

BOOK REVIEWS

Anabaptists and Postmodernity

Edited by Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast

Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S.

2000. 440 pp. paper [no price listed]

Do Anabaptists have a distinct contribution to make to our western Christian encounter with postmodernity? This excellent collection of essays presented at the 1995 conference on Anabaptists and Postmodernity makes a strong case that they do.

The Anabaptist contributions spring from their theological stance which sees Christians as a counter-cultural community of believers living in the cultures of this world, but called to be different from that world. They view the world and its systems from the margins, not the center. Consequently they are cautious of truth claims and power plays of all dominant cultural and theological paradigms. In this they share the suspicions of postmodernity. But they reject the postmodern claims that all knowledge is only perspectival and relative. They boldly affirm that truth is found not in humanly constructed systems of knowledge, but in the history of God's revelation of himself in Scripture, and definitively in his incarnation as Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Christians are those who are followers of this Jesus.

Anabaptists recognize that the knowledge of God's revelation is always understood in particular historical and cultural contexts, and are wary of defining truth ultimately in human knowledge systems rooted in reason and experience. They look to the church to be the hermeneutical community that reads and interprets Scripture and applies it to life. This volume is an example of this stance. The writers share fundamental Anabaptist assumptions, but there is no attempt to construct a unified critique and response to postmodernity. Rather, testimony and dialogue characterize the

spirit of the articles. Clearly others must enter these discussions, particularly Anabaptist leaders from Africa, Asia and South America, who now constitute the majority of Anabaptists.

Their counter-cultural stance makes Anabaptists aware and suspicious of all human cultures, including that of post modernity. They wrestle with understanding and living the Gospel in all contexts. On the one hand, the gospel can and must be communicated truthfully in all cultures and times. On the other, it must remain prophetic, calling all people and cultures to be transformed by the Gospel. The church must guard lest it become captive to the ever changing cultures in which it lives. It is important, therefore, for the church and Christians to live in the tension of being God's people and bearing witness to God's Good News of Salvation, but living in different cultural worlds. The unity of the church does not lie in uniformity in outward forms, but in the unity of God's Spirit that makes them one body of which Christ is the head. The Anabaptist response to postmodernity is not to seek to establish a new dominant paradigm in cultures, but to bear bold and confident witness to Christ in all cultures.

Religions and Cultures: First International Conference of *Mediterraneum*.

Edited by Adriana Destro and Mauro Peace

Binghamton, NY: Academic Studies in Religion and the Social Order Global Publications, Binghamton University.

2002. ix, 183 pp, paper. \$25.00

Reviewed by Paul Hiebert

This volume presents the papers from the first seminar sponsored by *Mediterraneum*, a consortium of eight universities fostering the comparative study and mutual understanding of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These three major religions claim that they are unique, and cannot be compared with the others. Yet historically and religiously they have much in common. *Mediterraneum* seeks to build bridges of understanding not by exploring broad analytical generalizations, a tendency too common in the English speaking academy, nor by highlighting the differences. Rather, it begins with exploring a deep understanding of elements of each religion presented by spokespersons from with each tradition.

The topics covered are wider ranging: from an anthropological understanding of how we, today, should read early Christian texts, to a study of Simon's (a 17th scholar) new approach to the study of Jewish myth, an analysis of the response of tribal religions to encounters with universal religions, an analysis of Aramaic incantation bowls and the role of Kabal in the middle ages, of Islamic views on martyrdom, of types of Islam in the Maghreb, of teaching religions by using classical texts, and of mysticism and religious beliefs in Islam. Each is presented by an expert in the field. There are many insights into specific religious traditions that are valuable not only to scholars, but to those seeking to understand participants in the other traditions.

This book does not present a new synthesis that enables us to compare and understand these three major religions. Rather it begins the long and necessary process that will be needed to bring understanding between members in all three. By presenting detailed studies of

historically and culturally located religious beliefs and practices, it is a model that helps us avoid jumping to quick judgments or easy bridges in order to get on to some other task.

BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY: THE MISSION OF TRANSFORMATION AND THE
TRANSFORMATION OF MISSION (American Society of Missiology
Series, No. 17).

By: Anthony J. Gittins

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 1993. xx, 1876, paper,
no price given.

Reviewed By: Paul G. Hiebert

Few questions in missions today raise more questions than the nature and limits of the contextualization or inculturation of the Gospel in new human settings. Much of the discuss has focused on the message. In this excellent study, Anthony Gittins moves our discussion to a deeper level.

Using the incarnation as his model, Gittins points out that inculturation means not only the transformation of new Christians, but also the missionaries. We must leave our positions of privilege and power, and enter into true relationships with the people we serve. We must not only go, but also be met by the people, not only teach but also learn. An incarnational ministry is mission and mission in reverse.

Gittins goes below the current discussions on inculturation and shows us the sacramental nature of mission. Inculturation involves the message and the messenger. Even more important it is God present in the specific human contexts where his Word is proclaimed in local words, and he is present in the midst of his people gathered in worship.

The author sees the Eucharist as the place where God encounters humans, and uses it as the model for all human encounters with God and with one another. Drawing on Mary Douglas, he examines the taking and receiving of bread as a universal symbol of relationships. He explores the nature of gift giving, hospitality, and eating together, and sees in them bridges for the communication of the gospel. But he also sees the need for the church to reexamine its own beliefs and practices of the Eucharist itself if it is going to help people truly encounter God in their own historical and cultural settings.

Drawing on his own experiences in Africa, Gittins gives us specific examples of the encounter of the Gospel with traditional beliefs such as witchcraft and popular religion. He avoids the traditional responses of uninformed condemnation and uncritical acceptance, and shows how deep insights into a culture and sensitivity to people can help us to inculturate the Gospel in living and transforming ways. Inculturation is a journey and there are dangers, but none as great as not setting out.

Not all will agree with Gittins conclusions, but he forces us all to think more deeply about the nature of the Incarnation, the Gospel, the Eucharist and Christian mission.

Harper, Susan Billington

In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. C. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 2000. xxi + 462 pp. ISBN 0-8028-3874-X Hard cover.

This is Christian biography at its best. Drawing widely on primary sources, and meticulously documenting her analysis, Susan Billington Harper examines the life of Bishop V. S. Azariah, a leader in the indigenization of the church in India. Harper sets the stage by describing the historical context in which Azariah lived: British colonial rule, the rise of Indian nationalism, and the end of the Empire. In this setting, Mahatma Gandhi was the leader in the move to create an independent India, and Bishop Azariah the leader in developing a truly Indian church. As a Christian, however, Azariah did not see the church in India as independent and separate from the global church, but a partner with churches in other lands. Consequently, he was often accused of compromising with the colonial powers. But Azariah had a greater vision of the church as transcending national boundaries and their hostilities.

Harper traces the forces and counter-forces among missionaries and Indian leaders to the indigenization of the church, and how these shape Azariah's ministry as the first Indian protestant bishop. Some saw him as the model of a new emerging Indian leadership, others as incapable of replacing missionaries in a key office. Throughout, Azariah focused on his ministry to an exploding church among the untouchables in South India. He wrestled deeply with issues such as the church in a caste society, the gospel in Indian dress and symbols, the genuineness of mass movements to Christianity, and the organization of congregations in a society administered by *panchayats*. Azariah saw the need to contextualize the gospel and the church in the Indian village setting, but he did not advocate an uncritical accommodation. He stressed that the Gospel, not Western Christianity, was the criterion by which Indian church leaders should engage

their society and culture. He pioneered many of the ideas that are now shaping Indian churches in their search for an identity that is truly Christian but also India.

Harper goes below the surface of historical and cultural contexts, and gives us glimpses into the person of Bishop Azariah. It is here that we see his deep commitment to Christ, his walk with God, and his passion for giving birth to living, reproducing churches in rural India. He was most at home in shepherding converts and congregations born out of the mass movements that swept Andhra.

