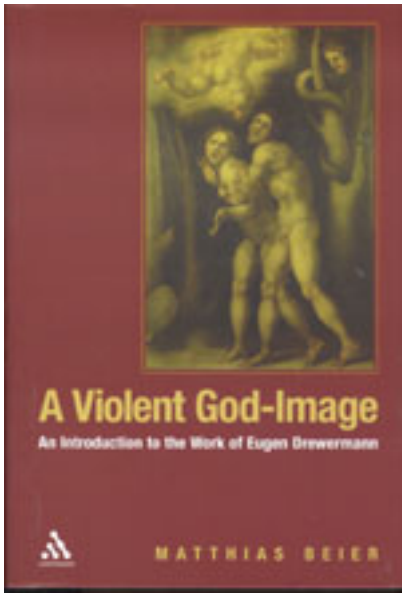


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Beier, Matthias

A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann

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This first full-length volume in English on the thought of Eugen Drewermann is a welcome and long-overdue introduction to the groundbreaking work of the most prolific theological writer in the German language over the past twenty years. Eugen Drewermann's work is of special interest to biblical scholars as the first comprehensive application in the twentieth century of psychoanalytic insight (in some instances also of biology, physics, and cosmology) to a wide range of biblical texts, as well as to the fields of moral theology and ecclesiology.

We learn from Beier that Eugen Drewermann, born in 1940 in Berkgmen, Germany, was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest, did advanced training in psychoanalysis and theology, and held a post in dogmatic theology at a Catholic Seminary in Paderborn, Germany. As a result of his views, he was, like Hans Küng, challenged by the church and banned from teaching. More drastically, he was suspended as a priest in 1992, "the most serious disciplinary action against a priest-theologian in the 20th century." The conflict between Drewermann and the Roman Church became a major media event for Dutch, French, German, and Italian audiences. He became one of the most widely quoted priests in Europe, appearing regularly on radio and television and in the press (e.g., a major article in the June 15, 1992, edition of the widely read German newspaper, *Der Spiegel*,

under the title [in translation], “The Goliath Churches Tremble before the David Drewermann”).

Drewermann’s literary output is prodigious. Since 1971 he has written more than seventy books. Three of them are of special interest in the context of this review. The first is Drewermann’s doctoral dissertation, published as *Strukturen des Bösen* (The Structures of Evil; 3 vols., 1985–86). Beier helpfully explains what is news to many of us in the English-speaking world, that the historical context for all of Drewermann’s thinking and writing is the Nazi era in Germany. At the heart of Drewermann’s work is the question of “how a nation steeped in Christianity could be swept away by the destructive ideology of Nazism” and, subsequently, “how the worst crimes of humanity” can be done “in the name of some of the most cherished ideals of humankind (e.g. duty, allegiance, obedience)” (127). Drewermann’s answer to these questions is that Auschwitz created a crisis in theology, leading to the realization that the problem is not with God but with humanity, a question not of theodicy but “anthropodicy.” Drewermann proposes that the key to understanding the problem is not theological but anthropological, and more specifically psychoanalytic, that is, psychological inquiry into the psychic origins of warfare, violence, and the violent God-image and the degree to which their origination is located within the haunts of church and scripture.

A second publication with explicit relevance for biblical scholarship is a massive two-volume set under the title *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese* (Depth Psychology and Exegesis, 1984). The subtitles of the two volumes list a rich roster of biblical literary genres: “dreams, myth, fairy tale, saga and legend” in volume 1, “miracle, vision, wisdom saying, apocalypse, history and parable” in volume 2. Drewermann explores each from three perspectives: the historical-critical, the mythic (transcultural), and the personal psychological. It is noteworthy that one quarter of the Drewermann oeuvre is devoted to biblical exegesis, including three two-volume sets of commentaries on the Gospel of Mark (1990), Matthew (1992), and, most recently, John (2003), viewed under the lens of historical criticism but also psychodynamic analysis of the role that the gospel plays in the inner lives of readers.

