

**A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann. Matthias Beier. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006.**

Unlike René Girard, the influential French thinker with whom he is often compared, renowned German theologian Eugen Drewermann remains relatively unknown in the English-speaking world—despite his books reaching bestseller status in Europe, translated into about a dozen languages; despite a very public conflict with the Vatican that resulted in his leaving the Catholic Church after he was forbidden by Church officials from both teaching and preaching (*Time* magazine even dubbed him the new Martin Luther); and despite an increasing awareness of, and interest in, Drewermann's theories within the American academic world. To remedy this situation in part, psychotherapist and professor Matthias Beier has produced in *A Violent God-Image* the first real English-language introduction to Drewermann's thought, focusing upon those works that address the use of fear inherent in most traditional interpretations of the Christian faith, the violence promoted against both self and others on account of this fear, and how the scriptures might be reinterpreted in light of modern psychotherapy to allow for an escape from fear and the full realization of God's love. *A Violent God-Image* proves to be a fascinating exploration into the work of one of modern Europe's most influential thinkers and will, one might hope, provide the impetus for the translation of Drewermann's major works into English.

Beier opens his study of Drewermann's work with a lengthy chapter devoted to the central issues in the theologian's three-volume *Strukturen des Bösen* ("Structures of Evil"), in which Drewermann interprets the primordial history of the Yahwist exegetically and psychoanalytically as presenting human nature as it always has been, especially when it comes to the violent God-image held by humankind—essentially the view that God is a being before whom humanity is not worthy, having to justify its very existence somehow. Beier ably summarizes Drewermann's reading of the early chapters of Genesis as the theologian argues for the place of fear as mankind's true original sin: "The psychically violent God-image which is completely opposed to anything human is ... the result of an original fall from God due to the fear of one's own nothingness, one's own existential contingency" (103). The eating of the Tree of Knowledge was less an act of prideful

disobedience and more the result of Adam and Eve's inability to trust in God and their fearful attempt to recapture God by becoming like him. In response to this fundamental fear, humanity has developed complex moral strictures designed to provide some assurance of goodness and justification before God, but "Drewermann stresses again and again that ... [a]ny moralizing of the theological guilt of humans is itself working by means of fear and thus reinforces sin. Only the experience of trust and unconditional acceptance can melt the icy structures of fear and evil" (110).

Beier moves on to analyze Drewermann's approach to the issue of war and his argument that Christian moralizing has inadvertently promoted war but that only "religion holds the key to healing human belligerence *if* only religion would avoid its one-sidedly moralistic and rationalistic stance," that is, "if religion would aim instead at helping people ... *be* in harmony with themselves, and as a result in harmony with others" (145–146). As the means by which deeply spiritual fears are played out, wars cannot be solved through ethical or moral approaches but rather through a pure religious approach not concerned with practical issues of ethics, a religion that "calms the fear of the human spirit by pointing to a pre-existent grace, to the unconditional acceptance by an absolute good will that is at the same time absolutely compassionate" (191). Of course, much of the work in establishing such a religious worldview, in Christian terms, entails eschewing the violent God-image and recovering the nonviolent God-image of Jesus by stripping the image of the cross of its sacrificial and sadomasochistic trappings, which have long made suffering a virtue. Rather, "[t]he redemptive significance of the Cross thus does not lie in the suffering of Jesus, but in Jesus' overcoming the fear of death through trust in God and in his loyalty to the truth of his own existence in the face of a world and a type of religiosity ruled by fear and collective alienation" (226).

Beier's final chapter brings all these threads to a head in his discussion of Drewermann's 900-page *Kleriker: Psychogramm eines Ideals* ("Clerics: Psychogram of an Ideal"), the book primarily responsible for the punishments meted out to Drewermann by church authorities. Drewermann argues that the Catholic Church responds to the fundamental anxiety of human beings with a series of institutional and moral safeguards that only reinforce the violent God-image by instrumentalizing fear. This, combined with a theology of sacrifice that makes a virtue of misery, leaves clergy poorly suited to address their own existential problems or questions of faith, much less those of their parishioners.

Drewermann argues for a “reinterpretation of the evangelical counsels” of poverty, chastity, and obedience that “shifts the focus away from an external, objective perspective to an internal, subjective perspective” (323), as well as the removal of celibacy requirements and the restrictions against married and female priests, which would allow for the inclusion of people whose focus could thus be more human than institutional.

Beier’s task as a writer was no enviable one—to digest down into one volume the various and intricate ideas from the near hypergraphic Eugen Drewermann—and in a manner easily approachable, no less. But he has done an outstanding job. *A Violent God-Image* not only convincingly argues that Drewermann’s work needs greater critical attention in the English-speaking world, but it also makes the case that issues of violence and conflict might best be approached by first examining the image of God that most humans hold in common. Beier and Drewermann both are calling all humanity to the difficult project of peace, a project that must begin with a look inward at the tangle of fear that lurks still in the human heart.

Book Reviewed by:

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