Book Reviews


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A giant challenge in pursuing any type of ecclesiastical model in India is the complex nature and diversity of context, both within the church and beyond. It seems almost an impossible task to pursue a viable ecclesiastical model. What stands out in Swarup Bar’s *Permeable Spirit Ecclesiology* is that his theologizing engages head-on with India’s gruelling realities as he interweaves them with the divine calling of the church to be prophetically engaged, critically relational, and porous at its borders by being grounded in the Spirit conditioned by a christological dimension. He contends that the viability of an ecclesial model must be judged on its concreteness and must turn away from the “abstract and metaphysical emphases” of theology. Hence, the key element of the model that he proposes is a relationality initiated by the Indian church through genuine dialogue without compromising her distinctiveness as an “embodied community of Christ” and her Indian character. Bar uses these dialectics to argue the case for a permeable ecclesiology. Bar’s critiques of prior relational models in the history of the church in India is their hierarchical posture, the centrality given to the inherited Western heritage and traditions of different denominations, eventually building on his objective toward a decolonized church that is authentically Christian and Indian.

Representative of Western scholarship, Bar engages with Jürgen Moltmann, Stanley Hauerwas, Kathryn Tanner, and Amos Yong (chapter 2). Although he appreciates Moltmann’s concept of the dynamic Spirit as an extension of the Spirit’s work in the ecological and cosmic dimensions, Bar...
is disappointed at its failure to capture the distinctiveness and concreteness of the God-world-church relationship that he is envisaging. Hauerwas’s ecclesiocentric model is equally viewed with some suspicion as it may lead to further alienation by locating the church at the center, thereby ignoring many peripheral concerns and issues. Additionally, Tanner’s approach demonstrates nonviability in terms of a theology of religions for a pluralistic context like India. In Yong, he locates a reasonable balance that can be utilized to develop his thesis since Yong’s focus on the Spirit and the Word/Christ allows the community of believers to potentially maintain critical relationality without sacrificing either distinctiveness or concreteness.

P. Chenchiah, M.M. Thomas, and Samuel Rayan are taken as theological partners from the Indian context (chapter 3). Among them, Bar concludes that Rayan’s Spirit ecclesiology with a decolonial approach is most suitable in the construction of the ministry and mission of a permeable Spirit ecclesiology. With decolonial approaches in vogue in ongoing theological scholarship, it is not surprising that Bar is attracted to what Rayan offers: an engagement with concepts that are not Western (for instance, bread and breath) and an emphasis on liberation of the marginalized. This enables him to further explore current discussions around universality-particularity, unity-diversity, and spiritual-concrete in the Indian context. Hence, his proposed model is also instrumental in rethinking about ecumenism, multiple religious belonging, interfaith relations, and the interplay between theoretical-practical. By vouching for an integrated unity rather than an organic unity that may be superficial in nature, Bar calls on the urgent task of relearning how to play critical, prophetic, and liberationist roles. These roles, as Bar suggests, must be at the borders—borders that are porous.

Bar’s critic of the Indian church as extremely institutionalized and rigid is perhaps overly generalized, considering the plural nature of the Indian church in terms of setting and denomination, as he himself admits. Perhaps this can be understood from the perspective of his position as having a leadership role in the church. Among other things, the study also shows that Western traditional ways of constructing theology will not work for the Indian context. The study is crucial in its critical assessment of the Indian church and pushes the discourse around opening new directions on how the church can think about religious hybridity, plurality, and
marginalization. It will benefit theological students and church leaders in India but also prompts theologians and the church globally to contemplate on how pneumatology is robust and tangible in the way it has been treated.

On the whole, a thorough and extensive discourse of pneumatological or ecclesiological themes is lacking since selected issues take center stage. Doing so might have allowed the author to offer a more in-depth theological treatment of ecclesiology that is Indian and Christian. Suggested as a “motivation and direction” for reflecting further on ecclesiological conversations with the Dalits, adivasis, tribals, women’s issues, and ecological crisis from a pneumatological perspective, one can also add to the list the scope of the model as a prototype for churches in India within their specific local contexts.

About Reviewer
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