

Book Reviews

Peace Clan: Mennonite Peacemaking in Somalia, by Peter Sensenig (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016, pp. 260)

—Reviewed by Jonathan Bornman



I was gripped by this book in which a fellow Mennonite peacemaker wrestles with the story of 60+ years of Mennonite witness and service in Somalia. At the center of the story is what happens when sincere disciples of two very different faiths meet in weakness: Somali Muslims and pacifist Mennonite missionaries and Mennonite

Central Committee workers. Sensenig works from primary sources, and many of the main players are still living, so the relationships continue. These ongoing relationships also lead to new connections. For example, in 2014, a group of Mennonite teachers visited the university in Hargeisa, by invitation of the Somaliland Ministry of Education.

The author draws extensively from John Paul Lederach, quoting from his writing on conflict transformation more than any other single source. Author Mark Gopin of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University is also a frequent source. Sensenig embraces the just peacemaking theory and practice pioneered by his mentor at Fuller Theological Seminary, Glen Stassen. The missiology of David Shenk runs deep throughout this book: keeping one's identity in Christ clear while welcoming and valuing the contribution of the other is a constant theme.

The chapter titled, "Salt, Light and Deeds," is the strongest. Mennonites in North America have struggled with how to understand our Great Commission calling and the Sermon on the Mount. Should we emphasize evangelism or service? With the clear eye of a theologian and the experience of an insider, the author uses the Mennonite experience in Somalia to illuminate this conundrum and point a way forward that is intellectually and biblically inviting. He argues that Mennonite peacemaking work in Somalia followed the mission Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 5:13–16 to be a community of salt, light and deeds. Mennonite peacemakers use these terms to describe their commitments: salt refers to communal practices that witness to Jesus the Prince of Peace; light points towards God's saving work and elicits the cultural resources that will glorify God; deeds refer to

acts of service that reflect God's concern for the wellbeing of people. This kind of community embodies an alternative to the violence of the powers. Sensenig writes, "In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus initiates a family whose means and ends are peace—in Somali terms, a *peace clan*" (92).

In this same chapter, the call to discipleship and community, so foundational to Mennonite identity, is tied to the church. He writes,

From the beginning of the Mennonite presence in Somalia . . . the formation of fellowships of believers gathered around Jesus has been an indispensable goal. Witness to Jesus the Messiah was inseparable from the work of service to the Somali people in education and medicine. (92)

While reading about kinship, clan, and conflict, I was reminded of something I recently heard from Salim Munayer, "My future is bound to my enemy's future and my enemy's future is bound to mine." Munayer is the founder of Musalaha (arabic for reconciliation), an organization that works towards reconciliation in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Mennonites have learned through the Somali encounter how closely tied enemies are to each other and that solutions for peace are bound up in mutual relationships of respect and honor.

"What can it possibly mean when someone identifies as a Somali Muslim Mennonite" (220)? This question appears in the opening chapter and the concluding one. Sensenig argues that this is not an oxymoron if Mennonites are understood as a peace clan providing the imaginative framework for Muslims and Mennonites to partner together. He is proposing that the peace clan is different than the church. The peace clan centers its identity on peacemaking. The church's identity is centered on Jesus crucified and resurrected. If this is the case, then a Somali Muslim Mennonite makes sense . . . it is an identification with the peacemaking commitment of Mennonites. From my Anabaptist theological perspective, peacemaking without Jesus who entered into suffering and carried the cross is powerless to bring forgiveness and reconciliation. Peacemaking is not singularly based on just the teaching of Jesus—Jesus lived it. Jesus absorbed violence and hatred and returned grace and mercy. Mennonite peacemakers in Somalia lived what Dr. Larycia Hawkins calls "embodied solidarity"; knowing their suffering Lord Jesus, they were empowered to enter fully into the life of their communities.

Sensenig quite rightly and clearly makes the point that Mennonite peacemakers should draw on any and all sources for peacemaking. He makes a strong case for the resourcefulness of Sufi peacemaking traditions and an appeal to draw on Qur'anic sources as well. The partnership between Mennonites and Muslims in Somalia is a remarkable example, of which peacemakers of all backgrounds must take note!

