Jon Davies and Gerard Loughlin, Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society (Studies in Theology and Sexuality 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 223. No price.

Ian A. McFarland

Scottish Journal of Theology / Volume 55 / Issue 03 / August 2002, pp 369 - 377
DOI: 10.1017/S0036930602220384, Published online: 21 August 2002

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0036930602220384

How to cite this article:

Request Permissions : Click here

Professor Green continues his previous work on the concept of imagination in this highly readable book, a revised and expanded version of the Edward Cadbury Lectures, delivered at the University of Birmingham in 1998. He traces the hermeneutics of suspicion to Feuerbach and his influence on the later ‘masters of suspicion’, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. According to Green, central to the hermeneutics of suspicion is the identification of the core of religion with imagination. However, the modern masters were unwittingly dominated by a false dualism between reason and imagination, *Begriff* and *Vorstellung*, which has now been effectively removed by contemporary philosophers of science and philosophers proper. Therefore, the very simple thesis of the present book is that whilst religion can indeed be defined by its origin in the imagination, this need not discourage believers, because the old antithesis that rendered religion irrational and infantile no longer holds.

The orchestration of this argument starts with an analysis of Kant’s rejection of the positivity of religion in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. The ability to distinguish form from content is in the background of the accommodationist theologies that were to start from Kant. Such theologies reject the form of the Christian religion on grounds that it is based on positive authority and particular historical occurrences and concentrate on uncovering an essential content to it, accessible to and founded on reason. Green’s important and in my view correct contention is that ‘the positivity of the gospel cannot be reduced to a merely formal aspect of faith distinguished from its essential content, but rather that it constitutes an inescapable feature of the grammar of Christian faith’ (27). But religions are not systems of thought that can be abstracted from their cultural setting and practices. We need not have waited for the linguistic turn to hear this, since Kant’s friend and colleague Johann Georg Hamann was about telling it a long while ago. Professor Green is thus participating in the contemporary revival of interest in the work of the Königsberg philosopher, not least by annexing a valuable translation of Hamann’s letter to Kraus. Hamann, as a host of other theologians cum philosophers have pointed out, anticipates the linguistic turn well ahead of Saussure and Wittgenstein. His basic disagreements with Kant revolve around the priority that should be
awarded to language instead of thought and to the sensual over the intellectual. However, Green suggests that there is a Christian theological motivation behind this reversal. Instead of having a human reason, abstracted from language, tradition and experience, it should be ‘impregnated by the seed of the divine word . . . and live as man and wife under one roof’ (68). Hamann, that is, chooses to read reality in light of the word of God, acknowledging the positivity of the gospel. This analysis of Hamann occasions some reflections on the issue of incommensurability whereby Green cautions us against confusing it with either incomparability or incompatibility. For religion is a matter of imaginatively ‘reading reality as’ something. Not surprisingly, Professor Green argues for an ethical version of fideism, namely a fideism that will not refuse dialogue and criticism from other perspectives.

Next Green turns to Feuerbach’s critique of religion and urges theologians to take his critique seriously. He concurs with Barth’s assessment that ‘the attitude of the anti-theologian Feuerbach was more theological than that of many theologians’ (91). By this Barth and Green acknowledge the truth of the discovery that ‘the organ of religion’ is the faculty of imagination. We can, the latter suggests, retain the descriptive thesis of Feuerbach (that the organ of religion is imagination) and reject his evaluative thesis, namely that because religion is produced by imagination it should be treated with suspicion. The next great master of suspicion is Nietzsche, to whom Green devotes the longest chapter. Nietzsche’s merit is to have exposed that all facts are interpretations and that there are no apolitical and acultural ways of looking at reality. With this engagement we have reached the end of the first part of the book as well as the threshold of postmodernity.

