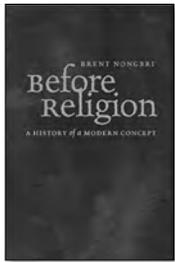


Book Reviews

Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept, by Brent Nongbri (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 275 + ix)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This is an outstanding introduction to the development of the concept of religion, and how problematic a casual usage of the term can be. Nongbri's emphasis is on "ancient religions," but his data includes a focus on the development of the modern concept of "world religions."

Seven succinct chapters drawing on and documenting insights from many other scholars build a compelling case against "religion" as a universally valid category. As Nongbri says in his introduction,

The idea of religion as a sphere of life separate from politics, economics, and science is a recent development in European history, one that has been projected outward in space and backwards in time with the result that religion appears now to be a natural and necessary part of our world. This appearance, however, turns out to be a surprisingly thin veneer that dissipates under close historical scrutiny. The following chapters are an attempt to offer such scrutiny. (7)

After a first chapter discussing modern usage of the term religion, Nongbri attacks the use of this term in translations from ancient texts. This amounts to a fascinating and insightful analysis of three terms, the Latin *religio*, the Greek *thrēskeia* and the Arabic *dīn*. Modern translations of these terms as "religion" are shown to be invalid from their original contexts. The discussion of "religion" in the Qu'ran should deeply impact current thought on Islam and insider movements.

The third chapter looks at four ancient developments that have been suggested as the origin of the concept of religion. These four are the revolt of the Maccabees, Cicero's analysis of Roman gods, Eusebius' Christian analysis of true and false beliefs, and early Islam. Nongbri's conclusion after analyzing these matters is that "introducing 'religion' into these discussions would seem to cause more problems than it solves, as ancient peoples had different ways of conceptualizing themselves and others" (64).

Chapter four considers "Christians and 'Others' in the Pre-Modern Era," which amounts to three case studies of how earlier Christians did *not* employ the modern construct of

"religion." The first is a study of Mani and Manichaeism, which is often seen today as a religion even though earlier Christians always categorized it as a Christian heresy. The second study is of Islam as another Christian heresy, particularly as seen in the writings of John of Damascus. Finally, there is the fascinating case of Buddha being treated as a Christian saint (as explained in the story of Barlaam and Ioasaph). Rather than conceptualizing a "Buddhist religion," Buddha ended up being inducted (with significant alterations) as a Christian saint!

Chapter five presents an analysis of European developments leading to the modern concept of "religion." The Reformation played a pivotal role here, along with the integral development of nation-states in Reformation and post-Reformation history. Jean Bodin and John Locke are then considered as key figures in turning the concept of "religion" into a private personal affair separate from the state. Nongbri quotes William T. Cavanaugh's analysis of the post-Reformation "wars of religion;" that calling "these conflicts 'Wars of Religion' is an anachronism, for what was at issue in these wars was the very creation of religion as a set of privately held beliefs without direct political relevance" (98, quoting from "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House": The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), p. 398)

Chapter six looks at "New Worlds, New Religions, World Religions." Brief discussions of "religion" in India, South Africa and Japan lead into the development of the concept of "world religions," a term that seems to have been used first in 1864 (125). Nongbri concludes that

textbooks, departmental websites of universities, and the media tend to present the model of World Religions as a self-evident fact: these religions are "simply there," and classifying them in this way is a natural or neutral activity. I have shown, however, that there is nothing natural or neutral about either the concept of religion or the framework of World Religions. (129)

Chapter seven returns to ancient religions, and "The Modern Origins of Ancient Religions." How Greek and Roman data came to be considered under the category of "religion" and the development of the concept of ancient Mesopotamian religion are analysed. This leads to a discussion in the conclusion of the consequences of reading our modern ideas into other cultures. Nongbri does not argue for ceasing to use the term religion, nor is he opposed to referring to "religion" as a second-order, redescriptive concept." When using the term religion he's concerned we're aware of what we are doing and that we "avoid giving the impression that religion really was 'out there' embedded in' or 'diffused in' the ancient evidence" (158).

This was a very easy book to review because the content is so well organized, so clearly stated, and so concisely summarized.

The centrality of the topic of religion for modern missiology is obvious, and this text demands a paradigm shift away from “conversion as change of religion” to what is being called an “insider movement” approach.

Although the data on World Religions is only a small part of the text, this is the best book I have found for introducing “religion” and “world religions” and should be integrated into curricula dealing with those topics. The centrality of this topic for modern missiology is obvious, and this text demands a paradigm shift away from “conversion as change of religion” to what is being called an “insider movement” approach. Nongbri is not pioneering new ideas, but provides an excellent statement of the current consensus in the field of religious studies.

Living Among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-Making among Ex-Muslim Christians, by Duane Alexander Miller (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016, pp. 272)

—Reviewed by Fred Farrokh



Introduction

Theology may be likened to great rivers such as the Nile and Mississippi, which run their majestic courses before splintering into their respective deltas. Christian theologians often focus on the splintering—the distinctives of their respective denominations. Yet, less attention is given to the streams and tributaries that feed the mighty theological rivers.

