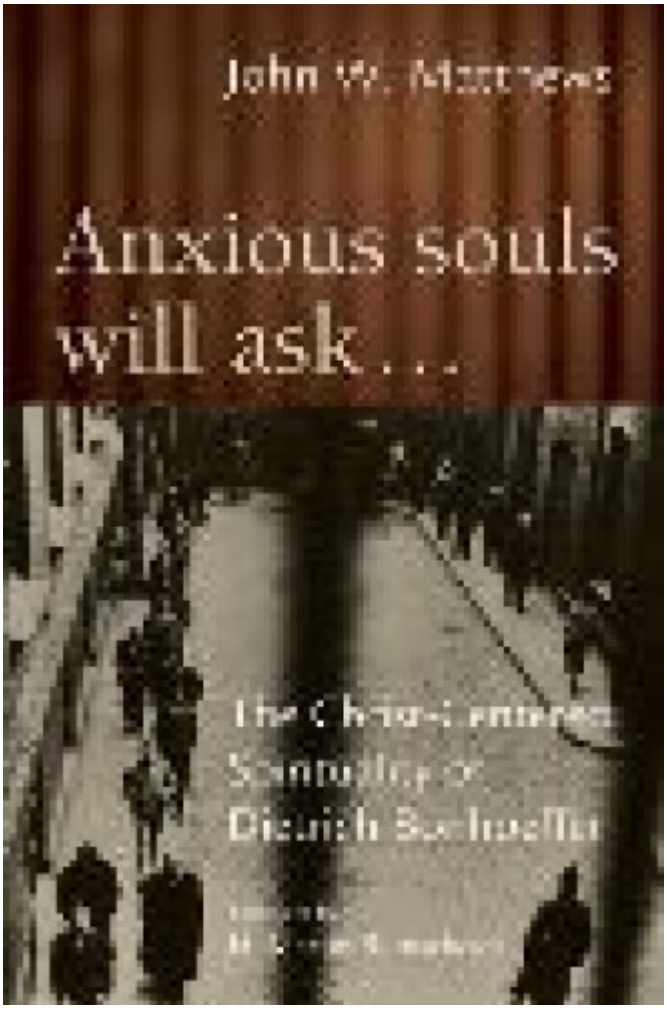
Examined lives

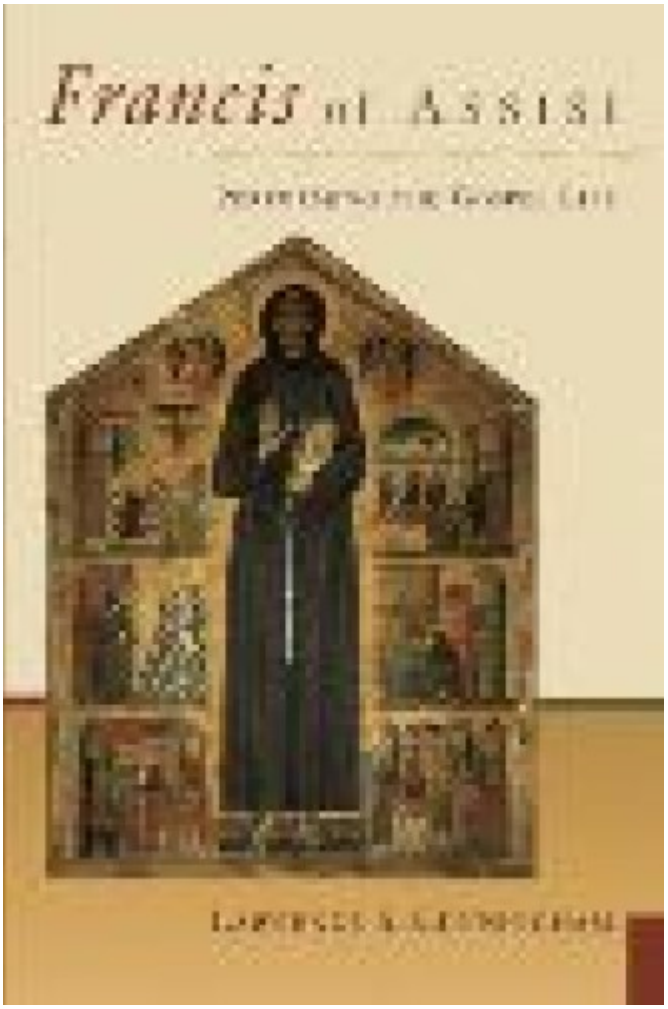
By Richard A. Kauffman in the April 5, 2005 issue

