

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

DECEMBER 2010

VOLUME 10, NUMBER 1

SILENCING THE BISHOP: THE UGLY IRENAEUS

C. E. Hill

Author's note: The following is excerpted, with minor adjustments to the footnotes and with Americanized spellings, from Chapter 3 of *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), a chapter entitled "Silencing the Bishop, Part II: The Ugly Irenaeus". In the face of present-day claims that in the second century Gospels were "breeding like rabbits" and the four now-canonical Gospels were merely four among many, Irenaeus of Lyons, probably the most significant Christian author of the late second century, alleges that the church had received from the times of the apostles only four authoritative Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Irenaeus thus continues to be a pesky problem for certain modern reconstructions of early Christian history. The selection below concerns the attempts of some scholars to downplay the witness of Irenaeus by making him appear both isolated in his views and unappealing (i.e., grossly intolerant and underhanded) to modern readers. The first part of the excerpt, which deals with a charge that Irenaeus ordered the destruction of the holy books of his rivals, may have an interesting relevance for residents of Gainesville, FL, which was recently the site of a highly publicized threat to burn Qurans.

Before proceeding, it is fitting for me to point out that some of the material contained in Chapter 2 of *Who Chose the Gospels?* was presented in a different form in lectures I gave at the Christian Study Center in the fall of 2006. I'm grateful to Richard Horner both for that invitation to be a part of the work of the CSC in 2006 and for the opportunity now to print this selection from *Who Chose the Gospels?* CEH

Destroying Books

As we have seen, Irenaeus had very definite ideas about the four Gospels, and about other Christian

books which he alleges were accepted as authoritative by churches throughout the empire. Irenaeus also valued other, non-Scriptural, Christian literature such as the letters of his former teacher Polycarp, or those of the martyr Ignatius, the popular allegory *The Shepherd* written by a Christian named Hermas, the traditions collected by Papias of Hierapolis, or the apologetic writings of Justin of Rome. But Irenaeus definitely did not welcome books which embodied

the heretical views he thought were so harmful to people and dishonoring of the God of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. This being the case, it is sometimes hard for scholars to resist overstating his methods of dealing with opponents. We have already cited Elaine Pagels' statement that Irenaeus resolved "to hack down the forest of 'apocryphal and illegitimate' writings." Just how does she think Irenaeus undertook to accomplish his literary deforestation project? According to Pagels, "Irenaeus confronted the challenge . . . by demanding that believers destroy all those 'innumerable secret and illegitimate

writings' that his opponents were always invoking . . ."¹ Again, she calls attention to Irenaeus' "instructions to congregations about which revelations to destroy and which to keep . . ."²

Censuring books would be bad enough. But ordering their destruction sounds positively barbaric! Based on this practice alone, it is easy to form a conception of Irenaeus as a cruel inquisitor willing to employ extreme measures to achieve and enforce theological uniformity. The only problem is, the charge isn't true. Nowhere in the five books of

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Against Heresies does Irenaeus demand that anybody destroy any rival, holy books. Nor in his other surviving theological work, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, does he make any such demand. Without question, he would have preferred that heretical books should not exist, and that no Christian should ever have to read them—he clearly advocates that rank-and-file Christians avoid them (AH 5.20.2). But ordering their destruction—as if he had the authority to give such instructions to churches and expect them to be obeyed—is another matter.

Much as Origen would later do, Irenaeus had apparently made his own collection of heretical books which he used for study and response (AH 1.31.2). In fact, he notes in one place that previous apologists for his brand of Christianity had been ineffective precisely because they were not sufficiently studied in the doctrines of their gnostic opponents (AH 4.preface.2). And so, Irenaeus took the trouble to read their books and to hold personal conversations with those of different persuasions. This part of Irenaeus' library may have consisted of at least the *Gospel of Judas* (1.31.1); the *Gospel of Truth* (3.11.9); a version of the *Apocryphon of John* (1.29.1) (these last two have been preserved in the Nag Hammadi finds); some writings of the Carpocratian sect (1.25.4, 5); certain Valentinian "commentaries" or "notes" on Scriptural passages (1.preface.2), including comments by a man named Ptolemy on the Prologue to the Gospel of John; and he had at least read, if he did not also own, some written work of Marcion's.

