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In whose image: faith, science and the new genetics

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In Whose Image: Faith, Science and the New Genetics

John P. Burgess, Editor

Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998

140 pages, \$23.95 Softcover

This book is a response to the call of the 202nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church for an account of the impact of the Genome Project on broad based theological issues. According to the editor, the essays in the volume comprise “a significant effort by one mainline denomination to reflect on the Christian faith in light of changes in science and technology” which “lends itself to both personal and group study” (viii; ix). Whatever the intended use, the book is undoubtedly a student’s guide; each chapter concludes with a summary and study questions, and the book is written with the educated non-specialist in mind. Furthermore, *In Whose Image*, is not strictly denominational (except for James C. Goodloe’s article on Presbyterian theology), but will benefit all Christians of a liberal persuasion concerned with issues in science and religion.

The six essays (plus an introductory essay) that comprise the book are divided into three parts: “Interactions Between Science and Religion” (chapters 1-3); “Genes, Environment, History: What Really Determines Us” (chapters 4-5); “What God Created Us to Be” (chapter 8). The first three chapters attempt to reconcile science and religion on philosophic, historical and theological grounds: Margret Gray Towne’s article calls for “critical thinking” and “informed skepticism” (chapter 1); James Miller provides a brief account of the historical interaction between science and religion in the classical, modern, and postmodern era; and James Ayers considers the Book of Genesis as a “hymn of praise” which is more akin to modern literary biblical criticism than historicism. Each of these essays argue, in its own way, that science and religion need not be adversaries, but interact to provide knowledge about existence. The two chapters that compose Part Two are introductory essays in the science of genetics (R. David Cole’s “Do Genes Control Us?”) and biological evolution (I. Lehr Brisbin, Jr.’s “Perspectives on the Origins and Evolution of Humanity”). Both essays provide clear introductions to some complex scientific theories, although the religious implications of these theories could have been more fully integrated into the scientific discussions. Part Three is comprised of theological reflections on the nature of humanity in a modern, scientific world: Susan L. Nelson’s article (chapter 6) reminds science of humanity’s dependence on God; James Goodloe interprets the scientific enterprise in light of Reform Presbyterian belief; and Ronald Cole-Turner (chapter 7) outlines the questions modern theology must take into account, given the findings of the modern biological sciences.

In Whose Image is a much needed introduction to the theological issues raised by the biological sciences because the dialogue between science and

religion, historically, was really the interaction among physics, cosmology and religion. Even after Darwin, physics and cosmology were still the most prominent sciences, and therefore the bulk of interest in science and religion was oriented towards them. It is only with the recent tremendous experimental (and financial) success of geneticists in cloning living organisms and the ethical implications of such work that theology is now taking biological science very seriously. While a chapter introducing the issues faced by religious ethics in terms of genetic manipulation is warranted and conspicuously missing (given its importance and urgency since this technology is already readily available), the volume contains enough good introductory material to deserve a wide reading among those interested in the interaction between modern biology and liberal Christianity.

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Coming Out as Sacrament

Chris Glaser

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998
155 pages, \$23.95 Softcover

Welcoming But Not Affirming

Stanley J. Grenz

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998
210 pages, \$29.95 Softcover

These two books, from the same publisher, are on the popular and contentious topic of homosexuality and the church. The first, by well-known gay church activist, Chris Glaser, is firmly in the queer liberationist genre. The other, by Vancouver evangelical professor, Stanley J. Grenz, is just as forthrightly in the "love the sinner, hate the sin" category.

Glaser's book, while using the language of sacrament, really models a queer hermeneutic for our time. It is not actually as deeply rooted in sacramental piety and imagery as the title might lead one to expect. This is not surprising given Glaser's self-conscious Presbyterian roots. In a book that is exciting because of its creative use of scriptural text and story, Glaser shows other gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered (and any one else who for reasons of solidarity or self-enlightenment cares to read it) how to appropriate biblical myth in light of our lives and experience. It is a good application of the method of faith` Marcus Borg