In Review



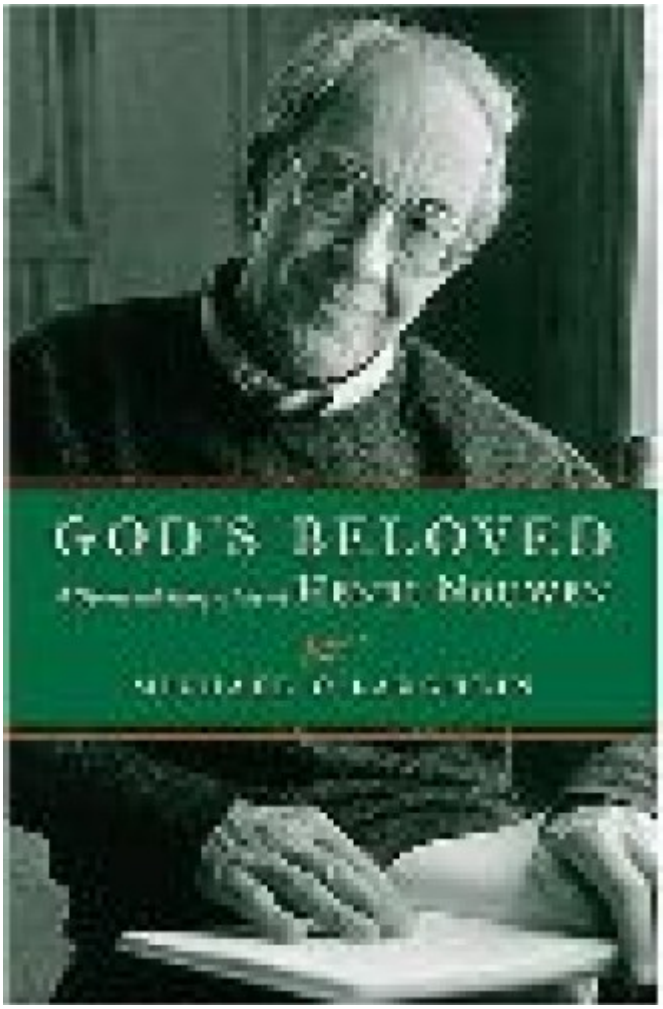
Anxious Souls Will Ask . . . : The Christ-Centered Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

John W. Matthews
Eerdmans



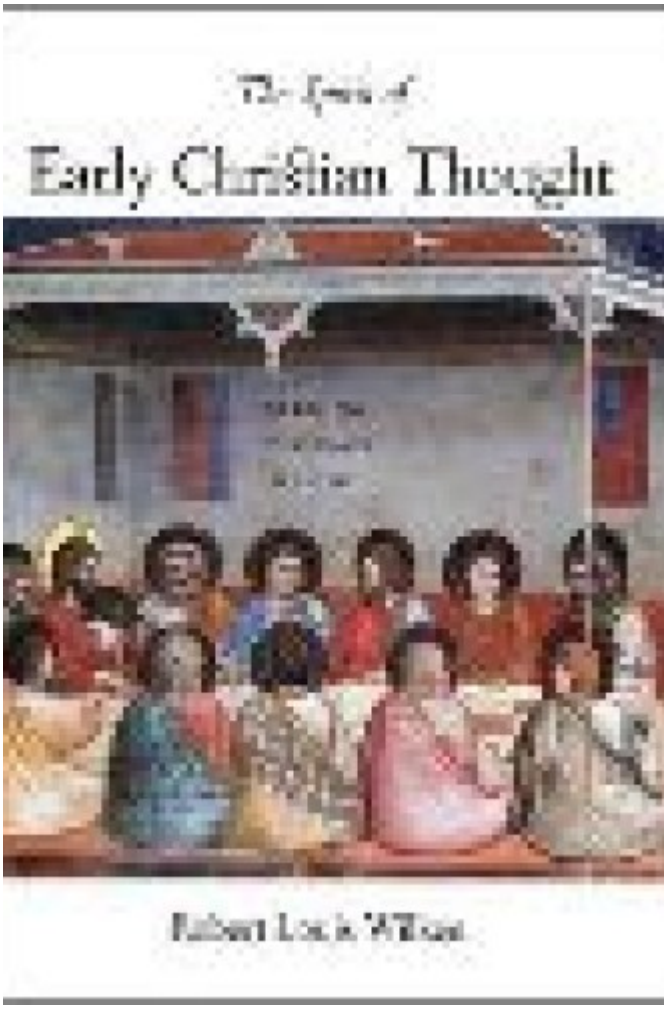
Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life