Up to this point Green has ‘followed the course of the hermeneutics of suspicion’. The remaining three chapters in the book deal with the new possibilities that are available to theology in late modernity, all in view of the erosion of the dualism between reality and imagination. Green takes part in the discussion provoked by G. Ward’s book on Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology and argues that Barth may indeed be read as offering a Christian semiotics in which all attempts at metaphysics are postponed in the endless play of signs. Even the identification of Jesus as the ‘governing sign of all signs’ doesn’t give in to the temptation of the transcendental signified. The following chapter, ‘The Hermeneutic Imperative: Interpretation and the Theological Task’, is a description of what such a hermeneutics of the imagination will be like. There is no escaping interpretation, both in relation to texts and in relation to reality. That is to say, there is no escaping imagination. The interpretive task is indefinite, since there will
always be a surplus of meaning which refuses to be closed off. Green’s contribution to this somewhat trite position is that it is consonant with both a hermeneutics of the cross and with the mysterious and graceful nature of God who thereby guards the openness of scripture. The last chapter looks at various possible strategies for dealing with both suspicion and the relativism of postmodernity. The argument is that there is indeed a specifically Christian suspicion that is both necessary and valid. This is not, however, to fall back into foundationalism, for theology should constantly strive to get beyond objectivism and relativism. ‘Christians ought not to object when their religion is relativised’ (203). The foundation of Christians ‘does not appear in this world as absolute’ (199).

Having outlined the basic argument of the book, I will close the present review with some brief critical comments. One is left with the distinct feeling that, for all the stress on the imperative of interpretation, the contemporary scene is too clear and distinct for Green. He writes as if the debate between theorists like Kuhn and Feyerabend and (critical-) realists were long over and we have all acknowledged in awe the clear contribution that the former made. It is the opinion of the present reviewer that, while there can indeed be no facts that are perceived apart from a theoretical grid, there are better and worse perceptions just as there are better and worse imaginations. For indeed, as the history of science shows, some of those scientific imaginations proved inadequate to describe the world and were in consequence discarded. Green himself seems to allow for this when he grants that ‘Not whether to imagine but how to imagine rightly is the central theological question to emerge from the conversation with Feuerbach’ (104). Unfortunately, however, he does not further elucidate the conditions of this revisability. If imagination is indeed this interface between reality/ text and interpreting subject, then it must be revisable and open-ended itself, with a view to becoming more adequate (or less adequate) to reality. Granted, we do not have the luxury (some would not see it as such) of a detour around imagination towards reality. But how are we to safeguard against ‘mis-imagining the world in significant respects’ (202)? Perhaps Professor Green, as well as many co-sojourners on the theological road illuminated by aspects of postmodernism, should be less confident in the resources they are using. For this is also what grace and the interpretive imperative requires.

Adonis Vidu
University of Nottingham, UK

While the degree to which Western understandings of sex have changed in the last half-century is widely recognized, its implications are a matter of ongoing and often acrimonious debate. The contributors to this collection provide a range of perspectives on the decline of what the editors describe as the ‘sexual orthodoxy’ that positioned sex firmly within the bounds of heterosexual monogamy, and the corresponding proliferation of new interpretations of sex and sexuality.

The essays are divided into two sections, the first of which examines the factors contributing to the breakdown of ‘sexual orthodoxy’. The opening essays by Davies, Dennis, and Mellor and Shilling contain a wealth of sobering statistics and thought-provoking observations, but their shared sense of lament for an earlier era of social constraint begs a host of questions about the issues of power behind the public regulation of sexual mores. While the individualism of much contemporary reflection on sex is both theologically and socially problematic, reliance on an external authority in sexual matters raises more questions than, for example, Mellor and Shilling’s uncritical celebration of official Catholic teaching would suggest.

By contrast, Alan Storkey’s deconstruction of the mythology of the sexual revolution succeeds in showing how idiosyncratic contemporary society’s obsession with ‘sexual fulfilment’ is without romanticizing the past. His and Linda Woodhead’s essays both question the narrow limits within which sex these days tends to be construed by arguing that the Christian tradition has resources – many of which have up till now been deployed sporadically if at all – for broadening our perspective.

