



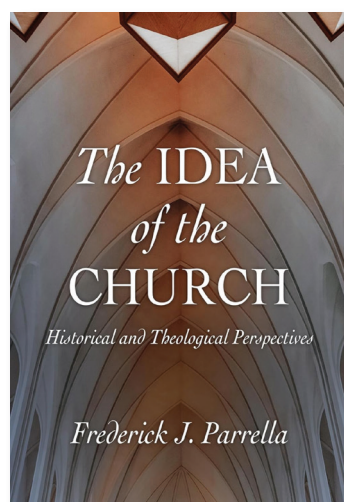
Book Reviews

April 2025

Section Editors: Craig L. Nesson, Troy M. Troftgruben

Review a book!

Currents in Theology and Mission is seeking to expand its number of regular book reviewers. If you have interest, please send name, contact information, and areas of primary interest to currents@lstc.edu.



The Idea of the Church: Historical and Theological Perspectives. By Frederick J. Parrella.

Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2023.
ISBN: 978-0-8814-6915-8.
320 pages. Paper. \$35.00.

Frederick Parrella offers a detailed theological and historical overview of the foundations and changing elements in Christian understanding of the church.

He characterizes this as a “family album,” the history of “God’s people united in the Holy Spirit” (5). After clarifying key terms, he centers his discussion on the paschal mystery of Jesus; “there is no ecclesiology without Christology” (39). The next five chapters present a historical summary from the apostles to the present—a daunting undertaking but well-structured and clearly narrated to cover major themes and developments.

From the apostolic period to the thirteenth century, Parrella highlights major shifts: from Judaic to Hellenistic; from the Body of Christ and the People of God to Christendom. He incorporates this latter shift as an ongoing tension in the church’s self-understanding—between focus on the community’s experience of the mystery of God and Jesus’ transforming power to the structural organization unified through norms and bishops. Other key developments include monasticism, canon law, a shift from Plato to Aristotle, and from starting with the infinite to beginning with the finite.

Parrella connects political and economic developments in western Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the church becoming a political authority. He argues that this period produced “tragic divisions ... between piety and theology, between faith and reason, and between laity and clergy” (105), leaving the church in need of reform and leading to the Protestant reform movements. While some see the Council of

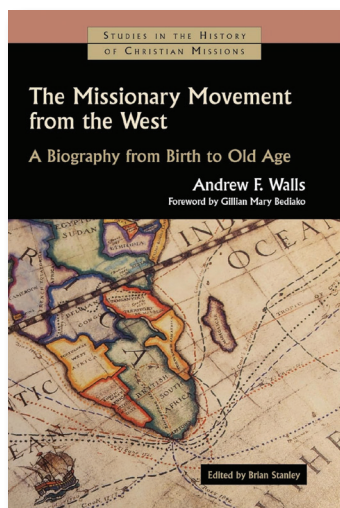
Trent as simply a reaction to Protestant movements, Parrella shows its primary hope “to restore the visible church to its spiritual roots in the mission of the Gospel” (119). Still, he notes that the church continued its pyramid model and expressed a triumphalist self-understanding, culminating in the declaration of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870.

Parrella shows that even then, other voices emphasized historical and experiential dimensions of truth, encouraged ecumenical discussions, and greater involvement in society. He connects these views, first rejected as Modernist error, to the more open, engaged views of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Parrella carefully notes that the Council documents include both the traditional hierarchical view and the understanding of the church as a community centered in Christ, with renewed interest in Scripture and liturgy. Parrella adds depth to this analysis of the modern period by incorporating ecclesial understandings of several twentieth century theologians, both Protestant (Tillich and Barth) and Roman Catholic (de Lubac, Maritain, Gilson, Congar, Schillebeeckx, and Rahner).

For the present, Parrella focuses on the two clashing ecclesiologies seen earlier—the “legislative-juridical” understanding with a pyramid of authority and the biblical-historical view of the church as “community, sacrament, and servant” (251). While this clash leaves the American church polarized, Parrella concludes with his conviction that the church will survive as a living, changing tradition, responding both positively and negatively to the history and culture in which it lives.