Lawrence S. Cunningham
Eerdmans



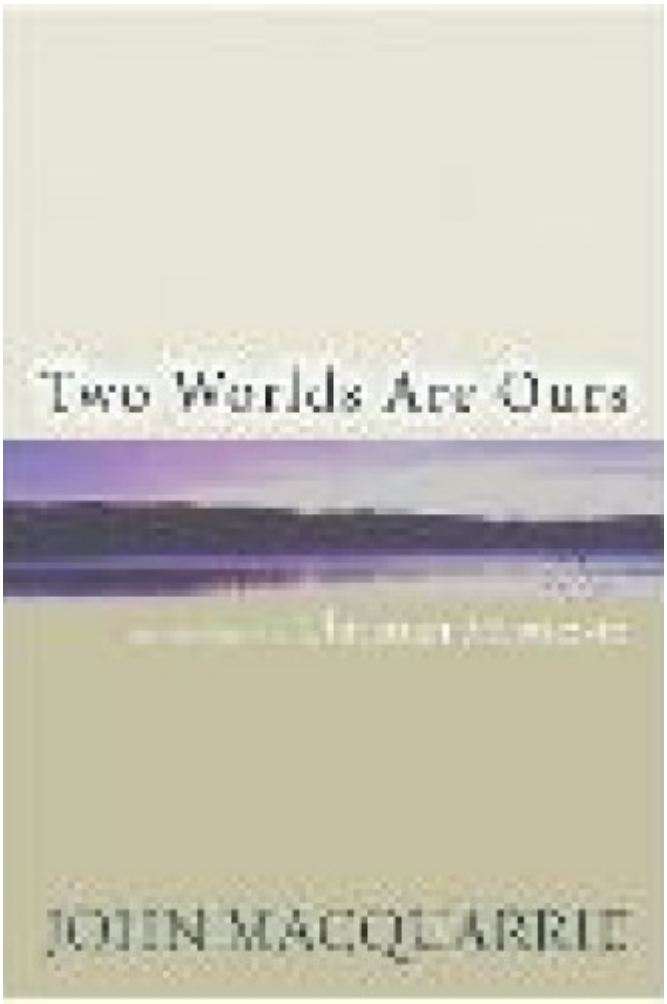
God’s Beloved: A Spiritual Biography of Henri Nouwen

Michael O’Laughlin
Orbis



The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God

Robert Louis Wilken
Yale University Press



Two Worlds Are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism

John Macquarrie
Fortress

Books on spirituality abound, and the publication of new ones seems not to abate. Writings in this genre often focus on experience and practical disciplines of spirituality. The books featured below are not practical in that way; rather, they provide historical and theological analysis that is foundational to spirituality.

Lutheran pastor John W. Matthews believes the church in the U.S. would benefit from pondering the "spirituality" inherent in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, especially those letters written in the spring and summer of 1944 to his friend and later biographer Eberhard Bethge. Aware of the marginalization of the church in Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer noted that "anxious souls will ask what room there is now left for God." That question led Bonhoeffer to muse on another one:

who “Christ really is, for us today.” He concluded that Christ should be at the center of all life, not on the boundaries of life or simply in the church. The problem with the church, he said, was that it was concerned with its own preservation when it should be involved in the redemption and reconciliation of the world.

While some have thought that Bonhoeffer’s reflections about a “religionless Christianity” knocked the props out from under the faithful, Matthews argues that Bonhoeffer was erecting more durable, dynamic pillars of the faith—five, in fact: to be in Christ is to be in community; Christ is incarnationally involved in all of life (he is the “beyond in the midst of life”); the most profound witness of the church in the world will be prayer and righteous action, not just proclamation; Christian spirituality is marked by “participation in the suffering of God in Christ”; and Christians, like all people, are called to mature, responsible living, and they should not ask of God what they should be able to do for themselves. In an epilogue Matthews suggests how these pillars might undergird the church today.

Depicted in garden statutes with a bird perched on his shoulder, invoked in the liturgical blessing of animals and subjected to hagiographical biographies, St. Francis is susceptible—like no other figure in Christian history—to being sentimentalized. Resisting these romanticized portraits, Cunningham attempts a theological analysis of Francis, squarely placing him in his own time and culture. Cunningham challenges the thesis of Paul Sabatier, a nineteenth-century French Protestant who argued that the Franciscan reform movement was something of a forerunner to the Protestant Reformation. Instead, Cunningham maintains, Francis was a quite orthodox believer in his time, and his movement was consonant with other reform movements of the age—movements that were, in fact, sanctioned by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).

