

The Presents of Grace

Review of

A Miracle of Grace: An Autobiography

By E. Glenn Hinson

Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012

448 pages / \$35.00 cloth

Reviewed by **Phillip M. Thompson**

This religious autobiography of a Southern Baptist minister and university professor will be of interest to Merton readers for two reasons. It is both a careful reflection of Dr. Hinson's spiritual quest for meaning and it also demonstrates, once again, how Thomas Merton profoundly impacted a person from a different religious tradition.

Christian autobiography since the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine has been a source of inspiration and insight about the spiritual journey. Dr. Hinson's goal in his own words is not about how good or bad he is but to "discuss the ways God enters into a human life" as a "miracle of grace" (Preface). One of his inspirations for this project is Merton's notion of how grace is always present in our life experience (32).

The book often presents an engaging picture and the narrative voice is clean and avuncular with little academic pretense. This voice reveals how Dr. Hinson's childhood made him an unlikely candidate to be a renowned Church historian and spiritual leader. In the Missouri Ozarks, he was raised in poverty with an alcoholic father and poor prospects. He and his brother were prone to fights, drinking and general devilment. The table was stacked against his future, but he was an apt learner and selfless teachers and mentors guided him into the life of the spirit and mind where he thrived. He would hold a number of prestigious academic positions garnering an impressive array of awards for his teaching and many writings.

The book is gripping when Dr. Hinson is dealing with personal challenges such as his loss of hearing or issues in his family. His journey is at times quite difficult and he bears his crosses with an authentic human anguish that is balanced by the ballast of his faith.

There are some aspects of the book that fall prey to certain dangers in writing about yourself. One problem is that the book sometimes gets into the weeds about the details of his various academic and Church appointments. Perhaps the reader might have been spared some of these details. A few evocative examples illustrating some important challenges to his charity or sanity would have sufficed. One other criticism: in many parts of his life and its struggles, the author is balanced in his analysis and charitable in his conclusions. There is at least one exception. Dr. Hinson is obviously still angry by his perception of a conservative coup against moderate Southern Baptists, including himself, in the late 1970s. Writing in a state of anger is problematic. Let me provide an illustrative

Phillip M. Thompson is executive director of the Aquinas Center of Theology at Emory University, Atlanta, GA and author most recently of *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological World* (2013).

example. Dr. Hinson is quite right to condemn the comment by Bailey Smith, the conservative head of the Southern Baptist Convention (1980-1982), that God could not hear the prayers of Jews, who did not invoke Jesus as their Messiah (234-35).

In his published response to this comment in a newspaper, Dr. Hinson makes a strong argument that Dr. Bailey ignored Jesus' Jewishness, denied the efficacy of Old Testament prayers, and forgot the religious freedom history of Baptists. So far so good, but he should have stopped there. Instead, he ends his letter with: "Statements such as this one are the stuff from which holocausts come." He then went on to state that "at this moment" events in the South were looking "ominously like those that happened in Germany in the 1930s" (237). Such statements demean the truth of that terrible event by a false comparison. Quite simply, millions of moderate Baptists were not on the verge of being rounded up and massacred in the early 1980s.

Dr. Hinson is on more sure footing in his comments on Thomas Merton. In 1960, he met Merton when he took seminary students to the Abbey of Gethsemani to learn about the Middle Ages (Preface). The meeting with Father Louis dispelled many preconceptions.

Merton disarmed us. He enthralled us with his sense of humor and engaging manner. . . . When he finished he asked if we had any questions. One of the students whom I could count on for a query asked what I feared someone would ask: "What is a smart fellow like you doing throwing away his life in a place like this?" I waited for Merton to open up his mouth and eat that guy alive. But he didn't. He grinned a little and said, "I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation." You could have knocked me over with a feather. I have never met anyone who believed in prayer enough to think of it as a vocation. (124-25)

Dr. Hinson would from that point forward take students regularly to Gethsemani. He continued to read Merton and appreciated his insistent message to the modern world that contemplation was important in a world of action (125). Merton's message on contemplation and the Second Vatican Council's opening to other faiths was a "kairos" moment when God intervened in a special way in the world (126).

Merton would be a source of many reflections over the course of his career. Dr. Hinson wrote several articles on Merton, contemplation and prayer. He was also a founding member of the International Thomas Merton Society in 1987, serving as an officer in many capacities. He was also involved in a series of leadership controversies that he discusses in detail (338-42).

Finally, the book unpacks a parallel tendency of Dr. Hinson and Merton to seek an ultimate ground of unity between faith traditions. He draws comparisons between Merton's condemnation of a parochial "Catholic ghetto" and his own search to experience life beyond a "Baptist ghetto" (356-59). He wants to get Baptists to join in a more inclusive and open Christian family. In addition, like Merton, he wants to incorporate and reconcile in his own thought the divisions of Christianity. He will not leave his Baptist heritage but he will encourage others in his denomination to "see themselves in union with the Whole Body of Christ" (359).