

Book Review

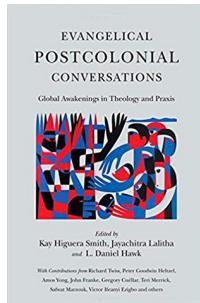
Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk (editors).

Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis.

Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014. eb, 272,

\$30.00, ISBN 978-0-8308-9631-8.

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Conversation begets opportunity. Yet, with unfamiliar conversation partners, how to best navigate the discursive shibboleths? In this collection of theopolitical essays, a roundtable of knowledgeable guides offers orientation to the shared terrain overlaid (contested?) by postcolonial studies and evangelical theology. Most of the essays have been intentionally co-authored, thus evoking a sense of discussion throughout the volume; the process of nominating the editorial team, itself, was peer-democratized. Connections to Evangelicalism tether every contributor by claim (i.e., personal identification) and/or by context (i.e., institutional setting). Together the contributors call for constructive, reorienting, and multivocal engagements to take place within Evangelicalism—an invitation that remains open, given the present state [2018] of religio-public discourse globally.

A total of 28 authors contributed essays. Following introductory pieces by seven contributors, this anthology is divided into five parts. First, “Mission and Metanarrative” includes four chapters that feature noteworthy analyses of American Indian [sic] and Asian Indian colonial contexts, as well as postcolonial resourcing for constructing African Christology; as a result,

numerous imperialisms imposed historically for the benefit of Western Christianity come under indictment. Part two, “The Stories behind the Colonial Stories,” collects two essays seeking to deconstruct philosophical and sociopolitical narratives that have been employed historically to fund instantiations of Euro-American colonizing; given the rich analysis on offer, readers today may very well wonder whether there is anything *post*-about the *colonial* mentalities being critiqued here (and largely operative today). Three chapters in the third part, “Revisioning Evangelical Theology,” resoundingly intonate within postcolonial tonalities certain modulations for classical theological loci, including eschatology, Christology, and pneumatology. Four chapters in part four, “Transforming the Evangelical Legacy,” privilege *praxis* for a strategic liberating from the colonized mindset that seems to correlate to evangelical imaginaries; such theory-laden-practice and practice-driven-theory, complexified by the notion of iterative cycling between action and reflection, function as the beating ministerial heart of the volume as a whole. In part five, “Closing the Circle,” the lone chapter endorses opportunities for furthering postcolonial-evangelical conversations, thereby serving thematically to conclude the anthology. A brief benediction and an *in memoriam* for contributor Richard Twiss are included at the end of the text.

Liabilities and benefits abound, both, throughout this collection. Consideration for the background of this project reveals an intent to provide convincing rejoinder to both sides of the “liberal” (postcolonial) and “conservative” (evangelical) divide within Global North contemporary theopolitics—an entrenchant polemics evident, in particular, since Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Heltzel’s (2008) *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*.¹ As with that pathbreaking anthology, this collection privileges (for the most part) a U.S. perspective, particularly in its working definition of Evangelicalism. The index includes no entry for “Evangelicalism,” although one of the introductory essayists does articulate “six evangelical attributes,” viz. christocentrism, conversionism, charism, textualism, activism,

and communitarianism.² Congruences between this taxonomy and other descriptions of Evangelicalism (e.g., the so-called Bebbington quadrilateral) would appear to extend this volume’s applicability beyond U.S. shores. However, the text’s subtitle in its present form belies a residual Global North-centrism running throughout this project.³ Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the term “evangelical” can be of significant benefit beyond the Global North contexts being presupposed here. The volume’s appeal may, therefore, be limited in Global South contexts that are given no explicit consideration or direct representation in these pages. This may be, after all, an intramural conversation for Evangelicals and less than helpful within dissimilar geopolitical contexts.

The key pragmatic question is whether readers can recognize enough common ground between themselves and these progressive authors, in order to inhabit a shared discursive space sufficient to engage supremely important concerns, such as power, identity, sociality, and faithfulness. The potential for so much dissonance of assumptions and interpretations might rightly be perceived as a weakness for any project; yet this potentiality is, for this volume,

1 Even prior to the release of Benson and Heltzel’s (largely) U.S.-centric volume (October 2008), the University of Manchester’s Lincoln Theological Institute inaugurated a series of international meetings entitled “Divinity After Empire” (May 2008). In the years following these coinciding events, similar discussions were taking place in a number of meetings and media—viz. the “Postcolonial Theology Network” Facebook group (founded September 2008), a book panel for Benson and Heltzel’s collection during the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Chicago (November 2008), a meeting at United Theological College in Bangalore entitled “Decolonizing the Body of Christ” (January 2010), the launchings of the Journal of Postcolonial Theory and Theology (first issue October 2010) and Journal of Postcolonial Networks (first issue November 2011), a series of meetings sponsored by the organization Postcolonial Networks entitled “Postcolonial Roundtable” in Wenham (October 2010) and San Francisco (November 2011), and the “Postcolonialism and Religions” monograph series by Palgrave Macmillan (initial title June 2012). The volume presently under review is one fruit from some of these cultivations. For more information, see <http://www.borderlesspress.org/postcolonial-networks-timeline/> and the two contributions by Joseph Duggan in the present volume (viz. Acknowledgements and Introduction to Part Five).

2 From his observations of the roundtable, Robert Heaney notes certain “attendant thought[s] and practice[s] sometimes associated with evangelicalism,” which for him include “patriarchy, nationalism, social conservatism, racial discord, conservative Republicanism, the privatization of faith, Reformed theology, imperialism and the desire to make evangelicalism a uniquely American civil religion”; these may also be seen as “the very loci for evangelical postcolonialisms” (29-30). While the point is well-taken, such comments do further reify a predominant (and likely domineering) U.S. frame of reference.

3 The present essays were collected (commissioned?) under the working title, “Great Awakenings: Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations,” which clearly evokes British-American sensibilities for framing such theological and communal renewal.

a strength. It is the very novelty of terminology, literatures, logics, and aesthetics demonstrably attendant on postcolonial approaches that is of most notable value for, in particular, the evangelical everyperson. Risk is inherent in the conversation and engagement.

Conversation not only begets opportunity but assumes openness, honesty, and all the trappings of our particular commitments. Clearly some degree of practical theological sophistication is necessary (*inter alia*) for this project to succeed in its larger goal of instantiating further global awakenings in praxis, theology, decolonization, liberation—and, dare this Evangelical say: salvation. For the less-than-initiated Evangelical looking to engage postcolonial thought, this collection offers several entry points for carrying on such engagement, always with the conviction that transformation of this inequitable world—a world that God loves—is possible.

