

LIVING AS A CHRISTIAN

A review of PRACTICING OUR FAITH: A Way of Life for a Searching People
Dorothy C. Bass, editor (Jossey-Bass/97/paperback/98)

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1 Amid the ever-expanding field of action-possibilities, we have an ever-increasing need to discipline ourselves to intelligent-compassionate **choice**: "I can't do everything, but I can do something; & this is what I'm going to do...." If there's a pattern to our choosing, we call it a **commitment**. Negatively, a commitment is a rejection of all other possible commitments (in the marriage liturgy phrase, "for-saking all others"; where the spouse-choice is hardest, it means forsaking this particular other). To choose is to limit & to commit is to **exclude**.

A narratologist (who chooses to view life as story--if a Christian, the Christian story) excludes philosophy (speculation on the really real). A canonical-ist excludes all other literature than the Bible & tries to give due weight to all the parts thereof & positions therein (as Jn. Wesley, an Oxford professor many-ways learned, called himself, vis-a-vis the Bible, *homo unius libri*, a man of one Book). A pragmatist, being action-oriented, excludes thought-unrelated-to-action.

2 POF (the book I'm reviewing in this Thinksheet) is **useful**, "practical," for Christian retreats (& is so being used here in Craigville August 2-6) because it's doubly narrow: it's about doing & about being Christian about it. I applaud both. And I applaud its Christian generous breadth: it's 13 authors cover much of the Christian traditions (except the Orthodox & the Baptists). And I applaud its mix of fe/male theologians (6 women, 7 men): we humans cannot be, in the full sense, "one flesh" (Gn.2.24; CEV "like one person") unless we hear one another across as well as within the genders. (The authors, meeting together, achieved that transcendence in an exciting Christian community.)

3 These 13 **Christian pragmatists** (pragmatic at least for the purposes of this book) were to work within the sphere of a psychosocial understanding of "practice," developing a thought of Clyde Dykstra (who co-wrote the preface & contributed a chapter), viz., to consider together what we Christians are to *do* though it'll always be difficult for us to *think* together.... x: "Can we conduct our daily lives in ways that help us not just to get by but to flourish--as individuals, as communities, as a society, in connection with all creation & in communion with God?"

4 The book is concerned that instead of running Eastward or elsewhere, we Americans look to "the deep wells of Christian history, belief, and experience" (5). This corrective to the current disdain for "organized religion" & fascination for "spirituality" (4): "Inward journeys are not enough to meet our need." 5, italics: "Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world." (Flag "together," a special-limited meaning of practice--a meaning observably too narrow for the authors themselves.) 6: "Practices address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts." (Flag "needs": pragmatists-actionist see themselves as needs-suppliers, as relationalists promote doing things "together." The two biases aren't bad, but we should ask [in light of §1, above] *What's being left out, & why?*) 8: "become partners in God's reconciling life for the world." 9: "Worship distills the meaning of the practices and holds them up for the whole community to see." 10: "The practices are all interrelated." 11: "Our hope when life ends rests on Christ's victory over death." Two loud cheers for this book! (Not bad: I seldom give more than one cheer for a book.)

Chap.2, "Honoring the Body," gets off to a bad start (biblically) by comparing God's creating the universe with a woman's birthing (14: "this must be the way God made the world"). As gravity pulls everything downward, nature religion collapses transcendence (in symbol, the male distance from the offspring) into immanence (in symbol, the female bodily continuity with the offspring). Consistently (as in pronouns for God), the Bible fights against goddess religion, which correlates with nature as **sacred**: we aren't surprised, then, that this author teaches "the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others" (15), against our religion's hard-won desacralization of nature. Though the book is about practice (Christianity-in-action), she gives no hints as to what stands we are to take on abortion, war,

execution, suicide, assisted suicide--all of which, in addition to murder, violates flatly the alleged sacrality (numinous untouchability) of the human body.

Sadly, this author is so alien to our religion that she inevitably distorts Scripture. 14: She segues smoothly from intra-creational labor-pains (Ro.8.22-23) to the antibiblical notion of Creator/creation labor pains (again, "the way God made the world"). Two distortions in this: "our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness" (corrections: *we* [or at least men: 1Cor.11.7]; & the *imago dei*, biblically, is not specific as to divine characteristics). And a false generalization from grace (the Christian's "body is a temple of the Holy Spirit," 1Cor.6.19) to nature (everybody's body, as sacred, being a temple of divinity)--in violation of the context, in which the prostitute's body functions for profanation & is thus not naturally sacred. Am I being picky? Of course! One function of a Bible scholar is to see/feel/object to the multitudinous antibiblical, out-of-context **spins** people put on the Bible in order to give their notions scriptural warrant. Not that they all do it consciously; many are far downstream for the distortion-source & object to strict construction ("What it meant."), when they hear/read it, as though *it* were distortive.

