

# Books: **THE GOD OF OUR CALCULATIONS**

**J**OSEPH FICHTER'S *The Catholic Cult of the Paraclete* has stood since 1975 as the most professional yet appreciative study of the charismatic movement. Meredith McGuire, whose scrutiny dates back more than a decade, has completed what must now stand in the center of the plentiful publications on Catholic pentecostals. Her perspective is that of participant-observer, sympathetic yet sober. Her attention is fastened upon four features of the movement: strategies for recruitment and allegiance, dynamics of prayer meetings, attitudes involved in faith healing, and authority style in an exuberant community.

McGuire sees the movement attracting persons whose reliance on a firm sense of order is no longer served by the church. A vernacular liturgy left in large part to local adaptation; moral issues on which there is heated and public dispute; entire segments of the layperson's creed lobotomized out of existence: the church is failing to provide an authoritative and simple way to salvation. And in public, before a cynical and secularized society, the church offers a limp and unimposing presence. To such a clientele, now more middle-aged than the earlier waves of young converts, McGuire sees the movement holding up a reassuringly secure vision. Its doctrine is homely yet definite, its authority imperturbable, its moral teaching without quibble.

Increasing deviation in perspective and emphasis will probably strain relations between the movement and the larger church, which has hitherto been acquiescent. McGuire sees in the group a

## **PENTECOSTAL CATHOLICS POWER, CHARISMA AND ORDER IN A RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT**

Meredith B. McGuire  
Temple Univ. Press, \$22.50, 270 pp.

## **WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE**

Harold S. Kushner  
Schocken, \$10.95, 149 pp.

## **James Tunstead Burtchae II**

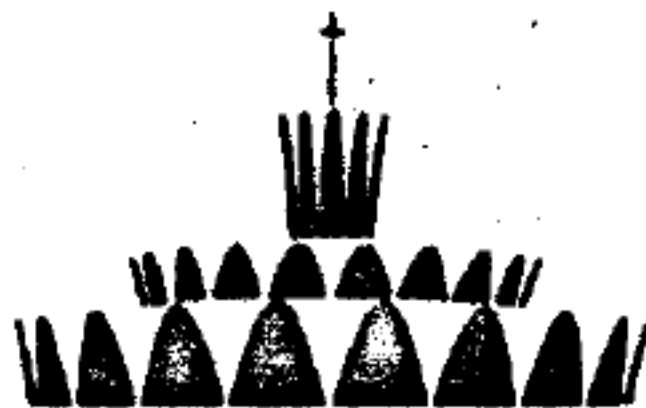
growth of sectarian qualities: a contempt for society at large, a sense of privileged access to truth, a creed that claims dominance over other sources of understanding, a leadership which requires total allegiance. Contrary to Fichter, who saw in

the movement the more fluid and less totalitarian qualities of a cult, she observes that its steersmen are growing increasingly hostile towards competing navigators, and are heading in a more sectarian direction.

Also noted is the privatizing of religion among charismatics. Few social activists are drawn into membership nor, once committed, do charismatics tend to involve themselves actively in the economic, social, and political order. Ethical concerns are explicit on individual behavior or marital relations (e.g., male dominance and female submission). But matters of social ethics are expounded with less bite. Ministries of the movement are mostly devoted to its own membership. "... [I]nteraction in the public

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sphere is defined as far less important than key aspects of the private spheres: personal devotion, family life, and the prayer group. . . . In essence, the pentecostal movement among Catholics represents the celebration and enhancement of the privatization of religion. [This] enhances the segregation of 'opinions' on social issues from the sphere of religious experience and meaning, [and] makes it highly unlikely that the move-

ment will produce any significant effort for socio-economic change, at least in developed countries. Theodicies provided by the Catholic pentecostal belief system legitimate members' middle-class comforts and allow them to express their concern for less comfortable members of society by prayer."

For a theologian, McGuire's soundings into the implicit charismatic understanding of God give much to reflect on.

The pentecostal is familiarized with a Lord who is attentive to the most everyday occurrences. He or she looks to Jesus to relieve high blood pressure, find lost car keys, and secure employment. Pain, poverty, and illness are interpreted as sequelae of sin or the work of Satan or evil spirits. Thus healing prayer begins with the exorcism of demons and an appeal for the alleviation of sin, so that serious sickness can then be relieved.

This Lord of Pentecost is expected to incline his ear to the most earthy and particular supplications. This could be token a belief in his exquisite care: if no lily flowers but under his watchful eye, surely he cares distinctly about your sister's shingles and the current price of your GM stock. Yet somehow he does lack something of the grandeur of the sparrow-eying Lord. He is diminished by the presumption that he is at our beck to remedy our paltriest concerns.

