Something evolving

by John Sykes in the June 21, 2000 issue

City of God, by E.L. Doctorow

Nothing if not ambitious, E. L. Doctorow's latest novel attempts a spiritual summation of the 20th century, written in a postmodern register. The list of Big Topics the novel covers includes cosmology, starting with the Big Bang; the ideas of Einstein and Wittgenstein; the two world wars; the Jewish Holocaust; and the ascendancy of the visual over the verbal in our digitized culture. What makes the novel worth the careful attention of people of faith is its attempt to make religious sense of a profoundly reshuffled cultural deck.

The title--an echo of St. Augustine's, of course--is apt in a couple of ways. First, the book is urban in setting and orientation, with the New York City that Doctorow knows so intimately providing the touchstone. And it has an Augustinian preoccupation with God's role in history. As the narrator from whose notebook we are often reading muses, "You wonder how much God had to do with this, how much of the splendor and insolence of the modern city creatively built from the disparate intentions of generations of men comes of the inspiration of God. Because it is the city of the unremarked God, the sometime-thing God, the God of history."

Unlike Augustine, Doctorow's characters and narrators are scored by doubts, both intellectual and moral. On the intellectual side are the familiar assaults of historian and scientist upon traditionalist assumptions. If Enlightenment-inspired knowledge is to be accepted, God has not dealt with the created order in quite the way that Jews and Christians have thought. And morally, the ways of God have been rendered problematic by the Holocaust. Doctorow brings these concerns together when a troubled Episcopal priest, who calls himself the Divinity Detective, knocks on the door of a small synagogue devoted to a movement called Evolutionary Judaism.

By the time he stumbles upon EJ, the Rev. Thomas Pemberton has reached the end of his tether. His congregation has dwindled as the neighborhood has changed and his sermons have grown bitter. No single stroke has stunned his faith. He's long known the things that trouble him, he says. But now he's beginning to feel their

weight. Yes, he tells a parishioner, church history was written by the winners. Canonical accounts of Jesus and doctrinal formulations represent political victories, not divine dicta. As he writes in his sermon notes, "To presume to contain God in this Christian story of ours, to hold Him, circumscribe Him, the author of everything we can conceive and everything we cannot conceive . . . in our story of Him? Of Her? OF WHOM? What in the name of Christ do we think we are talking about?"

As Pemberton sees it, the presumption of claiming that our historically conditioned story somehow discloses the decisive and exclusive truth about the God of this vast universe is almost as great as the specious sense of moral superiority that allowed the Holocaust. In his last sermon at St. Timothy's, he asks what Christian response would have been commensurate with the unspeakable disaster: "A mass exile? A lifelong commitment of millions of Christians to wandering, derelict, over the world? A clearing out of the lands and cities a thousand miles in every direction from each and every death camp?" The fact that no such action has ever been contemplated strips the church of its moral credibility.

Pem sees signs of hope not in Christian circles but in EJ, the movement begun by a husband-wife rabbi team. Directed to them by the unlikely expedient of a stolen cross that ends up on their roof, Pem finds his own way to the future through Christianity's mother religion. The new synagogue is Jewish in its respect for scripture and Sabbath and its strong sense of Jewish history. Sarah Blumenthal is the daughter of Holocaust survivors, and Joshua Gruen risks his life to track records of the event. The "evolution" that Evolutionary Judaism acknowledges is the march of human consciousness. It hopes for "a hallowed secularism" in which "God can be recognized as Something Evolving, as civilization has evolved--that God can be redefined, and recast, as the human race trains itself to a greater degree of metaphysical and scientific sophistication."

The attraction of this religious agenda for Pemberton is manifold: its heightened ethnicity combined with ethical universalism, its rationalism balanced by spiritual affirmation. No doubt many readers on the liberal side of Jewish and Christian allegiance will likewise be drawn to EJ. Yet, given the postmodern mode of the book, with its fragmented narratives, unconnected characters and constantly shifting perspective, the resolution of the main story line seems a bit neat. It is as though Doctorow--a natural storyteller--can't quite rid himself of the old conventions. More daring and interesting are the unintroduced and unexplained monologues in the voices of Wittgenstein, Einstein and even Frank Sinatra.

Most problematic is what one might call the novel's incomplete eclecticism. Ideologically, Doctorow seems committed to a decentered culture where no religion or group has favored status or special access to truth. But clearly this book is dominated by Jewish, Christian and Eurocentric concerns. Why should Muslims or Cambodians, for example, regard the Jewish Holocaust as the major metaphor for evil in world history? In other words, there is a contradiction between the fractured, postmodern style of the novel and Doctorow's attempt to provide a unifying framework through it. Still, as a record of important currents in American religious sensibility, Doctorow's vision deserves consideration.