This call for the recontextualization sets the stage for the second half of the book, which offers a series of attempts to reconceive sex in a postmodern context. Adrian Hastings is more positive about the plasticity of contemporary sexuality than many of the authors in Part 1, though his suggestion that coitus be reserved until a relationship ‘can carry the meanings of mutual self-giving and ongoing commitment’ seems to differ little from traditional teaching beyond floating the morally dubious possibility of separating such commitment from marriage. More promising appropriations of postmodern thinking are found in the essays by Janette Gray, RSM and Tina Beattie, with Gray offering the prospect of celibacy as a way of being sexual that challenges the equation of sexual expression with sexual intercourse, and Beattie suggesting some surprising, if mutually critical,
complementarities between John Paul II’s teaching on embodiment and Luce Irigaray’s feminist philosophy of difference.

Elizabeth Stuart’s reflections on sex from a queer perspective offer a sharp criticism of sexual orthodoxy by arguing that the eschatological vision of sexuality implicit in Jesus’ teaching entails a profound critique of the patriarchal and heterosexist order. Despite her emphases on the continued need for concrete reflection on ‘sex in the next days’, however, her own vision of eschatological sexual communion remains vague, and many of her specific points (e.g. her suspicion of monogamy as a heteropatriarchal construction) correspondingly unpersuasive. Gerard Loughlin’s concluding reflections, also eschatologically focused, succeed somewhat better, partly because he proceeds by contrasting his vision with the vivid, death-centred sexual imagery of the film Alien 3.

Ian A. McFarland
University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK


Since William Farmer resurrected Griesbach’s hypothesis of Gospel relationships in the 1960s, a small group of like-minded allies, almost all based in the USA, have continued to defend this solution with vigour, vehemently arguing the case that Matthew was the first Gospel, that Luke used Matthew and that Mark used them both. One of the most senior members of the group now known as the International Institute for the Renewal of Gospel Studies is David Laird Dungan, the author of a major new History of the Synoptic Problem.

Dungan claims that his History differs from others in several ways. He issues a welcome reminder of the extent to which scholars are influenced by their ‘cultural assumptions’, even if he generates the impression that it is only two-source theorists who are so influenced. He adds that this is the first history to take seriously what he terms all four different ‘aspects’ or ‘components’ of the ‘full Synoptic Problem’, the canon, the text, the composition and the interpretation of the Gospels that constitute the book’s subtitle. Dungan traces developments in each of these elements in Gospel interpretation from the first century to the present, claiming that this broader discussion of questions like ‘Erasmus and the Return of the Greek New Testament’ and ‘The Overthrow of Erasmus’ ‘Standard Text’ and the Descent into Textual Chaos’ (Chapters 14–15) has been absent from previous histories of the Synoptic problem.

Dungan adds to these four ‘aspects’ of the Synoptic problem an exposi-
tion of ‘the heretofore unknown fact that there are not one but three clearly defined, strikingly different forms of the Synoptic Problem’ (394). The first of these ‘forms’ is characterized by the way Origen handled differences between the Gospels, in a ‘multivalent, multicentered manner’ (3). Although he was ‘the first to confront every aspect of the Synoptic Problem’ and ‘as such, he may rightly be regarded as the paradigm for all later attempts to account for the differences among the Gospels’ (4), Origen’s approach has now ‘all but disappeared in white, Euro(North American biblical interpretation’ (357). The second form is typified by Augustine, ‘who represents the apex of the authoritarian, literalist approach to the Gospels’ (3). Dungan explains that ‘The Gospel harmony is the telltale sign of the Second Form of the Synoptic Problem’ (4) and this form is still alive and well in contemporary Western fundamentalist circles. The third form of the Synoptic problem ‘is by far the most active in the latter part of the twentieth century’ (357). Its framework is the post-Enlightenment historical-critical approach, its favourite tool is the synopsis, and its origins are traced back to Spinoza and Griesbach. This is the ‘form’ of the Synoptic problem with which academic critical scholarship is most familiar.

