

Book Review

OUR SOUTHERN ZION: A HISTORY OF CALVINISM IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA LOW COUNTRY, 1690-1990, by Erskine Clarke. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 472 pages.

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RE: Weeks' Review of Clarke's Book

I am delighted that this book by Erskine Clarke is receiving a careful review on our pages. The author happens also to be the editor of the *Journal*. In his intimate modesty, he flinched at printing the review under his own editorship. The review has been secured and is printed at my behest. The book is reviewed, not because Clarke is editor and well-beloved colleague, but because it is an exceedingly important piece of research on a subject intimately linked to the history and character of Columbia Seminary. Clarke should be held accountable for the book, but is innocent concerning the publication of the review.

Walter Brueggemann

This is a fine work, an obvious labor of love; and it fills a real need in American religious history—for a critical yet sympathetic history of a distinctive community over the centuries.

The chronological treatment of the low country South Carolina Reformed community includes chapters on the initial settlements in the colony, the Reformed beginnings, the particularity of low country Reformed, and the effects of the Great Awakening. Chapters on the conflicts between loyalists and revolutionaries in the War of Independence, the development of ante-bellum Reformed life, its variety, theology, and its distinctive inculcation of slavery precede the chapter on the Civil War. Chapters on Reconstruction, African American adaptation, and the lingering internal conflicts among the African American Reformed are followed by one on the "white Reformed" from Reconstruction to World War II and a concluding treatment of contemporary low country Presbyterianism.

Clarke found that the Reformed preached as Reformed in other parts of North America and that they practiced much as Reformed practiced elsewhere as well. This conclusion contradicts the conventional wisdom that the South Carolina low country was "Cavalier" in faith as well as life.

Clarke also found that the intellectual and spiritual life of the low country Reformed gradually changed in nature. From a society closely linked to those in New England and elsewhere, the Reformed came to form what Clarke cites as "our little world," a coherent but more ingrown culture among Blacks and another among whites. With the pervasive impingements of the twentieth century, particularly those in the wake of World War II, the "little worlds" began to diminish in coherence and in their power to fashion the lives of adherents. Recently the triumph of the "therapeutic" and the "managerial" images of the minister compounds the force of the erosion.

Clarke concludes with brief sections on the present situation, which he characterizes as that of "sun belt," in which the secular and the pluralistic have gained sway. He challenges readers, particularly low country Reformed readers, to make use of the

present freedom from the parochial and the dead hand of the past. Can, in the words of the hymn, new occasions teach new duties? Can low country Reformed Christians exercise enough imagination to present compelling models for faithfulness?

Clarke introduces his effort by stating some of his assumptions about the relationship of religion and life. He names five. Those assumptions are worth repeating, for they not only determine his selection of data and the narrative which follows, they can also help in assessing the depth of truth in the portrayal.

Clarke follows Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Emile Durkheim in seeing religion rooted in social reality, but he could have gotten the same insight from elsewhere. "The religious life of a people reflects their historical setting no less than a people's art or science or technology..." (p. 3).

In tension with his first assumption is Clarke's second: "Religion provides a powerful way of understanding the world, gives explanation of the incongruent and contradictory events of human life, offers emotional support and ways of comprehending human suffering, and provides to the believer ethical standards for living in such a world" (p. 3).

Third, after Paul Ricoeur, the social context is dynamic and suggestive, possessing a "metaphoric quality" to enable a constantly changing religious hermeneutic.

Fourth, "a dynamic and reciprocal relationship exists between a religious tradition and its social context." Clarke quotes Clifford Geertz, who claims religious symbols "both express the world's climate and shape it" (p. 4).

Fifth, Clarke perceives religion also serving "ideological and utopian functions." It can and does legitimate power, but it also can and does support alternative social possibilities.

These are profound and provocative assumptions, and they set the tone for the sophisticated and constructive work. They provoke the reader to questions about the nature of religious reality and about the necessary circularity of all our endeavors of the mind or spirit.

Clarke affords a glimpse into the power of these assumptions right away, for he simply states on the page following that "the Reformed tradition" exists and that "a worldview and an ethos" are embedded in a "particular religious community" (p. 5). He finds "a remarkably strong and influential Reformed community in the low country." Granted, he takes out an insurance policy to protect himself, calling it also a "subgroup" and a "little world" within the larger.

