

Book Review

Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Religions: Encountering Cornelius Today

Tony Richie

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In an age of unprecedented interreligious exchanges, developing an intentional, articulate Pentecostal Theology of Religions (PTHR) is a pressing need. PTHR constitutes far more than academic abstraction—it addresses the daily intersection of faith and life and calls for “Spirit-gifted and Spirit-attuned reflection and reasoning” (p. 1). In his recent book, Tony Richie draws on insights gleaned from his many years of missionary work, ecumenical leadership, and scholarship to offer a constructive introductory text.

Richie develops his proposals thematically, weaving together historical background, biblical support, and interaction with a widening circle of dialogue partners. In the first few chapters, he lays out a theological rationale for PTHR and attends to preliminary concerns, such as the centrality of Christ, the role of the Church, the place of the Scriptures, and the theological rationale for the existence of the religions vis-à-vis God’s salvific purposes. Richie begins to adjudicate the tension between the particular and the universal, the reality of religious pluralism and the danger of philosophical pluralism, and genuine dialogue and uncompromising Christian witness.

In chapter 2, Richie attempts to locate preliminary Pentecostal contributions within a broader historical survey of the discipline. He introduces the positions of early

Pentecostal pioneers such as Charles Parham and Bishop King, unearthing within Pentecostal tradition a “wideness of embrace” that facilitates ecumenism and inter-faith relations (pp. 45-46). He also examines the contributions of Evangelicals who, like their Pentecostal counterparts, strove to balance God’s forbearance and the universal implications of the atonement with personal responsibility and the integrality of Christ and the Scriptures. Here, as throughout the book, Richie distinguishes the “religion of Christ” from Christianity in order to strengthen the case for Christian inclusivism as “something of a via media between relativistic pluralism and rigid exclusivity” (p. 19).

Chapter 3 moves forward to the contemporary scene. Richie identifies significant charismatic and Pentecostal scholars in the field and briefly describes their contributions. He touches on Clark Pinnock’s appropriation of Wesley’s prevenient grace and J. Rodman Williams’s cautiously optimistic theology of religions in order to demonstrate the utility of a pneumatological framework for a PTHR. He then turns to Pentecostals, such as Frank Macchia, Steven Studebaker, and Keith Warrington, who affirm both the uniqueness of Christ as well as the expansive reach of God’s grace through the Holy Spirit. Finally, he plumbs the Trinitarian and pneumatological approaches of Veli-Matti

Kärkkäinen and Amos Yong, which he deems complementary in spite of their nuances.

In chapter 4, Richie suggests that Pentecostals should implement a procedure to guide their interreligious encounters and identifies the traditional Pentecostal practice of testimony as a suitable paradigmatic resource for engaging religious others in a manner that is consonant with Pentecostal faith and values (p. 108). As Pentecostals share these faith-infused historical occurrences through the agency of the Holy Spirit, they fulfill their responsibility to communicate the gospel as faithfully and compellingly as possible while maintaining a posture of grace and humility.

In chapter 5, Richie responds to Yong and Kärkkäinen's interactions with his previous work. He agrees with Kärkkäinen that PTHR must advance to the realm of the concrete, but argues that PTHR should attend to existing concerns before undertaking comparative theological discourse. Richie pauses to wrestle with issues such as the instability of the Middle East before probing the meaning and shape of evangelism in multi-faith environments. He concludes that a robust and responsible witness embraces the religious other even as it rejects the ideology of religious pluralism.

In chapter 6, Richie extends the conversation to include a non-Pentecostal, Jürgen Moltmann. He provides an overview and assessment of Moltmann's theology of religions, finding much to appreciate—especially Moltmann's hearty integration of Christology, eschatology, pneumatology, and missiology. However, Richie finds Moltmann's universalistic tendencies problematic and cautions against a vulnerability that might lead to syncretism or to compromise Christian identity. Richie suggests that Pentecostals may accompany

Moltmann on part of his journey, but “most likely will want to get off the bus a bit before he does” (p. 139).

Chapter 7 comprises further analysis of Moltmann's interaction with Richie's previous work, most notably Moltmann's reading of Richie's interpretation of Bishop King's theology of religions. Richie wrestles again with the tension between the universal and the particular, issuing a strong admonition to keep the focus on Christ. He returns to the heuristic “religion of Christ” to bridge the gap between Christianity and the world religions, echoing Bonhoeffer's desire for Christ to transcend history and culture to become “the Lord of the world.”

In conclusion, Richie examines some of the issues that lie ahead for PTHR, such as various stances on the deities, scriptures, and founders of other religions. He advises Pentecostals that intra-faith dialogue provides the necessary foundation for interfaith conversations. Finally, he affirms the freedom of religion even though the necessary liability of liberty is that people will make alternate and misguided choices (p. 188).

I found this book accessible and thought-provoking, irenic, and engaging. Richie integrates the theoretical and the practical, incorporates multiple and diverse perspectives, and interacts with an impressive body of scholarship. He strives for both continuity and creativity, resulting in a book that is both edgy and familiar. Further, Richie's methodological sensitivity to Pentecostal belief and practice adds resonance and aesthetic elegance to his work. Although perhaps not broad enough in scope or systematic enough in structure to obviate a further introductory text on the subject, Richie's book does indeed take significant steps toward a Pentecostal Theology of Religions.