Irenaeus had also come across some books by a man named Florinus, and it is in connection with these that we find the closest thing there is in the writings of Irenaeus to a demand to destroy heretical books. This comes not in *Against Heresies* but in a letter/treatise Irenaeus wrote to Victor of Rome shortly after the latter's election as bishop in 189 CE. In this letter Irenaeus informs his younger colleague about the writings of Florinus, who was at that time advocating Valentinianism.³ Irenaeus and Florinus had been acquaintances decades earlier when Irenaeus was a youth in Smyrna in Asia Minor and Florinus was a young government official assigned to Smyrna and an admirer of the well-known Smyrnaean bishop, Polycarp. Florinus later drifted away from the teaching of Polycarp and (after flirting for a while with Marcionism) had embraced the doctrines of the Valentinians. At the time of Irenaeus' letter to Victor, Florinus was living in Rome, teaching in what was probably a house church and writing books which espoused Valentinianism while still claiming to be a presbyter of the orthodox church in Rome. Irenaeus calls Victor's attention to Florinus' books, "that for the sake of your reputation you may expel these writings from among you, as bringing disgrace upon you, since their author boasts himself as being one of

your company. For they constitute a stumbling-block to many, who simply and unreservedly receive, as coming from a presbyter, the blasphemy which they utter against God" (Fragment 51, ANF; Syriac Fragment 28).

It was not, then, simply that Irenaeus disapproved of the contents of Florinus' writings—he disapproved of the contents of any number of heretical books, as we know from *Against Heresies*. Florinus' books were not rival Gospels; they were not books which were in any sense contenders for inclusion in the canon. What was it, then, that moved Irenaeus to advise that Victor "expel" these particular books from his midst? Evidently it was that Florinus was still passing himself off as a presbyter of the Roman church in fellowship with Victor, thus gaining for himself an illegitimate endorsement, as well as bringing notoriety to the church in Rome. This fits a pattern noticed by Irenaeus and confirmed by other evidence, that Valentinians considered themselves free to confess in public the doctrines of the mainstream church but to teach in private things which were diametrically at odds with them (AH 3.15.2).

Irenaeus requests that Victor "expel" this man's writings from his midst. Irenaeus' words may mean that if some of Florinus' books should have somehow slipped into the Roman church's library, they ought to be removed. Perhaps Victor would go as far as to issue a public disavowal of the writings and a warning to house churches in fellowship with Victor not to read or be taken in by them. Yet not even here is there any instruction, much less any "demand," to destroy these books. At this point in history, as Raymond Starr points out, even the emperor had trouble pulling off such a demand. Because books were all copied by hand and privately circulated, "suppression or official discouragement could never be entirely successful nor were they expected to be. When a book was removed or barred by order of the emperor from the imperial public libraries, the author would be disgraced, but his writings were not destroyed, since they could still circulate in private hands."⁴

Needless to say, no church—not Irenaeus's church in Lyons nor the church in Rome—had anything resembling the kind of imperial power (the kind which would later be exercised against Christians by the Roman government) to search out private copies of a detested book, seize them, and destroy them. In sum, Irenaeus did not demand that congregations destroy any Gospels, alleged apostolic letters, or revelations he had not "chosen" for them.

Sex, Lies, and Anti-heretical Tracts

It is clear that many today believe Irenaeus was ruthless in dealing with his opponents and unfairly tried to prevent their voices from being heard. On the

question of his accuracy in representing the theological views of his opponents Irenaeus has, perhaps surprisingly, been largely acquitted by recent studies, even after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library. But what about his personal attacks on his opponents? Did Irenaeus' palpable frustration with these people and their teaching ever lead him to misrepresent their characters? It would be very remarkable if it never did. As we have seen, it is difficult enough for today's scholars, schooled in the ideals of objective impartiality, trained with the exacting methods of modern scholarship, and backed up by eagle-eyed copy-editors, to avoid distorting the views and the characters of those in the ancient world whom they find unattractive.