The third work of Drewermann that merits special attention in this review is the book that precipitated his fall from grace in the church: *Kleriker: Psychogramm eines Ideals* (Clerics: The Psychogram of an Ideal, 1990). It is based on his findings in psychotherapeutic work with Catholic clergy, identifying neurotic factors at work in the formation of clergy within the Roman Church.

The first of four chapters in Beier’s book is entitled: “Fear, Evil, and Origins of a Violent God-Image” It presents an overview of Drewermann’s foundational work, *Strukturen des*

Bösen, examining the God-image in the Yahwist narrative of Gen 2–11 and its implications for the development of a violent God-image. At the heart of *Strukturen des Bösen* is the thesis of a profound theological shift in the God-image in the transition from Gen 2 to 3–11.

The turning point is Eve’s conversation with the serpent, who plants in Eve’s mind the alluring temptation of thinking of herself as equal with God (a “primary neurosis”). This fantasy precipitates a second troubling fantasy of fear. It is the foundational fear of an ambivalent God who wavers between magnanimity and recrimination, ready to punish, slay, drown (Noah), or confuse (Babel) in payment for disobedience or hybris. It was out of such fear, as we learn in the Cain and Abel story, that humans felt compelled to sacrifice to a “God” whom they perceived has need of sacrifice; we further learn that under the constraints of these compulsions and internalized images of a violent God, the killing of humans is generated. The killing is not over possessions but for the blessing of a capricious, unpredictable, and ambivalent deity. Nothing has changed in God in the Cain and Abel story. The change has occurred in the minds of the primordial pair and all of their descendants. God has become the enemy. Throughout his writings, Drewermann promulgates existential *fear* of an *ambivalent God* as the psychodynamic source of war and violence.

Chapter 2, “War, Christianity, and the Destruction of Inner and Outer Nature: Effects of a Violent God-Image,” establishes the link between the psycho-mythic matrix of Gen 2–11 and Christian sanctions of war. Beier draws on Drewermann’s *Der Krieg und das Christentum* (War and Christianity, 1992), advancing the thesis that war is “the arena in which deeply spiritual fears are acted out” (173). Drewermann approaches fear from three perspectives: as a biological, psychosocial, and existential-psychological reality. Two factors that Drewermann finds amplifying fear within the Christian ethos are anthropocentrism and rationalism. He finds anthropocentrism implicit in the biblical text, pitting the human over the natural and the tribal over the universal, with its “devastating effects both in the treatment of nonhuman nature and of fellow humans” (156). “Rationalism ” a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, abets fear in its incapacity to see that human behavior is not as responsive to reason, creeds, codes of ethics, or threats of punishment, as it is to symbols embedded in myths, stories, legends, dreams, and cultural fictions that reach deep down to the affective roots of the human psyche.

In a series of sections entitled, “Ritualizing Human Aggression Effectively,” “Sublimating the Instinctual Aim of Aggression,” and “Healing Symbols of Religion: The Eating of the Godhead in the Holy Meal,” Beier describes Drewermann’s vision of the relation of religion to the ethos of war and fear. Religion, Drewermann contends, cannot stop war once it is activated. Ethics and moral theology come too late to solve the

problem of war; at worst they provide justification for war through "just war" theory. The role of religion through its symbols and its sacraments is to provide a "prophylaxis preventing the emergence of the dynamics that lead to war in the first place" (208).

Chapter 3 turns to the antidote for the fear-bred violent God-image: "Recovering the Non-violent God-Image of Jesus: Working through a Sadomasochistic Interpretation of the Cross." Drawing primarily on the two-volume *Das Markusevangelium* (The Gospel of Mark, 1990) and an article by Drewermann on the symbolism of tree and cross within the history of religions, Beier tells us that "in this chapter, we will travel into the heart of Drewermann's therapeutic reinterpretation of Christianity where the beliefs in Cross and resurrection are seen as essential elements of a drama of the 'cleansing' of the God-image from its fear-based projections of ambivalence" (209).

