

with a “preferential option” for the marginalized.

Hall finishes with a whimsical reflection on a visit to a megachurch that, he finds, embodies all the seductions that characterize U.S. religion generally. His response to that experience is a series of alternatives à la Peter Abelard:

Affirmation, Sic/Presumption, Non;
Immediacy, Sic/Folksiness, Non;
Jesus, Sic/Jesus-ism, Non;
The Cross, Sic/Substitutionary Atonement Theory, Non.

The megachurch, he concludes, is in the kind of bondage that Luther warned about.

One might, at first glance, judge that Hall is simply an old white guy doing cerebral theology that is remote from the immediate challenges of contemporary life. Hall is indeed an old white guy! But given my sense of congregational life, I judge that he has drawn

very close to the crisis of faith that daily confronts serious churchpeople. The challenge, it seems to me, is to find a place to stand from which to engage the frantic survivalism, the endlessly picky small-bore demands and the usual business of small-time personal rubs that are uncritically contained in ideology. Given such a daily menu, the depth and wonder of grace get lost in the shuffle of keeping on. Hall provides the reader a way to think differently and, eventually, a place to stand in freedom.

For Hall, old as he is (even older than this reviewer!), this is no doubt the last book . . . until the next one. The next one, like this one, will be welcome. What Hall shows us is the urgency and possibility of our moment for offering another performance of the old drama whereby the way that is not our way gets a hearing. The work continues, and Hall gives nourishment for the task.

The Quest for the Historical Satan

By Miguel A. De La Torre
and Albert Hernández

Fortress, 256 pp., \$20.00 paperback

According to Albert Schweitzer, the quest for the historical Jesus ends with the questers looking down a well and seeing their own reflections. Could the same be said of a search for the historical Satan? With few exceptions, we have tended to see Satan in the face of the other. Satan has proved to be a useful foil to describe one’s enemies and to make sense of the continuing presence of evil and suffering in the world, whether or not one believes in a literal Satan.

A quest for the historical Satan has been undertaken for the purpose of understanding how this image came to be, how it has been used in history and how, despite technological progress, it is still used to explain the fact that evil remains with us. Leading this quest are two professors from Iliff School of Theology, ethicist Miguel De La Torre and historian Albert Hernández. They begin in the present, introducing us to the ways in which Satan is portrayed by Hollywood and by various religious communities. From there, they go back to Egyptian mythology and move through early Jewish developments and on to evolving Christian and Muslim understandings.

Satan began as a trickster with an ambiguous identity and became the embodiment of absolute evil. The evolution of this image is fascinating and enlightening, and as we delve into it, we discover that many of our assumptions about Satan and evil are misguided and mistaken.

Why this book? The vast majority of Americans say they believe not only in God but in a literal Satan. A 2000 Princeton survey suggests that 75 percent of Americans believe in Satan, and a 2007 Baylor survey reached similar

Reviewed by Robert D. Cornwall, pastor of Central Woodward Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Troy, Michigan, and editor of Sharing the Practice, the journal of the Academy of Parish Clergy.

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results. Books and movies, whether religiously oriented or not, give evidence of our fascination with the dark side of reality, and some American Christians believe that the United Nations is a satanic entity. All the evidence suggests that we continue to believe that "Satan is alive and well on planet earth" (as in the title of a 1972 book by Hal Lindsey).

In their quest to tell the story of the evolution of human understandings of the figure of Satan and other personifications of evil, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Hindu, the authors discovered that through the ages there has been great variation. In the book of Job, Satan is a member of the heavenly court whose responsibility is that of accuser and prosecutor. Whatever mischief Satan causes is at the direction of God. Later, especially after the postexilic encounter with Zoroastrianism, a dualism set in, and Satan began to emerge as a powerful opponent of God. By the time of the New Testament, Satan was often seen as the personification of absolute evil, a view that continued to develop into the patristic era and on through the medieval era.

As an exclusivist Christian monotheism engaged the Hellenistic syncretism that dominated the Roman Empire, it interpreted such options as expressions of the demonic and the Satanic. Dualistic tendencies were present, but some of the more adept theologians, such as Augustine, recognized the danger of seeing evil as having an equivalence of the good; thus Augustine portrayed Satan as real, but not as a rival to the good.