Yet there is one portion of his report in particular which has prompted some scholars to call Irenaeus' honesty into question, and this one is particularly interesting in the light of our present knowledge about sexual abuse. Irenaeus claims that a certain Valentinian teacher named Marcus, whom Irenaeus calls "a perfect adept in magical impostures" (*AH* 1.13.1), duped and then sexually violated certain women of the church. Some of the women who had been induced to join Marcus later confessed—or alleged—that they had been seduced by him and succumbed after participating in his sexually charged rituals (1.6.3; 1.13.5). These are very serious charges. Obviously, if they are true, it was exceedingly disturbing to the church in Irenaeus' day. If they are not true, it is disturbing that Irenaeus would repeat such libel. Disturbing too, however, is the number of scholars today who ignore, downplay, or dismiss the report altogether, assuming or explicitly charging that it is nothing more than typical Christian slander on Irenaeus' part, made for polemical purposes. Writes one: "Lying behind such slurs is the notion that those who side with God will lead moral, upright lives . . . the charges of immorality continued for as long as there were orthodox polemicists to make them. They continue today, among Christian groups inclined to accuse others of heresy."⁵ Another says: "For the most part, Irenaeus' information about Marcus seems to be nothing more than malevolent rumors."⁶ Viewed as standard, Christian polemical fare, such charges as Irenaeus makes against Marcus are taken seriously only as reflecting poorly on the person who made them.

Malevolent rumors can at times have deadly consequences. We have seen that Irenaeus' Christian community in Gaul had been on the receiving end of such not many years earlier. Some of his friends suffered the ignominy of having to deny with their dying breaths charges that they ate their children or slept with their daughters. And theirs was not the first, nor would it be the last, community of Christians so to suffer. Earlier in the century Melito of

Sardis in Asia Minor had written to the emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–80 CE) complaining of people pillaging Christians' property and of Christians being put to death because of lies and false accusations (*EH* 4.26.5–11). Intermittent exposure to public scorn for "immorality" or "atheism" dogged catholic Christians for centuries. Any natural disaster or danger to the public good might even be seen as retribution by the gods for public toleration of the Christians. Tertullian would write in about 200 CE: "They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, 'Away with the Christians to the lion'" (*Apology* 40). Irenaeus had witnessed some members of his congregation thrown to the lions, others burned alive, others tortured and left with permanent physical handicaps. And this persecution was fed by anti-Christian smears. Coming back to Marcus, then, was an embittered Irenaeus, still stinging from the recent distresses of his own Christian community, simply doing to Marcus what others had done to them? The seriousness of the charges on all sides makes the matter deserving of a little more attention.

The acts attributed to Marcus, as outrageous as they are, are not beyond belief (like, for instance, charges of child murder and cannibalism). The financial and sexual seduction of women by charismatic, itinerant male teachers was not at all unknown in that day. The contemporary philosopher and satirist Lucian of Samosata, in his satire *The Runaways*, inveighs against the Cynic philosophers:

When beauty comes within the reach of these grave and reverend gentlemen, they are guilty of excesses that I will not pollute my lips with mentioning. They have been known, like Trojan Paris, to seduce the wives of their own hosts, and to quote the authority of Plato for leaving these fair converts at the disposal of all their acquaintance . . . I will not tire you with a description of their drunken orgies; observe, however, that these are the men who preach against drunkenness and adultery and avarice and lewdness. Could any contrast be greater than that presented by their words and their deeds? . . . To hear them, you would say they were at war with pleasure, and Epicurus their bitterest foe: yet nothing do they do but for pleasure's sake. (*The Runaways* 18–19, see also 30–1)⁷

If this is "standard polemical fare," it is at least not standard *Christian* polemical fare. Lucian, far from being a Christian, was in fact a well-known opponent of Christianity.

