

# *The Progressive Catholic Review:* *An Evangelical and Ecumenical Discourse*

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## **BOOK NOTES**

### **A Miscellany**

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*NOTE: Some of the notes are very brief, some are longer. Some books can be summarized succinctly and some need more elaboration. All are recommended and the length or brevity is not an index of the strength of that recommendation.*

Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

*When an Evangelical pastor admonishes us to take the love of God in Christ Jesus seriously and pleads that we cease scaring the hell out of people (literally), we need to listen. Yes, the book contains a simple message, but with some important nuances that are worth reading*

Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

*This is a large book based on a lifetime of study by one of the world's leading contemporary Sociologists of Religion. He spends most of his time taking a look at some profound shifts in religion in the pre-historical and ancient periods, but he asks excellent questions that apply to our own time as well as times past. For our purposes, his most interesting question is probably this: To what extent do our religious inclinations and articulations stem from our biology and our "Collective Unconscious" as well as from our various cultures? In a relatively lengthy conclusion (pp. 567-606) Bellah rapidly brings what he has learned about the far distant past through the Early Modern Period and into the present. His final words are a good place of departure for any further reflection: "If we could see that we are all in this, with our theories, yes, but with our practices and stories, together, even though we must contend through mutual discussion with abiding differences, we might make just a bit more likely the actualization of*

*Kant's dream of a world civil society that could at least restrain the violence of state-organized societies toward each other and the environment."*

Marcus J. Borg, ***Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power - And How They Can Be Restored***. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

*Who would have thought that a book combining theology, biblical scholarship, linguistic and semiotics would be a compelling page-turner? Every adult Christian (and some precocious folk en-route to adulthood) can benefit from reading this engaging and perspective-challenging book-length essay, whether one is a seasoned pastor or someone with the chrism of the Easter Vigil still fresh on their heads.*

Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, ***Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals***. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

*This breviary was compiled by members of The Simple Way Community in Philadelphia. They are Evangelicals dedicated to a life of poverty in service to the poor. They live in intentional community among those whom they serve. In these pages we find solid Catholic faith blended with a profound commitment to social injustice inspired by Christ's love (and the blending is easy). Some of us in the Community of St. Francis have been using this resource for the daily office to great benefit. We also share fellowship with a mixed Catholic and Evangelical community in another Chicago neighborhood who use this as their breviary, which gives us opportunity to share worship with sisters and brothers who are both on a different path but really the same path.*

Stanley Hauerwas, ***Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir***. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010.

*Stanley Hauerwas is a prominent American theologian who is difficult to classify. I once described him as a "Methodist/Mennonite/Catholic/Lutheran/ Anglican,"<sup>1</sup> and that is oversimplified. In this memoir Hauerwas explores all of these influences and more. As a storyteller he is the equal of Mark Twain for timing and wit. As a crafter of theological insight he is as acute and succinct. He will also have you in tears as he explores his experience of the murky dimensions of the human condition. It is salutary that this notice appears in this issue, because he offers us a spiritual journey that is remarkable and will leave the reader with so much to contemplate.*

Anthony Kenny, ***A New History of Western Philosophy***. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

*While this book has several virtues, not least of which is that it is long enough (a little over 1000 pages) to give fairly good coverage while not being too long to be usable. However, I confess that I include it primarily because it does a better job than other such histories of philosophy of*

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.csfeccc.org/sfvhouse/ecr/v1n29.pdf>

*exploring the crucial importance of Franciscan and Dominican influences on the emergence of the universities in the High Medieval Period and in defining Scholasticism. Kenny's treatment goes a long way toward deconstructing the un-nuanced view of Friars as simple folk who hung with Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men.*

Jack Mahoney, S.J., ***Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration***. Georgetown, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011.

*Many who are familiar with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin will certainly hear echoes of his philosophically and theologically infused paleontology as they read this book, but it is not simply "The Omega Point" revisited. Mahoney brings his perspective as a Christian ethicist to this analysis, with happy results. He not only sees remarkable compatibility between Christianity and evolution, he sees Christianity itself as a product of evolution. The argument, of course, is more detailed and sophisticated and any Christian interested in considering a new perspective (spiced nicely with theology with very ancient roots) would do well to spend time enjoying the succinct, accessible and clearly written treatment of a complex topic.*

James Martin, S.J., ***Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life***. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

*There are some moments of wisdom and huge hunks of hilarity in this Stand-Up Homilist who also gave us **The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything**.*

Michael Novak and William E. Simon, Jr., ***Living the Call: An Introduction to the Lay Vocation***. New York: Encounter Books, 2011.

*This book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on lay vocations. The authors ground their exhortations less in abstract arguments than in examples of specific laypersons in active and fruitful ministries within the Roman Catholic Church. This book can both inspire and inform laity as well as instruct clergy in all branches of Christianity.*

Stephen Prothero, ***God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter***. New York: HarperOne, 2010.

*Prothero respectfully looks at the function and interplay of the "World Religions" in a way that does not fall into the placidly pleasant fiction that all religions worship the same God and are different paths to the same place. He usefully points out that this homogenizing approach is merely the recreation of other religions in a manner that is comfortable for the one making the claim of sameness. Respectful pluralism demands that we deal with basic differences without making judgments. Prothero does a good job of delivering such a treatment.*

Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, ***American Grace: How Religion Divides us and Unites Us***. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.

*Based on an impressive review of scholarly literature, a thoughtful assessment of popular culture sources, and an enormous and sophisticated survey project ("Faith Matters" funded by the John*

Templeton Foundation), the authors present an interesting profile of the American religious landscape. It is constantly shifting, prone to relatively rapid cycles of decline and increase, and provides a contradictory platform for both cultural unity and division.

Rodney Stark, ***The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion***. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

*The entire book is worth reading, but for those interested primarily in the contemporary American scene Chapters 20 (Pluralism and American Piety) and 21 (Secularization: Facts and Fantasies) are the most important. Stark is critical of the secularization thesis, but his argument is quite different from Charles Taylor's **A Secular Age**. Stark's method is highly empirical and depends heavily on utterances people make when responding to surveys about religiosity. While I prefer Taylor's approach, Stark's approach is worth considering for its concentration on Christianity as a form of popular culture.*