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Review of *Why Are We Here? Everyday Questions and the Christian Life* edited by Ronald F. Thiemann and William C. Placher

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Why Are We Here? Everyday Questions and the Christian Life. Edited by Ronald F. Thiemann and William C. Placher. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998. viii + 166 pp. \$15.00 (paper).

This important collection of essays seeks to draw out the connections between theological reflection and the questions of faith that matter most to all kinds of people. It emerges from the ongoing conversations of several the-

ologians and graduates of Yale, but it is written for a wide and non-specialized audience. William C. Placher states in the Introduction that this book is for "seekers, for pilgrims still intellectually journeying in matters of faith," including those "found both inside and outside Christian churches" (p. 4).

The variety and importance of the essay topics can be illustrated in terms of several selections. Kathryn Tanner's essay "Why Are We Here?" provides the title for this volume, and urges that the meaning of life not be overidentified with role performance. She notes that our relationship with God is not about "being hired to perform a job" (p. 13). The meaning of our lives exceeds our productivity, and God is also the God of times that seem barren and desolate (p. 15). If we do not have that perspective, then our own meaning may be reduced to mere utility and function. In this light, she asks, "What is an old woman worth, without husband or family to attend to? What is an unemployed life worth, one that makes no economic contribution to the wealth of the nation?" (p. 13).

In the essay "Why Are We So Indifferent About Our Spiritual Lives?" David Dawson states that to be spiritually indifferent is "*not to care* one way or another about our own lives, but instead *to care* about everything else" (p. 23). He warns that our children, students, or close family members "provide a litmus test for whether we are centered persons in our own right who no longer look to others to satisfy our needs, and whose needs are no longer defined by the regard of those outside us" (p. 35). Thomas F. Tracy states in "Why Do the Innocent Suffer?" that it is more important to focus on what God does to overcome evil rather than trying to figure out in every case why God permits evil (p. 47). Although we affirm that God can bring good out of evil, this does not mean that evil is sent to us by God for our own good. The good that emerges from evil is a redeeming and healing work of grace, not the result of a "means/ends strategy" (p. 47). In Christ, God "acts to redeem us as doers and sufferers of evil by taking us into a relationship grounded in the triumph of love over suffering in God's own life" (p. 54).

Bruce D. Marshall notes in "Are There Angels?" that biblical angels—unlike today's media angels—chiefly act for the sake of a "larger purpose," providing not so much comfort and relief as a call to action and exertion. For example, "Isaiah and Ezekiel get to see angels, not in order to reassure them that life has a spiritual dimension or to help them cope with the perplexities of daily life, but in order to equip them for the difficult prophetic work that lies ahead" (p. 77). Michael Root draws together theology of the Church and salvation in his essay "Why Care About the Unity of the Church?", noting that salvation in the New Testament "is not simply a benefit persons receive from God . . . salvation is a true communion or fellowship with God" (p. 101). Root states the argument of 1 Corinthians 10-11 to be that our "community with Christ is also necessarily a communion with others in Christ" (p. 103). The reign of God announced by Jesus is not "just a new relation between God and

individuals," because "the renewal of communal life is an essential aspect of what Christ does" (pp. 99-100).

The essays in this collection will prove to be accessible for many people, including undergraduates, seminarians, participants in adult study groups, and those who simply want to begin to consider a variety of "everyday questions" of importance relative to the Christian life. The essays are presented without footnotes, but suggestions for further reading are included with each essay. This collection is helpful, thought-provoking, and easy to use. I intend to use it for an undergraduate class that will explore various themes in Christian theology.

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