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**Evangelical
Theology in the
New Millennium:
The Global God:
Multicultural
Evangelical
Views of God in
Review**

By

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Babylon: The Rastafari
Reader* (Temple
University Press, 1998).

Among the varied traditions that comprise Christian thought, the evangelical faith has characterized the heart and soul of Christian theology since the first century. But evangelical theology as a sub-field of study came into full bloom only since the mid 1900s in the works of British, Canadian and, especially, United States scholars too numerous to mention here. A short list of the leading names must include George Eldon Ladd, Carl F. H. Henry, G. Ernest Wright, Bruce Waitke, Richard Longenecker (of Canada), F. F. Bruce and J. D. G. Dunn (British). Also worthy of mention are my own mentors from Wheaton College, Merrill Tenney, Gerald Hawthorne, Samuel Shultz, and Walter Elwell. Leading graduate schools and universities in Sheffield, London, Scotland, Canada and the US continue to train young evangelical scholars in Bible, theology, and church history.

In the last 50 years, evangelicals have produced a mind field of books in biblical

studies to nurture and guide faith most of which sought to avoid divisive controversies that plague the fundamentalist movement. Because of their passion for biblical theology based on the exegesis of biblical texts, evangelical scholars were severely criticized in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s by critics like James Barr of Oxford University for their part in the post World War II "Biblical Theology Movement." Barr charged that the biblical theology movement was built on the shaky grounds of semantics, word study or lexicography, "the acts of God in history,"¹ uncompromising emphasis on biblical authority, and divine revelation (Barr 1961, 1966, 1973, passim).

Evangelicals have had to respond also to criticisms from "both sides of the aisle" within the church itself. Fundamentalists regard evangelicals as a "sell out" of the faith when they do not support the fundamentalist version of the "battle for the Bible" or conservative partisan political agendas. "Progressive" Christians, on the other hand, say evangelicals bury their heads in their theological sand, ignore pressing contemporary problems and human misery in society, and often behave as though God is an Anglo-Saxon male perceived only through western (especially American) eyes. Christians who see ecumenical cooperation as vital to Christian understanding of God in a highly diverse, multiethnic, and multicultural America regard evangelical faith as too privatized, too ethnocentric, too exclusive, and too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good in the twenty-first century. At the beginning of the new century, evangelical faith faces another challenge—the problem of pluralism in our

¹As seen in G. Ernest Wright & Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God*.

global community. The Achilles heel for evangelicals in our global environment is “the challenge to be relevant without being syncretistic” (Noëlliste 1998, 114).

The impressive collection of essays in *The Global God, Multicultural Evangelical Views of God* edited by Aída Besançon Spencer and William David Spencer seems tailor-made to put the criticisms to rest. Gretchen Gaebelein Hull summarizes the problem succinctly. “Racially and spiritually, the United States of America has become much more multicultural than many persons would like to admit. . . . Facing this pluralism head-on, most Americans hope to avoid the sort of ethnic strife that has yielded such bitter fruit in the Balkans, and they resolve to do their best to avoid the paralyzing religious strife of Northern Ireland and the Middle East” (65). In addressing this problem, *Global God* does not offer an ecumenically inclusive conception of God that embraces the cosmology of all religions of the world. The book does not proffer a pluralistic view of world theologies in “a potpourri of other voices” (17). Instead, this is a Christian book where Christian scholars explore their views of God and interpret Christian faith within various cultures under the rubric of classical monotheism. The book’s “premise is that the God revealed in the two written covenants of the Bible is the only supreme God” (18); and its contributors’ task is “to learn more about God by having people who love God and treat God’s written revelation as authoritative and reliable, reflect on God’s attributes from their cultural situation” (103).

Lest anyone misconstrue the theological position of the book, Aída Spencer’s opening chapter, “The God of the Bible,” provides an exposition in classic evangelical biblical theology style on fundamentals of the faith. Through the study of metaphors, key words, and theological concepts in the Bible, Spencer expounds personal actions of God towards

God's people (22) through God's self-revelations (24-35) as a way of emphasizing standard Christian understandings of God's nature and character (30-35).

Aída Spencer's other chapter "God the Stranger: An Intercultural Hispanic American Perspective," warms to the theme of the book as she focuses the volume on the problem of multicultural and ethnic sensitivity. Writing out of many worlds and bedeviled by issues of class, ethnicity, and national identity, the Hispanic American scholar used anecdotal experiences of her own struggle with cultural distance, feeling the pains of a stranger and the enigma of an outsider, to wrestle with the question of identity and what it means to be different in the United States. Spencer finds solidarity with the homeless Jesus of the Gospels who had no place to lay his head (Lk 9:59-62), and the God of the Old Testament (OT) who often appeared to people as a visitor and a stranger. Spencer writes, "One of the major listings of God's attributes centers around strangers and other potentially oppressed people, orphans and widows" (97). This serves as a reminder that Christians are all aliens and strangers in this land, and that the spirit of hospitality and multicultural sensitivity influenced by positive biblical models of love and justice should inform Christian faith and praxis (99-101).

