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## **BOOK BRIEFS**

*John H. Armstrong*

### ***AS I LAY DYING: MEDITATIONS UPON RETURNING***

Richard John Neuhaus

Basic Books: New York, New York (2002)

168 pages, cloth, \$22.00

We are born to die. Not that death is the purpose of our being born, but we are born toward death, and in each of our lives the work of dying is already under way" (3). With these sobering words the acclaimed writer Richard John Neuhaus begins his little treatise on facing death and returning. "Death is the warp and woof of existence in the ordinary, the quotidian, the way things are. It is the horizon against which we get up in the morning and go to bed at night, and the next morning we awake to find the horizon has drawn one day closer" (4).

Though the reader may, at first, be put off by what seems excessive morbidity, such prose jars the reader into the reality of what is as human as birth itself. Neuhaus writes to jar you. He grabs you by the lapel and seems to say, "Listen friend, this is for you!"

Ideas taken from Augustine, Goethe, Job, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy are powerfully used in the opening chapter to set the stage for Neuhaus' personal reflections. He argues that former reticence about sex and death, in everyday human conversation, has been replaced by a great liberation. The problem is this liberation has removed the mystery and without the mystery there is no profound reflection. An unreflective life is not one that will be lived well nor one that can face dying well. As in so many areas of modern life television has intruded into the inner sanctum of our humanity making everything appear clinical, if not entertaining. "Death with

dignity" now allows multitudes to embrace euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide.

The background of Neuhaus' personal reflection was his own personal brush with death when an operation went badly wrong and he almost bled to death internally. He frankly admits his most personal questions and explains how he thought about himself, his circumstances and his future. There are parts of this story that are profoundly moving. As one would expect from Neuhaus, there is a blend of traditionally Roman Catholic thought with more evangelical Protestant teaching.

This is not so much an essay about one person facing his own mortality as it is a profoundly Christian attempt to make sense of life and death in the moments of actually facing your own death. For this reason I found the book extremely valuable. In fact, since reading this little volume before my evening sleep I have come to reflect far more intentionally on my own death. Neuhaus notes that from the twelfth-century *Enchiridion Leonis* comes the nighttime prayer of children: "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take." I prayed that prayer a few times as a child. Since reading this meditation I find myself praying it every evening. It is not just the prayer of a child.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG  
Editor-in-Chief

**OUR ONLY COMFORT: A COMPREHENSIVE COMMENTARY  
ON THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM**

Fred H. Klooster

Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources (2001)

Two volumes (1,250 pages), cloth, \$99.95

What is your only comfort in life and in death?" So begins the most encouraging, and still the most useful, catechism of Protestant evangelical Christianity—the Heidelberg. These wonderful volumes develop the theme of "comfort"

showing that this is what the catechism will bring to those who use it wisely. But is "comfort" an adequate theme for the message of the Bible? Klooster thinks so and shows why.

Klooster develops the theme of the catechism ("comfort") by showing that in the original German the word was *trost*. The German word carries the idea of (complete) trust, or "truth"—"troth"—and the sense of being faithfully cared for in the way God intends for us as his children. Comfort is like a thread that runs right through the historic catechism, making it a beautiful tapestry of solid teaching about God and our relationship to God, our neighbor and God's world.

The Heidelberg Catechism has several features that make it immensely pastoral and practical for the church. It is evangelical in the very best sense. And it is laid out for use on 52 Lord's Day settings, thus making it a tool that can fit into the calendar and be used with profit again and again, as should be the case with any good catechism. The entirety of essential Christian theology is to be found here as well. Most Christians would profit by a personal and devotional study of the catechism even if it is not used in their particular tradition. This new two-volume set includes the full catechism in both German, the language of its origin, and English. Every question is extensively discussed and explained.

Some Reformed traditions develop an annual series of sermons around the Heidelberg Catechism. This approach to the pulpit has much to commend it, even though some expositors have criticized it for being less than faithful to the text of the Bible. I believe a minister can preach effectively from the catechism and remain expositional in the best sense. These volumes should improve such preaching if they do nothing else. The expositions found here are readable, thorough, and Christ-centered. They are also scholarly without becoming incomprehensible or pedantic. Word studies on various themes are also provided. Doctrinal summaries and historical surveys of the background of the doctrinal issue at hand make the volumes even more helpful. Klooster also provides a thorough background on the origins of the catechism, which I personally value very highly. Another extremely beneficial aspect of this

work is the applications that are suggested for preachers and teachers of the catechism.

