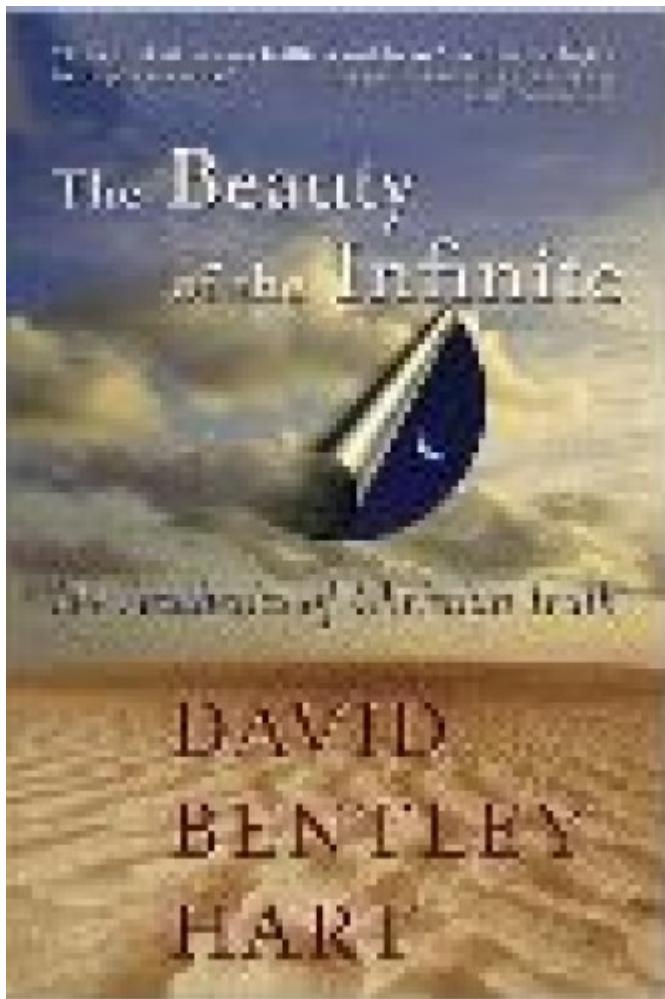


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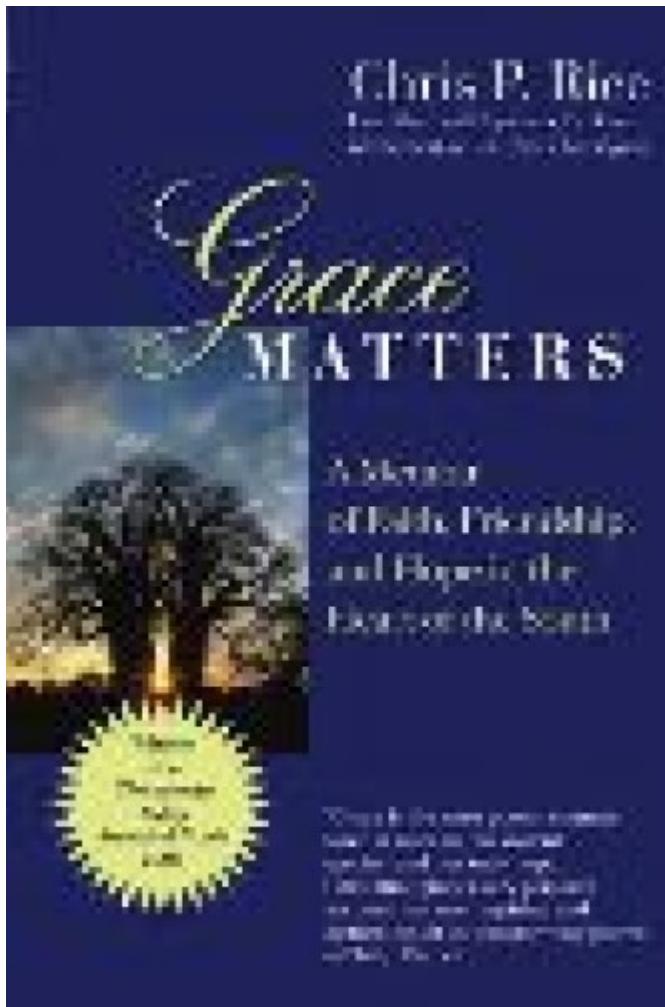
Books in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