But what does it mean to serve the God of love, might, and power justly in a world gone crazy over power, and where *might* is often *right*? William David Spencer lifts up God's primary attribute of love, which guides God's divine power and might, as a yardstick for measuring our use of power in the world. People who choose love over power, and use power lovingly, choose for God. But those who do not, choose against God; they use power for the destruction of

others and therefore suffer the consequences of their sins (40-43, 45-48). Blazing a trail for a new form of evangelical social consciousness, Spencer points out that since Columbus' encounter of the New World, European "Christian" custodians of power secured wealth and domination by the blood of natives in the Americas and enslaved Africans. Spencer writes: "In grisly demonstration of the dark side of Jesus' warning in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus was once again being crucified in the slaughter of the weak of the earth" (46). The nineteenth-century Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny, as official paradigms of America's misuse of power, are carved in the blood of weaker neighbors and enslaved Africans (49-51). "The legacy of supposed divine or natural power investiture, of subjecting others and of handing on that error to succeeding generations invaded the twentieth century, creating the climate of estrangement and of contention that molests contemporary North America" (52).

But William Spencer finds a host of Christian witnesses choosing love over power even in the midst of the abuse of power: Bartolome de Las Casas and abolitionists like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, George Liele Mennonites against slavery in Virginia, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sojourner Truth, Abraham Lincoln, and many others (49-50, 53-55) who risked their lives in love over power. But anxious to give his country a pat on the back for the good it has done in the last century, Spencer finds love in the most controversial of places—US Immigration policies, US foreign policy on aid allocation, operating budget for social security and government-supported programs (55-58). Believing that America can do better in the new century, Spencer issues a new challenge to "tear up that [old] map and lead this nation on another route" through individual and collective responsible decision making and actions (59-61).

Gretchen Gaebelin Hull's "The Complementarity of God's Love and God's Righteousness: The United States of America" is invaluable; it strikes at the nation's "Christian" conscience by raising the question of what it means to follow our creed of securing inalienable rights of equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all Americans, especially in light of the Bill of Rights of 1791, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865, and the Nineteenth amendment of 1920. "One of the very positive results of the United States' civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s was sensitizing the overwhelmingly white population majority to how careless and unjust those controlling political, economic, and social power can treat minorities" (64). Hull readily admits that facing the question of diversity and "implementing fair play for an increasingly diverse population seems harder rather than easier" (64). The problem bedevils evangelical Christianity in a more profound way than it does national policy. Hull's questions are trenchant: "In order to avoid any appearance of intolerance" in the bid for "racial harmony," should Christian faith be privatized only within oneself and one's tradition in order not to be "intrusive or discourteous to other faiths?" (65). What does it mean for all to be God's children, or have "Different strokes for different folks" and say "everyone's moral choices are equally valid?" (70) Can Christian ethics accommodate Houston Smith's philosophy "All roads lead to God" (67), or the slogan "I'm OK-You're OK?" Has religious morality outlived its usefulness, and can federal and state laws by themselves "instill the moral values needed to heal dysfunctions such as hard-core poverty, crime, and the epidemic of teenage pregnancy?" (69).

Hull writes: "The legislative process cannot create righteousness, neither can the criminal justice system provide

atonement, moral restitution, or final emotional and spiritual closure for instances of injustice” (70). As the “founding fathers” did in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we must appeal to a higher power to overcome tribalism and rugged individualism. We need the higher morality offered in Christian faith fleshed out in the “tough love” like that which sent Christ to the cross (78). Hull holds out God’s complementary attributes of love and righteousness for individual and communal healing, justice, and social transformation, and says that finding the healing power of righteousness and God’s answers to the needs of a pluralistic society does not mean we divide God to suit the diverse culture or compromise one’s faith (76-83). Hull concludes: “Although individual Christians will not be able to lend support to every justice issue, nevertheless each instance of injustice demands the collective attention of God’s people. Collectively, God calls us to look beyond both personal and national self-interest, to put aside political preference . . . and instead to uphold biblical standards of love and righteousness” (84).

