

Christology Beyond Dogma: Matthew's Christ in Process Hermeneutic. By Russell Pregeant. Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978, 176 pp., \$6.00 paper (\$4.00 for SBL members).

In this thoughtful and creative book, Pregeant proposes to go beyond Bultmann's demythologizing and its heir (the new hermeneutic), develop a "process hermeneutic" out of Whitehead's process metaphysics, and then apply that hermeneutic to some of the more difficult questions in Matthew's gospel. The results he weighs by assessing their "depth" (their ability to demonstrate layers of meaning in the text not visible from other angles) and "appropriateness" (that the results are confirmed by at least some evidence in the text itself). Within its self-imposed limitations—e. g., the adoption of explicit antisupernatural presuppositions, labelled "scientific," and the uncritical acceptance of Whitehead's metaphysics—the work is a reasonably thorough and clear exposition.

Anyone who is venturing to pioneer in a new field is likely to tumble into pitfalls, and Pregeant is no exception. His book deserves more detailed interaction than the confines of this review allow, but a few of its problems may be briefly noted.

(1) Although Pregeant pits his process hermeneutic against Bultmann and his heirs, he nevertheless adopts in too strong a form the disjunction between text and reader. Of course he could not have been expected to read the later book by A. C. Thiselton (*The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980]), which demonstrates the possibility of coming to a valid if partial understanding of an objective text by "fusing" the two horizons (the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader). But there are other studies that antedate Thiselton's magisterial work and offer telling criticism of the new hermeneutic in its most extreme forms—criticisms with important ramifications for Pregeant's proposals. These he does not consider.

(2) Pregeant generally discusses scholarly contributions that stand in reasonably close proximity to his own approach, but he studiously avoids interaction with studies that call in question something fundamental to his approach. For instance, the explicit antisupernaturalism of the first page has been repeatedly shown to be a function of modern cultural blinders, and it is astonishing that he nowhere interacts with (for instance) the rigorous critique offered by Wolfhart Pannenberg. When talking about the Biblical text Pregeant fares no better. For example, in discussing Matt 5:17-20 he allows room for dialogue with interpretations of *plēroō* that feed into his process approach, but he does not so much as mention the interpretation of "to fulfill" in that passage offered by Robert Banks, whose proposal, if adopted, vitiates Pregeant's entire chapter. Again, although Pregeant in this book is building on process metaphysics, it is worrisome that process theologians, including Pregeant, continue on the whole to attack alternative systems without thoughtfully responding to threats on their own flanks. For a recent example of one such threat see Bruce Demarest, "Process Theology and the Pauline Doctrine of the Incarnation," *Pauline Studies (Festschrift F. F. Bruce)*; ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris; Exeter: Paternoster, 1980) 122-142.

(3) An essential part of Pregeant's application of process hermeneutic to passages he selects from Matthew (5:17-20; 11:25-30; 13:36-43; 25:31-46) is the need to demonstrate that the language of the text has, in each case, "a metaphysical thrust which may function in a way that is quite at odds with a univocal rendering of its terms" (p. 75). Methodologically this seems to depend on two steps: first, finding the desired thrust as a deduction of some textual point; and second, pitting this deduction against some explicit statement to the contrary. A statement pointing to grace, for instance, in reality affirms God's universal love, and that love is in contradiction with particularism. To pull this old chestnut out of the fire is well-nigh irresponsible, at least without thorough interaction with the countless responses that have demonstrated that there is no incompatibility whatever. Worse, Pregeant's hermeneutic is self-confessedly based on a method that must find (or manufacture) historical and theological disjunctions—a classic fallacy in all historical research (cf. David Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* [New York: Harper, 1970]).

(4) Although Pregeant wants to distance himself from hermeneutical approaches in

which the interpreter finds in the Scriptures the Christ already presupposed, he has fallen into the same trap. Toward the conclusion of his study Pregeant summarizes his findings by saying that the “real nature of the New Testament’s witness to Jesus as the Christ. . . is, from the perspective of a process hermeneutic as I conceive it, a proximate lure which serves finally to point beyond itself bifocally: toward a particular human self-understanding on the one hand and toward an apprehension of God as the ultimate ground of this possibility on the other” (p. 157). Stripped of the technical language, Pregeant is saying (as his next lines go on to affirm) that the Whiteheadian metaphysics he has adopted, applied to language to develop Whiteheadian process hermeneutic that is then applied to NT Christology, interprets that Christology in such a way as to show that its real nature is nothing less than the substantiation of Whiteheadian metaphysics. Methodologically this approach is not easily distinguishable from the way Harnack (for instance) found a liberal Jesus in the NT.

(5) A never-failing source of astonishment in a book like this is the elevated, “religious” tone it seeks to preserve. We are told: “For if the Christ figure of the New Testament no longer appears as the exclusive irruption of grace into history, he nevertheless appears to those who are grasped by his words and deeds as the full and definitive disclosure of a grace always and forever being given in the universe. In this image they are surprised with a radical love which accepts them into an unbreakable fellowship with the ground of reality; in this image they are confronted with a radical call that bids them lay aside their selfish motives and find fulfillment in living for the sake of the total reality and broadest community in which they stand” (p. 168). God is not a personal, transcendent and loving Person, but (a more-or-less Tillichian) “ground of reality” or “total reality”; radical love cannot be measured, as in the NT, by the unique self-sacrifice of the incarnate Son in time-space history; the “call” is nothing personal, but a challenge effected by the speech-event of the existential encounter with the text; the “disclosure of grace” has nothing to do with the gracious self-disclosure, self-revelation and saving mercy of a personal God. Yet all the religiously emotive force of these and other terms—e. g., fellowship, image, irruption of grace—gives the sentences a religious hue that seems rather too generous for what is actually being said. For ground of reality’s sake, let us avoid the evocative language of Christianity when its distinctive core has been removed.

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