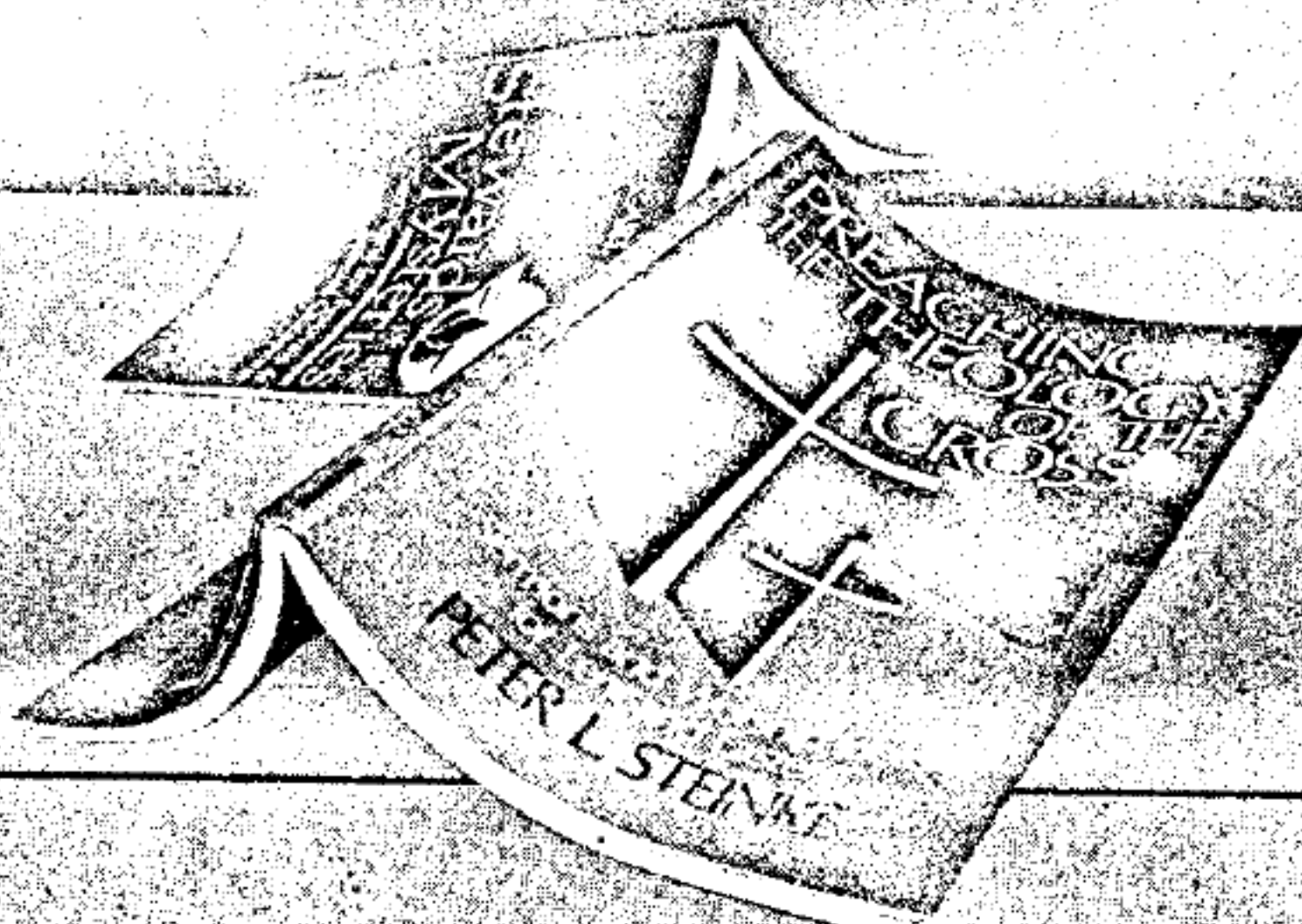
The church is ready to acknowledge miracles when they show forth the divine benevolence and testify to special women and men whom the Lord has possessed by his Spirit. But the craving to construe every auto accident and upturn in the business cycle as a skirmish between Jesus and Satan for possession of each one of us has too little in common with our received faith in the Father almighty. It is the Gospel writ tiny.

It is no copyright of charismatics, of course. This God so widely worshiped has troubled many a soul. For if an influenza fever broken or sunshine on a wedding day or a new furnace donated to a convent are, to true believers, to be taken as signs of God's periodic affection, then spina bifida at birth or the hit-and-run death of a young father of three or dry rot in the basement beams must be darkened by God's wrath. If all the give-and-take of welcome and dread events is spoken by God in a decipherable stream of good and bad news, if weal and woe mean blessing and curse, then this is a puzzling world and that is surely a God you would want to be wary of.

Harold Kushner was not wary. When his firstborn was diagnosed at three to suffer from a wasting, terminal illness, the young rabbi felt his faith buckle. "Like most people, my wife and I had

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grown up with an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure who would treat us as our earthly parents did, or even better. If we were obedient and deserving, He would reward us. If we got out of line, He would discipline us, reluctantly but firmly. He would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would see to it that we got what we deserved in life." But when days go dark and humans suffer, this theology invites them either to begin blaming themselves or, if they can find no equivalent fault, to begin hating God.