The theological conversation becomes a much stickier matter when African Traditional Religions (ATR) enter the theological conversation. The chapters by Dieumème Noëlliste, Tokunboh Adeyemo, and Edward John Ossei-Bonsu on African and Caribbean religions address the question of how much inclusiveness evangelical theology can tolerate without losing its Judeo-Christian soul. Noëlliste rejoices: “At last, the era of the concentration of theological reflection in only one sector of the world has come to an end. The rapid spread of the church in heretofore foreign areas is resulting in the decentralization of theological activity” (104). But this “welcome development” comes with a challenge

which “concerns the relationship of theology to culture” in the Two-Thirds World. Reminiscent of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, the Caribbean theologian raises the question as to whether Christian theology should function above culture (transforming it), indifferent to culture (ignoring it), against culture (rejecting it), subjugated to culture (“a thoroughgoing cultural theology”), or fused with culture (syncretism). Noëlliste finds usefulness in culture facilitating, elucidating, informing, enriching, and interacting with Christian theology (106-108). This means reconciling African cosmology and its apparently remote deity and pantheon of divinities in Afro-Caribbean religious thought (Cumina, Myal, Shango, Santeria, Voodoo, and Orisha) with Christian theology (109-110).

To Noëlliste, an Afro-Caribbean understanding of God as separate and apart from God’s creation and based on God’s divine nature and standard of holiness (114-19) should inform Christian theology in the region. The contemporary theologian concludes that contrary to modern Christian thought which (apart from the Barthian protest) “has shown bias toward immanence” as a result of “the reconstruction of Schleiermacher and Hegel” (125), theology is on the wrong path. As a model for preserving the essence of a Christian theology that has relevance for the Caribbean, Noëlliste recommends a transcendence of God “that neither fears contact with immanence nor allows itself to be dissolved by immanence when the two intersect” (120). Afro-Caribbean and Christian thought are not mutually exclusive, and Christian theology must set the tone for theological conversation under the “ontological superiority of the “I am that I am” revealed in Scripture. This God is thoroughly transcendent over and above the created order, but active in people’s daily lives in holiness and love.

Much of Tokunboh Adeyemo's "Unapproachable God: The High God of African Traditional Religion" is a study of African cosmology with its intricacies, complexities, pantheon of divinities, and varied tribal perceptions of reality. It shows that notwithstanding its theological consciousness, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not Christian. If Africans have knowledge of God, they know Him only "in part; and seeing him, they see through the mirror of creation dimly" (144). But Adeyemo believes that "though there are many sides as to the tribal perception of God due to linguistic, geographic, and cultural variations, the belief in a supreme deity is a prominent theme among Africans" (136), and can be an olive branch in the theological chasm. The transcendent God of the Akan and the Yoruba is "immanent and self-evident. . . Where there is life, there is God" (137). The African datum "God is, hence man is" finds resonance in Romans 2:14-15 and Calvin's *Institutes* (138-39). As in Christian theology, God is perceived in ATR as living and acting in Africa through natural phenomena, oral tradition and history, providence and preservation, personal experience and culture (139-44). Therefore, although the gap between ATR and evangelical theology is real, Adeyemo concludes, "Even though in times past God has 'allowed all the nations to follow their own ways,' (Acts 14:16), God has never left himself without a witness" (144). Africans can approach the "once unapproachable God . . . through faith in Jesus Christ whom the Supreme God sent to bridge the chasm they too perceive between heaven and earth" (145). So not only does Adeyemo believe that Christian theology can learn from ATR but Christianity, as a brighter light than ATR, must set the theological agenda.

Like Adeyemo's chapter, the value of Edward John Osei-Bonsu's "The God above Tradition Who speaks to all

Traditions: An African (Ghanaian) Perspective” lies in what it says about the nature of ATR. The Ghanaian pastor says unequivocally, “Biblical Christianity does not favor the practices of Ghanaian traditional religion. Yes, God is the Supreme Being and God expects his people to communicate to him directly. . . The Scripture refutes the traditional belief that ‘no ordinary human could talk to God directly’” (161). Osei-Bonsu goes so far as to say practice of ATR is *bondage*; “The indigenous religious care is also fraught with problems. Essentially, this syncretistic religion is a pseudo-Christian cult” (162). He finds elements in Ghanaian religion that are “wrong” for “one’s walk with God,” and says that some practices are “primarily utilitarian” in nature. Osei-Bonsu wants to change what he calls the erroneous concepts and “help Ghanians, in particular, to know God in a personal and intimate way, while God would still meet their personal needs in times of existential difficulty or crisis.” How is this accomplished? “One way is an *active care* where the Christian churches would ‘engage in practical existence expressed in terms of fellowship, providing identity for their members, and responding to immediate physical and pastoral needs.’ Another way would be affirming where the communal and caring spirit in the Ghanaian tradition would be upheld and nurtured in the Christian church. Some traditional, not religious, practices must be considered and contextualized as we offer care” (162-63). Osei-Bonsu’s anecdotal testimony “from bondage to freedom” makes it clear that he believes African religion and culture are inferior to Christianity and that, though Christian theology should learn from African culture, it should seek to transform it.

