

October 17, 2011 Don Michael Hudson, "Eastertide"

Eastertide: A Review of Lauren Winner's Girl Finds God

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Reading Ms. Winner's book has been a particular joy to me for various reasons--perhaps primarily being her mediation of the Jewish and Christian worldviews. It still amazes me to this day how many Christians forget that Paul and Jesus were devout Jews and that Christianity is the child of Judaism (Romans 9). Ms. Winner not only takes Judaism and the Hebrew Bible seriously, but she wrestles God and holds on as she departs one worldview into another. If we remember that Judaism is orthopraxy (proper practice) and Christianity is orthodoxy (proper doctrine) then we understand how dramatic and heart-rending it must have been for Ms. Winner to leave her faith--for a Jew to no longer practice as a Jew is to lose her identity. Period. A somewhat similar analogy would be if a Christian were to leave Christmas and Easter. And it's not that we would just miss the festivities--the Christmas gifts and Easter eggs and all that goes with it--we would lose the significance of those moments in the Christian faith and calendar also. Who are we if these are no longer our holidays? So for this young Jewish woman to turn her back on Hanukkah and stumble toward Christmas is costly, shattering and yet thrilling to watch. She, however, enjoys the ride and allows herself the freedom of fits and starts, questions and setbacks.

This brings me to my point of confusion in this section of "Eastertide". She makes the great connection between Judaism and Christianity that both eagerly anticipate the Messiah. Yes, one to come and one who has come, but both Jew and Christian

live in the ruins while yearning for a glory yet to be glimpsed. "Both Jews and Christians live in a world that is not yet redeemed, and both of us await ultimate redemption." Indeed. Then what do we do in the meantime? Do we wait so impatiently for the coming that we "leave" this world and stare at the future? I don't think so. This is a place where Nietzsche was so brilliant. To him, the Christians who depart this world in the sole hope of the future life are nihilists--they only find meaning in the future. Salvation must wait while I slog through another day here on earth. The Resurrection is a drug. But there is another tendency--one that Ms. Winner explores in her chapter--the tendency to focus on sin and forgiveness and confession. As I was reading I had to ask at one point--"How did Father Pete get in here?" Now to throw my cards down here--yes, I am a Protestant and perhaps I have too much protest in my Protestant, but I am not questioning the practice of confessing to a priest or rector. Adversely, I am questioning the obsession with confession and all the sins that go with it.

I have to confess that I really don't spend much time confessing. And it's not that I am perfect--just ask anyone who knows me. I don't really focus on my sin or the need for confession because I think it is one more way to "leave" this world and ironically focus on myself in ways that are not good. This is the tyranny of all fundamentalisms--we are constantly being watched and we are incessantly failing--shame and guilt are our taskmasters. I cannot help but recall Michel Foucault's "Panopticon"--life is a prison and there is someone in a tower who watches our every move and will count every strike. "Faith" subtly moves into the oppression of totalitarianism, and the crucifixion becomes a fixation. Not for me. And I think I can back this up theologically. Ms. Winner says that "on Yom Kippur Jews confess their sins, both privately and corporately. Before the holiday begins, they go around asking the forgiveness of everyone they have wronged; the Talmud teaches that God forgives the sins we've done against Him freely, but he will not forgive the sins we've done against our neighbor until they have forgiven us first." Sounds like the teaching of Jesus doesn't it? Yes, I am constantly

changing and growing, but I am most concerned about the way I live out the gospel with the people in my life. Do I love and care and respect and honor and speak well of and speak well to? If not, then I need to go to that person. I didn't do anything against Father Pete so I won't be confessing anytime soon. But my students, my colleagues, my beautiful family, the woman behind the counter...do I live out the beauty of the gospel? If not, then get to it. And when I sin against God I'll ask him to forgive me too, but then I'm done with it because there's work to do, good food to eat, great trips to take, widows, orphans and strangers to take care of--there is life now. I am human and that is the beauty of the whole thing to me. And while I pace the room awaiting the resurrection I would prefer to work on repairing the world closest to me rather than obsessing with my sins.

And lest one thinks I've stumbled into the abyss of heresy let us remember the words of the Apostle Paul. Jesus is the second Adam who became sin for us and the crucifixion--that awful Friday of sin and death--the few moments when God left the scene--brings death to death. One of the most beautiful elements of Christianity is that sin is done and so death is conquered. According to Paul and Augustine and Luther and Calvin and Barth the human condition is hopeless, but Christ is all hope. The crucifixion is over, and the resurrection has occurred--but not yet, not completely. We as Christians are left to live between the death of Friday and the Sunday resurrection. George Steiner comes to mind here: "But ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other. In the face of the torture of a child, or the death of love which is Friday, even the greatest art and poetry are almost hopeless. The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and hope...are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man (Real Presences, p. 232, italics mine). To live and love between Friday and Sunday is to revel in hope and freedom and yes--anticipation of what is yet to come. As I have said repeatedly in the classroom, "Christianity

is about redemption, not perfection." So get over yourself. Return to God which in the Hebrew means to bring your face back (tashuv) and then guard your life with tender mercy (hesed) and right justice (mishpat) while waiting (havah) patiently, eagerly on the Lord (Hosea 12:7).

Works Cited