Nor does Irenaeus rest blanket charges that indict the entire Valentinian community or its leadership, like those made against the apostolic Christians in the *Gospel of Judas*. That is, he alleges no similar crimes on the parts of other Valentinian teachers, such as Ptolemy and Heracleon, or Valentinus himself. In fact he allows that “There are those among them who assert that that man who comes from above [that is, the Valentinian] ought to follow a good course of conduct” (AH 3.15.2). But both Irenaeus and others in his community had personal knowledge of many of Marcus’ current and erstwhile followers, first in Asia Minor and later in Gaul (AH 1.preface; 1.13.7).

Most notable in this matter is Irenaeus’ mention of one particular woman, the wife of a deacon in his church when he lived in Asia Minor, where Marcus taught. The woman, after consorting for a while with Marcus and eventually being coaxed by church members to leave him and return to her husband, “spent her whole time in the exercise of public confession, weeping over and lamenting the defilement which she had received from this magician” (AH 1.13.5). Irenaeus presents this as a very public case which occurred in a specific locale with a specific woman, the wife of a deacon in his church. If he is making this up it surely will have aroused many suspicions and finger-pointings within his old church back in Asia Minor where his writings were read. Moreover, many in the congregations in Gaul had come with Irenaeus from Asia Minor, and would have known if the story about the church officer’s wife was his invention or not. These considerations, then, make it hard for me to agree with those who assume that Irenaeus simply invented the story as part of a smear-campaign against Marcus and his followers.

But what about the woman herself? Perhaps it was she who fabricated the story about Marcus’ unseemly exploits. But if so, what was her motive? Her constant confession of her unfaithfulness could not have brought her a notoriety she or her deacon husband would have sought. There were no civil damages to collect by taking her alleged victimizer to court, no tabloids offering money for her story. And according to Irenaeus, this was not an isolated occurrence. It had been repeated time after time during the “ministry” of Marcus in Asia Minor and then in the Rhône valley, where some of Marcus’ followers had emigrated. Shall we assume that the stories of these women too were fictitious, and that they all simply wanted to titillate their listeners or cover up their mistakes in order to gain re-admittance into the church? Irenaeus says that the women who eventually left Marcus often confessed “that they have been defiled by him, and that they were filled with a burning passion towards him.” That is, it appears they did not simply make Marcus

the scapegoat, but owned responsibility for their illicit excitations.

Marcus is not here to defend himself, and the women cannot now be cross-examined. Should we, then, in cases of doubt, simply *assume* that the deacon’s wife concocted her story, along with the other women Irenaeus mentions? Recent scholarship has given us empathetic and valuable studies of many women from the history of early Christianity, including Mary Magdalene, Junia, Thecla, Blandina, Perpetua, and Felicitas. But nobody (to my knowledge) has risen up in defense of this woman or her fellow injured. She gets no sympathy from scholars, even female scholars, even feminist female scholars, whom we might expect to be alive to the plight of women in patriarchal societies.

The refusal of modern scholars to take the testimony of this woman and her co-plaintiffs seriously, and on the other hand, their tendency to speak glowingly of Marcus (perhaps the strongest argument for crediting Irenaeus’ report is that Marcus still has a mysterious ability to make people swoon today!) may seem a little disconcerting, particularly given what we have learned in recent years about society’s tendency to dismiss women’s stories of abuse.⁸ Could it be that the risk for some is simply too great? For admitting that the stories of exploitation might be true could seem to remove one demerit from the reputation of Irenaeus.

Conclusion

While it will be evident that I think the efforts of some in the academic community have overreached – to the point that they have done to Irenaeus just what they accuse him of doing to others – in the end, no matter how ugly Irenaeus looks, no matter how unpleasant his rhetoric might be or how outdated his intolerance of substantive theological pluralism seems, the effort to spotlight these features can only have limited success. This is because it still belongs to an *ad hominem* argument which can only temporarily distract from the real question. And that is, is Irenaeus simply a blip on the radar screen, an inexplicable eruption appearing out of nowhere and quickly sinking back into oblivion? Or, does he represent a wider phenomenon, one that had real precedents and left other collateral effects? In short, was this “arch-conspirator” acting alone, or did he have any accomplices, any “co-conspirators,” in his “plot” to set the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as the standards for the church?