Chap.4, "Household Economics," has some practical ideas for the simplification & just-ification (making more just) of life, though it's not specifically Christian. Shockingly, it uses the Christian technical term "incarnation" without even mentioning Jesus as God incarnate (not to mention exclusively: God's only coming in flesh). 47: "Incarnation is a theologian's way of speaking about Spirit in matter. Along with many other traditions, Judaism and Christianity understand the inner secret of Creation to be the indwelling of God within it." Except for the fact that the chapter's in a book purportedly Christian, I've no objection to the poetic expropriation of a central Christian word to preach a more intelligent & humane economics. ...Once the expropriation occurs, the word can be used in the new sense as a neo-technical term (49): "A conviction of incarnation has continually informed the faithful economic imagination in both personal and institutional-political terms." But the word-change has an inescapably negative feedback against canonical-classical Christian theology, where incarnation is a unique, unrepeatable event, not a category of happenings....But I do like this new take on tithing (57): reduce by 1/10th your (& your church's) use of power & water.

Chap.5, "Saying Yes and Saying No," is a practical guide to personal askesis (spiritual training), though it does mention the book's focus as "practicing *together*." 72: "Daily personal prayer, examination of conscience, and participation in a faith-sharing group" are "smaller practices" that can help sustain "the larger practice of saying yes to life, saying no to destruction." Her perspective is relationalistic (61): "Our spirituality is our capacity to relate to God, to other human beings, and to the natural world"; & she quotes approvingly Marcus Borg's conversion of Jesus into a relationalist (67): "The alternative wisdom of Jesus sees the religious life as a deepening relationship with the Spirit of God [*sic*, not as Jesus would say, "Father"], not as the life of requirements and rewards." The girls being better than the boys at relationships, the perspective here would lead us to guess correctly that the author is a woman. Another give-away: her consistent prioritizing of feminine over masculine ("she or he," "a man or a woman," & six times "women & men"). No clues as to what specifically is meant by "life" & "destruction," but the sexual politics is clear.

Chap.6. "Keeping Sabbath, strikes all the appropriate old & new notes except study --so important in the sabbatarian traditions of Judaism, the religion from which the "sabbath" (Heb., "ceasing," thus rest) as a weekly religious observance became somehow-sometime attached to the (Christian) Lord's Day, which is the week's 1st day (or 8th, if we incorporate Gn.1-2.4b). The chapter's message is (76) "we need sabbath" and should "relocate" it "in the biblical stories of creation, exodus, and resurrection if we are to discover the gifts it offers." 82: "Christ's victory over the powers of death makes each weekly day of rest and worship a celebration of Easter."....This book on Christians' "practicing together" has little to say about our studying together, & Sunday after worship & light lunch is an excellent time

for it. "Joyful worship" (86), yes; but also joyful study as much centering on God as what we formally call worship.

Chap.7, "Testimony," opens with a little boy testifying (in Wed.pm prayermeeting) thus: "Thank God for what he has done for me." That was long ago, & the child almost certainly did not use this book's antipronominal PC substitution, viz., "Thank God for what God has done for me." My hermeneutics of suspicion kicks in: I can't trust PRACTICING OUR FAITH to do honest quoting. (The probability is that the "Black Church" preacher who wrote this chapter sent in "he," & the publisher changed it to "God.")....The text gives the impression that the Wed.pm "testifying" was a Black Church (in the author's case, Methodist) distinctive; but regularly in that weekly service for years I testified in a (white) Methodist church & then a Baptist church. And I can report that it was the best possible training for witnessing "in the world."....Witnessing is (sometimes fatal) truth-telling.

Chap.8, "Discernment," is eminently practical, with wisdom especially from the Jesuits and the Quakers. Discernment is work, an integrated process of seeking (individually & communally) God's will.