One additional feature that I found quite helpful is the appendices. One deals with "difficulties" associated with questions 12-19 by asking if these questions are a "scholastic intrusion" which came about because of Anselm's influence? (Klooster says "no" but read it for yourself!) A second appendix, of 34 pages, provides an extremely insightful and succinct history of the Apostles' Creed. This is followed by an eight-page appendix titled, "A Brief Doctrinal History on the Trinity." The "Anointing of Priests, Kings, and Prophets" follows, and an appendix on "Father, Son, and Gender" provides some immensely useful discussion of the gender-inclusive language debate about how we speak of God. The bibliography is extensive, though not annotated which I would have found useful given Klooster's wealth of insight. A very good index will also allow the reader to search the books over and over with profit.

Fred Klooster taught for more than thirty years at Calvin Theological Seminary and spent a lifetime pursuing an avid interest in catechetical studies, origins and modern applications. He is generally recognized as one of the few accomplished scholars and teachers of the Heidelberg Catechism alive today. After he retired from teaching in 1988 his colleagues urged him to do this particular work and the result is impressive well beyond my short endorsement. This set not only meets a real need but it provides for the reforming church a resource that church leaders can use with incredible profit.

Cornelius Plantinga, the president of Calvin Seminary, writes: "This mature study is the crowning achievement of a life's reflection." And my friend, I. John Hesselink, a contributing editor to this journal, should have the last word about these important volumes:

This splendid commentary fills a long-felt need for a thorough, scholarly and accessible commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism. There is nothing quite like it in any language in regard to depth of analysis and biblical and theological interpretation. It is also written in a clear and lively style that will commend it to

interested lay readers as well as pastors and scholars (from the dust jacket).

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG  
Editor-in-Chief

Editor's Note: This set can be ordered directly from CRC Publications at (800) 333-8300 or at [www.FaithAliveResources.org](http://www.FaithAliveResources.org).

*LIFE IS A MIRACLE: AN ESSAY AGAINST  
MODERN SUPERSTITION*

Wendell Berry

Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press (2000)

153 pages, cloth, \$21.00

Wendell Berry's is a prophetic voice to a technologically enamored age. He is also profoundly rooted in Christian thought and possesses a literary quality that is highly effective. One reviewer has even called him, "The best serious essayist now at work in the United States." I am inclined to agree.

In this extended essay, Berry devotes his critical powers to the best-selling book *Consilience*, by Edmund O. Wilson. He believes we are presently on a course of arrogant and dangerous behavior in both science and other intellectual disciplines. He cogently argues that Wilson's reconciliation among science, religion, and the arts is really the subjugation of religion and art by science. Berry argues that religion and art should not be subject to the materialistic and reductionistic presuppositions and false assumptions of science. He further shows that the aims of modern science are almost impossible to distinguish from those of industry and commerce. What is really needed is a new kind of Emancipation Proclamation that truly frees life from corporations. Quoting from King Lear, Berry bases his title upon the line: "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again."

What engages Berry throughout is the question: "How do we create healthy human and natural communities?" And, how do we preserve the proper balance between humans and

the earth, between science and the humanities? And can individuals live and act in a manner that reflects service to the common good while creating healthy human communities?

Berry demonstrates that scientific materialism has led us to reject mystery. As a result of this rejection we have fallen to a kind of scientific reductionism that strips life and relationships of real meaning. After showing that "ideas are not material" (50) he asks, "How [then] can they have a material origin?" He concludes, "If they are not material in origin, how can their origin be explained by materialist science? This is the major fault line of Mr. Wilson's book. His interest in explaining the origin of things whose authentic existence is denied by the terms of the proposed investigation" (50-51). "Anybody who thinks that this 'scientific' reduction of creatures to machines is merely an issue to be pondered by academic intellectuals is in need of a second thought" (51). The impact of this reductionism touches not only art and religion but also government and personal liberties. Wise Christian leaders would do well to ponder the persuasive argument Berry makes for this case throughout his essay.

These kinds of questions might seem a bit removed from evangelical Christian reflection but the reason, sadly, is because evangelicals do not do this kind of serious work. But Berry's arguments are convincing, and well worth the time given to understanding them. He has been blest with a keen moral imagination, a rare quality in those who speak to the wider culture in our time.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG  
Editor-in-Chief

### JONATHAN EDWARDS CONFRONTS THE GODS

Gerald R. McDermott  
New York: Oxford University Press (2000)  
245 pages, cloth, \$45.00

English Deism arose as a direct challenge to traditional religious ideas, especially confessional Christianity.

