

Book Review

Global Renewal, Religious Pluralism and the Great Commission

Amos Yong and Clifton Clarke

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Overview

Amos Yong and Clifton Clarke have collaborated to publish a two-part investigation and elucidation of Renewal Theology's perspective on world religions and missiology. The first section presents three separate essays dealing with different aspects of the current debate regarding religious pluralism. Renewal scholars Clifton Clarke, Tony Richie, and Steven Studebaker present works that sets the stage for much of what follows in the second section of the volume.

Clarke presents a broad-stroking evangelical, renewalist perspective that seeks to clarify and encourage both the benefits and necessities of interreligious dialogue. He claims such interreligious relations can no longer be considered an optional endeavor for followers of Christ living in a multicultural, globalized world. He offers historical, biblical, and cultural arguments for pursuing authentic and open investigation into the broader range of religious expressions. Additionally, Clarke and Studebaker independently present bold arguments in favor of acknowledging and embracing both the reality and opportunity

religious pluralism presents for multi-ethnic enculturation.

These scholars provide key missiological, pneumatological, and Trinitarian insights that point to the ongoing work of the Spirit inside the complex religious milieu, both historically and in contemporary terms. These well-written, well-researched, and insightful forays provide insight into an increasingly important theological conundrum for many evangelical scholars. To that end, Richie's work connects the inclusivist goal of Renewal Theology to the work of Catholic theologian, Yves Conger. Richie highlights the costs and damage theological exclusivism has perpetrated within evangelical missiology and suggests Conger's inclusivist pneumatology offers a much-needed corrective to the Western mindset. He reminds western theologians that a reconsideration of Conger's theological and epistemological humility would exemplify to the broader religious community a courtesy and concern too often absent in evangelical scholarship.

Yong and Clark's book is engagingly helpful for missionaries serving in cross-cultural setting. However, with the religious pluralism growing rapidly in the United

States, this book also is relevant for the local church pastor. The growth of Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic peoples in North America should inspire pastors to consider how the discussion of the second section of this text, “Renewal Missiology and Interfaith Encounter,” can be related to their respective context. The pneumatological dialogues discussed in the book engage issues of value that are part of Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic theologies and cultures. Each author of this section reflects on how the missional Pentecostal in contexts overseas or in their local communities can relate the person and work of the Holy Spirit to religiously pluralistic settings.

In chapter 4, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen discusses how Pentecostals and Buddhists can begin a pneumatological dialogue through their respective theologies on suffering. His chapter is titled: “*Dukkha and Passio: A Christian Theology of Suffering in the (Theravada) Buddhist’s Context.*” In the first part of his essay, Kärkkäinen attempts to discern the understanding of suffering from Buddhist and Christian traditions. For the non-specialist in Buddhist’s studies, this is helpful. The Buddhist’s practice is to live in such a way that negates suffering in this life and the next; therefore, suffering is a place of common ground for Buddhists and Christians to begin interfaith communication. It certainly is a starting point for understanding a common denominator of life importance for Buddhist and Christians. The author writes of the various types of biblical “right suffering” such as “Divine, Redemptive, Integrative and Healing.” Kärkkäinen rightly does mention that Pentecostals have sound theology in the area of the Holy Spirit and power. However, he notes that Pentecostals need a better theology of the person and work of the Holy Spirit and suffering in existential life experience. Hence,

Kärkkäinen says Pentecostals need to further engage the text of Scripture in this area of suffering to better connect with Buddhists to relate the fullness of the gospel.

Chapter 5, written by Kristen Kim, is titled “Theologies of Religious Pluralism: Pneumatological Foundations and Conversion in India.” Kim looks at Hinduism and the importance of personal faith identity rooted in religion. Being part of a larger community and nation furthers such faith identity. To be Indian is to be Hindu, and to be Hindu is to be Indian. Thus, when contemplating the choice to convert to Christianity, the tension is profound for the Hindu of India. Kim reflects that the rise of Hindu nationalism in the last decade further exacerbates the difficulty of choosing to become a follower of Christ in India. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that living in the United States does not make the decision to follow Christ easier. This decision will alter one’s life, family, and community relationships despite the cultural context.