In Review



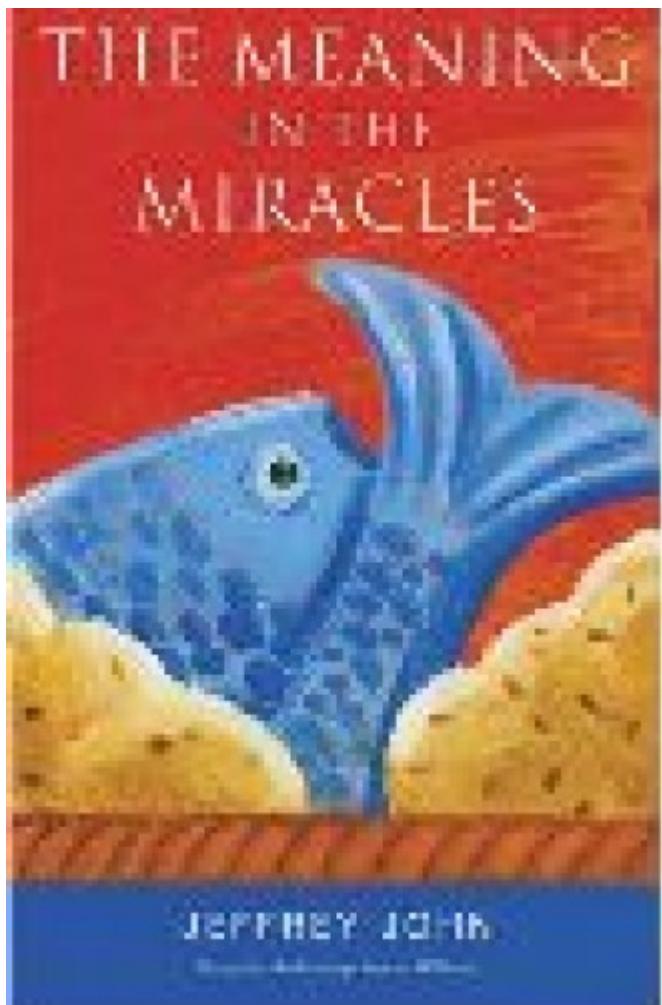
The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth

David Bentley Hart
Eerdmans



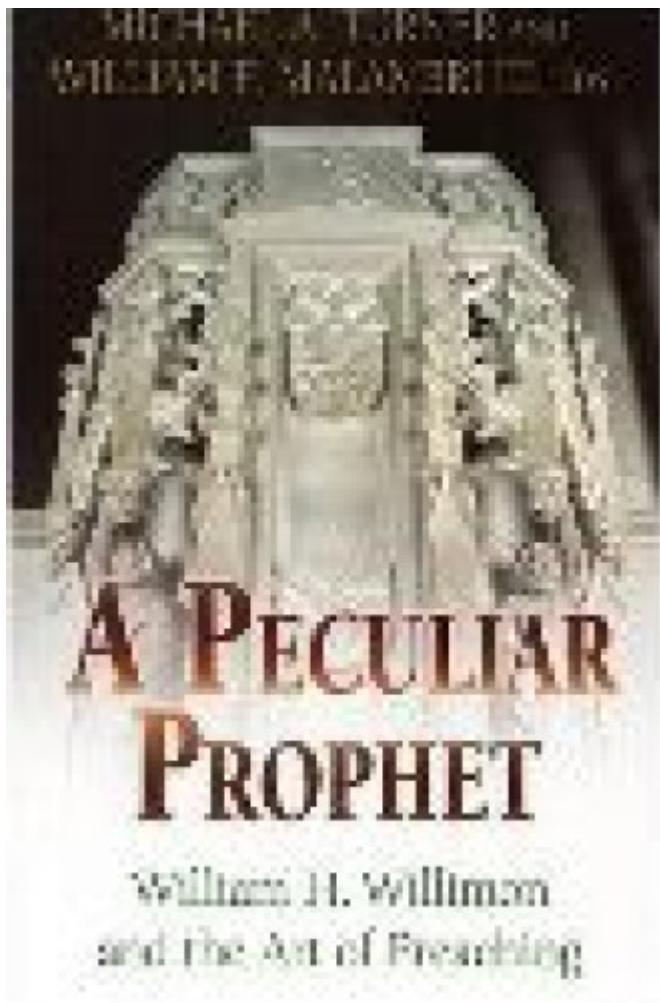
Grace Matters: A Memoir of Faith, Friendship, and Hope in the Heart of the South

