
Book Reviews

Stephen T. Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), xii + 191 pp., \$24.99, ISBN 978-1-5409-6074-0, paperback.

Reviewer: LEOW Theng Huat
Trinity Theological College, Singapore

It has been a joy to read this book. As someone who is a proud member of the evangelical movement and who has concurrently lamented its numerous weaknesses, I am heartened to see Stephen Pardue describing in his book a significant deficiency of evangelical Christianity and charting a path toward its overcoming. For too long, evangelical Christians have tried to do theology in a context-free bubble, floating six inches above ground (so to speak). We see culture and church tradition as barriers to understanding the faith. We view them as obstacles to be overcome in order to arrive at the untainted gospel.

Pardue takes a carefully sharpened needle and, with great skill, proceeds to burst this bubble. In the form of five main theses (set out on pp.7-11), he gives persuasive arguments as to why Evangelicals should actively engage culture and church tradition in our theologizing, and how foolish we are to think that we could do otherwise. Being steeped in the evangelical movement, Pardue understands the possible objections his fellow Evangelicals would raise against his proposals. He patiently counters them by explaining why the path he has set out would not lead to much-feared outcomes such as idolatry, dilution of the gospel, and uncontrolled subjectivity.

Pardue is uniquely well-placed to carry out this project. As he explains in the introductory chapter, although he was born into an American family and did his theological education in the United States, he has lived about three-quarters of his life in the Philippines. Being what he calls an “alien”

Corresponding author

LEOW Theng Huat: thenghuat@ttc.edu.sg

in both the United States and the Philippines (11), Pardue is able to see more clearly than most how contextual Christianity is at its heart, and how recognition of this fact leads not to the undermining of the faith, but to its enrichment.

What else would I have liked to see in this book? I have three suggestions as to how this already excellent work could be made even better.

I propose, first, that Pardue could be much tougher in his critique of the present state of evangelical theology. In my understanding, the chief reason why evangelical thinkers have downplayed the importance of culture and history is due to “the restrictive habits of mind dictated by Enlightenment rationality” (168). (This phrase is from John Webster, whom Pardue features prominently in his closing chapter.) It is the hubris of the Enlightenment that pushes Evangelicals both to propose the existence of a timeless and decontextualized “gospel core” (29) and to imagine that we are the ones with the ability to distill this.

The irony needs to be pointed out more starkly: The rejection of contextual theology by Evangelicals is due to the imprisonment of the evangelical movement within a particular context—that of Enlightenment rationality. Such imprisonment has led evangelicals to hold positions uncomfortably similar to those taken by liberal thinkers. Consider, for example, a figure like the early twentieth-century German theologian Adolf von Harnack. He sees contextualization as corruption. He insists that the task of the theologian is to recover the context-free essence of Christianity by peeling off the “husks” of history and culture. How is this different from the approach of Evangelicals, described so clearly in the book?

There is much soul-searching for Evangelicals to do. We usually look at the liberals with both pity and disdain. We wonder how they could end up in such complete bondage to the ethos of the Enlightenment. The fact is that Evangelicals might not be in a much better position.

This critique of Evangelicalism could be amplified by setting out more comprehensively the negative implications of the neglect of culture and church tradition. Pardue does mention some of these, such as the imperialistic tendencies that result from the illusion that one’s context-laden theology is universal and timeless. But more can be said. The neglect of culture has, for example, led to the failure on the part of Evangelicals to

root the gospel deep in the soil of our ethnic and national communities. We have not succeeded in making people “feel at home” (to use Andrew Wall’s phrase) as they embrace Christianity. There is frequently the sense that we have to jettison, almost wholesale, our history and culture in order to be faithful Christians. Such a superficial presence of the gospel in our communities does not bode well for its prospects when times of testing arise. Similarly, the neglect of church tradition has impoverished evangelical Christianity to a considerable extent. One only has to look at the uniformly bland and shallow worship services in many evangelical churches to get a sense of how much we have lost.

What is the purpose of this augmented critique of evangelical theology? Perhaps the best service we can do to our movement is to lay bare in as stark a manner as possible where we have made a wrong turn, and how devastating the consequences have been. The hope is that any shock effect that might be generated would make it easier for Evangelicals to embrace Pardue’s suggestion to walk a different path.