The chapters written by Grace Y. May, Tsu-Kung Chuang, Bong Rin Ro, and Tae-Ju Moon are evangelical biblical exposition within Chinese American and Korean American

cultural contexts. In her exegetical study, "Viewing God through Twin Lenses of Holiness and Mercy: A Chinese American Perspective," Grace Y. May discussed "the interplay between the Scriptures and the contemporary Chinese American church" under the umbrella of God's holiness, moral character and mercy (167). May finds parallels between biblical names and character of God and the moral principles, "filial piety," and a general "sense of respect in Confucianism and Chinese American Christian worship (171-72). The only real challenge May sees in this conversation is the Chinese American "self-righteous complacency" which leads to a "lack of political self-awareness" and "lack of joy" (177-78).

In her study, "Shang-di: God from the Chinese Perspective," Tsu-Kung Chaung agrees that much can be gained in Christian thought from the moral teachings expounded in the *Analecets of Confucius*, the writings of Mencius, and other Chinese sacred texts (193-95). Indeed, Christians stand to gain from imitating the devotion, life of chastity, and meditation in the Buddhist monastic and ethical tradition. The greater challenge, however, lies in reconciling the Chinese deification of humans, a la, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and the bureaucratic heavenly structures in Chinese folk cosmology with Christian theology. Chuang says in spite of those divine structures (197-98), "Chinese religion, at best, highlights God's wisdom and holiness. . . the God in whom we believe is all wise and wants beliefs reflected in our way of life, ethics, morality, and wisdom" (199). The supreme God as creator, immanent, and holy speaks to the Chinese cultural context, but not as an equal partner; for Christianity must supply the creation theology missing in Chinese thought.

Although Pastor Yong-Gi Cho's Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul, the largest in the world, and perhaps the richest, may give westerners the impression that Korea is a Christian country, Bong Ring Ro's "Communicating the Biblical Concept of God to Koreans" shows that Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and especially Shamanism, are entrenched and pervasive in Korean life via politics, culture, "art, music, education, ethics, and so on" (216). The major question is, can Theravada Buddhism, which cares little about the existence of a deity but is committed to achieving Nirvana purely by human efforts, cohabit with evangelical faith in a personal savior and Son of God? Even the Mahayana Buddhist idea of a man becoming a divine Buddha is at odds with the fundamentals of Christian faith characterized by a Trinitarian view of God. Nonetheless, Ro wants to communicate Christ to Koreans using Korean-Christian divine name correlatives, mythological concepts of God, common understandings of natural theology, the image of God in humans, and a shared understanding of the good life (222-228).

As one of the world's oldest religious practices shamanism, related to sorcery, magic, divination, ecstasy, and appeasing of the spirits, is as important a player in the multicultural Christian theology conversation in Korea as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Tae-Ju Moon's "The Korean American Dream and the Blessings of Hananim (God)" shows that the shamanistic tradition pervades every aspects of the country's religious life. "Shamanism in Korea is a pragmatic belief system, primarily concerned with the seeking of fortune and the avoidance of misfortune with the aid of the power of a superhuman or shaman" (239). Shamans function as priests who mediate between humans and the gods, act as healers and exorcists who bring relief

from physical and mental pain, “explain abnormal phenomena and predict both bad and good fortune,” and arrange cultural festive occasions and recreation (242). Although “the Protestant churches have adopted a critical attitude toward shamanism,” Korean Christianity has adopted many Shamanistic characteristics, and is influenced by it,” even adopting the shaman word and concept *Hanim*, God of the heavens (241). Christianity and Shamanism share common interest in a powerful God who can control other spirits and situations. They believe that evil spirits exist. They hope for positive results from ritual activities and spiritual obligations (242). Young-Gi Cho and other prominent Christian ministers have adopted the threefold blessing common in Shamanism for prosperity, good health and longevity, and protection from harm or evil. The *Hanim* blessing and its strong theology is therefore, for Moon, a rallying point for Christian adaptation, cultural appreciation, and theological conversation in Korean.

To my knowledge, *Global God* is the first of its kind in evangelical theology. Without compromising its faith, its provocative discourse challenges Christians to rethink their practice of cultural, theological, and ethnic dominance in the world which has become a global family of people. The Spencers have put together another fascinating anthology which blazes a trail for a new evangelical social and multicultural consciousness. The collection is very consistent. Scholars stuck to their objective of studying cultures and learning from God’s attributes. But this book is not all things to all people. Its strong theological commitment will meet warm acceptance in the evangelical communities around the world, especially in the Two-Thirds World. But the contributors should not be surprised if scholars of world religions are not enamored over the book’s pro-Christian evangelistic tone.

That is, the book's strongest position may be a bone of great contention.

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