Chris Rice
Jossey-Bass



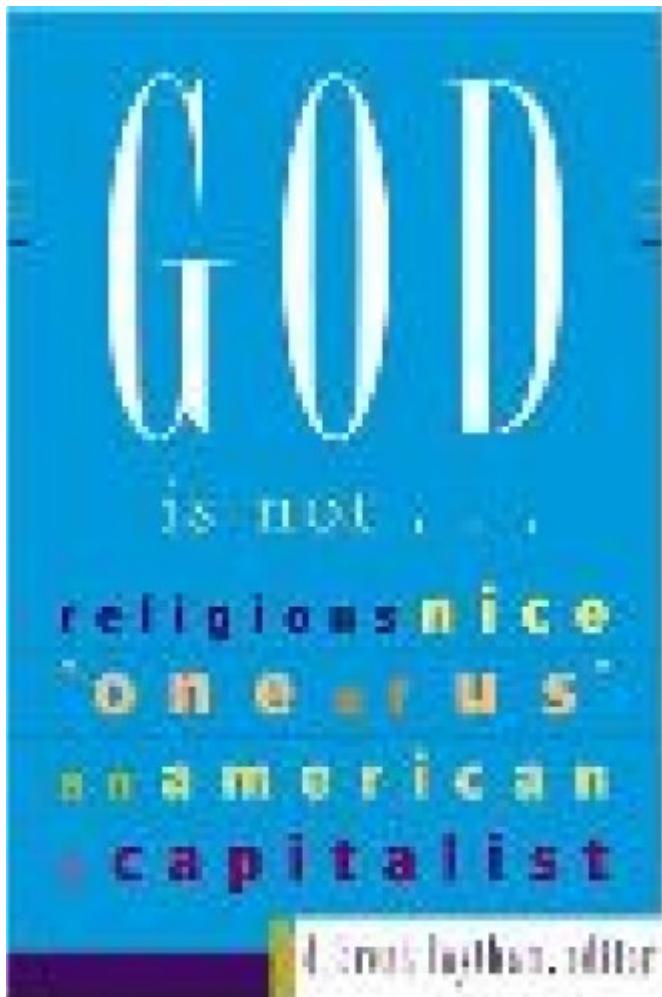
The Meaning in the Miracles

Jeffrey John
Eerdmans



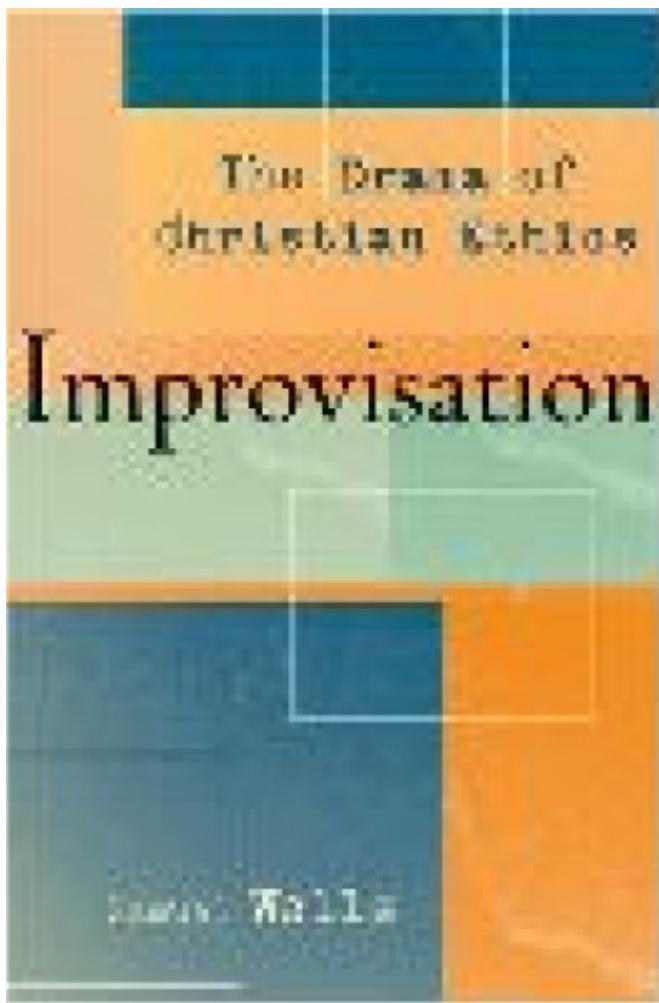
A Peculiar Prophet: William H. Willimon and the Art of Preaching

