

BOOK REVIEWS

John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1988. xx + 220 pp. Reprint of 1960 edition.

Bernard of Clairvaux's remark about Holy Week, that it begins in breast beating and ends in hand clapping, comes to mind as one reads the newly reissued *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation*. Bernard's order is, however, reversed: first one claps the hands at the book's reappearance, while at its conclusion one is saddened, not by John Deschner's performance, but that so few have followed his lead the past three decades in bringing Wesley studies to the sophistication it needs and demands.

Those pondering this book as a model for how to explicate Wesley's theology are likely to be both exhilarated and frustrated. A closer reading and more insightful exegeting of the foundational *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* and sermons can scarcely be imagined. Fresh from observing the 250 anniversary of Aldersgate, Deschner's reading of Wesley's writings as "manifestations of a theological *conversion*" has never been more convincing. One admires, too, the spunk of Deschner the graduate student—this study's first incarnation was for a University of Basel doctorate—as he contradicts Wesley's accepted interpreters and even rejects Wesley's storied claim of being within "a hair's breadth" of Calvin on justification. These are the exhilarations.

In his "Forward to the Reprint Edition" Deschner goes some distance toward quieting criticisms voiced against this book over the past quarter century. He positions his work to participate in contemporary ecclesial and ecumenical dialogue, and sounds the obligatory "let us never read Wesley as a pious individualist" note. Francis Asbury Press, the volume's new imprint, categorizes *Wesley's Christology* as "Historical Theology/Doctrine," but perhaps it did not heed the book's subtitle or consult Deschner. Only at second hand, if at all, is this book "historical theology." Mention of Arminius, Thomas á Kempis, William Law and Jeremy Taylor is almost nonexistent. The Reformation is the only historical period Deschner is much interested in, and in fact he calls his investigation "rather more a problem in symbolics than in the history of doctrine." It is doubtful if John Wesley ever wrote the word "symbolics," but assuredly he knew the history of doctrine. Here, then, is the frustration: Wesley studies today, spurred on by its aging if still potent exemplar Albert C. Outler, is invariably historical.

Working together as they did for years at Southern Methodist University, Deschner has in fact learned much from Outler. In his new forward, Deschner credits Outler with helping him to read Wesley historically. If only lately historically, Deschner has always read Wesley wholistically.

That whole he names "Christology," even if it often appears to be soteriology by another name.

From a theologian's theologian we would expect a profounder Christology, fitted out with an ontology and ready with a compelling psychology. From Wesley the folk theologian we are grateful to receive a nearly deified, and only marginally human, Christ, powerful to save us under the prophetic, kingly and priestly rubrics that Deschner relentlessly unpacks. Thus when only the first third of *Wesley's Christology* is devoted to "The Person of Christ" we are not surprised. Wesley's heart was in praxis, not pontification, and the heart of his God wanted to save us, not lecture us.

Deschner captures all of this, but does not let it capture him. He is aware, as he notes, that "the Christology is largely imbedded in or even concealed under soteriological material," but does not forsake his Christological calling. His book is not mistitled, for Christology, especially Christ's work, is paramount throughout. It is a Christology that hints at and frequently answers questions other Wesley researchers often overlook, such as the Trinity, the Law and Christ's relation to it, and Wesley's musings on whether there is a second justification at the final judgment.

How happy we would be if, Kierkegaard like, Deschner would now write a massive "concluding unscientific postscript" to the "Christological fragments" here assembled. Religious epistemology, knowing God in Christ and understanding human mystery thereby, would be its mandated focus. The one oversight in Wesley studies is the one underlying it all: how does John Wesley "do theology?" How does he speak about God? Can Wesley's theological method be articulated, or is it as fitful as his Georgia sojourn? If Deschner cannot answer this call, the clarity of *Wesley's Christology* will have appointed others, not necessarily wiser, but surely the better for having mastered this splendid work.

RODERICK T. LEUPP
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Major J. Jones, *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987. xi + 124 pp. \$24.95 (\$14.95 paper).

While reading *The Color of God*, one is immediately reminded of works along similar lines such as Benjamin May's *The Negro's God* and James Cone's *God of the Oppressed*. In the book at hand, however, the author's intent and scope are different. Jones, Administrative Dean Emeritus of Gammon Theological Seminary, has set out to develop an "Afro-Americanized concept of God." After chapters devoted in turn to

the historical development of black theology and its African roots, Jones turns to the heart of his argument. He takes up the problems of hermeneutics, theodicy, Christology and the Holy Spirit within the context of the black religious experience.

