good old days were never quite as good as we remember them, but such examples do show how much has changed for the average fan. Now, *everything* seems big league: the money made by owners and investors, the players' salaries, the television contracts, the ticket prices. At the very top, the quality of play in baseball, football, hockey, and basketball is probably better than ever, but the expansion of the leagues has meant a dilution of talent. Blackout rules and premium-channel cable contracts, meanwhile, keep games off free TV. As a result, fans now pay more to see less talent play less often.

Economists Quirk and Fort have written a short, accessible book that explodes some myths (e.g., the escalation of player salaries has driven up ticket prices) and compellingly argues for radical change. In examining this big-money industry—teams in the four major professional leagues earned more than three-quarters of a billion dollars in 1996—their analysis is economic, but their methodology is that of investigative journalists: follow the money.

The authors show that the major financial beneficiaries of the big TV contracts are the owners, not the networks or the stations. But most of that largesse flows through the owners to the players, who, since the advent of free agency and strong unions in the mid-1970s, have earned something approximating their financial value to the organization. Just as the owners grumble at contract time, most pro sports teams operate on thin profit margins. And winning does not always increase net profits.

So who's to blame for the fans' plight? According to the authors, the culprit is the leagues, which are structured as monopoly cartels. Protected by Congress from the antitrust lawyers at the Department of Justice, they are able to extract tax breaks and other bribes from state and local politicians who are desperate to keep teams in the neighborhood. Quirk and Fort recommend splitting each of the big-league cartels into several competing leagues, on the model of the AT&T breakup. But they do not address the political obstacles to their plan—the millions that the leagues and owners spend on Washington lobbying and campaign contributions.

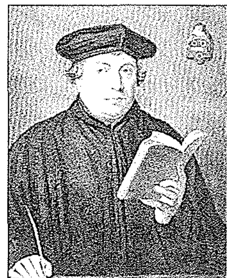
Creating a competitive environment for professional team sports is an issue waiting for an ambitious politician, one who is willing to stand up to entrenched interests. It would take a politician running for national office without a full-blown agenda, probably a Republican who believes that consumers benefit from competitive markets. Ideally the candidate would know about pro sports from personal experience as, say, a managing partner of a major league baseball team. Are you listening, George W. Bush?

—*Marty Linsky*

Religion & Philosophy

MARTIN LUTHER:
The Christian between God and Death.
By Richard Marius. Harvard Univ. Press. 542 pp. $35.

When the great Catholic humanist Desiderius Erasmus advocated a moderate approach to reforming the corrupt and corrupting 16th-century church, Luther the absolutist would have nothing of it. A figure of prodigious energy, but wracked and agonized and subject all his life to spells of depression, Luther railed against Erasmus and other champions of reason. We know the dignified and purposeful Erasmus through his portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger. The Luther of this absorbing and dramatically shaped new biography should have sat for Hieronymus Bosch, or for Edvard Munch in our own century.



Marius, the author of a biography of Thomas More, regards Luther's temperament as his tragedy, and the author's sympathies are with the Erasmuses of the world. He concedes Luther his peculiar greatness, but he does not forgive the defects of character and personality that, in Marius's uncommonly harsh view, brought

horrors: "For more than a century after Luther's death, Europe was strewn with the slaughtered corpses of people who would have lived normal lives if Luther had never lived at all." Marius cannot shake his awareness of the enduring consequences of the man's actions, for better and for worse. Luther's translation of the Bible helped shape the modern German language, but his nationalism and his insistence that people obey their rulers helped shape modern Germany.

Born in 1483 into a Europe haunted by death and plague, by skepticism, and by threats to belief, Martin Luther became a monk after he endured a terrifying apparition on a country road during a thunderstorm. Marius argues that he was impelled throughout his life by an overwhelming fear of death as nothingness. For Luther, religion was the means of conquering death through belief in the Jesus Christ of Scripture, which the individual Christian could interpret without direction from the church. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church, its superstitions, and its hated pope had to go.

By his early thirties, Luther was a figure to reckon with, ready to set himself against centuries of Catholic practice, as he did in challenging indulgences and sacraments. He was declared a heretic by Emperor Charles V after a showdown with the secular and religious authorities at the Diet of Worms in 1521. "By 1526," writes Marius, "the most creative part of his life was over, and his ceaseless battles with adversaries descended often into repetitive invective and vituperation that weary the soul." Many of those adversaries were Luther's fellow reformers, but he became as doctrinaire as a pope in resistance to their claims. Although Marius acknowledges that the final two decades of Luther's life merit fresh consideration, he confesses that he is not the man for the job. It takes a wise biographer to beg off.

Marius devotes much of the book to considering the key texts through which Luther evolved and spread his beliefs (the American edition of Luther's works runs to 55 volumes). The author admirably explains the theology, but contemporary readers, free to worship the planet Pluto if they choose, may tire of the furious old controversies. In a way, our freedom is part of Luther's legacy, because the scourge of religious war unleashed by his rebellion against the Catholic Church led in time to an age of reason (though not of reasonableness). That consequence would have appalled him, but readers of this book may see it as a nice justice—a divine justice, even.

—James Morris

BUILDING A PROTESTANT LEFT: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941–1993.

By Mark Hulsether.
Univ. of Tenn. Press. 400 pp. $38

Some readers may prefer to retitle this book *Dismantling a Protestant Left*. In the wake of Vietnam, black power, and women's liberation, the more-or-less unified Protestant left of World War II—pro-labor, pro-Allies, pro-Niebuhrian realism—was split in fragments. *Christianity and Crisis* magazine tried to bridge the gaps, both inside and outside the church. But, in the view of many centrist observers, the bridging efforts simply endorsed identity politics, exacerbated the divisions, and, ultimately, doomed *Christianity and Crisis*. For these critics, the magazine's heroic founding generation—including Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett—was ill served by its successors, who fell victim to the same utopian longings that Niebuhr and Bennett had tried to foil in the 1940s.

But Hulsether, a professor of religious studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is shrewd to stick to his "building" metaphor. To begin with, the fragmentation that afflicted liberal Protestantism (and liberalism generally) after Vietnam was not altogether new. Rather, it was an extension of splits that developed in the late 1940s and 1950s between hawks and doves, and between cultural traditionalists and modernists on such issues as sexual morality. In addition, Bennett himself, as chairman of the *Christianity and Crisis* editorial board in the late 1960s and senior contributing editor in the early 1970s, sought some accommodation with anti-war, feminist, and minority groups, which were—rightly, in his view, and Hulsether's—demanding structural reforms in race relations, education, family, and treatment of the poor at home and abroad.

In Hulsether's judgment, the magazine's demise in 1993 is not evidence that it should have stuck to its original Niebuhrian guns. Even Niebuhr, before his death in 1971, was questioning his earlier Cold War militancy, especially on the morality of nuclear deterrence. Rather than signaling the failure of pro-