A new stream is flowing into global Christian theology, through the contribution of a new generation of Christians of Muslim background (CMBs). Duane Alexander Miller notes in general, “The study of CMBs is very much unresearched” (5). In *Living among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-Making and Ex-Muslim Christians*, Miller sets out to remedy this deficiency by considering how CMBs are developing their own practical theology, even if this may not yet resemble textbook-style systematic theology.

How Miller Sets Up His Book

It should be noted this book is based on Miller’s doctoral dissertation. As such, it necessarily includes hypotheses testing and theory formation. Nevertheless, *Living among the Breakage* is highly readable.

Miller, an Anglican, begins this fascinating study by addressing contextualization, though not from the angle that some *IJFM* readers will likely expect. Instead of focusing on the often-controversial topic of contextualized cross-cultural communication, which Miller describes as

“directed contextualization,” he amplifies the contextualized, indigenous theology-making of the CMBs themselves. He describes this as “organic contextualization,” a process which is inherently done *by and from* the local church. Miller credits the Taiwanese educator-pastor Shoki Coe with framing contextualization within an ecclesial parameter. Herein, indigenous Christians undertake the “double wrestle” with “God’s Word” and “God’s world.”

The book’s title, *Living among the Breakage*, comes from T. S. Eliot. Miller notes that we live in a time of breakage, described by Peter Berger as the “heretical imperative.” Miller explains:

Some people make choices that previously would have been unthinkable—whether that may be the Baptist lady in Oklahoma who converts to Buddhism or the Muslim sheikh in Mecca who converts to Christianity. (2)

While Christian readers may lament the decision of the Baptist lady in Oklahoma, missional Christians should not overlook the momentous times in which we live: Muslims are turning to Christ. Miller has done yeoman’s work in accessing these CMBs and soliciting their perspectives.

Miller gives particular attention in this study to the concept of “power,” employing Steven Lukes’ theory of “Three Dimensions of Power.” This angle may seem odd but by the end of the book the reader will consider it germane. Theology-making tends to be an empowering pursuit. CMBs are often persecuted and frequently powerless in the face of coercive forces around them, such as governments, Sharia legal constrictions, and even family members who consider them a “pollution” which must be eliminated.

Miller also includes a robust section on “conversion,” which *IJFM* readers will recognize as a controversial topic.¹ The author recognizes that conversion may be a process rather than something that happens at a given moment in time; his CMB interviewees clearly indicate they embrace the identity of being Christian converts out of Islam. This choice by Miller essentially delimits his research to Muslim-background theology-makers who now identify themselves as Christians and part of the global Church.

Miller’s Field Research among CMBs

Miller’s introductory chapters set the stage for his field research among CMBs in three different contexts—a “Muslim-background congregation” in an unnamed Arab country, and two diaspora Iranian congregations, one in the UK and one in the USA. Miller has lived in the Middle East for nearly a decade, and speaks Arabic. The author thus

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has a contextual familiarity which allows him not only to find the dots but also to connect them.² He also embedded himself in these communities for long enough to observe their worship and take the pulse of their “double-wrestle.” In all things, Miller is to be commended for bringing forth the perspectives of what the reader cannot but help to recognize as real people who face real challenges, even if pseudonyms are used.

How CMBs are Expressing their Theology

Though CMBs are not typically writing theology textbooks, Miller demonstrates the richness of the new CMB theology in their poems, songs and worship services. Miller also elicits their theological perspectives through personal interviews with laypersons and leaders. Miller by no means suggests that CMB thinking is monolithic. Chapter Five covers CMB theological output as manifested globally in their devotional poetry, testimonials (“conversion narratives”), and “wisdom literature” in dealing with real-life issues of persecution, reconciliation, forgiveness, baptism, and marriage. “Ayya” is a Muslim-background female lay pastor who features prominently in the Arab congregation, indicating that the willingness of CMBs to have women in leadership extends far beyond the Islamic paradigm, and may even surpass that of many Arabic evangelical contexts.

The Content of CMB Theology-Making

What exactly is the content of CMB theology? This is the heart of the book, and it could well result, if Miller so chooses, in a new missions primer or a number of missiological training articles. Suffice to say CMB self-theologizing does not simply mirror global patterns. For instance, CMB views of atonement emphasize less the penal substitutionary aspect of Christ's work, and more the manifestation of God's love poured out on the Cross.

Muhammad and Islam

IJFM readers have been exposed to the missiological discussion regarding the prophethood of Muhammad. As Harley Talman queries, “Is Muhammad also among the Prophets?”³ While, it is no surprise that the CMBs in Miller's study take a negative view of Muhammad and the religion he founded, Islam, Miller includes a blunt observation: “I do not recall a single instance of any CMB ever telling me they had learned anything about ethics or God from Muhammad” (224). Readers who are not from a Muslim background may wonder if this is simply a knee-jerk reaction by new believers who feel Islam has not only bound them personally but also consigned all their deceased loved

ones to hell. How do these CMBs back up their position? The answers come within this erudite volume.

