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# The paradoxical vision: a public theology for the 21st century

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based both on the archaeological finds as well as the writings of the monks from that period. The sociological commentary was rivetting and would have made a complete volume in and of itself. An interesting and welcome addition to this tome, is a chapter entitled "Who's who of Judean Monasticism". This is a collection of brief biographies of the personalities who sought to follow their call to the monastic life in the Judean desert.

There is a clear distinction made by Hirschfeld on the two types of monasteries that existed in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E.; the *Laura* and the *Coenobium*. The *Laura* was a collection of monastic hermits, who only came together for weekly meals and worship, spending the remainder of the week in their own cells. The *Coenobium* is an enclosed compound where the monks shared everything in common on a daily basis.

The illustrations, photographs and drawings in this volume add to the reader's learning. The author has carefully arranged the photographs of archaeological excavations alongside drawings of how the completed building or artifact would look intact. The maps throughout the book not only provide an excellent reference tool for understanding distance, but for those who have visited Palestine, an idea in what proximity these monasteries were and are located.

Hirschfeld has provided a comprehensive and valuable tool to those who are engaged in research in this area. The footnotes, bibliography and content form a sound launching pad into further research. In addition this volume provides a complete overview of the area of Byzantine period monks, their living conditions and their routines. This book is therefore an asset to any personal or professional library, interested in monasticism, archaeology and or part of the story of ancient Christianity in Palestine.

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## **The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century**

Robert Benne  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995  
242 pp. \$21.75

Robert Benne is a Lutheran writing out of the American context (ELCA). Benne is an academician, currently serving as professor of religion at Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia and has a quarter century of experience writing theology.

Benne's context is American Christianity—arguably quite distinct from the Canadian context; nevertheless, this volume has much to commend it to Canadian readers. Benne's book is neither comforting nor comfortable to

read. It is timely, tightly written and theologically sound, if not politically correct.

In Part 1: The Challenge of Public Theology, Benne defines 'public theology' as "the engagement of a living religious tradition with its public environment—the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life".

In Part 2: The Paradoxical Vision, Benne develops this vision as precisely the paradox theology which is the hallmark of classical Lutheranism. It is paradox theology which Benne argues has been mostly absent from the domain of public theology. Benne believes that much public theology in the States has been historically done out of the Reformed theological perspective; lately, the Roman Catholic Church has been influential through its public theology. The Lutheran voice has been infrequent. But Benne sees the "paradoxical vision" of classical Lutheranism as the most appropriate framework (biblically and Christian) out of which public theology should be done.

The skeleton for this paradoxical vision consists of four themes, each of which Benne develops with great care. These are: (1) the qualitative distinction between God's salvation and all human efforts, (2) the paradox of human nature (*simul justus et peccator*), (3) God's paradoxical rule (the "two-kingdoms" doctrine), and (4) the paradox of history (the already and not-yet-ness of the kingdom of Christ in time).

Benne assesses the public theology of the American Lutheran bodies according to the paradoxical vision. He accomplishes this by analyzing public theology statements of the predecessor bodies to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, reports of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the ELCA social teaching statements specifically "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective".

The author contends that, institutionally, organized American Lutheranism has not given adequate voice to the paradoxical vision in its public theology. He contends that individual expressions of the vision have had much greater influence on public theology. The individuals he holds as public practitioners are Reinhold Niebuhr (whom Benne describes as having had a "love/hate relationship" with Lutheranism), Glenn Tinder (an Episcopalian who Benne believes is theologically closer to Luther than Calvin), and Richard John Neuhaus (former Lutheran and now Roman Catholic, who Benne suggests is the most straightforward proponent of the paradoxical vision).

In Part 3: Live Connections: How Theology Becomes Public, the author articulates his vision of the way in which Lutherans utilize the paradoxical vision in doing their future public theology.

Robert Benne does not write to please his readership. His critiques are sharp; he is not without some very definite opinions. Pastors, theologians and academics will all find themselves agreeing here, wincing there. This is definitely not "a nice little book for religious studies classes". Then again, it should be required reading for everyone entrusted with doing public

theology in the institution's behalf: those who articulate public policy, Church and Society committee and board members, bishops, members of National and synodical church councils.

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## **Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society**

Ted Peters

Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994  
327 pp. \$21.25 softcover

Ted Peters is a systematic theologian who writes of sin as a movement towards radical evil. His book leans heavily upon social psychologists, largely Freudian; the early church fathers, primarily Augustine of Hippo; and "the earlier generation of neo-orthodox theologians", primarily Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and "secondarily" Karl Barth and Emil Brunner (p. 6). Sin, Peters writes, is unable to give good reason for what it is or does and is therefore not "subject to rational explanation" (p. 10). Yet, attempt to explain it he does by seven steps, calling these "parsing the phenomenon of sin" (p. 10). As he discusses these we are shown how it is that humans move towards radical sin through anxiety, the first step, which predisposes humankind to act out of a fear of loss, "*the sting of death within*" rooted in original sin, *peccatum originale*. This, Peters defines as "corporate sin as well as the propensity to commit sins that arise from the condition of human anxiety" (p. 26). As discussed elsewhere, within this work corporate sin is not so alien from the idea of hereditary sin, which Peters seems to reject but which is raised elsewhere in the text as a question of sociobiology "Genes and Sin" (ch. 10).

Anxiety as rooted in our psyche is both a call of God and the breeding ground for sin (p. 62, 63). Our anxious selves must from our beginnings meet with love and nurturing if we are to learn trust and to grow in faith and believing. Peters writes that those who image God for us will influence us for good and God and away from being controlled by anxiety. Love at our beginning, and a pattern of faithfulness in our lives, predispose us to grace, and make it possible to live our own lives with faith (p. 80).

Anxiety as a thesis for the roots of sin is well argued using both theological and psychological constructs. Anxiety is explained as the fear of non-being and the crisis point for individuals and nations. It lurks in the "preconscious fear of death" and can drive us to a state of despair from which we may rise up in rage (p. 38) to move through the stages of unfaith, pride, concupiscence, self-justification, cruelty and blasphemy. This last is redefined as the "misuse of divine symbols so as to prevent the communication of God's grace" (p. 16) and takes two forms: covert and overt