The massive scope of this history will no doubt help to remind contemporary NT scholars, many of whom treat the Synoptic problem as irrelevant and dull, of the continued importance of this topic, and the extent to which it is intimately involved with elements like the composition and text of the Gospels. Moreover, here we have a chance to be educated about the all-important pre-history of the problem. It is not often when discussing the Synoptic problem that we are treated to lengthy discussions of such a range of key figures, from Origen (Chapter 7) and Augustine (Chapter 10), to Luther and Calvin (Chapter 13), to Griesbach and Holtzmann (Chapter 20). This is without doubt the most ambitious history of the Synoptic problem ever to have been written. Unfortunately, though, the book’s ambition is also its greatest weakness and it is likely that the book will frustrate its readers.

Even the most superficial reader will notice the odd imbalance of the book. Dungan complains that other histories begin in 1800 and so ‘do not tell the whole story’ (2). There is the opposite problem here: Dungan is so concerned with the pre-1800 scene that his book ends up paying far too little attention to what he calls ‘the most recent form of the Synoptic Problem’. This is especially the case over the last half-century, to which Dungan devotes less than 50 pages (‘Current Trends in the Post-Modern Period’, 343–91) in comparison to almost 200 pages in Part 2 of the book (‘The Creation of the Modern Critical Method’, 143–341), which, Dungan confesses, ‘probably set a record for long-windedness’ (345).
The book’s imbalance is connected with, and perhaps caused by, its oddest feature, that it avoids giving a precise definition of the ‘Synoptic Problem’ that is its stated focus, working in practice with a huge, hold-all definition that seems to be something like ‘academic study of the Gospels’. Of course matters like textual criticism and hermeneutics are relevant to the study of the Synoptic problem, and it is certainly the case that much study of the Synoptic problem has in the past been narrow and self-obsessed, but it is another thing actually to describe such issues as ‘aspects of’ the Synoptic problem and to devote large parts of the history to the discussion of them. It is a question, in other words, not only of definition but also of proportion, and at times this book reminds one of the Griesbachian Mark. For just as the latter indulges in expanding the details of stories like the Gerasene demoniac but drops teaching like the Lord’s Prayer and the Beatitudes, so Dungan devotes over 60 pages to Baruch Spinoza at the expense of focusing on all sorts of key elements in the development of the Synoptic problem proper over the last century.

Moreover, at the risk of being oversimplistic, the term ‘Synoptic’ problem is generated by the term ‘Synoptic’ Gospels, and nowhere here is there any discussion of that most basic issue, the distinction between the Synoptics and John. The reader unfamiliar with the Synoptic problem would have no idea from reading this book that the extensive, verbatim agreement between Matthew, Mark and Luke is not shared with John. Rather, where Dungan does draw attention to any difference, he suggests that it is a question purely of the theological and historical judgements on the Fourth Gospel. Dungan claims, for example, that ‘Huck’s synopsis dispensed with most of the Gospel of John’ because ‘prevailing opinion held it to be totally unhistorical (350; cf. 322). But Gospel synopses (including the pioneering attempt of Griesbach as well as those of contemporary Griesbachians) do not necessarily ‘dispense’ with John because of any historical or theological judgement on it but only insofar as they are synopses of the Gospels, books that arrange the Gospels synoptically, inevitably giving preference to those Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – to which the synopsis thereby lends its name.

These difficulties in conception, definition and strategy are compounded by the marked focus on the Griesbach hypothesis, for which Dungan is a vociferous advocate. This focus is not in itself any bad thing, of course, but it is combined with a summary treatment of other theories, and there are several cases of misrepresentation. Neirynck’s position on the minor agreements is much more nuanced than that they ‘were just accidental coincidences where Matthew and Luke simultaneously and independently altered their text of Mark in precisely the same way’ (387); Georg Strecker
is in favour of Deutero-Markus not 'Ur-Markus', and the spokesperson at the Göttingen symposium for Deutero-Markus was not Strecker but Albert Fuchs (378); and the section on the Jesus Seminar (355–6) is (at best) pure caricature.