Deism taught that God created the world but now has no ongoing relationship with it. In its simplest form it was an aggressive denial of providence. Generally it stressed natural religion grounded in human reason over revealed religion grounded in special revelation. For a period of time it held popular sway in academic circles, both in England and America. It is also noteworthy that several of our founding fathers were Deists. For most Deists a god who damned anyone to hell was unworthy of worship.

The study of the theology and philosophy of Jonathan Edwards has become quite popular in recent years. A veritable renaissance of work on America's theologian has been written by academics on both sides of the Atlantic. Gerald R. McDermott, a contributing editor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*, has already contributed one serious work on Edwards in *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (1992). McDermott is clearly one of the most highly regarded Edwards scholars in this growing group of men and women. This present work confirms again that he is both original and careful.

McDermott tells the reader in the preface that he began to think about this particular book while doing doctoral research in 1987 at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. It was there he discovered "a vast labyrinth of Edwards's sermon and notebook manuscripts—most of them unpublished and scrawled in a hand that can reduce a scholar to tears." What he found amazed him—"hundreds of folio pages of Edwards's notes on non-Christian religions" (vii).

Why would a theologian like Edwards, deeply committed to Christian particularity, have such interest in other religions? Other questions arose: e.g., "What was the purpose of these ruminations? How did these religions fit into his theology? What was he planning to do with these notes?" What McDermott discovered is truly amazing, at least to those who assume they already know how Jonathan Edwards would respond to questions about other religions. "I came to see that Edwards had joined a spirited discussion that was changing the way many Europeans would think about God, and that he was

using this discussion to rethink both Enlightenment religion and his own Reformed tradition" (vii). Thus this book, which the author tells us was written to "explain what I found" (vii).

McDermott believes that Edwards was preparing, before his untimely death in 1758, a rather sophisticated theological response to Enlightenment religion that was surprisingly generous toward non-Christian traditions. Edwards did this by rethinking critical Reformed categories in order to defend the goodness of God and his justice in dealing with the "heathen world."

The early church had a tradition, called the *prisca theologia*, that intentionally looked at elements of true religion that it discovered in non-Christian systems of thought. Jonathan Edwards, McDermott believes, saw beyond the fairly traditional categories of typology, which generally included history and nature, to suggest that non-Christian religions are among the "types" God used to point to the redemption of Christ. McDermott is utterly convinced that Edwards was more than fascinated by religions outside of Christianity.

The real Jonathan Edwards is profoundly nuanced in his beliefs and practice. This goes for popular treatments on the left and the right. It is common to classify Edwards as a Calvinist, yet he actually refused to call himself by this name. His theology, says McDermott, "falls loosely within that tradition and was perceived that way by later generations" (236). For years I did not realize just how important this observation really is with regard to the real Jonathan Edwards. The idea first dawned on me when a noted Reformed historian assured me that Edwards was not really a Reformed theologian. In my utter amazement I set out to confirm or deny what he said. After some years of reading and discussing Edwards with serious readers, I now find myself agreeing with McDermott (and a host of like-minded Edwards' scholars as well). According to Samuel Hopkins, who knew Edwards as well as anyone, "Tho' his principles were Calvinistic, yet he called no man, Father. He thought and judged for himself, and was truly very much an original" (220; cf. footnote 15). Edwards, in his famous work, *Freedom of the Will*, said, "I utterly disclaim a dependence on

Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in everything just as he taught" (22).

McDermott argues that Edwards understood the threat of radical Enlightenment thinking (there are several types of Enlightenment thinking). He sought to challenge this thought by tackling it head-on. He did this in a myriad of ways, all aimed at establishing the truthfulness, and logical reasonability, of Christian revelation to regenerate minds. Edwards eventually attacked Enlightenment thinking from within its thought-world, not from without. For this reason the terms and ideas he employs were understood by the people of his time and, in turn, often have been missed by modern popularizers.

In the best sense, we should argue that Edwards was anchored in the theology of the Reformation. But he was an original, in the sense that he submitted everything to the thought of his time and spoke the language of his own people. This is, to my mind, a wonderful model. We are wrong to parrot Edwards, in fact we are usually not understanding what he actually said when we do it. What we need is a new theologizing, like that done by Edwards, that takes into account the present world and speaks to it a fresh word deeply rooted in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Anything less is not a true doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. What still amazes me is how few who embrace the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* bother to put this into practice. It reminds me of Chesterton's cryptic comment about Christianity when he said it had not been tried and found to fail but it had never really been tried at all.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG  
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