and "neopagan" ways. The "gospel" of the title, Braaten explains, is not the gospel as-opposed-to-the-law, but rather "the whole message of Jesus Christ...not only what Jesus personally proclaimed but what his apostles proclaimed *about* him" (7). "Neopaganism," in turn, involves the "modern variations of the ancient belief of pre-Christian mystery religions that a divine spark or seed is innate in the individual human soul" [Eckhart's *Seelenfünklein*]; it is the dissolution of the three pillars of orthodoxy ("history, kerygma, dogma") into the acids of "self-assured subjectivity" (7).

The rhetorical nature of this work is reflected in the choice of terms, starting with the title; these give some indication of the assumptions (and elisions?) which undergird these articles. Although Braaten dismisses the historical approach to the study of Christianity, particularly the search for the pristine Jesus and his unsullied message, there is unquestionably here a sense of a distant and lost ideality of origins: of a pre-Hellenistic "Hebraic-Christianity." Throughout this Tertullianistic volume, the "way of Athens" is chided (with some justice,

given the dangers of the 'philosophization' of theology and the secularization of devotion). But can we really dismiss the syncretic roots of European Christianity (and later, of American Christianity)? To do so would be to dismiss Aquinas, Origen (often cited here) and even Augustine. It may be too simple to see Christianity as, in Braaten's words, "a general glaze covering up the virility of pagan culture" (16). In short, while it is important to recognize the "pagan" elements within Euro-American culture, it is problematic to suggest that "Christianity" retains a pristine essence which is above and beyond its historical transformation vis-à-vis Western culture. The catch-all term "neopaganism" is also rather vague; Braaten insists it refers here to the sort of neo-Gnosticism spoken of by Harold Bloom in his recent work on *The American Religion*. But this is, for one, a caricature of Gnosticism, which was never truly defeated by orthodoxy; it is also a curiously limited use of the term "paganism" (a word which retains, even in a secular world, negative connotations and a certain bogeyman appeal).

If Braaten's opening essay is full of sound and fury, Robert Jenson's follow-up is a convincing variation on some of these themes. Particularly interesting is the way Jenson subverts the reader's expectations; just when you expect an avowal of theocracy, the author offers a critique of pluralism for *not being pluralistic enough*. A truly "plural culture," says Jenson, would involve, not the quest for a vacuous "theocentric" universalism, but rather the "advocacy and debate of authentic commitments" (36; John Cobb has argued in very similar fashion against the same foes, theocentric pluralists John Hick and Paul Knitter). Jenson's remarks on fundamentalism also deserve attention; he laments in particular the misuse of this term, not in order to justify fundamentalists, but in order to lend some clarity to this heated issue. Fundamentalists suffer much by being caricatured, the name becoming unequivocally pejorative; though their methods may be sometimes questionable, striving for orthodoxy must not be considered, *prima facie*, a bad thing. Indeed, the critical or kerygmatic aspect of a remnant Church, as spoken of by Douglas John Hall in his recent writings on Christian theology in a North American context, is imperative. Jenson concurs: "Most desirable would be, of course, that a genuinely plural culture and state were achieved, so that a smaller church and renewed synagogue could continue to contribute to the larger society" (36).

What would this contribution entail? The most interesting essay in this volume may be the short piece by L. Gregory Jones, entitled "The Psychological Captivity of the Church," where the author provides a balanced and insightful critique of the "therapeutic" hold on the popular Christian imagination, as well as on a Church obsessed with "pastoral care." Jones (avoiding both the construction of chimeras like "neopaganism" and the rhetoric of intolerance) sets his sights on a difficult, but very real problem—the transformation of mainline Christianity into a New Age self-help bourgeois liberalism, where angels become the objects of talk-show devotion, and both Christ and God are shunted aside, in favor of the comfort of one's own personal winged messenger. This essay gives a convincing analysis of the dangers of a church *too* involved in the world.

J. A. DiNoia's "Christian Universalism" continues Jenson's critique of theocentric or "reality-centric" approaches to religious pluralism. To allow for salva-

tion *extra ecclesiam* is, argues DiNoia, a mistake—but only because salvation is a particularly *Christian* goal. The argument is based on a remark made to the author by a Jewish rabbi, that Jesus Christ was the answer to a question he had never asked. In similar fashion, he argues, nirvana is the answer to a question which can only be broached by way of Buddhism. While the case for “nonexclusive particularism” is interesting, DiNoia makes the most of his argument by using two very different traditions (Christianity and Buddhism), and we are left to wonder whether this approach would be sufficient in, say, Muslim-Christian dialogue, where salvation may be a similar end for which are prescribed divergent, and even mutually exclusive, means.

In short, this is—for all the questions it may raise, and the provocation involved—a timely and important book, one that cannot be easily wished away by anyone concerned with the future of Western Christianity. One could contest the (very nineteenth-century) Hebraic-Hellenic distinction made by many of these authors (the longest essay in the book, by Kenneth Paul Wesche, is a rather academic treatment of the “Jewish apocalyptic” roots of Christianity), and the vague enemy against which they set their weapons (neopaganism), but this pithy collection packs a surprisingly heavy punch, raising issues which must be addressed if the church is to survive in a world come of age. James Crumley gives a positive encapsulation of the spirit of the collection, one which goes beyond the bombast, when he suggests that “[f]or the church to understand the society in which it ministers is not only desirable but essential. However, for the church to allow the society to set its agenda is disastrous” (120). Either...or.

J. M. Shields

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Theology for the Community of God. By Stanley J. Grenz. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. ISBN 0-8054-2801-1. Pp. xi+890.

Stanley J. Grenz is known to those both outside and inside Protestant evangelical circles. His desire to link certain insights of the eminent German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg to his pietist (Baptist) heritage has earned Grenz the due respect of his colleagues (those outside) who do not share his dogmatic concerns. A rather voluminous roll of publications, given to wide-ranging topics in ethics and theology, has established him as a pillar of the North American evangelical community (those inside). *Theology for the Community of God* is Grenz's mature attempt to bridge in one large volume these intellectual (theology) and experiential (faith) dimensions of the Christian tradition which, evidently, have so profoundly influenced his own spiritual pilgrimage (x).

In addition to a modest Introduction, initiating the reader into the “mysteries” of the nature and task of theology (1–34), the book is divided into six parts (with four intervening chapters consistently separating each part) in accordance with the six prominent themes of Christian theological reflection: “Theology” (i.e., God/Trinity; 35–161); “Anthropology” (162–314); “Christology” (315–