Love and Power

Miller's application of Lukes' power theory comes into focus by the end of the book. CMB theology-formation, notes Miller, is “Christo-centric.” The material provided by Miller about CMBs is too emotive not to quote from it:

In turning away from the Umma and Muhammad and the Qur'an, they have turned away from a loveless power they perceived there to Jesus, his Church and the Bible and a deity whose power is perfected in weakness and whose love is stronger than death. And from this experience of the deity's love-power some have endeavored to build a new identity from the breakage among which they have lived. (237)

In many ways, the CMB theology-making chronicled by Miller demonstrates a depth which eclipses the textual fundamentalism of Sunnism, reaches deeper than the cathartic messianism of Shi'ism, and soars higher than the spiritual mysticism of Sufism.

CMB theology includes a strain of liberation theology—a term Miller uses in the book. Yet, it is not the Latin, political liberation theology of decades past, though Islam is undeniably political. Instead, the liberation is a spiritual one. It is a liberation that includes union with Jesus, the All-Powerful One who once rendered Himself seemingly powerless.

Insider Movements and Ecclesiology

Here Miller observes:

IM is indeed an open debate among American evangelical “scholars,” but among the CMB's I met, it is of no interest. Rather there is a clear consensus that belonging to a local church, being baptized and, with only *possible* exceptions when faced with danger, using the label *Christian* and rejecting the label *Muslim* are indeed what God and the Bible require. That is *their* point of view—theology done by the ex-Muslim Christian. The centrality of the Church in this theology is not up for debate because for them, apparently, the Church is seen as *part* of the Good News of God revealed in his Messiah. (222)

These CMBs demonstrate some creative and brave strategies in dealing with community expulsion and persecution, including the use of safe houses. Ayya even visited the Muslim families of CMB women she mentored to try to rescue and restore these ruptured relationships.

Identity

Turkish CMB Ziya Meral has chronicled the plight of his fellow CMBs in *No Place to Call Home*.⁴ The Arab CMBs

C*M*Bs feel they no longer retain Muslim identity, yet the wider Muslim community refuses to confer upon them Christian identity. This results in a slow, incomplete identity formation which Miller describes as “liminal.”

studied by Miller express a similar dilemma. They themselves feel they no longer retain Muslim identity, yet the wider Muslim community refuses to confer upon them Christian identity. This results in a grindingly slow, yet incomplete, identity formation process which Miller describes as “liminal.” One Arab lay leader even “wondered if it would take an entire generation before a new (non-liminal) identity could emerge” (144). This daunting timeframe may challenge those who prioritize rapidity in missions.

Unfinished business

Though he is a leading researcher of this global CMB movement, Miller wisely asks his readers not to overstate or generalize his conclusions. For instance, Miller’s interviews of diaspora Iranian CMBs cause him to conclude that they seek a purified Persian culture based on Christianity and shorn of the Arab Islamizing influence. While this may be true to an extent, many such congregations worldwide feature Afghans, Tajiks and other (non-Persian) Iranians worshipping side by side. Furthermore, many ex-Muslim Iranian Christians recognize the shortcomings of their own native culture, which may feature indirect and less than honest communication. An Iranian Christian brother once asked when we are going to take Jesus’ command seriously to simply let our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no.” And Miller’s choice of viewing CMB theology-making through the prism of power theory is a valid avenue, but it is not the only appropriate prism of study. While more research is needed, Miller has made an excellent contribution in this new field.

Concluding Thoughts:

Duane Miller has entered the world of ex-Muslim Christians. It is not a simple world, but a complex one of trauma and breakage, trial and triumph. Through his research, Miller must be commended for not only identifying the key issues facing CMBs, but probing the very pain and open shame that sets the backdrop against which CMB life is painted. Indeed, Miller has painted a picture of CMBs who share with Jesus both the fellowship of His sufferings and the irrepressible power of His resurrection.

For those willing to invest the time to read a book that is somewhat academic, Miller’s *Living among the Breakage* will be well worth the while. For those teaching seminary or training classes on ministry to Muslims, adding this book to the “Required Reading” list will be a wise choice. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, the entire *IJFM*, 30:1 (Jan–March 2013).

² Readers may also benefit from a recent wider global survey of CMBs which Duane Miller co-authored with Patrick Johnstone of *Operation World*: Patrick Johnstone and Duane A. Miller, “Believers in Christ from a Muslim Background: A Global Census,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, vol. 11, article 1 (2015).

³ *IJFM*, 31:4 (Oct–Dec 2014): 169–190.

⁴ Meral, Ziya, *No Place to Call Home: Experiences of Apostates from Islam, Failures of the International Community* (New Malden, Surrey, UK: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2008).