Alerted by his own misery to the many ways good folk in his flock could be stricken, Kushner choked on the God-defending theologies he had been taught: that God would prove fair in the long run, that suffering ennobles or purges those who bear up under it, that no one is given a heavier burden than he or she can bear, that early death is to rescue the innocent from a depraving world. These seemed either to deny reality or to imply an unworthy deity, and they also mitigated outrage at injustice in the world.

After Aaron Kushner died at fourteen, his father had wrestled the ancient problem through, and he brought out his quickly popular book on God and suffering. What makes it so worth reading is the author's sensible rejection of theory after theory devised to explain how the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune all bespeak a mysterious but eventually decipherable purpose of a fair-minded God. But Kushner's own theological answer is, sadly, almost as flawed as the ones he disallows. Ironically, it is constructed on a profound misunderstanding of *Job*.

That book (*sans* the prologue and epilogue of a later editor who flinched at the daring of the first edition) was published to correct a teaching derived from the great prophets. Whereas more ancient thinkers had explained unmerited prosperity or suffering as retribution for others' deeds, shared out across a tribe or down the generations of a family, Jeremiah and Ezekiel rejected that explanation. In their view, the Lord would be no more ready than any just man among us to favor or to afflict someone on another's account. Every man suffers for

his own sins. Both Job and his visitors abide by this prophetic teaching. His adversity convinces them he must be guilty of some awesome offense, but it enrages him because he knows that is not the case. The Lord, roused to hurricane force by all this theological bickering, rages onto the scene. He demands why, when he had never thought it needful for them to understand how the tides flow or when the mountain goats breed or whence comes the dew, they should be so cocksure that he had unpuzzled for them the far greater mystery of suffering. Enough for them to know that he knows what he is about. Job's answer, and the book's sign-off for theologians: "I had better lay my finger on my lips."

*Job*, of course, helped provoke the

turmoil which led to the *Wisdom of Solomon* and its break-through doctrine that the just would survive injustice and death and would journey, not to the underworld with the unjust, but to the heavenly court. Latter-day Judaism was subsequently swept by a Sadducean distrust of this theological development, but Christians received it, through the Pharisees, as a progressive insight of the living tradition. *Job's* point is that believers ought never imagine that God's governance and justice are simple enough for them to comprehend in their application. Rabbi Kushner has somehow turned this around. "[The author] believes in God's goodness and in Job's goodness, and is prepared to give up his belief . . . that God is all-powerful. Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the Book of Job chooses to believe in God's goodness." Kushner has the book balking at precisely what it was written to vaunt: a Lord whose goodness and justice bear upon us in ways that transcend any of our daily calculations and interpretations.

Kushner's theology and that which McGuire describes among charismatics stand starkly opposed to one another. But

## REVIEWERS

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# PRAYER

We feel God present and hear Him call us to be still.

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they are alike in that they both diminish God, and in doing so they both miss some elements very central to Christian speculation on God's governance.

First, one cannot safely pick and choose what in the world will serve as signs of God. One person will cultivate posters with starlit mountain lakes and inscriptions from the Psalms, and will luxuriate in a God of elegant bounty. But another will be gripped with loathing for a God who drowned his young sister in exactly such a lake. Both are really picking out

things and events which they, according to some prior notions of their own, not found in nature or history, have decided are revealing. However, they are not receiving the revelation from what they behold; they are identifying it according to what they have already accepted. The church does not see nature or history offering any consistent or decipherable vision of God. She points us straightaway at Jesus's death and resurrection. Jesus, who dies for those who kill him, displays in himself and for his Father an absence

of all wrath, an inability to punish, a relentless love. In him God is disclosed to us. Elsewhere he is not revealed; he is suggested, by persons or scenes or events.

Second, one thing which God apparently does not create *ex nihilo* is the character, the innermost *ego* of a human. That, unlike freckles or a musical ear or a gentle temperament, is not ours: it is *us*, and we must be the author of it, of our self. Everything else we have; but that, we are. God creates us, but this most

inward center of his creature, our self, we must co-create. In that way we are identical with who we are. All else, the corona of endowments and influences, is given to us. But our moral personality is who we have managed, through choices or the forfeiture of choices, to become.

Third, we need time and opportunity to become. We cannot imagine the possibility of growth to human maturity, into transforming love, in a world where events are not haphazard. Any of the tidier worlds our imaginations might

fashion, where people could expect a fair reward for their efforts, would be deprived of the most precious advantage our world now enjoys: the possibility of virtue. Appetite for the reward would outrave desire for our neighbor's welfare. Strangely, in just such a just world we could never become just. It would be in our interest to give our neighbors their due, but precisely because of this self-interest we could never develop the strenuous and loving zeal for their dignity and rights which is the virtue of

justice. Just acts would be guaranteed, but just people could never ripen. We would be surrounded by justice but unable to possess it. Ironically, the only world imaginable wherein we can grow to the full stature of human maturity is the one in which both good and bad things — and evil things — can happen, and the best people can be crucified.

The God whom McGuire reports and the God whom Kushner portrays would both be loving, perhaps, but not loving enough to allow us to become so.