Chap.9, "Shaping Communities" as (my figure) islands of order in the human sea of chaos: (120-1) "Life is a mess, and...governance is necessary for the positive flourishing of life." Well-ordered churches are manifoldly contributors to the well-ordering of society; good leaders "help people identify the challenges they face and untangle the issues entailed in them, and they do so in a way that gives people work appropriate to their skills and on a scale and at a pace they can tolerate"; they "draw out the strengths of people while rendering the weaknesses as irrelevant as possible." 123: "Jesus constituted his community around power turned upside down."

Chap.10, "Forgiveness," 145: "Our broken ways can become habitual, and our forgiveness needs to become habitual too." "Forgiveness can be abused. When isolated from faithful patterns of mutual discernment, mutual confession, and ongoing repentance as a vocation for every member of a community, the language of forgiveness can be manipulated to protect the powerful or to make conflict even worse than it was before. Honest, sturdy communities guard against such abuse." The author does not deal with two-way forgiveness, forgiveness as conditional (e.g., Mt.6.15).

Chap.11, "Healing," 149: "The central [healing] image for us [Christians] is not *cure* but *wholeness*...chiefly in terms of right relationships with God and our neighbors....the resurrection of the body." Even now, Jesus, "the firstfruits of this resurrection,...share[s] the benefits of his victory over death in very concrete ways." 150: Healing now is "part of the coming wholeness that God intends for all creation....part of the reconciling activity of God in the world." Receiving or giving healing, "we participate directly in the divine restoration of the material order." 151: "When we are very ill, we are brought to the place where life and death meet. For Christians, this place is the cross....a prelude to new life. Transformation occurs when we experience our illness in this context." The early church "regarded healing by prayer and the laying on of hands as a normal part of the church's mission." Our therapeutic culture has not brought wholeness. 162: "For us, as for our Master, preaching, teaching, and healing must combine to form a seamless garment [Mt.4.23]."

Chap.12, "Dying Well," 164: Weekly "the [Christian] community gathers to celebrate the resurrection, God's final victory over death. Every year, during the season of Lent, it focuses on Christ's death on the cross....Those who face death experience the living presence of God through the living presence of the community that cherishes and mourns them." 165: "The 'rescue credo' of modern medicine often interferes with our chances of dying well." We must, as Hospice does, "shift the focus away from the disease and back to the person." 167, ital: "When Christian practices are healthy, dying well embraces both lament and hope, and both a sense of divine judgment and an awareness of divine mercy." 170: "As followers of Jesus Christ [& his cross], we are not to save death and dying for the end of our lives."

Life in Christ requires dying now." 171: "In its power to separate and alienate, death is part of the old order. Christians who hope for the coming of God's new reign must nurture resistance to the powers of death in this world." 174: "The significant convergence between Catholic and Protestant practices of dying well is a hopeful sign for the future of the Christian community."....While I disagree with nothing in this chapter, & especially applaud its handling of the paradox that death is both natural (the world's present emphasis, a "necessary loss") & an outrage redemptively removed-in-process (the Bible's trumpet tenor), I must add death as creaturely stricture against the hubris of pretending to deity (Gn.3.22-23, divine self-protection against humanity). Human efforts to pierce the ontological glass ceiling result in repeated necessary humiliations--of which I speak, in my dairy of ½-c.-less-1-day-ago, thus: "What a monster of infamy man would become if all other beneficent influences were his but the thought of death!"

Chap.13, "Singing Our Lives," 182: "The act of singing together of life lived and felt binds heart and mind with ordered sound." The early Christians were sacred-song-saturated, for singing the Word is (Augustine) "praying twice."....A masterful chapter, with a keen sense of hymns as "sung theology." I would only add a word of warning: since the people (come to) believe what they sing, the church should exercise a critical consciousness about the theological content thereof.

Chap.14, "Growing in the Practices of Faith." 195: The authors' "deepest and dearest purpose is to contribute to the search...for a life-giving way of life. We hope that talk about practices can make a difference in the way people walk with one another and with God. Being together with other people who share our concerns is indispensable." And "we need to look beyond what our own little circle possesses....the Bible, theology, and the experience of people of faith." 199: "A yes is always tied to a no, and vice versa." 202: Without prayer & Bible study, "the twelve practices we have discussed...would collapse." 199-200: The author's useful "Guide to Exploring Christian Practices." 202: "reminding one another to pray, study, worship, and practice."....Chap.3, "Hospitality," is solid, excellent.

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