Readings in Western Religious Thought: The Ancient World

Harold Remus
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Edited by Patrick V. Reid
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Of the making of textbooks there is no end, as Koheleth might say
today. This one, by an assistant professor of religious studies at Providence
College, Rhode Island, is intended for courses in Western civilization or in
the history of Western religious thought (1). "The ancient world" in the
subtitle is defined as the period from ca. 3,000 BCE ("the beginnings of
civilization in Mesopotamia and Egypt") to ca. 450 CE ("the collapse of the
Roman Empire") (1). The author expects readers to use the Hebrew Bible
(i.e., the Old Testament) and the New Testament in conjunction with the
book because "the Judaean-Christian tradition has had the greatest impact
on the religious consciousness of the West" (1) and (presumably) because
translations of both are readily available and therefore obviate the need to
include extensive excerpts in the book.

In choosing sources to include, Reid looked for those that "best reflect
the basic religious values of the culture or movement and their adaptation
during the course of history" (1). He makes the usual observations about
length ("long enough to give the flavor of the work") and variety ("wide")
(1). For each section he provides an introduction and a "minimal [read:
one to three titles] bibliography" (1). Readers will have to compile their
own index(es).

The author's introductions represent mainstream scholarship, i.e., in-
formed and with no lurches to "right" or "left". There are few surprises
either in the sections: (1) Ancient Near Eastern Religions (Mesopotamia
and Egypt); (2) Israel and the Hebrew Scriptures; (3) Ancient and Classical
Greek Religion; (4) Hellenistic and Roman Religions; (5) The New Testa-
ment; (6) The Christian Fathers and Early Christological Councils. The se-
lections are also fairly standard, e.g., Enuma Elish, Gilgamesh Epic, Hymn
to Aton, excerpts from representative biblical books, Homer, Plato, Stoics,
Cicero, Vergil, mainstream Christian fathers, councils. Surprising, how-
ever, is the length of the excerpt from Vergil's Aeneid, eighty-nine pages,
counting Reid's lengthy introduction, which fails to explain why he dished
up flavour so generously in this case. One wonders if the fact that one of his
colleagues had an unpublished translation of the Aeneid ready to hand (2)
may have had something to do with it. However, if in Edward McCrorie's
very readable translation students and others discover Vergil, should one
really complain?

I do lament, however, that the immediate milieu of Israelite religion, i.e.,
Canaan, is not represented, except very briefly in introductory comments,
and that non-mainstream Christians aren't allowed to speak viva voce. Baal
still lives in the West, as do gnostics, Montanists, and Marcionites, and it’s instructive to observe their original manifestations.

But, of course, one book can’t do everything, and this one, if not used as a textbook, would serve as a gift you might give yourself for bedtime reading (I’d take it over ugh! Stephen King any day) or for a program of study that puts “all that ancient stuff” together in an orderly, not overwhelming, way.

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The Anonymous Christ: Jesus as Saviour in Modern Theology
Lee E. Snook

The rising tidal wave of contemporary Christology has begun the process of charting a new course for theology. Professor Lee Snook, who teaches systematic theology at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, has published a helpful (but at the same time problematic) introduction to the contemporary Christological scene. This is an introduction addressed to a very particular audience. Snook is speaking to “all those who have difficulty taking the traditional churchly confessions of Jesus as their starting point” (7).

According to Snook, soteriology is the ultimate measuring-stick that determines the authenticity of any Christology today. An authentic Christology must demonstrate how Jesus saves humankind from the multidimensional forms of lostness. Lostness refers to: idolatrous unbelief, hopelessness, anxiety and alienation, oppression, ecological disaster, isolation, false and distorted consciousness.

For Snook, there is no one, absolute, definitive Christology. Every Christology has its bias, whether or not its proponents are conscious of it. An authentic faith in Jesus as Saviour today will review reality as: openness, multidimensional, dialogue, complex, and pluralistic.

Snook employs two major methodological categories to interpret contemporary Christologies. First, he borrows, in a modified form, the categories of George Lindbeck. Snook presents the Christologies of Karl Barth, Hans Frei, Paul Tillich, the liberation theologians, and Thomas J.J. Altizer as “Cultural-Linguistic”. The Christologies of Wolfhart Pannenberg, John Cobb, Edward Schillebeeckx, John Hick, Karl Rahner, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith are presented by Snook as “Experiential-Historical”. The