But what if "Reformed traditions" (plural), "worldviews and ethoi" (plural) and even "religious communities" are more significant than their singular expressions? What if, for example, the power of "family religion" supersedes that of "congregational communities" so that a congregation of low country Presbyterians is more a collection of extended families than a singular body? What if we underestimate the richness of diversity in doing history so the complexity of contemporary life looks qualitatively different from the past? What if different "essentials" characterized the faith of those Reformed, or even some of them, rather than the usual: "sovereignty of God," "human sinfulness," and the "doctrine of grace" through the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, which both Clarke and I take as starting points for considering the faith?

I appreciated Clarke opening for examination his own presuppositions. As I read the work, I kept realizing the necessity of, and asking about the problem of, perceptual

circularity.

Clarke does so many things well in constructing the narrative. He mixes the data from local situations with that from more comprehensive sources—session minutes and secondary sources, for example. He provides social profiles of ministers and elders, of prominent families and of working people. He deals with Presbyterian and Congregational practice as well as with the preaching and the articulated theology. He outlines the theology of stalwarts, such as James H. Thornwell and John Girardeau. He follows the music and the worship of various periods (There I go, with Clarke and most other historians, assuming distinctive characteristics in different time “periods”!)

But the best thing Clarke provides is what you might expect from his previous scholarship—a substantial treatment of African American religion and life both interwoven and distinct from that of the whites in hegemony. So few general histories take seriously the nature and contributions of slave religion, the biblical authority for Black aspirations and movements, the complex relationships of African Americans and whites in ecclesiastical life, and the causes of Black suspicion of mainstream denominations. Clarke does not flinch or retreat in the telling of the tale, and the results offer wisdom for us all.

What of the story is particularly useful for preachers? Illustrations abound. Here, for example, is the Black revolutionary, Denmark Vesey, a Presbyterian. Now you will not find that in most sources, and Clarke carefully points to the multiple sources of Vesey’s revolutionary actions. But Vesey belonged, as a free Black “person of color,” to Charleston’s Second Presbyterian Church. Here the images of Moses and deliverance of God’s people found utopian expression as they would for others Reformed, or simply biblical. Clarke points to the irony of Vesey employing the same images in 1822 for slaves that colonial whites had used fifty years earlier in beginning the Revolution.

Here also is the richness of “the Reformed tradition” (or “Reformed traditions,” by alternative reading). Puritans, Congregationalists, Huguenots, Scots, Scotch-Irish, and others formed the fabric. African Americans early entered the context to influence it mightily. Distinct congregations kept identity for many generations, all the while changing in nature to meet new circumstances. Even now, the making of the new Presbyterian denomination becomes a “thick” story of collaboration and suspicion. I am reading *Church with a Conscience*, a history of the Church of the Covenant in Cleveland, Ohio, as I write this review; and Clarke does for a whole region what Carol Poh Miller does for a congregation—affords a taste of the theological heritage.

Analogies with other parts of the United States “religious geography” are easily made. Particular identities did develop, frequently (always?) with race as a primary but not exclusive factor. Those “little worlds” gave an internal coherence, usually at the price of inclusivity and interdependence with other cultures. I think of Appalachia (with its several subcultures), Southern Illinois, Kentucky Bluegrass, Virginia Tidewater, and Mississippi Delta as just a few. Preaching in any one of those, or perhaps in scores more, one could analyze changes in the Carolina low country without encountering the same valences one would encounter in employing the history of that particular culture.

One might even argue that the coherent but parochial life has dissipated in recent years in favor of a more homogenous, more loosely bound culture. There are now many “sun belts” of various kinds in American life.

Another profound benefit of the book for preachers and other ministers comes in reading Clarke's portrayal of the clergy—African American and white—through time. How reflective of our cultures are we? How captured by the therapeutic and managerial have we become today? Can we take up the challenge to lead in imagining models for a society to come?

I play with the thought that the history of the low country Reformed serves as metaphor for American Presbyterianism and "mainstream" Protestantism more broadly. Did the diversity in origins unite to become over time "our little world," a world which is now severely eroding and challenging us all mightily? Thanks to the author for such a thorough and thoughtful book.