Drewermann's psychological approach to the Gospel account is taken from two perspectives. From an objective perspective, using a Freudian approach, Drewermann approaches the symbolism of the cross with the question of why Jesus was killed. His psychological analysis invalidates two responses to the question. The first is the sadomasochistic interpretation of suffering and death found so often in Christian piety and clergy training that tends to render suffering as an unambiguous good. The second is the anti-Semitic neurosis that projects the blame on past (and present) people or groups of his death. Drewermann proposes that our focus should instead turn to the question of the "factually universal mentality that leads to the killing of one who questions a violent God-image" (210). A second psychological approach from a Jungian perspective attends to the subjective level of the symbol of the cross as an intrapsychic archetypal symbol for realities at work in the hearer.

In his Gospel commentaries Drewermann insists on the need to turn to depth psychology to appreciate the "personal" dimension of the historic symbols of the Gospel narrative—the cross, resurrection, baptism, rebirth, and the Eucharist—and to lay the psychic groundwork for the displacement of a violent-God-image based on fear with one based on trust (faith). Drewermann will propose that the sin original to the human condition is fear of God as violent. Its antithesis is trust (faith). Psychoanalytic treatment cannot be the foundation of this trust, but "it can clear away the psychological reasons which get in the way of such a fundamental attitude" (250).

Beier opens chapter 4, "Analyzing the Clergy Ideal of the Roman Catholic Church," with a telling quote from Margaret Atwood: "That is the other side of selflessness: its tyranny." The subject of the chapter is Drewermann's controversial book *Kleriker* and its psychological analysis of what he describes as "sadomasochistic psychospiritual structures and their domination of the clergy ideal" in Roman Catholic clerical formation—though

he by no means limits this phenomenon to the Roman Church nor does he find it in every one of its dioceses or priests. The “clergy ideal” he has in mind identifies priests completely in terms of their office, losing sight of the individual inside the collar. For Drewermann, that entails the suppression of individual subjectivity, the imposition of a sacrificial mentality as the ideal of priestly behavior, and the repression of sexuality. Drewermann’s objective—born out of his initial investigation of psychoanalysis for the good of his parishioners, only to discover that it illumined his own experience—is to bring psychoanalytic understanding to the nature and etiology of the issues of celibacy, abortion, homosexuality, the ordination of women, child molestation, the moral theological dictum of the insolubility of marriage, and the vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity.

In the end, Drewermann’s hermeneutic goal is a “therapeutic reinterpretation” of this “clergy ideal.” From the subjective side this would entail developing a curriculum for clergy education that integrates psychology, behavioral sciences, history of religions, and cultural anthropology. From the objective structural side it would call for a social order, presently unrealizable, thought not unthinkable, within Roman Catholic polity, in which “the pyramid of status and power is built from below rather than from above” in the service of an ecclesiastical ethos that begins with the individual.

Beier concludes his book with two appendixes, a forty-page bibliography that includes the entire Drewermann corpus and twenty-four pages of secondary literature, plus a valuable eleven-page index of subjects and proper names. The first appendix on “Drewermann in America” documents the fact that only four of Drewermann’s minor works are available in English translation. It also reports on Drewermann’s lecture tour to America in 1999 arranged by Beier. The second appendix offers “Notes on Translation,” citing several translation decisions made by the author in rendering Drewermann in English.

The effect of Drewermann on his “mother church” in Roman Catholicism is yet to be measured, despite the church’s repudiation of his teaching in the early 1990s. However, it is doubtless due to Drewermann’s indefatigable efforts in getting us to think psychologically on biblical and theological issues that the 1993 document produced by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” included “a psychological approach” in its masterful survey of sixteen significant contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation

We are indebted to Beier for undertaking a translation task only a native German speaker could accomplish, given the complexity and technicality of Drewermann’s prose. To be sure, one is amused by the markedly Germanic neologisms, such as “anthropodicy” and

“metaphysicize,” and one wishes Beier might have not taken for granted our understanding of *Dasein* (279). Beyond this Beier has provided for the first time access in English to the texts and ideas that this remarkable theologian has produced over the last thirty years and has initiated us into Drewermann’s dextrous use of Freud, Jung, Adler, Szondi, Schultz-Hencke, and a range of theologians, existential philosophers, and scientists in interpreting political and ecclesiastical events of our time and the historical, mythic, and psychological dimensions of the Bible.