With this historical and contemporary explanation, Kim looks at respective means by which Hindu and Christian can attempt to carry on theological dialogues on the Spirit. She discusses a broad spectrum of perspectives—from the liberal “Universal Spirit” approach of South Indian Methodist, Stanley J. Samartha, to missionary to India, Lesslie Newbigin’s refute of Samartha’s theology of the Holy Spirit based on John 16:13. Newbigin believes that the person and work of the Holy Spirit in Christian tradition is unique and not to be blended with the theologies of other faiths. Such bookends of pneumatological dialogue provide the theological boundaries from unacceptable to acceptable. Here Kim discusses the place that Pentecostal pneumatology may engage the Hindu spirit world far more effectively than mere

Evangelical cognitive theology. The world of the spirits and the Holy Spirit is real. Kim encourages Pentecostals to make the most of communicating the person and work of the Holy Spirit in living and speaking the gospel to Hindu peoples. This theology of the Spirit allows for a dialogue that informs and disciples the Hindu in the truth that the Holy Spirit will be a counselor, guide, and comforter during life's most challenging times. Although not mentioned, but vital whether one lives in India or Indiana, the Holy Spirit moves and works as well through the body of Christ. The community of Christ in the local church will be vital to the discipleship of Hindu converts—and to strengthening their sense of belonging to a new, incarnate community of faith.

The last faith discussed, which has tremendous implications in our world, is the gospel and Islam. In chapter 6, Cephas N. Omenyo, entitled his essay "Renewal, Christian Mission and Encounter with the Other: Pentecostal-Type Movements Meeting Islam in Ghana and Nigeria." As a missionary to the Muslim world, I found this chapter especially encouraging and enlightening. The author writes about the current conflict between Muslim and Christian communities. However, this conflict has not kept Pentecostal and Charismatic churches from intentionally reaching out to Muslims. Omenyo shares about the pervasive Pentecostal/Charismatic theology of the Holy Spirit not only active in Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, but also in Mainline churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The result is a dynamic Church of multiple traditions empowered by the Holy Spirit for pneumatological dialogue with Muslims in daily life between neighbors—in the marketplace and beyond. The Holy Spirit-driven conversations are not left to Christian and Islamic scholars in academic settings but, as in the New Testament, the entire body of Christ. An

excellent point the author makes is that Pentecostals and Charismatics have a tendency to demonize Islam, resulting in offending Muslims and even igniting violence. On the other hand, Mainline and Roman Catholic Churches follow the approach of connecting with Muslims in such a manner that communicates the gospel, but does not go to confrontational extremes. Omenyo says that some Pentecostals and Charismatics will say Mainline and Roman Catholic Churches have watered down the gospel. This is not compromise, but wisdom and effective mission that truly provide room for the person and work of the Holy Spirit to touch the Muslim's heart and mind with the truth of the gospel. Such an approach in diversified religious contexts, like Ghana, Nigeria, and Chicago, allows for a pneumatological dialogue to accomplish the Holy Spirit's desire—to lift up Jesus that Muslims may be drawn to Him. No matter where one serves, the current pluralistic and globalized world requires that Christ-followers deliberate and reflect on such issues in order to communicate the gospel to people outside the purview of Christendom—from the ends of the earth to the end of one's own block.

Conclusion

This volume enters the evangelical tent at an opportune time. Both Yong and Clarke seem fully aware that their venture into the historically tumultuous arena of religious pluralism has in the past drawn fire from the giants of conservative theology. Any hint of the shadowy slope of postmodern relativism, pluralism, or nominalism has frequently resulted in a stern response from the broader evangelical superstructure. At times, the resistance can be vitriolic and a knee jerk reaction rather than a studied and discerning engagement of the facts and concepts presented. The recent reaction from

conservative evangelicals to rumors, heresy, and universalism from popular evangelical pastor Rob Bell, before his book was available for review, presents a case in point.

Despite whatever resistance may follow and in light of the allergic reactions of many conservative theologians to all things “postmodern,” there remains a significant need for scholars to engage the “real” world of religious diversity with calm and collected thought. Yong, Clarke, *et al*/have provided a significant effort toward accomplishing this daunting task. Their work seeks to discover and describe the movements and intentions of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the increasingly complicated, bifurcated and diverse global village, where fear of the “other” can too often rise above love of one’s neighbor. Renewal theologians and their unique pursuits may, in fact, be leading the way for all evangelicals who recognize the drastic and exponential changes occurring in the world and are endeavoring to illuminate the way of Christ’s reconciliation and redemption. Yong, Clarke, *et al*/have collectively

proposed the epistemological, theological, ontological, and methodological horizons for evangelicals to adopt if they are to remain effective influences of the gospel within their cultures. Recognizing the Spirit, if God is not bound by either the hegemony or anthropomorphism of western epistemology, evangelicals must continue to adapt and expand their ideological horizons to meet the non-western reality found throughout the majority world.

Such an adaptation is not a compromise of evangelical distinctives, but rather demonstrates humility, common sense, and compassion. This volume skillfully uncovers and inspects aspects of the Spirit’s evangelistic endeavors to engage all peoples, from every tribe, nation, and epistemological paradigm, drawing them into the redeeming realm of God’s Kingdom. Its engagement of these essential theological and missiological issues does not represent a conciliatory acquiescence to “the mind of the flesh,” but rather a realistic engagement with the facts and circumstances of an increasingly non-western centric world.