Making use of black and non-black sources, Jones seeks to limn a concept of God that is at once relevant to the lives of individuals and the black liberation struggle. His contention is, in part, that black theology has never been a merely speculative discipline. For this reason, he stresses the moral aspects of God's nature; especially as they undergird the black quest for liberation. It is therefore crucial to develop a concept of God that has been freed from white accretions, and consonant with the black experience. The first step of liberation is the rejection of the God of the oppressor.

The most distinctive part of Jones' work, and what distinguishes him from other black theologians, is his placing of the concept of God within the context of personalism. He declares his purpose in the preface when he states, "I contend that God is One Unitary Holy Personal Being . . ." (x). Given the importance and distinctiveness of this part of his work one wishes that Jones had given it a fuller treatment.

The Color of God is an important contribution to black theological scholarship that should generate much discussion within the church as well as the academy.

C. JARRETT GRAY, JR.
Madison, NJ

Margaret R. Waters, Dorothy Riker, and Doris Leistner, compilers, *Abstracts of Obituaries in the WESTERN CHRISTIAN ADVOCATE, 1834-1850*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Society (315 West Ohio Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202), 1988. 438 pp. \$35.00.

This is another valuable genealogical resource for those interested in the history of American Methodism. Most of the deaths reported occurred in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and other midwestern states. Many of the obituaries supplied information on the decedent's birthdate, birthplace, residences, and relatives.

The obituaries are listed according to year although the volume also includes a name index and a geographical index. Also listed are places from which photocopies of the obituaries may be obtained.

CHARLES YRIGOYEN, JR.
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Walter N. Vernon, *Becoming One People: A History of Louisiana Methodism*, Bossier City, LA: The Everett Publishing Company, 1987. ix + 375 pp.

Becoming One People is Walter Vernon's latest addition to his growing corpus of works on Methodist history. Having previously published seven books, including histories of Methodism in north Texas, Arkansas, and a collaboration on ethnics in the South Central Jurisdiction, this book offers a comprehensive history of Methodism in Louisiana from its beginning in 1799 to 1986. Vernon, the former editor of church school resources for the General Board of Education, has based his work on the extensive use of primary and secondary sources. The book is to be admired for its thorough documentation, as well as its complete indices of names, churches, and institutions.

Vernon is to be commended for his attempt to write an inclusive history. This requires his interweaving the contributions and developments of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Protestant Church, the United Brethren, as well as the Louisiana Conference on the Methodist (Episcopal) Church. Rather than focusing solely on institutional developments of the several conferences, relations with Methodist-related health, social service and educational institutions have been included. Vernon likewise has gone to great lengths to make note of the contributions of the laity. In addition, attention is given to the churches' response to socio-political issues. This book will prove of great interest to all persons interested in Methodist history in the southwest.

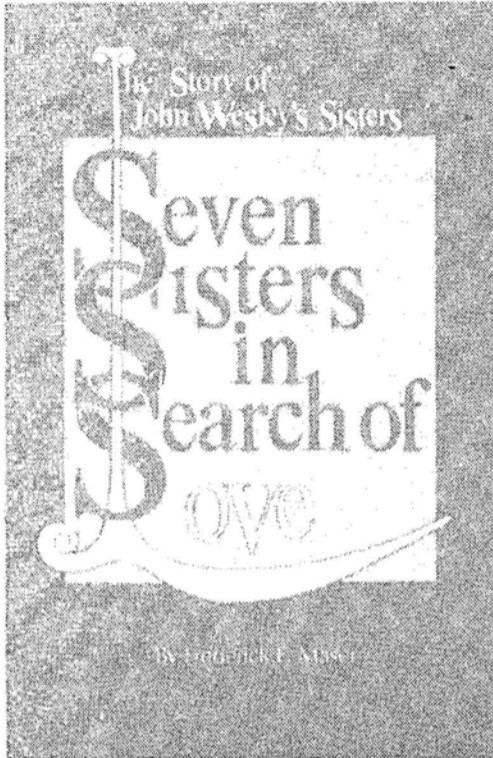
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