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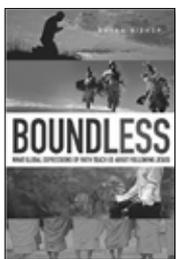
The peace clan is described as “a salty, yeasty minority identity” (230)! Anabaptists embodying a Jesus-centered pacifism represent a challenge to the larger evangelical movement that gives theological assent to the use of violence in certain contexts. Studying the Somali Sufis with their strong connections to pre-Islamic peacemaking traditions is important. Such a minority-witness is vitally important to finding peaceful solutions to complex, intractable conflicts.

Mennonite institutions should consider making this text required reading for anyone engaged in theology, missiology, peacemaking, service or witness in their many forms. Peacemakers from other traditions will also benefit from this research. Why?

Mennonites have understood rightly that the seeds of peace are sown in relationship, founded on the hope that God is calling out a peace clan who can teach one another how to walk in the light of the Lord. (235)

Boundless: What Global Expressions of Faith Teach us about Following Jesus, Studies in the History of Christian Missions, by Bryan Bishop (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015, pp. 240)

—Reviewed by Darren Duerksen



Discussions about global Christianity, including religious “insider movements,” are often of great interest to missionaries and scholars. They are not, however, a regular topic of conversation for most regular western and American Christians. For the latter, information about global

Christianity often only comes through short “mission reports” in newsletters or at church. Those who have gone a little deeper and have become familiar with controversies such as insider movements may only hear of them through the impassioned summaries and critiques of certain pastors, Christian leaders, or website blogs.

Bryan Bishop’s book seeks to fill the gap between the Christian academy and the Christian sound bite, providing for western Christians an introduction to Christ-followers from various cultural and religious contexts. He focuses on those who have not followed traditional, western patterns of

worship and have instead been influenced by (and utilize) various local patterns of worship and community. He has a particular, though not exclusive, interest in “C5 movements” (as introduced by John Travis on his C-scale), or those who follow Christ but remain a part of their Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Native American, or other religious communities. He wants to understand these and similar movements that challenge the traditional western patterns of doing church.

Although he seeks to understand these movements, his deeper question regards what these movements might teach the western Church in a time of declining membership. As more and more Christian young people leave the churches they grew up in, and claim that their religious affiliation is “none,” Bishop wonders,

Might some of the unaffiliated “nones” in the United States come back to Jesus if they didn’t have to enter traditional evangelical Christian culture to find Him? ... Could they also benefit from other insights from overseas? Could they find ways to follow Jesus that fit within their own styles and meeting places? (19)

To explore these questions in more depth, Bishop introduces us in Part 1 to “the insiders” from a variety of contexts. Chapter 3 starts in India where he describes some Hindu followers of Christ who meet together for *satsang*, or truth-gatherings. One of them is Pradip, a young man who miraculously began following Jesus exclusively while remaining a part of his Hindu family and hosting a Christ-centered *satsang* in their home. Bishop then describes in chapter 4 his interactions with a few of the many Christ-focused Muslim *jamaats* (mosques) in Bangladesh. Some of these maintain a Muslim identity and others have a more Christian identity. However, all of them, as Bishop describes them, seek to maintain good relationships with their Muslim families and communities in unique ways. In chapter 5, Bishop shifts to Thailand and describes his conversations with believers from Buddhist backgrounds. Though most of the believers Bishop describes have chosen to be “Christian” in their identity, they are also seeking to integrate Thai Buddhist traditions into their Christian faith in ways that are perhaps unique from traditional Thai churches. Finally, in chapter 6, Bishop describes some Native American Christ-focused powwows in the US and Canada. I particularly enjoyed the discussion he has with “Sarah” as she articulately shares the way her journey of faith and her Native American identity have converged. Though brief, each of the moving personal vignettes in these four chapters give a helpful introduction to diverse movements to Christ: peoples’ own stories told in their own words. This section is certainly a strength of this book.

