

Book Reviews

The Body of the Cross: Holy Victims and the Invention of Atonement. By Travis E. Ables. New York: Fordham University Press, 2022. ix + 260 pages. \$35.00.
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Most theologians today take it for granted that theological doctrines have dates. In *The Body of the Cross: Holy Victims and the Invention of Atonement*, Travis Ables successfully shows just how late in the day the theological doctrine of substitutionary penal atonement emerged in response to a “complex set of theological, liturgical, and political dynamics” of the late sixteenth century (195). Resisting well-known typologies of atonement theory characteristic of modern theology, for example Gustaf Aulén, Ables structures his account of atonement around “practices, political contexts, and patterns of popular life” (8) and provides a “reluctant genealogy” (7) of penal atonement. Carefully tracing how the cross morphed from a symbol of imperial terror to one of ecclesial masochism, Ables explores how Christian theologians deployed a “logic of vicarity” (7) in the creation of “holy victims” (9). The result is a major contribution to the historical theology of the cross.

More than a survey of key thinkers or theories, Ables provides a series of glimpses into the horizon of each era he investigates. By selecting lesser-known texts and works of art, he effectively invites readers into the intellectual and affective worlds of his sources, especially how the cross held both theological and social implications in different epochs. This approach allows Ables to explore the cross as a “semaphore for a larger set of meaning-making practices and imaginative variations” (7). Moreover, Ables shows how the various transformations of the theology of the cross he recounts are not the fruit of theoretical concerns over metaphysical precision but responses to pastoral and social questions about how to organize ecclesial and civic life. The cross has been interpreted as a symbol of both salvation and damnation; it consoles the elect as it torments the damned. The cross both inspired third-century martyrs to make their deaths a eucharistic offering alongside Christ and it terrorized the interior spiritual lives of Puritans who identified themselves as the source of Christ’s suffering. From concerns over orthodoxy among early centuries to the small Christian communities of sixteenth-century Strasbourg, Ables traces

how the symbolism of the cross undergoes an inversion to become a source of torment for the faithful informed by penal atonement theories.

Major questions regarding Christian attitudes to suffering surface throughout the text. How is the manner of Christ's death redemptive? Should Christians imitate the cross? Is the saint an *alter Christus*? Should Christians welcome suffering? Should injustice be resisted or is making oneself a martyr to somehow undermine the work of Christ? Normally, these questions are answered with varying appeals to the cross, but to make transcendent meaning of the cross is often to avoid addressing the actual historical events around the brutalization and execution of the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth. Too frequently, and not in the far distant past, the cross has been deployed to justify the promotion of silent suffering in the face of injustice thereby robbing the cross of its prophetic power.

In his conclusion, Ables returns to the liberating message of the cross. Engaging James Cone and Delores Williams, he explains that although the cross has been used to facilitate the sacerdotal and psychological subjugation of the laity, and even to justify religious violence, it still empowers those who suffer to resist injustice in the name of Christ and thereby to share in his victory over sin and death. Ables suggests, "Given a little room to breathe outside the reductionistic typologies of modern theology, our texts became more diverse and more bizarre than is often realized" (194). If you think you know the history of Christian reflection on the cross, Ables invites you to think again and to join him on a journey into the center of this preeminent Christian symbol. *The Body of the Cross* is essential reading for advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty with interests in historical theology and soteriology.

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The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology. Edited by Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. xxxiv + 966 pages. \$50.00 (paper).

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Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe's offering of Catholic theology in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology* studiously resists the lure of critical Catholic theologies that engage questions of difference and power (such as decolonial theology and theologies exploring the existential and