Worse still is an unfortunate but major error whereby two very different solutions to the Synoptic problem are confused, the Augustinian theory, which defends the canonical order as the order of composition, associated with B. C. Butler and now hardly held by any reputable scholar, and the Farrer theory, one of the most important contemporary perspectives, which defends Marcan priority but dispenses with Q, the theory particularly associated with Michael Goulder. At first one wonders if this is just a temporary slip, but it seems not – Farrer and Goulder are misrepresented on all four occasions that they are mentioned ('the modified Augustinian hypothesis proposed by B. C. Butler and Austin Farrer', 369; 'the Augustinian hypothesis (Goulder)', 376; 'Augustinian (Goulder)', 378; 'The Continuation of B. C. Butler's Proposed Solution ... Austin Farrer and his student Michael Goulder', 384–5). This kind of confusion is simply unacceptable, all the more so in a history specifically focusing on the Synoptic problem, and particularly egregious given the repeated concern Dungan expresses over the lack of an adequate reception for the Griesbach hypothesis.

Further, while Dungan usefully reminds us of some painful episodes in the history of Gospel scholarship, the overt stress on the role played by German political agendas in the establishment of Marcan priority largely obscures the actual arguments that were developing for the two-source theory, especially in the United Kingdom, and ultimately contributes to some unsavoury, unhelpful thoughts. It is unlikely that adherents of the Griesbach hypothesis will make friends for themselves by implying so strong a link between Marcan priority and the attitudes and events that culminated in the Holocaust (especially 339–40). If Griesbachian scholars plan to continue to explore these avenues (which seems certain given the statement that 'definitive evidence is not yet in hand', 340), they might do well to make it quite clear that there is absolutely no link between the contemporary defence of Marcan priority and 'hatred of the Jews' that they of course rightly deplore.

Although the book is attractively printed, there are several question marks over elements in its production. The lack of a bibliography sometimes makes for difficult reading, not least given that many books discussed in the text and footnotes are missing from the index (for example, Orchard and Longstaff, Kloppenborg, Goodacre). The book contains a number of errors, including ἐπιθετός, οἱ (14); ἄμαρτώ (20); the Gospels report not
Peter’s ‘betrayal of Jesus’ but his denial (22); εὑρεγελίον (41); Prophyry (97); ‘Christ Church College, Oxford’ should be ‘Christ Church, Oxford’ (193); ‘von Simons’ should be ‘Simons’ (326 and 489, n. 91); σῶτρ (399, n. 9); τῷ and ὀφ (401, n. 25); Ἐβρα τα διαλέκτρος (401, n. 28); ‘op. cit. n. 46’ should be ‘op. cit. n. 45’ (443, n. 71); ‘op. cit. n. 60’ should be ‘op. cit. n. 56’ (487, n. 66); ‘Orchard and Orchard’ should be ‘Orchard and Longstaff’ (488, n. 73); Οὐίκσ (509, n. 76); ‘Farrar’ should be ‘Farrer’ (516).

The book’s endnotes are also difficult to navigate, with only ‘Notes to Chapter 1 [etc.]’ at the top of each page. And finally, the publisher’s advertising material is unhelpful. In an attempt to market the book to those interested in the Jesus Seminar, half of the blurb focuses on their views, but they are wrongly characterized as that ‘these Gospels are all based on the hypothetical Gospel of Q’, a concern given the book’s attempt to be setting the record straight.

The enduring legacy of Dungan’s book should be to encourage us to view the Synoptic problem within the broader framework of the history of the reception of the Gospels, from the first century to the present. But its strength in attempting to achieve this laudable objective is at the same time the book’s greatest weakness. Little able to distinguish for the most part between the history of the Gospels and the study of the Synoptic problem proper, the latter is left submerged in an over-ambitious project that combines care at some points with haste at others, leaving us with a History that is clear only in its conviction that the Griesbach hypothesis is right and that it has been done a great disservice.

Mark Goodacre
University of Birmingham, UK