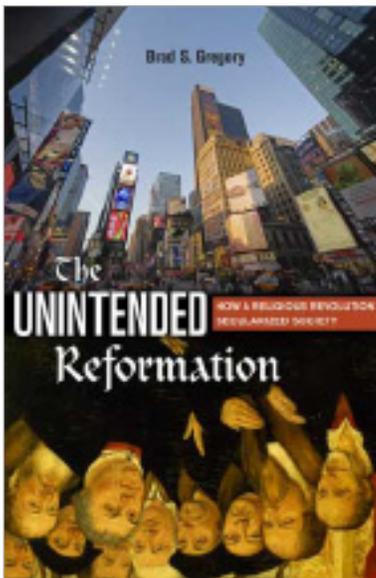


BOOKS FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY



**The Unintended Reformation:
How a Religious Revolution
Secularized Society**
Brad S. Gregory

Cambridge
Belknap Press, 2012
\$39.95

Pastoral ministers, carrying out the work of the new evangelization often speak in generalities about what constitutes a “secular society”. If ministers are to engage in the new evangelization, responding to secularizing trends in ecclesial life, they will need to move toward a more exact diagnosis of what constitutes secularity. Reading Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation* will assist such ministers in this work.

Gregory, an associate professor of early modern European history at the University of Notre Dame, situates the secularization of society (both European and American) within the context of the religious revolution of the Reformation. He begins each chapter with some feature of modern life, then “offers a genealogical explanation of its historical formation with particular attention given to the Reformation era’s transformative and unintended influence” (22). Thus, one comes to see that secularization is a complex process involving our understanding of God’s relationship to the world; the grounding of truth claims in both Scripture and reason alone (and the

subsequent failure of this project); the use of political power relative to religion; the complexities of moral discourse in an era without universal truth claims; the rise of capitalism and its subsequent effect upon human desire; and, the secularization of knowledge in higher education. And through the genealogical approach, the reader begins to perceive how present realities are shaped by and informed by assumptions, practices, and institutions developed in the distant past. To treat the root causes of secularity will thus require attention to the complex intellectual, social, political, and thus religious history that led to the “modern age.”

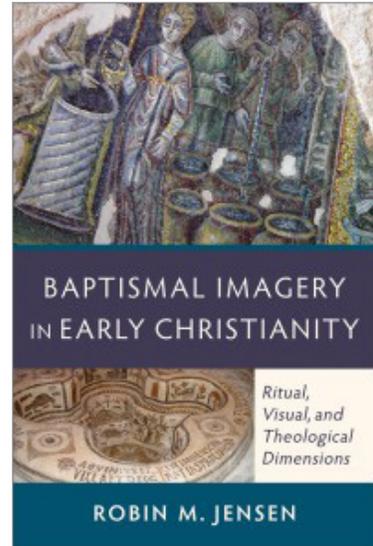
What makes Gregory’s work so important to pastoral ministers is how he invites readers into the drama of history itself. Historical study shapes our understanding of the present reality, making us capable of responding in a strategic way to the problems that we face. And history is not an inevitable series of events, but the work of strategic actors, many of whom (though well-intentioned) unleashed specific ideas and practices that have been detrimental to the “development” of Western society as whole. Let me cite an example from the text itself, Gregory’s treatment of “consumer culture.” Historically, in cultures influenced by Christianity, avarice was viewed as a sin, not as the basis of economic growth. For the most part, this remained true among Protestants at the time of the Reformation. But, as Gregory notes, the structures of capitalism were forged in the conflict between Catholics, magisterial, and radical Protestants, in conjunction with the rise of the “secular” nation-state. He writes:

Discord about the Bible subverted biblical teachings about human desires and material things. Antagonisms between Christian moral communities liberated market practices from traditional Christian morality and produced a market society. Competing confessional

empires prompted countervailing nationalist assimilations of providence that viewed wealth, power, and prosperity as signs of God’s favor, thus recasting mercantile avarice as politically and religiously sanctioned duty. Doctrinal impasses led to the demographically widespread, cross-confessional acceptance by Christians of practices and values that had been antithetical to Christian teaching since Jesus and Paul. Disruptions born of doctrinal disagreements among Christians launched the legitimation of acquisitiveness and the strange—although now all but naturalized—Western notion that a “standard of living” refers neither to a normative human model nor even to ethical precepts, but to the quantity and quality of one’s material possessions and the wealth that accompanies them. And disagreements about the substantive Christian good unintentionally hastened an acceptance of the goods life *as* the good life within the formal ethics of rights characteristic of hegemonic, Western states (272-73).

