

Lauren F. Winner. *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. 240 pages. \$28.

In *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*, Lauren F. Winner displays how humans can deform Christian acts of devotion. It follows titles such as *Invisible Weapons: Liturgy and the Making of Crusade Ideology* (2017), by M. Cecilia Gaposchkin.

Winner focuses upon Eucharist, prayer, and baptism. At the Eucharist, Christians consume a Jewish body and are not always transformed into people of peace, but of bloodshed (36). The meal suggests supersession and exclusion. It has also fueled Christian violence against Jewish flesh. Winner recounts how a rumor that Jews threw a pebble at a monstrosity carrying the host became another spark to ignite the killing of hundreds of Jews in Prague on Easter 1389.

Prayer can become duplicitous, asking from God the reduction of one evil while deepening another (86). Winner points to the petition and confession from slave-owning widow Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard: “Negroes are as deceitful & lying as any people can well be—Lord give me better feelings towards them.” Petition risks requesting the wrong thing in attempts to sound right: “(Forgive me, for unkind thoughts & have mercy on me!)” (57-59). Confession may seek mercy to excuse prejudice. Brevard’s prayers fail to discern the good and instead desire what God opposes (93).

Baptism threatens to “extract” the baptized from their “local” (aspects of identity such as social location, language, history, and family) and “superinscribes, rather than erases, particularities, and superinscribes them in a way that they are still legible” (97). Put another way, baptism redefines kinship and reinvents lineage in ways that threaten to dilute who we are in God. Winner raises godparentage as one example of how family becomes destabilized and embraced. Actual parents do not serve as godparents, yet godparents extend the family of the baptized. Christening parties display another contrasting side of how baptism disorients identity. The pageantry of Christening absorbs the theological profundity of joining the family of Christ with ornate domestic celebrations of new life in earthly family trees.

To be clear, Winner does not dismiss the practices of Eucharist, prayer, and baptism. Though the Eucharist can feed anti-Semitism, she sees the fractured state and corrupt history of the Eucharist disclosing the reality of encountering Jesus; even Judas received. For Winner, repentance ought to follow confession and attend to redress, even when such redress seems impossible. Facing that impossibility, Christians can lament how the gifts of God become deformed, and recognize that ultimately only God can save. Even the “flowers and food and baubles” of Christening function like an “unofficial ‘sacramental,’” hallowing the material as signs of God’s invisible welcome and grace (132).

The book closes with an appendix entitled “*Depristinating Practices*.” It reiterates Winner’s central argument that the study of Christian practices must take seriously how Christian practices “carry with them their own deformations” (180). Moving through figures such as Ted Smith, Craig Dykstra, Stanley Hauerwas (the book is dedicated to Hauerwas), George Lindbeck, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Wendy Farley, Sarah Coakley, and others, it reads somewhat like a curiously placed literature review. Yet the appendix helps situate the principal conversation partners. It also distinguishes Winner’s contribution.

One footnote challenging the claims from William Cavanaugh’s *Torture and Eucharist* (1998) and his interpretation of Eucharistic gathering as an organization of bodies for transformative social resistance and hospitality is especially penetrating (186, #32). Winner sees

the Eucharistic arranging of bodies as also including measures of self-protection against Jews. I will not go into further detail because it's worth a direct look. But her rebuttal there makes the book, or at least that note and the chapter to which it belongs, required reading for advanced scholars of liturgy.

*The Dangers of Christian Practice* also deserves inclusion in many syllabi of Christian worship, liturgics, and practical theology. By showing selected dangers too often taught and shared as infallible, it will deepen the integrity of any researcher, teacher, leader, or devotee of Christian worship.

Other aspects of her argumentation, however, seem curious. Does a diary constitute an anthology of prayer? Was a more fundamental paradox of baptism overlooked, i.e. how the origins of baptism began with the consecration of imperfect human hands (Mk. 1:7; Matt. 3:14-15)? White-against-black and Judeo-Christian paradigms of race and ethnicity are normative in the volume. Of course, Winner cannot cover every possible transgression. But an extra historical example or two might suffice to indicate how widely the dangers of Christian practices travel across cultures.

Furthermore, there's something psychologically probing about the prose style in *The Dangers of Christian Practice*. The introduction begins in a meandering way that seems to investigate Winner's own difficulties with Christian worship without saying as much. As the book develops, it is as if Winner is searching and attending to personal repair, too. Of what, I won't venture to guess. Maybe it will surface more clearly in a novel to which she alludes as a project of hers (142). Winner is already a celebrated author. I wonder if the novel whispered in the current book might make more of an underdeveloped but provocative connection with which Winner teases the reader: a loose insight that the title of Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* (1904) appears to magnify the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 12—"before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken" (163). Interestingly, and not mentioned by Winner, Qoheleth prefaces that line with an imperative, "Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them,'" and the passage ends, "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity." *The Dangers of Christian Practice* awakes from that kind of anamnesis.

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