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POETRY FOR ADVENT REFLECTION

“The Mother of God”

by William Butler Yeats

The threefold terror of love; a fallen flare
 Through the hollow of an ear;
 Wings beating about the room;
 The terror of all terrors that I bore
 The Heavens in my womb.

Had I not found content among the shows
 Every common woman knows,
 Chimney corner, garden walk,
 Or rocky cistern where we tread the clothes
 And gather all the talk?

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,
 This fallen star my milk sustains,
 This love that makes my heart's blood stop
 Or strikes a Sudden chill into my bones
 And bids my hair stand up?
 (1933)

“Nativity”

by John Donne

Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb,
 Now leaves His well-beloved imprisonment.
 There he hath made himself to his intent
 Weak enough, now into our world to come.

But O! for thee, for Him, hath th' inn no room?
 Yet lay Him in this stall, and from th' orient,
 Stars, and wise men will travel to prevent
 The effects of Herod's jealous general doom.

See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eye, how He
 Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie?
 Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,
 That would have need to be pitied by thee?

Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,
 With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.
 (1610)

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As we come to the end of another year, we would like to thank all of you who have been participants and partners with the Christian Study Center. We once again enjoyed a good semester; through speakers, reading groups, and classes, the Christian Study Center continues to be a gathering place for people and ideas.

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NOTES FROM THE READING GROUP: WHY CHURCH AND UNIVERSITY NEED EACH OTHER

C. John Sommerville

Last year, the Christian Study Center's Reading Group paired Anthony Kronman's critique of the secular university, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Yale, 2007), with Mark Noll's *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994). It proved a sobering exercise, whichever side one takes in the academic culture wars. Kronman, who was dean of Yale's law school and has a philosophy PhD, remembers learning in college that "the meaning of life is a subject that can be studied in school" (35). He is dismayed that academics now dismiss the subject as if it were juvenile, when in fact all other questions seem trivial by comparison. Indeed, his book could have been entitled "the scandal of the secular mind."

Until a few years ago, academic apologists blamed American society for the university's problems and the sense that it has lost its way. But now there are critiques from within the university itself, and Kronman's is the most notable of these. He thinks we've created a dysfunctional system, as shown by the fact that "churches now monopolize the authority to address [the question of the meaning of life]" (7). Some might think that was encouraging, except that he also thinks that churches are declining intellectually because of the lack a sensible secular humanism to argue with.

By "the meaning of life" Kronman means "What, in the end, should I care about?" "One cannot live a meaningful life unless there is something one is prepared to give it up for" (26). He talks about ultimate concern, ultimate care, and ultimate value, and admits that these are essentially religious questions. They can't be answered objectively but "must be taken on faith." "The crisis of spirit we now confront is a consequence not of the death of God, but of man" (237). But he fears that universities do not have the resources for addressing such questions.

What has gone wrong? First, our universities adopted the "research model" of the German universities back around 1865. In their enthusiasm for discovering truth, professors began to forget that education had always been about shaping minds and character. The older colleges had done that by reading the classics, not for their style but for content. The research ideal disassembled those classics and distanced students from the societies that produced them. Then in the 1970s, "political correctness" took over humanities departments. In a nutshell, political correctness means that any claim about human nature is an artificial claim, "an expression of power in disguise" (88). All

our leading Western ideas about human nature or human values are being rejected as dogmas, which limit us even while giving us power over others.

Even secular humanism, which was meant to liberate us from our natural ignorance and prejudice, is now being criticized as oppressive by a political correctness that silences any open discussion of values. For when every tradition must be considered equal, and above criticism, there's nothing to discuss.

