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Review of *Grace & Obedience: Theological Essays in Criticism 1960-1999* by John M. Gessell

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Grace & Obedience: Theological Essays in Criticism 1960-1999. By John M. Gessell.
Sewanee: Proctor's Hall Press, 2002. xi + 114 pages. \$14 pb.

This collection of essays provides a retrospective view of John M. Gessell's theological contributions from the 1960s through the 1990s, and it clearly portrays his willingness to engage a host of contemporary issues with theological

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insight and strong conviction. The collection is introduced by a theological autobiography in which Gessell describes his own steps in becoming a theologian “not by reflective choice, but out of an existential demand to be able to make sense out of a world which would otherwise be nonsense” (2-3). In the essay “Source of Light and Life” (1999), Gessell adds that “the theologian’s task is to acknowledge his existential task and, at the same time, to transcend it” (106).

Gessell pulls no punches concerning his positions and stances. He states in his introduction that he is often “restless” with the Episcopal Church’s “inadequate theological vision,” and that he has “come to realize that I am at war with the Episcopal Church and its accelerating absorption into the values of a radical secularist culture and of the warfare state, its sexual terrorism, and its vulnerability to being highjacked by the right wing” (13). This position is consistent with his statement in the essay “Theological Existence in the Church Today” (1980) that “the Church’s growing alliance with the conservative drift to the right unwittingly secularizes its life by putatively identifying as Christian the values of a secularized world and confounding the Church’s well-being with the welfare of the nation” (34). In this regard, Gessell seems to have identified a trend that continues into the present.

The topics of critical theological reflection in this collection of essays are varied and wide-ranging, from priestly authority to Sunday school to biblical economics to homosexuality to the political implications of faith and worship to outrage at the consecration of a bishop opposed to the ordination of women, and much more. These topics are still timely and provocative. For example, in “The Tightening Noose” (1980), Gessell warns that the arms race and a nuclear war could “become an excuse to set up a national security state, to give the Pentagon a free hand at home and around the world, to remove all restraints from the CIA and FBI, to stifle all criticism of government policy and of the nuclear energy industry—in other words, to abolish all civil liberties now protected by the Constitution” (67).

Through all the issues and controversies, Gessell unfailingly seeks to root his own critical response in Christian belief. The meaning of Christian faith is to be discovered in the midst of the challenges and confusions of daily life. Indeed, Gessell states in “Source of Light and Life” that “Anglicanism, as a way of being Christian in the world” is characterized by three principles: “recognizing the distinction between what is necessary to salvation and what are, though important, matters of indifference; repudiating infallibility; and recasting essential formulations of dogma in light of continuing experience in the world” (102). In many ways, throughout this collection, that is precisely what Gessell does as he distinguishes essentials from less significant matters, debunks false claims, and reformulates essential Christian truth to address, make sense of, and learn from the most challenging issues of our time. —*Robert B. Slocum*