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# Readings in Western Religious Thought: The Ancient World

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## Readings in Western Religious Thought: The Ancient World

Edited by Patrick V. Reid

New York and Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987

viii + 395 pp., U.S. \$12.95 paperback

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 Judaeo-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., informed 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 Testament; (6) The Christian Fathers and Early Christological Councils. The selections 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, however, 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

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986

191 pp.

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