So Kronman's plea is that we revive "secular humanism," meaning an open, pluralistic and secular, but serious discussion. Questions about the human are what the university isn't dealing with, and the place to start reform. He fears that science and especially technology is making us question the very mortality that is fundamental to questions of life's meaning. Science has been so successful as to create a void of meaning that religion is now filling. He is discouraged by this. He thinks religions are by nature dogmatic, not allowing doubt or questioning, and demand a sacrifice of intellect, by which he means "faith."

Kronman doesn't recognize that Christianity, for instance, often expresses itself in narratives, liturgies, rules, visions, rather than dogmas. The various traditions in Christianity differ in how much they leave as mysteries. And faith doesn't just come *after* or instead of thinking. Recent philosophers have recovered St. Augustine's view that faith comes at the *beginning* of any rationality. Any successful search must have an idea of what it's looking for, and of its significance. So rationalities are *based* on assumptions, which might as well be called faiths.

Mark Noll's book was to challenge Christians to be more involved in the intellectual life of the country, including its universities. For too long, the church has feared intellectualism as destructive of religion, and concentrated on other important things like evangelism, charity, spirituality, worship. But it has forgotten that until a century ago Christianity was very involved in the country's social and political life, and was able to argue its positions and not simply impose them by force.

Much of Noll's book is about that history, and about the early twentieth-century trauma, when fundamentalism abandoned the political and intellectual life of the country, to concentrate on a more personal religion. On one hand, this has resulted in more robust religious communities than in Europe, where the church was compromised by its association with social and cultural elites. But in the process American Christians have lost the ability to argue their positions convincingly.

Noll shows how the Great Awakening of the 1700s created a new kind of Protestantism, different from our European heritage. It has many strengths, and was able to engage with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in a more fruitful way than Europeans did. Our

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political, intellectual and religious institutions were congruent with each other through the period of the Founding Fathers and beyond. But after 1865 there were challenges from immigration, social conflict, scientific naturalism, and Biblical scholarship that caused the church to retreat into a shell.

In the 1940s a new “evangelicalism” began to try to break out of this isolation, by political and intellectual efforts. But Noll thinks evangelicals are still being held back by an inability to deal theologically with the facts of biological change, and with issues in Biblical interpretation, especially involving “the end times.” Until they do, evangelicals will seem irrelevant to the universities which train our leaders.

Ten years after completing the book Noll updated his concerns in an article in the journal *First*

Things. He saw promising signs, but noted that progress was slow. There was hope in a new cooperation with Catholic scholars, in academic philosophy where a Christian presence is very pronounced, in more imaginative approaches among Christian scientists, in a greater awareness of intellectual issues within Christian colleges and universities (Notre Dame and Baylor, especially) and among young Christian faculty in secular universities, and in periodicals like *First Things*, *Books & Culture* and *Touchstone*.

A week after we finished discussing Mark Noll’s book, he visited the University of Florida and the Study Center, which is engaged in just the sort of explorations he was promoting.

C. John Sommerville is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Florida, and he serves on the Faculty Advisory Board of the Christian Study Center.

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¹ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief. The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 147–8.

² Ibid. 142.

³ According to Irenaeus, Valentinus, who brought his teaching to Rome in the mid-second century, took pre-existing Gnostic ideas and adapted them in a more outwardly Christian direction. Perhaps the most sophisticated of the second-century alternatives to orthodox Christianity, Valentinianism was known for its creative allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

⁴ Raymond J. Starr, “The Circulation of Literary Texts in the Roman World,” *Classical Quarterly*, 37 (1987), 213–23, at 219.

⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 198.

⁶ Ismo Dunderberg, “The School of Valentinus,” in Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (eds.), *A Companion to Second-Century Christian ‘Heretics’*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 76 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 64–99, at 83.

⁷ *The Works of Lucian*, tr. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905).

⁸ e.g. Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

Essay: "Silencing the Bishop: The Ugly Irenaeus"
by **C. E. Hill**

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Review: "Notes from the Reading Group: Why Church and University Need Each Other"
by **C. John Sommerville**

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Advent Poetry:

"The Mother of God"
by William Butler Yeats

"Nativity"
by John Donne
(See p. 5)

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