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# What in the world is God doing: re-imagining spirit and power

Loretta Jaunzarins

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silencing of women by the “Fathers” and deeply saddened by the walls built around the sisters in violation of the ministry of Jesus and the Galatians 3:28 manifesto of equality. Simultaneously I rejoiced at the courage and creativity of those sister apostles, missionaries, deaconesses, virgins and missionary nuns who managed to keep burning the fires of Christian equality during a nightmare of gender repression. I have read much of late of this repression/liberation struggle, but few have engaged my whole being – heart, mind and spirit – as much as Dr. Malone does in this work. I could barely constrain my outrage with the stance of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. That they were misogynist here and there, I knew, but Dr. Malone’s exposé left me furious. Their views and behaviour was so ugly and vicious that today we would react with horror to the display of such positions. Yet we continue to lift up these men and their abstract theologies while hiding their reprehensible views and treatment of women. Our seminary courses judge us and find us wanting.

Dr. Mary Malone has this to say at the end of her first chapter: “My hope is that readers will become as excited as I am at meeting such an extraordinary gallery of fore-mothers, and that they will share my joy of discovery and also my outrage at the deprivation and tragic distortion of the Christian story.” Certainly her wish proved true in my reading of this exceptional text, and I will do my part to see that her hope is fulfilled in my classes and in others I encounter. My only regret is that volume 2 is not yet written.

Sincerely,

Oscar Cole-Arnal  
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

## **What In The World Is God Doing? Re-Imaging Spirit And Power**

Lee E. Snook

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999

170 pages, \$25.00 Softcover

Lee Snook is emeritus professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota and writes this book in response to the impact of his years of teaching at the University of Zimbabwe and life in Africa. The reader will quickly discover that this is no ordinary book, just as Africa is no ordinary place, for Africa, compared to Snook’s United States, is alive with the Spirit of God. So alive is Africa with the Spirit, that Snook was forced to recognize this power and re-vision his theological concepts. To re-vision our understanding of the Spirit, Snook states that we must “reverse our normal way of speaking of God as Father, Son,

and Spirit. Instead of following this logic, which is the preferred sequence in the order of being...we follow the logic of experience and cognition.”

Snook leads us through this re-visioning of the Spirit by beginning in chapter 1 with a brief account of how he came to believe that spirit and power are one. He reclaims what Alfred North Whitehead called “the secular functions of God” by challenging the spirit/power split that pervades modern thinking and challenges us to “use our imaginations” when we think about God’s Spirit. Although Snook will excuse the reader for skipping over chapter 2, it is a valuable chapter to read and for more than just the historical recap of the how the doctrine of the Trinity arose. Here he challenges the notion that God is separate from the world and the dualisms in Western thought that undercuts any sense of wholeness or relationality in theology. Like many other “postmodern” theologians and philosophers, Snook wants his crack at eliminating the age-old dualisms that dichotomize body-spirit, matter-spirit, flesh-spirit, and so on. He discusses how religious and scientific thought parallel each other in structuring and relating experience, imagination, beliefs and concepts and of course makes reference to the philosopher/scientist who made this popular, Thomas Kuhn.

The next four chapters are the nitty-gritty of the book as Snook presents one by one ways of re-visioning the Spirit as power through the structures of narrative; namely, comedy, tragedy, romance and satire. Power is discussed as domination, freedom and justice, the long neglected power as beauty and love, and finally power in the form of dissent. Throughout these chapters Snook challenges the image of God as distant from human life and how this has been encouraged by most theologians. Instead, Snook argues that God, as Creator, is in all things and quickly reminds us of the difference between pantheism and panentheism. Snook believes that it will be the women in the stories of Jesus that will be the hermeneutical key to re-visioning the Spirit in our day and age.

Snook concludes his book with a chapter that again challenges our traditional beliefs/doctrines on the church and the Spirit. The mission of the church is foremost for Snook and he believes we will only be able to spread the gospel message when we respond to the power of God within us.

What I liked most about this book were Snook’s challenges to our traditional imaging of God, the world and the Spirit, but most especially his discussion on love and beauty. Probably the most interesting chapter for me would be chapter 6, “The Power of the Spirit in Destabilizing Laughter”. I also appreciated his focus on current problems facing the church and the world and not getting stuck on problems from the past. But what frustrated me were some of his assumptions. For example, although the Spirit is all pervasive in the world and therefore God cannot “break in”, Snook speaks of the “winds of change” which to me, are the “breaking in”, “kairos” moments of Paul Tillich. Snook also assumes that all postmodern thinkers are nihilistic and bleak about the human story. While

holding this assumption, Snook proceeds to call his re-visioning of the Spirit, “postmodern”. Probably the greatest difficulty in reading this book is Snook’s use of language. Although he defines words from time to time, he could use an initial chapter on the use of language. While he seeks to eliminate dualism in the language we use, he includes dualistic language in his discussions which tend to confuse more than clarify.

This is a book worth reading for clergy and lay people alike. Snook’s social location of Africa adds dimensions other books cannot compete with.

Loretta Jaunzarins  
Institute of Christian Studies  
Toronto, Ontario

## Christology

Hans Schwarz  
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998  
352 pages, \$38.99 Softcover

Hans Schwarz, of University of Regensburg, Germany, and Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, South Carolina, set for himself a lofty challenge: to articulate a christology that answers the questions of those engaged in secular religious-studies’ historical critical search for the historical Jesus. Wishing to avoid the polemic typified by the best-selling (on both sides) N. T. Wright/Marcus Borg debates, Schwarz attempts to steer a “middle course”. His fear is that most research and writing in the field of christology has left the seminaries and faculties of theology and is now housed in secular religious studies departments, where historical-critical, social scientific and cultural- anthropological approaches have all but obscured the question of faith. Schwarz counters this trend toward what he calls “pursuit of the historical Jesus for its own sake” with a self-consciousness about the task of theology as a word *of* and *about* God. This he does by providing a “solid historical and biblical introduction to the Christ of faith”. This he does by paying attention to the findings of those engaged in “historical Jesus” research – these are surveyed chronologically and critically (and exhaustively). His critical questions: is faith in Jesus as the Christ a logical outcome of the person, work, and proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth? What continuity is there between the Jesus of Nazareth portrayed in Scripture and the doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, and the Chalcedonian definition? Hardly new questions. But the strength of Schwarz’ work is the way in which he offers and evaluates the answers given in the past one hundred years or so of (mainly Protestant, mainly German) theology. One has the impression of following a senior theologian around his