From the numerous names I have cited above (Robert Bork, Britney Spears, Bernard Nathanson, Laura Ingraham, Charles Colson) it is clear that this book is not just about the church’s role in culture and society, it is about culture and society itself. Specifically, it posits the thesis that when the church in our culture becomes increasingly countercultural, it will prosper and when it accommodates to our culture it will die. Anyone interested in the state of health of American Christianity and American culture and society more broadly, ought to read this book. It challenges all comers to be more faithful and to take “the hard journey that leads to the foot of the ancient cross” (183).

—John Bolt


The cover art pleasantly forecasts the content of this anthology of essays: a late fourteenth-century illustration, “Philosophy Lesson in Paris,” with a master at the head desk, book in hand, facing his sober students as they try to make sense of his instruction. The anthology furnishes fifteen essays on the history of religious formation by top scholars in their fields. How shall the religious community direct the way of the young so that they will embrace the faith of the fathers? Not only has this question been asked throughout the centuries, but as editor Van Engen points out in his magisterial introduction, people in every age have gone back to learn how their ancestors managed this basic responsibility. He provides an array of writers who decry the possibility of recapturing such information, but is not intimidated by them. These essayists, though aware of the pitfalls of reconstructing the past, and though aware that we see the past through the lenses of the present, are all skilled in historical retrieval. Every essay puts us in touch with the theory and practice of religious education in early centuries through the Reformation. The project flows from a quotation by historian Jaroslav Pelikan: “The Church is always more than a school. But the church cannot be less than a school.” The essayists agreed to describe “distinct communities of belief and practice animated by transcendent allegiances, and the assimilation of peoples over time into that collective life” (26).

The book has three sections, headed as follows: “Early Synagogue and Church,” “The Middle Ages,” and “The Reformation Era.” Although the section dealing with the transformation in pedagogy brought about by the Reformation will prove the most useful to readers of CTJ, the earlier essays raise intriguing if, now and then, esoteric questions. Robert Goldenberg describes a type of religious community that taught only adults, leaving the teaching of the young to the home and whatever resources might be available. Concerned to produce a sage rather than a saint, they sought to enrich the communal life by diligent study of the ancient texts—striving to reach the highest level of understanding possible. As it turned out, it was the mass of common Jews who carried on the tradition of Judaism, rather than the elite in pursuit of ultimate wisdom.
Robert Louis Wilken’s assignment, “Christian Formation in the Early Church,” obliges him to consider the classical and the Jewish traditions enroute to his presentation of how the church fathers gave instruction about how Christians, though appreciative of how the classical teachers of virtue stood on tiptoe straining for high truths, must nevertheless supplement, supplant, and transform this legacy of wisdom. As for pedagogy, they said, “Teach the children the biblical narratives, and do it by telling those stories, not only reading them.” John C. Cavadini imparts pedagogical wisdom by pointing out how Augustine, in his preaching, approached the topic in the form of a dialogue: “He rhetorically positions himself and his audiences as embarked upon a joint venture of inquiry” (75). His writing was learned as he probed for deeper understanding of Christian faith, but, in his preaching, he would involve his hearers as he expounded the topic of the day. His disciple, Caesarius of Arles, lacked the genius to do this without patronizing his listeners. Blake Leyerle writes about early post-Constantinian monasticism, with its emphasis on the physical—fasting, celibacy, pacifism, abstinence from meat, and silence. One group of these monks went beyond normal levels of scrupulosity, seeking mastery of self through individual self-transcendence as they sought to edify, and form, the larger community.

Stanley Harakas begins the second section by describing the power of incarnational pedagogy in the world of Byzantium—its literature, law, architecture, icons, profusion of rituals, and reenactment of holy traditions. All of these “bring the world of heaven to the worshiper, and they transport the believer into the realm of the eternal” (121). Training began in the home, moved out to aristocratic families for further socialization, and continued with the use of strictly religious materials. Michael A. Signer deals with the idealization of education in the early years of premodern Judaism. Jews rebuked Christians for undertaking education not to increase their knowledge of God but to launch their careers. Parents took seriously the mandate of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which instructs them—as it does us still—to regard teaching their children as their primary obligation. John Van Engen’s essay sketches in detail the role of the thousands of medieval parishes that formed “a grid of sacred spaces forming people into local communities” (152). There was no escaping this institution, for it functioned as public law and as the focal point of human life, but it did not monopolize religious practice. Because the tradition of the great Roman preachers had long vanished, people were eager to hear occasional visiting preachers who came to town. They could also participate in the cult of saints, parareligious societies, and the highly attractive progression of the art of drama, beginning in the church and spreading out into the streets. Elliot R. Wolfson describes religious fraternities that believed that sacred wisdom should remain an oral possession; when it is written down, it becomes subject to misinterpretation. The reality of forgetfulness, however, led to compromises—though some creative exegesis emerged from these groups. Joseph Goering traces the rise in expectations of the clergy during the thirteenth century—from simply maintaining the religious culture, to greater emphasis on preach-
ing and teaching. This increased sophistication exposed superstitions and magic—and brought an end to the Middle Ages. Anne Clark explains the cult of the Virgin Mary; for all the ambiguities of her femininity (and gender differences mattered greatly in the Middle Ages), she was accessible for comfort and help to a wide variety of people and situations—from childbirth to spring planting of the crops.

We come now to the Reformation essays—David Steinmetz on Luther, Lee Palmer Wandel on Zwingli, and Robert M. Kingdon on Calvin’s use of the catechism. These essays speak to the awesome accomplishments of these Reformers; it was like turning a battleship around. People had to unlearn the old and learn the new. Luther based his defense of Reformation principles by appeal to antiquity—the early years of the Christian era—before the human-devised practices, requirements, and mendacity attached themselves like barnacles to a ship. Luther also had much to say about pedagogy, including the role of the catechism in the formation of the young. His emphasis on preaching came like a trumpet blast: divine revelation is not only a script, but the voice of the Lord expressed by his servant from the pulpit. Palmer shows how, under Zwingli, the church and the town council converged to make Zurich a theocracy. Education was held to be crucial to a well-informed Christian community. Calvin presided over the new order in Geneva. The old order was physically exiled, and new immigrants took over the seats of influence in church and state. For Calvin, too, the catechism was of prime importance in forming the young mind. It taught the child the right questions and provided the right answers.

Philip M. Soerge and Lawrence Cunningham contribute the final, somewhat specialized, essays to the collection. Soerge writes about the efforts of the Council of Trent to set new guidelines for a wide array of popular religious practices—curbing the grotesqueries of traditional religious processions, for example, but also legitimizing the continued use of such practices and pageantry as the masses found meaningful. Cunningham traces the long and rich tradition of personal mentoring in Christian formation—both between equals and unequals. Gregory had said it well: “The direction of souls is the heart of the arts.”

The essays in this book represent not only historical writing of a high order but also deal with a subject of enormous significance—nothing less than the transmission of beliefs for which their adherents, even today, will risk martyrdom.

—Steve J. Van Der Weele


Roger Van Harn has been a highly appreciated pastor and preacher for nearly half a century. He has had a variety of ministries, including a chaplaincy to one of our great universities as well as congregations in suburbia and in the inner city. From that crucible of experience, he speaks to us in his third notable