

## BOOK REVIEWS

**561. Prayer as Night Falls: Experiencing Compline**, by Kenneth V. Peterson (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2013. Pp. 226, \$19.99. ISBN 978-1-61261-376-5).

“Compline,” I wondered aloud to myself. “How much can anyone say about Compline?” It turns out the Kenneth Peterson can say a good deal. *Prayer as Night Falls* is part narrative, part scholarship, and part meditation. It contains twelve chapters and three appendices. Each chapter includes a short bibliography. Appendix A contains the text of Compline that is more varied and expansive than that prescribed in the Rule of Benedict. Appendix B presents the texts of hymns and psalms available to hear on the website [www.prayerasnightfalls/soundcloud.com](http://www.prayerasnightfalls/soundcloud.com). Appendix C offers a selected list of resources for praying Compline from various Christian sources East and West. The volume is also amply footnoted.

The Compline Choir of Saint Mark’s Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle was formed in 1956 by Peter Hallock, who was its director, inspiration, and creative composer until his death in 2009. Author Kenneth Peterson came to the choir in 1964 as a young college student of Methodist/Presbyterian background interested in music. Interspersed in the various chapters are pieces of the history of the choir, its audience of believers and atheists, hippies, New Agers, Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and Spirituals. It expanded this audience through local radio and has traveled North America and Europe on concert tours. It sings Sunday Compline in the cathedral, and its members are professional and semi-professional musicians from multiple religious denominations. Thus the narrative.

The text also contains abundant information on the sources of Compline, beginning with nighttime rituals of primitive peoples in Africa and the Americas that prepare for the coming darkness and its concomitant fears and uncertainties. The major religions have marked the evening as well as a time of uncertainty and of the need to invoke the Eternal. It is no surprise among these religions that Compline would find its immediate inspiration from Jewish practice of regular prayer morning and evening as well as throughout the day. Church East and West called the faithful to prayer at the beginning and end of the day. The waning light prompted thoughts of danger in the unknown darkness and night as an image of sin and death and the need to call upon the Lord of Light to sustain us in sleep. Church Compline, of course, contained the Hebrew psalmody which spoke of these “terrors of the night” as well as the hope of the New Dawn. It was the Master and Saint Benedict, then, who made Compline part of the monastic day, and future reformers found in the Rule of Benedict the possibility of change and enrichment. Thus the scholarship.

It is the author who takes all this material from the past and the present and shapes it into a meditative experience of Compline and the choir. Darkness, even in our electrified cities, is still a time when life slows and sleep beckons, allowing the inner self to emerge. The silence prompts contemplation of the day and of life itself with its challenges and sorrows, the author sharing some of his own with us. The tradition finds God in the darkness and suggests prayer for protection and the new light. The choir service itself evokes beauty of sound and ritual, movement and silence, providing an experience of mystery and the divine.

There is some of this narrative, scholarship, and meditation in each of the chapters, all interwoven into a story of depth and beauty—a religious experience in itself. As the listener becomes part of the music, silence and setting, the self recedes, the left brain of thought ceding place to right brain experience of the moment. Truth is found in beauty rather than in rationality. Contemplation is possible. All this could, I suspect, even prompt a question in our houses: Whatever happened to Compline?

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