Thus, when the preacher, the catechist, or the liturgist encounters the effects of consumerism in American parishes, it is not enough simply to condemn such practices. They are deeply rooted in the structures, the culture, and the institutions of American life. Even a parish’s explanation of stewardship as sharing the extraordinary gifts that one has received, for example, is consonant with assumptions that led to the development of what Gregory calls the goods life. To abide in a truly Christian understanding of gift, of salvation, of stewardship would necessitate a reformation of human desire through the particularities of Christian doctrine and practice. One cannot go back to a time before capitalism began to shape human desire; but, it is possible to challenge the very assumptions of a society grown forgetful of another way of living.

Gregory's tome is generative of an array of such insights for the pastoral minister, whether one is examining the history of science and religion, the relationship between the polis and faith, or the contemporary university. As such, *The Unintended Reformation* is a rare work that promotes a learned analysis of culture and of society that might enable a more intelligent and strategic approach to evangelization in parishes and schools alike. It does not dismiss nor perform an ideological polemic against the Reformation, instead holding up a mirror to our assumptions regarding the world. I wholeheartedly commend it to pastors, catechists, directors of evangelization, and those interested in responding to the decline of the religious imagination in the twenty-first century.



Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions
Robin M. Jensen

Grand Rapids
 Baker Academic, 2012
 \$24.99

Preachers and catechists frequently seek orienting resources to assist in the subtle art of mystagogical formation. In Robin Jensen's *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity*, one discovers such a source.

Indeed, relative to liturgical studies, there is no shortage of volumes dedicated to baptism in early Christianity. What sets Jensen's work apart is the delicate interweaving of early Christian art, analysis of ancient ritual

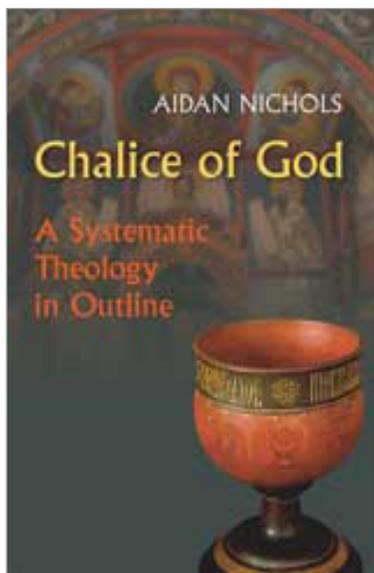
practice, and mystagogical texts next to one another. The book itself consists of five chapters, each of which treat various theologies of baptism, including baptism as cleansing from sin and sickness (chapter 1); incorporation into a community (chapter 2); the sanctifying and illuminating function of baptism (chapter 3); baptism as dying and rising (chapter 4); and baptism as the new creation (chapter 5).

Jensens' volume is especially strong when treating the role of specific biblical motifs in Christian art, as related to early Christian rituals of baptism. Biblical typology was undoubtedly influenced, not simply by the example of preachers, but the art that adorned the walls of Christian basilicas and catacombs. Readers of these ancient sermons will benefit from the artistic and ritual context, which may be ignored by those trained in textual analysis alone. Noah's frequent appearance in early Christian art in the ark, along with the dove, shows the richness of the baptismal imagination among post-apostolic Christians (18-20). Likewise, the dove itself, shown often with a faint blue liquid emerging from its mouth, testifies perhaps to interpretations of baptism as enlightenment by the Holy Spirit (120). There are dozens of such examples throughout Jensens' text, ones that would serve as seeds for preachers, catechists, and liturgical artists alike.

Further, the rich theological interpretations of baptism might serve as a cultivation of a richer baptismal imagination among all Christians. In the post-conciliar era, among Catholics in particular, the tendency is to treat baptism as primarily a sacrament of dying and rising to new life. Hence, the inclination to design

baptismal fonts, shaped either as a womb or tomb. But, this obsession with a Roman 6 theology ignores, for example, the understanding of initiation as a re-entry into paradise. Quoting Jensen, "Thus, spaces for baptism were filled with images that reinforced the symbolism of paradise, perhaps in order to become an actual, physical re-creation of that past and future home. The water of the font becomes the sacred river that flows back to Eden, against the current of the other four rivers, which brings thirst-quenching water...out to the world" (188). Such images for baptism are particularly fecund for developing a robust sense of evangelization. The Christian abides now in the context of a sacramental paradise, oriented toward a redeemed world that is coming into existence. The catechist or preacher invites the newly baptized, and those interested in incorporation into the community, to perceive all life as "...beginning, with a breath of God sweeping over water and the creation of a new morning" (213). Baptism, and the entire Christian life, can become eschatologically oriented. Human life, through baptism, is re-creation.

The preacher and catechist, who works his or her way through Jensen's text will discover a rich resource for performing a post-baptismal mystagogy in both a parish and university context. The work would also serve as a very fine introduction to early Christian baptism for pastoral ministers. And lastly, all those charged with church architecture, particularly baptisteries or fonts in parishes would benefit from a careful reading of Jensens' baptismal typologies.



