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Worship and evangelism in pre-Christendom

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inaccurate numbering of footnotes, Fritz West is to be thanked for this testimony to the life and work of Anton Baumstark. Grove Books are available through the Anglican Book Centre, 600 Jarvis Street, Toronto M4Y 2J6.

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Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom

Alan Kreider

Cambridge, UK: Grove Books Limited, 1995

45 pages, £ 3.95 paperback monograph

What a timely topic for a book! And what a wonderful little monograph! Anyone who is currently interested in the decline of the church, and who is familiar with the demise of “Christendom”, will find this book useful. In this post-Christendom era, this is a topic of intense interest: the phenomenal growth of the church before the Peace of Constantine.

“About one thing at least, there is no dispute: the pre-Christendom church was growing” (5). But why? Alan Kreider, Research Fellow in History at Regent Park College, Oxford, gives us his theory. It was not because of evangelism, or prayer, or public preaching, nor because of trendy, attractive, “seeker-sensitive” worship — for pagans were simply not admitted to “public” worship after the time of the Neronian persecutions. It was worship — but worship which followed a catechumenate, and which expected life-changing behaviour from those who participated. “I believe that worship, to which pagans were denied admission, was all-important to the spread of the church. It was important, not because it was attractive, but because its rites and practices — whether by design or intuition — made a difference in the lives and communities of the worshippers” (10). Christians at that time were out of joint with their culture, and so was their worship. Yet, the church worshipped and grew!

What made the faith of these “resident aliens” (*paroikoi*) so appealing? Kreider names eight factors of the Christian faith which appealed to the pagans of the day:

1. The fidelity of the martyrs;
2. The ethical living of the faithful;
3. Their care for the troubled and the ill in society;

4. Their freedom from addiction, compulsion, magic, money, and violence;
5. Their bonds of friendship;
6. Their women were concerned about the salvation of their husbands;
7. The social inclusiveness of the Christian communities; and
8. Their ethic of peace.

How was this brought about? Through a catechumenate process, preceded by a “weeding-out” of unfit and unprepared candidates, and cradled within a worship life which supported new Christians. The purpose of all this was “...to re-form pagan people, to resocialize them, to de-construct their old world and reconstruct a new one, so that they would emerge as Christian people who would be at home in communities of freedom” (23). The catechumenate, at first a response to heresy and persecution, gave persons a new history and new “folkways”.

The worship of this early church was a dramatic and transformative experience in all its aspects, viz., the Kiss of Peace, prayers for all persons (and especially for peace and unity), the mystery of the Eucharist, the offertory (seen as a dramatic liberation from addiction to accumulation), and so on.

Sadly, this dramatic and life-changing process ended when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. He blames this “nationalization” of Christianity on the shift to territorial Christendom: “Where everyone was a Christian, their primary allegiance was no longer to the trans-national family of God: it rather was to people with whom they shared a common race and place” (44). Instead of being “resident aliens”, they were now simply “residents”.

This slim, elegant, and simply written volume provides a superb justification for the practice of traditional, rich, challenging, and life-changing worship. If our present age is somehow analogous to that of the early, pre-Constantinian church, then perhaps we can learn from the way they worshipped and catechized. For, like persons of old, we too need to be “detoxified” of the dominant culture. What better way than in worship!

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