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Review of *John Williamson Nevin, American Theologian* by Richard E. Wentz

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John Williamson Nevin, American Theologian. By Richard E. Wentz. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. viii +169 pp. \$35 (cloth).

John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) was a professor of theology at the German Reformed Seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, a founder of the *Mercersburg Review*, and a leader in developing the Mercersburg theology. Despite Nevin's doubts about Anglicanism, the Mercersburg theology deserves considerable interest and attention from Anglicans as a catholic, sacramental, and historically grounded expression of faith in the Protestant tradition. Richard Wentz presents "a postmodern portrait of Nevin's ideas" (p. 8) that competently highlights both the major themes of Nevin's work and the historical context of his contribution. Wentz notes that Nevin contradicted much of the "rampant individualism" that characterized the revivalistic Evangelicalism of his day (p. 24). Nevin also resisted the "history-less character of the sectarian mind," as well as the "antiritualistic bias" of Puritan assumptions and the "spiritualistic impulses" of the Continental reformation (pp. 88, 128).

Wentz is at his best when he describes the forces and tendencies of American religion that Nevin countered. Wentz notes the Puritan legacy of "iconoclastic spiritualism" that prized subjective, internal devotion and tended to dismiss objective realities as "inconsequential or even satanic temptations" (p. 128). Nevin upheld an incarnational theology of salvation and Church. Salvation in Christ is made available and lived through the outward and visible realities of life, including most especially the life of the Church. Nevin countered the widespread American emphasis on subjective judgment and interiorized devotion by appealing to the "incarnational movement of history" (p. 94). He believed that history has been substantively altered in Christ's incarnation (p. 10). In Christ, God entered the world to "raise the entire world process into a fullness in the divine" (p. 117).

Nevin emphasized that inward and outward realities are not to be disjoined from one another. The natural order is more than just its visible appearance. It points beyond itself to the supernatural and participates in the supernatural, so that nature and supernature "coinhere" (p. 122). In this regard, Wentz could have given some profitable attention to Nevin relative to nineteenth-century romanticism. This relationship of inward and outward is also seen in Nevin's appreciation for the sacramentality of life, and the importance of the sacramental life of the Church. Outward forms can have no saving force without inward life, but inward life cannot be maintained if there are no outward forms (p. 21). Nevin likewise upheld the importance of the transcendent at a time when the "great temptation of the age" was to assume that the natural order with its "scientific, technological, industrial power" could be sufficient to the task of human fulfillment (p. 28).

Nevin pointed to the Church and the sacraments as the tangible way of encountering Christ for salvation. It is significant that Nevin had a leading role in proposing a new liturgy for the German Reformed Church. He sought to counter the "reigning idea of worship in America" which was virtually identified with "the utilitarian individualism of American revivalism" (p. 131). Wentz notes that Nevin's understanding of the Eucharist is at the heart of his incarnational theology. The Eucharist provides symbolic and objective expression of the creative process of the "real supernatural constitution unfolding itself historically in the world" (p. 37). Similarly, Nevin strongly upheld the importance of "the system of liturgy and the church year," which keeps the Christian life grounded in history. If this "system" is neglected, Nevin warns, Christianity tends to deteriorate into "mere utilitarian salvationism and history-less sectarianism" (p. 133).

Wentz's presentation of Nevin is thorough, well-organized, and generally clear. He has done a masterful job of drawing together the key points of Nevin's theology in light of the prevailing trends of American Protestantism in Nevin's time. Unfortunately, Wentz's study is often tepid. It would seem that much of the vibrancy of Nevin's life and theology is missing from this work. This shortcoming may also tend to limit the audience that will read Wentz's book. Nevertheless, this book represents a significant achievement—especially at a time when many major publishers are reluctant to market such studies of individual theologians. Nevin *was* a "major figure in the history of ideas in America" (p. 12). His contribution to the recovery of catholic tradition and incarnational theology in Protestantism is significant. Wentz's insights will provide a helpful introduction for those who want to know more about Nevin and the Mercersburg theology in the context of nineteenth-century American Protestantism.

An unexplored area of interest for Anglicans is the influence of Mercersburg theology on the Episcopal theologian William Porcher DuBose (1836-1918). DuBose specifically acknowledged his indebtedness to Mercersburg in his autobiographical *Turning Points in My Life* (New York, 1912, pp. 61-62). Although there are many parallels and shared points of emphasis, a systematic comparison of DuBose and the Mercersburg theology is yet to be done. Nevin will prove to be of interest to all who appreciate the "incarnational movement of history" and the sacramentality of salvation. His attention to recovering the wholeness of catholic tradition in Protestantism could prove to be the basis for significant ecumenical dialogue in the future.

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