Satan came of age as Christians gained power in the time of Constantine and began to suppress their rivals, whom they viewed as minions of Satan. Charlemagne sought to resist evil by forcing his enemies to convert on pain of death, and in the medieval age not only pagans but Muslims and Jews were envisioned as followers of the Antichrist. During this era Dante defined what would become the most common understanding of the devil, while witch hunts led to the suppression of women. Later, colonizers rationalized their violent conquests as acts of liberating their subjects from demonic oppression. The pattern continued in the modern era as the enemy, whether it was Hitler, communism or Islam, was cast as the embodiment of evil.

Although we moderns may be more skeptical of supernaturalism, we remain fascinated by the continuing presence of evil and by the image of Satan. The authors suggest, however, that we may have lost our fear of Satan. Indeed, perhaps Satan is now dead. But do we need Satan in order to believe in God? That is, do we need the image of Satan to help us explain the continuing presence of evil in the world?

If traditional views of Satan as the embodiment of evil are no longer satisfactory, could we benefit by a return to the earlier image of Satan as trickster (as in Job)? Could this image help us make sense of suffering and evil, while helping us let go of dangerous dualisms that lead us to demonize others?

Although we tend to portray the other

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as satanic, I agree with the authors' suggestion that the quest for the historical Satan leads back to us, especially those of us who are Christians. This quest, if we're open to its revelations, will help us exorcise "Satan and the demonic legions lodged within the heart and mind of an exclusivist and persecuting tradition."

Well researched and well written, with scholarly integrity, this book is accessible to nonspecialists. Readers will find themselves drawn in by the authors' exploration of our fascination with images of evil, by the color plates that illustrate this fascination and by the stories from popular culture and legend that the authors weave together with textual studies from religious traditions ranging from Egyptian polytheism to Islam.

The quest ends close to home, revealing to us our complicity in demonizing the other and justifying our own engagement in acts of evil. It can be a frightening reminder, and the authors are to be commended for their courage in raising the question: Who is the historical Satan?

Poetry Chronicle

Reading God's Handwriting: Poems

By Philip C. Kolin
Kaufmann, 96 pp., \$16.95

A prolific literary critic, editor of the *Southern Quarterly*, and University Distinguished Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, Philip C. Kolin is one of the growing tribe of very fine Christian poets whose work has often been sequestered in the limited venues of independent publishers. His newest collection is a beautifully printed, small hardcover volume that fits comfortably in the palm of the hand.

But these are not small or comfortable poems. Kolin takes on the most expansive of subjects: God's handwriting (or as he puts it in his preface, "God's hand writing") in scripture, history and

nature. He draws fresh pictures of biblical figures such as Joseph ("His staff grew lilies to woo her"); St. Anne ("She sat on my lap, / My Mater Dei, flesh / Of my flesh"); and Lazarus ("the third day is déjà vu for him").

In a series of Advent poems Kolin identifies the waiting, the watching, the impatience and the need to stay awake during very sleepy times to attend to a king whose throne is a womb. In "Holy Communion" he describes the "pilgrimage of naked faces" and the way "an oratory of mouths waits for / The breath of infinity to fill them / With a new genealogy / As God places a pearl on each tongue." He is able in "Genesis" to summarize the entire first book of the Bible in 15 lines with a catalog of images that captures its poetry, its main actors, its violence and its promise.

Kolin also ponders the deep narcissism of our sinful condition: "We are lost in the dense darkness of self / confusing the space of a coffin with / The size of a galaxy." But he is not devoid of a sense of humor, which puts so much in perspective as he describes a Martha who kept a perfect house, joining the choir "To starch everyone's voice / Into conformity with hers." Irritated by too long a wait in line for communion, she finally gets the message when "God told her / He loved all those wrinkled / And sin-stained banquet of self / Others gave Him, and told her / To get cooking on hers."

These remarkably varied poems will reward the casual browser, but they are more than random, occasional pieces. The reader who follows this book from beginning to end will find deep unities in a range of poems that are meant to communicate something larger than themselves.

Vineyards: A Journal of Christian Poetry

Edited by Philip C. Kolin
70 pp., \$10.00 (annual subscription)

This new journal edited by Kolin has produced two volumes of strong poetry

Reviewed by Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, the CENTURY's poetry editor, whose recent collection of poetry is My Father's Bones.



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