During the last half century a good deal of attention has been paid to the interface of psychology and religion in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. Some increasing interest has also been demonstrated in the subject in recent decades in the Republic of South Africa. Interesting patterns have manifest themselves in this process. In the United States the perspective has been primarily that of psychodynamic psychology explored by such professional groups as the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) and the American Association for Pastoral Care (AAPC) and their constituencies. In addition, such scholars as Capps and Lapsley of Princeton; Fowler, Gerken, Patton, Childs, and Hunter of Emory; and others, such as Meissner, have worked more with psychoanalytic models. In Europe and Latin America
on the other hand, the perspective has been almost wholly psychoanalytic, as has been the work of such Canadian scholars as Merkur and Schuyler.

Undoubtedly the most productive such scholar in Germany during the last two or three decades has been Eugen Drewermann, virtually unknown in the United States until recently because his work has not been translated into English. Drewermann is a theologian and psychotherapist considered by colleagues in his native land to be the most significant, the most prolific, and the best selling theological writer in the German language for the past twenty years. Considering that Hans Kung and other similar personages are in that picture, such esteem for Drewermann is very high, indeed. He has produced such works as Depth Psychology and Exegesis (2 vols.), Structures of Evil (3 vols.), Psychoanalysis and Moral Theology (2 vols.), Liberating Faith or Depth Psychology and Dogmantics (3 vols.), and The Cleric (900 pages). One of the reasons his work has not been translated into English is said to be the negative sensation produced in Germany by The Cleric, in which he published an analysis of his psychotherapeutic work with Roman Catholic clergy. Drewermann likes to tell the truth, and he does it with great skill and forthrightness, seemingly with the assumption that to do so is best for everyone in the long run. His church disagreed and silenced him in 1991, suspending him from the priesthood a year later. The Cleric offered a scathing analysis of the clerical mentality, ideology, and culture, anticipating the American clerical sexual abuse scandal by over a decade.

Matthias Beier now offers us a full-length English introduction to Drewermann’s work, a long overdue contribution to our understanding of the interface of psychology and religion. Quoting extensively from Drewermann himself, Beier informs us that Drewermann’s primary perspective is that Christianity has done violence to people by using fear as the primary motive for faith for nearly two millennia. This has come in the form of fear of hell, of exclusion from the community, and of God. In short, Christianity has made a career out of promoting a violent God-image. In a 2004 publication by this reviewer, entitled The Destructive Power of Religion, Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam 4 vols. (Westport: Praeger), the main claim was that all religions that derive from early Israelite religion and, therefore, from the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, are rooted in a false and inherently destructive notion of cosmic conflict. This notion implies two powers in the universe, a good power and an evil power, God and Satan. However, even the good force resolves all ultimate problems he encounters by resorting to ultimate violence: extermination of humanity by flood, destroying civilization at Babel, threatening to exterminate Israelites at Sinai, attempting to exterminate the Canaanites, subjecting his people to bondage and exile, and ultimately having his “beloved son” crucified in order to resolve God’s inherent internal psychic dissonance. This makes even the good God evil. Drewermann makes much the same point, agreeing that this ancient set of images has been promoted by the church and interiorized by devoted believers so that our unconscious archetypal dynamics are shaped by them.
Drewermann’s nonviolent interpretation of key Christian beliefs is the basis of his books and the backdrop to his analysis of the violent image of God that characterizes traditional interpretations of sin and the cross. It is this God-image, opposed to human desires and self-realization, that sanctified the killings of millions of peoples in wars declared to be “just,” and legitimated the violent exploitation of nonhuman nature and the aggressive economic exploitation of non-Christian cultures. Dorothy Soelle says of her colleague, Drewermann, that he “attempts to think nonviolently, something which has little tradition in the European history of theology, with its obsession with obedience and self-sacrifice, especially of those who have never learned to live their own life.” Matthias Beier, who has given us this present work on Drewermann, lectures in psychology and religion in the Graduate School of Drew University and is coordinator of the doctor of ministry program in pastoral care and counseling at Drew Theological School. He is also a psychotherapist in private practice and pastor in the United Methodist Church.

This volume has four chapters. First, we have the introduction, which treats Nazi Germany and a violent God-image, spiritual and psychological nonviolence, Eugen Drewermann as a public figure, and the work of Eugen Drewermann. Chapter 1 treats fear, evil, and the origins of a violent God-image, including a treatment of the historical context regarding the banality of evil and the impotence of Christianity; typical historical exegesis of Genesis 3 - 4; psychoanalytic assessment of that Scripture and its exegesis; and the results of philosophical and theological interpretations of the story of the Fall. In the second chapter, we have a summary of Drewermann on war, Christianity, and the destruction of inner and outer nature: effects of a violent God-image. Chapter 3 is on recovering the nonviolent God-Image of Jesus by working through a sadomasochistic interpretation of the cross. The final chapter is entitled “Analyzing the Clergy-Ideal of the Roman Catholic Church.” This is followed by the conclusion, an appendix on Drewermann in America, and another on issues of translation. Continuum has wisely given us a 33-page bibliography listing 330 entries and an ample index. The book is bound in a very attractive and substantial hard cover with an eye-catching dust jacket in red and gold, depicting Jacopo Pontormo’s Expulsion of Adam and Eve (1494-1557).

Beier has done us a very great favor in opening the door upon the work of Drewermann so well and wisely for both American scholars and interested, informed laypersons. This work is essential reading for every biblical scholar; every psychologist, particularly psychologists of religion; and professionals in the field of theology, ethics, and pastoral care.

—J. Harold Ellens