This biography is essential reading not only for those interested in the history of the church in India, but all those involved in cross-cultural ministries today. By examining deeply one historical case, we learn much about the possibilities and pitfalls of mission/national church relationships, of contextualization of the gospel in new cultures, and of the planting of vital churches in new societies. We are challenged to renew our own visions and passions. Above all we see again the power of the Gospel to transform ordinary people and communities despite their humanness.

Reviewed by Paul G. Hiebert, Prof. of Missions and Anthropology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Book Review
Paul G. Hiebert

Baum, Gregory, Ed. The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, Novalis, and Geoffrey Chipman.

Theology is reflection on the biblical texts. As this book shows so well, it takes place in historical and cultural contexts which pose problems theologians must address. Gregory Baum has gathered evaluations by eighteen leading Catholic and main line Protestant theologians of responses to the critical issues of the twentieth century, namely the two World Wars, the Great Depression and the Holocaust, the rise of modernism, Marxism, Fascism, Secularism, Capitalism, post modernism, and the rising voices of the marginal, the poor and women, and the ecological crisis. Each writer summarizes and critiques the theological debate surrounding a particular issue. These overviews are particularly helpful to those have not specialized in the topic at hand. We may disagree with their evaluations, but that is the purpose of this book--to encourage examination of how theology is done.

Taken together the chapters make a compelling case for examining not only the content of theology, but the context in which it is done. As Baum points out in his concluding reflections, Christian theology is the response of faith to the historical events that determine the life of a community. The chapters also force us ask how theology is done. What are the presuppositions theologians bring with them when they do theology? To understand theology, it is important to understand not only the Gospel and the context, but also the theologians.

A second lesson emerging from this overview is that it is not enough simply to contextualize the Biblical message. Too often the Gospel has become captive to its cultural and historical contexts, and become an ideology supporting immoral human systems. Theology is, in part, the task of the church as it seeks to bring God's prophetic Word faithfully to the setting in

which it finds itself. The Gospel is not only a message to be understood. It is a call to transformation, both of individuals and of societies. As the chapters show, the church as a whole has too often been silent or equivocal at times when a clear Biblical message should be proclaimed.

This book does not bring closure to the theological debates over the issues it raises. Rather it points to the need for further discussion on how theology is shaped by and shapes its historical contexts. In so doing, it points to the need to examine theologically the pressing issues of the non-Western world, and the new issues that face the church in the twenty-first century.

Paul G. Hiebert

BOOK REVIEW

Gunn, Giles

1987 **The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture.**

New York: Oxford University Press.

The title of this book is misleading, at least for students of missions. 'Culture' in this book is not used in the anthropological sense. Rather it refers to the high arts in general, and to western art in particular.

Are there absolutes by which art can be judged to be excellent? This is the central question of the book. The author examines various criteria that have been offered seeking to provide culture free criteria for judging the arts, and finds each of them wanting. He shows that today not only are all absolutes in judging art rejected, but also the very idea that people in one art tradition can ever really understand those in another tradition. Everyone lives locked up in their own world, and comparison or even communication between these worlds is impossible. In the end, Gunn seeks to recover a measure of mutual understanding between those in different cultures by arguing for a modified pragmatism, but admits that there is little room in his approach for making value judgments regarding excellence or morality.

The book reflects the growing awareness of scholars in different fields of the need to take cultural differences seriously. It shows the difficulty of determining any absolutes apart from divine revelation, particularly moral absolutes. The consequence of this, as Peter Berger (*The Homeless Mind*), Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*) and Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*) show is the spread of relativism in western culture, and with it a sense of meaninglessness and nihilism.

This book is useful for missiologists grappling with the philosophical questions of cultural variation and relativism, but its highly technical nature and limited scope are of little value to most practicing missionaries.

Paul G. Hiebert

School of World Mission