Michael A. Turner and William F. Malambri III
Abingdon



God Is Not . . . Religious, Nice, "One of Us," an American, a Capitalist

D. Brent Laytham, ed.
Brazos



Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics

Samuel Wells
Brazos

Rarely is theology important in proportion to its difficulty. Hart's book is. It is nothing short of a full-blown engagement with leading 20th century theological lights in philosophy and their argument that all rhetoric is necessarily violent. Hart is not content to hammer Derrida, Deleuze, Nietzsche and Levinas to bits with Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa. He actually offers a complete dogmatics, a vision of everything from creation to eschaton in light of Christ and the Trinity. The confidence of its author and the scope of its project are breathtaking.

The authors represent a new version of the classical “apophatic” tradition of Christian theology, which claims we do better to say what God is *not* than to try to say what God is. What God is not is “nice, ‘one of us,’ an American, a capitalist, and

religious.” As if that were not polemical enough, the final piece from the editor tells us what God is: “one, holy, catholic and apostolic,” applying the words of the Nicene creed now not to the church but directly to God. This is theology in full voice, showing critical engagements with popular culture, politics and church piety that make plain where Christians ought to agree with non-Christians and where they ought not (for example, one of the essays is subtitled “Why Christians Should Not Pledge Allegiance to ‘One Nation Under God’”).

As a naïve do-gooder attending Vermont’s elite Middlebury College, Rice decided to summer with an activist African-American church in Jackson, Mississippi. He never returned to Middlebury but stayed in Jackson 17 years, worshiping with and then living in intentional Christian community with fellow Christians, black and white. His is a story of a new generation of Christian engagement with racial questions. He describes his friendship with Spencer Perkins, the son of a great civil rights leader, with whom Rice consistently clashed even as the two grew in friendship. They lived into—and taught others all over the country about—racial reconciliation in Christ. Rice’s work reads like a novel, so that by the end we genuinely care about its “characters.” His hope is that we would not respond simply as well-entertained readers, but that we would “go and do likewise.”

Wells’s is among the freshest and most important new voices in theology and ethics. In his work one can sense the wisdom not only of a teacher but of a priest, leading students through difficult ideas as gracefully as he guides people of faith through their lives. Here he takes issue with a central metaphor in recent theology: that of “performing the scriptures,” which he finds to be too static and “conservative” an image. He instead likens the church’s moral life to the art of dramatic improvisation. Scripture is not so much a script for him—fixed and finished—but a “training school” that teaches us good habits and trust in one another. Acting morally is then a matter of learning “to improvise within tradition,” a balance between fidelity to tradition and newness. Wells considers the habits of improvisational actors to show how they illuminate theological ethics.

For many people, a miracle story in the Bible leads to one of two possible responses: the conclusion that this is merely a metaphorical way of presenting a spiritual truth, something that, though lovely, could never have happened; or the adamant claim, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Only with depressing rarity do we get past these poles. John offers consistently fresh readings of Jesus’ miracles that show them to be not records of what happened (whether true or false) but theological

accounts meant to shape readers in certain ways. John practices what he takes scripture to be practicing by offering spiritual quotations and prayers at the end of each chapter in a devotional display that manages not to crumble into sentimentality.

Two recent students of Willimon's have done more than collect new sermons—they have also gathered essays about Willimon from master homiletics Fleming Rutledge, Peter Gomes and Tom Long, and from theologians Stanley Hauerwas, Marva Dawn and Willimon himself. The result is something of a cross between a revival and a roast, with church leaders attesting to Willimon's influence and challenging him in enlightening ways.