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In Part 2, Bishop seeks to synthesize all he's seen into four basic principles that he feels, "demolish unnecessary barriers that believers in Jesus have built up around God, barriers that aren't biblical at all" (101). The first is the centrality of the Bible for these groups, the pervasiveness of which is often doubted by skeptical outsiders. He goes on to talk about the ways in which these and other groups are oral and value the art of storytelling. The second is the centrality of Christ. In this regard, Bishop discusses Paul Hiebert's concept of "centered sets" to help explain the self-described "focus on following Jesus" rather than on "changing religious communities." The third principle concerns turning the "pagan into holy," and Bishop tracks the various ways in which God's people have appropriated (and consecrated) rituals and symbols from various cultures and religions in order to worship God. In this he rightly notes how Christians (and Protestants in particular), in our under-emphasis on ritual, have missed out on the richness that such rituals often add to faith. A final principle is the desire to seek the whole truth. Here Bishop suggests, along with evangelical theologians such as Gerald McDermott, Christians can learn important things about God by respectfully listening to other religions. In this Bishop seeks a confident-but-humble posture, asserting, "We're not saying we know nothing. We're just saying we don't know everything" (152).

Part 3 is perhaps the most interesting, eclectic, and slightly frustrating part of the book. In chapters 12 and 14 Bishop returns to his question of what these movements and themes might teach western churches and ministries among the "nones" of the millennial generation. He suggests that we could adapt our religious words and vocabulary, find new locations to meet, find ways to partner with other religious groups on common causes, and adapt ways of praying that reflect those of other religions, while still focusing on Jesus. Each of these are intriguing applications, but each could use more elaboration.

In chapter 13, Bishop makes an interesting shift. Through some further research, he finds and acknowledges that some of the insider movements he has seen are sometimes "messy." He also dives more deeply into questions that he previously skirted, such as how insider movements relate to other churches and their long-term witness and viability. He also discusses the "western-styled" churches in many countries and their apparent popularity with certain segments of society. How is it that some want a "western-looking" church while others in their same country are drawn to an insider approach? While brief, Bishop is to be commended for acknowledging and discussing tough issues, even if they are often too briefly addressed.

Still another strength, in my opinion, comes when Bishop starts to become uncomfortable with some of what he is encountering in insider movements. He voices some of his questions but, instead of turning to quick and unequivocal conclusions, he acknowledges that his discomfort may in part stem from his own cultural location. He recognizes that Christian norms continue to change, and that we need to place much more trust in the mysterious (to us) work of the Holy Spirit than we sometimes do.

The book does have some weaknesses. One of the main weaknesses is Bishop's characterization of non-western, non-insider movement churches. To make his point about the legitimacy of and need for more contextual expressions of church, he sometimes refers to anything non-insider as exported or western Christianity. For example, he uses the example of the West's export of the hamburger as an (unfortunate) analogy about how non-western countries have received and accepted a homogenous "hamburger" Christianity. Despite some of the well-known ethnocentric legacies of missionaries, it does a disservice to non-western churches to claim that they are all homogeneously western or, as Bishop claims, that "the format for faith in Jesus appears pretty much the same all over the world" (28). This does not do justice to the enormous amounts of cultural and theological diversity that exist in global Christianity. In addition, it implies that the leaders and members of these churches simply accepted and continue to use a western version of the faith wholesale without adapting it. It is this kind of portrayal that Lamin Sanneh and others have skillfully critiqued, helping us see that from the earliest times new Christians have had agency, adapting and making the faith their own, even if retaining some of the practices taught by western missionaries.

But this is not to negate Bishop's overall point: Christianity *is* often experienced as foreign (and "Other") in various cultures and religions, and fresh expressions of faith that flow from and remain inside cultural communities are certainly one reaction to this. Also, there is most certainly a need for western Christians to appreciate and learn from the diverse ways these Christ-followers express their faith. In this, Bishop's work shines, and will provide an accessible introduction to these little-known and often-misunderstood moves of God's Spirit. **IJFM**