One cannot give a full account of Francis without taking into account the ripple effects of his life. Cunningham sees Franciscan traces not only in the orders that he spawned, but in elements of the Radical Reformation, liberation theology and the Catholic Worker movement. Cunningham’s strength is theological analysis, and he persuasively argues that one cannot understand Francis’s regard for the poor or his delight in creation apart from his Christian convictions—not a bad strategy given that some in the ecology movement and even Marxists have adopted Francis as a patron saint. Long before there was a “preferential option for the poor,” “poverty was the hermeneutical lens through which he read the gospel,” says Cunningham. St. Francis didn’t comment on the gospel so much as perform it. True, the

Franciscans produced theologians of the stature of Bonaventure and William of Ockham, but the unlettered Francis was no theologian, unless performing the faith is seen as a particular way of doing theology.

This is not the first biography of Nouwen, and most likely it will not be the last. Rather than offering a full-blown treatment of Nouwen's life, O'Laughlin attempts to take the measure of the man and to explore what his ongoing legacy is—a legacy that, he maintains, continues to grow and blossom. O'Laughlin had both a professional and a personal relationship with Nouwen, and he complains mildly that Michael Ford's biography, *The Wounded Prophet*, which deals with Nouwen's growing awareness of his homosexuality, is something of an exposé. Without denying that aspect of Nouwen's restless life, O'Laughlin aims to show that Nouwen was psychologically very healthy and that those aspects of his life that troubled him—his insecurity and feelings of abandonment by others, for instance—were an authentic part of who he was rather than elements of a neurosis.

The most intriguing and perhaps debatable part of this book is the chapter on the psychology of Nouwen, including his relationship with his stern Dutch father. It leans heavily on an analysis of his Myers-Briggs type (ENFP, which O'Laughlin claims is also that of former president Clinton, with whom Nouwen shared many charismatic and expansive personal qualities).

O'Laughlin thinks Nouwen has made a difference in the way we think about the Christian life—impressing on us that true knowledge of self and knowledge of God are integrally related—and in how we view the Eucharist, Jesus and prayer. He brings out Nouwen's concern for the marginalized, but underplays his interest in peace and social justice. The debate about Nouwen's legacy continues. Will Nouwen's writings still be read 35 years after his death, as are the writings of Thomas Merton? Will people be interested in Nouwen the person 50 years from now? Only time will settle that debate.

The key word in the title is *Spirit;* in other words, this isn't your typical history of early Christian thought. Although the book is not on spirituality per se, Wilken covers material that should be foundational to all Christian spirituality. Operating on the assumption that life and doctrine were one for the early church and that the Christian religion was "inescapably ritualistic," "uncompromisingly moral" and "unapologetically intellectual," he covers topics as far-ranging as early Christian poetry and art and more standard themes for Christian histories such as scripture,

sacraments and the Trinity. He attempts to demonstrate that love was indispensable to early Christian thinking, that early Christian thought was essentially biblical and that subsequent interpreters of the Bible would do well to read early believers' interpretations of the scriptures. Natural law, he says, hardly factored into early Christian thought. On each subject Wilken draws on key early Christian thinkers, especially Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Maximus the Confessor. *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* is a delight to read. It is written as history ought to be, especially for nonspecialist readers.

John Macquarrie is drawn toward mysticism, but he doesn't consider himself a mystic. Like a would-be swimmer who is too timid to take the plunge, he cannot lay aside reason in order to immerse himself in a mystical frame of mind. But this critical yet empathetic distance, which one would expect from one of the leading British theologians of the past half century, is a strength. While confining himself to the Christian tradition, Macquarrie acknowledges that mysticism isn't unique to Christianity; indeed, Christian mysticism was influenced as much by classical Greek sources like neo-Platonism as by the Bible.

After laying out ten characteristics of mysticism, Macquarrie plunges into a historical survey of its exemplars, from Moses to Merton. Macquarrie doesn't think a wedge should be driven between mystical and prophetic faith, nor even between individualistic and communal expressions of love for God. He is not skeptical about mystical experiences of God, including locutions and visions of light, but he subjects such experiences to rational scrutiny. "Mysticism has much to teach us," he concludes, "but it must not be separated from reason."