**Chalice of God: A Systematic
Theology in Outline**
Aidan Nichols

Collegeville
Liturgical Press, 2012
\$18.95

Courses in systematic theology at seminaries and schools of theology and ministry are often tempted to fall into the forgetfulness of foundations. In such classes, undue attention is paid to specialized arguments in the field of systematic theology before students have learned the basics. Further, such courses tend to pass over theologians born before the twentieth century. In what has become known as “postmodernity,” systematic professors are also reticent

to present a comprehensive understanding of Christian faith (a metanarrative), focusing more on a contextual theology that places emphasis upon the “experiential background” of the student above that of the Scriptures and the Tradition. For these students, once they find themselves in their ministerial setting, they leave behind their study of systematics, since it has little to do with their day-to-day work. Or worse, they inflict such arguments upon those seeking an introduction to the beauty of the thought and practice of Christian faith.

Fr. Aidan Nichols’ *Chalice of God: A Systematic Theology in Outline* might serve as an antidote to this approach for teaching systematic theology to pastoral ministers. In the introduction to the work, Fr. Nichols writes, “The objective has been to show how divine revelation emerges in human experience and thought as *coherently epiphanic* in character; that is, as manifesting a superabundant fullness of truth, beauty, and goodness, which exceeds those available by other routes” (xvii). That is, systematic theology is an exploration of revelation, God’s

action revealed in time and space, as coherently beautiful. Strictly speaking, Fr. Nichols’ text is not a complete work in systematic theology. Instead, it is an outline of an approach to systematic theology, which takes seriously the intelligibility of revelation. As such, the six chapters of the work are composed of theses that each build upon one another. The reader is thus invited into the very process of thought, of seeking, even of prayer that produced the work. Theology becomes a doxological and sacral meditation, whereby reason is transformed through thoughtful contemplation. The aesthetic, prayerful quality to what is ultimately a sophisticated work is amplified by the Byzantine and Russian iconography that is placed at the beginning of each chapter.

The foundational metaphor of Fr. Nichols’ exercise in systematic theology is also the title of the book, “the chalice of God.” Fr. Nichols employs this metaphor in a two-fold manner. The first is related to the use of philosophy in systematics. According to Fr. Nichols, all systematics must come to terms with philosophy, since systematic theology pertains

to reason. But, the philosophical approach should be chosen based upon the contours of revelation itself. Fr. Nichols focuses upon a “philosophical principal of order that will exhibit the world as a beautiful receptacle for the gift to creatures of the divine life” (6). The philosophical foundation is not unimportant. For at the heart of the universe is a gift, a reception. Human beings receive a world; they are bestowed a history, an identity, their very personhood. This ontology (study of existence) of gift is taken from Fr. Nichols’ own incorporation of Aquinas. Yet, he also employs a phenomenological approach, “the disciplined attempt to describe and analyse [sic] the immediate data of awareness as they are given to consciousness” (19). Human beings experience the world as cosmos, as history, as form, and as personhood—all aspects of being human, which reveal the gift character of the world. From Fr. Nichols, one is reminded that theology needs philosophy, precisely because philosophical method enables human beings to think intelligently about the world and about human existence.

This ontology assists the theologian in understanding the second and primary use of Fr. Nichols’ metaphor, the chalice of God as an apt description of Christian revelation. For, as Fr. Nichols notes, “the heart of Christian revelation [is]...the outpouring of plenitude on the world (cf. 2.4.3), through the self-emptying of the Holy Trinity in Jesus Christ whereby a reconciling and deifying share in divine life is accorded us” (8). Here, philosophical ontology is taken up and thus fully manifested through the revelation of God. Human beings come to see the giftedness of existence in its truest light through Christian revelation. The

remainder of the text pursues this insight through a Christological reading of the Scriptures (chapter three); a treatment of the traditioning of revelation through the Church and her liturgy (chapter four); the mystery of Christ as revealed in the sacraments, the saints, and grace in the moral life (chapter five); and lastly, the Trinitarian context of eschatology (chapter six). Throughout, Fr. Nichols masterfully employs the insights of the *ressourcement* movement, engaging in a systematic work that thinks with the theological masters of the Church. Ancient and modern sources are used side-by-side, modeling a form of systematic theology that thinks with the whole history of the Church. The purpose of systematic theology is not the advancement of theological research for its own sake. Instead, systematic theology is doxological in structure. Human thought about God is transformed through an intelligent encounter with the theological tradition.

In particular, I would recommend this text to deacon formation programs, students in introduction to systematic theology for pastoral ministers, and all those seeking a thoughtful and spiritually rich approach to the theological analysis of Christian faith. The work, since it is in outline form, might even serve as a rich resource for developing a syllabus for systematic theology courses in seminaries and schools of theology and ministry. Students will come away, not simply with an introduction to themes in systematic theology, but a philosophical foundation often lacking in approaches to systematics today.