My second suggestion is for Pardue to develop a more complete account of the role of Scripture in our theologizing. This is relevant as the first thesis which he advances is that “evangelical contextual theologies must look to Scripture as their magisterial authority, even as they increase their appreciation for the crucial ministerial role of culture for the theological task” (9).

Pardue is no simplistic thinker stuck in the myth of modernity. He does not think that we can, with the correct disposition and tools, achieve context-free objective readings of Scripture. He says on p. 46: “Culture shapes how we select, interpret and frame biblical texts. We bring different questions to the text because of the differences in our cultural contexts and even because of how our language shapes our conceptual world.”

There is, however, no satisfactory answer to the question of what it means for Scripture to have “magisterial authority” in the light of the significant influence of our context-laden “preunderstandings.” There is an appeal to the “power of the Holy Spirit,” which enables us to escape complete cultural captivity and hear God’s message to us in his word (53-54), but little else. The example of Rene Padilla and his movement of “Integral Mission” (58-61), given in the same chapter, is inspiring and

relevant, but it does not shed much further light on the way to comprehend the relationship between Scripture and culture.

The issue of what it means for Scripture to hold primary authority in our postmodern era (with its recognition of the inherently subjective nature of interpretation) is a pressing one for Evangelicals. One hopes that Pardue will address this in much greater detail in his subsequent works. One possible line of inquiry might rely on the insights provided by Hans-Georg Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," with a corresponding insistence that the "horizon" provided by Scripture exert an outsized contribution to our final understanding. There are, I am sure, other promising leads to follow.

In chapters 3 and 4, Pardue sets out a theological understanding of culture and the way Christian doctrine "propels, shapes and delimits the force of culture in theological reflection" (91). These two chapters make many pertinent points and offer valuable insights. However, one theological observation seems not to have been given sufficient attention: culture as part and parcel of what it means to be human. As flesh and blood creatures existing in various forms of community within time and space, culture is the inevitable outcome.

If, as Christians believe, creation is essentially good and human beings are intended by God to live in community, it follows that human culture is also principally a good thing. As God's salvific plan involves the exaltation of the human creature, it invariably also involves the exaltation of human culture, because the two are inseparable. (Karl Barth saw this in his well-known address "The Humanity of God.") A key aspect of our exaltation involves our appointment as God's "co-workers" (1 Cor 3:9, 2 Cor 6:1)—something to which the teaching of deification gives special attention. It follows that the cultures we dwell in and embody invariably have a key role in fulfilling God's work. The human contribution cannot be made without the influence and infusion of culture.

In chapter 4, Pardue cites the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the church as critical to understanding the place of culture in Christianity. My third suggestion is to add the doctrines of humanity and salvation (or, more specifically, deification). Their inclusion, I suggest, provides a more well-rounded picture of the critical role of culture in Christianity. They are also important for countering the revival of the

ancient heresy of Gnosticism that we see in many evangelical circles today. At least part of our tendency to seek a context-free theology might stem from a desire to escape our materiality, with its consequences of binding us and our perspectives within a specific time and space. This Gnostic ethos has crept in through the tenets of modernity, which, as I have suggested earlier, Evangelicals have embraced to no lesser an extent than the liberals. A fuller understanding of who human beings are and how our salvation involves every facet of our being (including our materiality) has therefore much utility for Evangelicals today.

These three suggestions are to be seen as an attempt to add a little more gloss to an already impressive work. I would like, in conclusion, to reiterate the immense contribution Stephen Pardue has made in writing this book. It is a fully deserved winner of the Christianity Today 2024 Award of Merit (Missions / Global Church). It is now trite to point out that Christianity is no longer a Western faith, given its sad decline in its traditional strongholds and rapid spread in the Two-thirds World. In the light of such development, for evangelical theology to have a future, we need to heed Pardue's message and follow the path he has charted for us. It is time to throw off the shackles of modernity.

About Reviewer

LEOW Theng Huat is Lecturer in Theology, Trinity Theological College, Singapore.