This book is accessible—geared to advanced undergraduates and first level graduate students—yet its content should be of interest outside academia in the broader church world. Although more heavily focused on Roman Catholic views, this history of the church’s self-understanding covers issues that should also engage Protestant church leaders.

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The Missionary Movement from the West: A Biography from Birth to Old Age.

By Andrew F. Walls.
Edited by Brian Stanley.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-4897-0.
271 pages, Paper. \$25.98.

This book, published as the concluding twenty-eighth volume of Eerdmans' "Studies in the History of

Christian Missions," was transcribed and edited from a four-year series of lectures given in 2005-8 at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven. The author, a leading scholar of the worldwide Christian missionary movement, admits the study is not a comprehensive "history of Christian mission" but focuses on the missionary movement deriving from European Christendom and its offshoots from the time of the Reformation to the present.

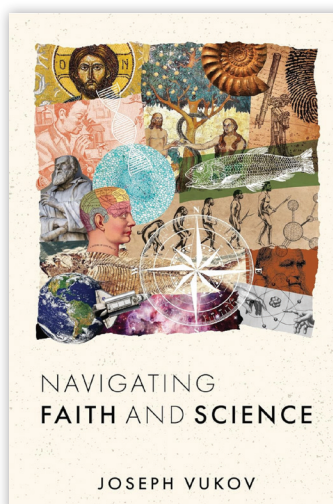
While occasionally referencing Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mission activity, this is an essentially Protestant story. Walls focuses on the Western Church's engagement with "foreign mission" beyond Europe since 1500, when "Christianity wore a more European face than it had ever done before" (4). The author wants readers to appreciate the limited though important role of the Western missionary movement which in many cases was preceded by long-standing indigenous Christian communities in the countries being "missionized."

In narrating the "missionary movement from the West," Walls divides the history into four parts: "Birth and Early Years," "Toward Middle Age," "Midlife Crises," and "Old Age" in which period he claims we have been living since WW II. Contrary to my expectations, this results in a serious decentering of what I was raised to think of as the Western Church's missionary impulse, however misdirected by racist, imperialistic, and colonialist interests. The global reach of Christianity today encompasses Asia, Africa and Latin America, which have the majority of Christians, while European and North American numbers continue to recede precipitously. Walls' important point is that the church has returned to a global geographical diversity which it evidenced in its earliest years beyond the stage dominated by the Western churches.

The final chapter, "The Theological Challenge of World Christianity," is a mind-bending invitation to imagine in our troubled world what new insights into the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ non-Western Christians may have to offer for both the global church and in the West. Especially provocative are his suggestions regarding what African and Asian fellow believers, untrammelled by reductionistic Enlightenment thinking, could

offer Western Christians. These include biblical issues such as principalities and powers, the nature of evil, and the presence of ancestors. Of particular importance are the nature of the Old Testament and its views of Yahweh as both a tribal and universal God.

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Navigating Faith and Science. By Joseph Vukov.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7961-5.
187 pages. Paper. \$19.99.

Church leaders for both youth and adults will benefit with this easy-to-read volume of discussions surrounding potential conflicts between faith and science. The premises of the book include Augustine's

view that all truth is God's truth and unites rather than divides (3). Humility on behalf of both science and religious experts is necessary because both science and religion continue to learn new insights and revelatory methods in their fields. 1 Corinthians 13:12 on "seeing in the mirror dimly" is the foundational biblical text for this book. Humility for both sides is not to trespass into areas where they lack expertise. Avoiding arrogance by claiming the final word is another part of this journey.

This is a guidebook to evaluate any interactions and potential conflicts between faith and science. The "Conflict Model," like the Scopes Monkey Trial, involves a zero-sum. This results in a choice between God or evolution, undermining efforts of both faith and science to uncover truths about humans and the world (10). All knowledge is partial and incomplete. To hold otherwise shows arrogance by either side. The Conflict Model often leads to divisiveness, especially in face of contradicting evidence (49).

The Independence Model holds that both religion and science run on parallel tracks. Questions about God are separate from any scientific inquiry. Science might seek the answers to "how" the world functions, whereas religion seeks meaning. Unlike the Conflict Model, science and faith seek answers to different questions (58-59). Religion answers the question of what humans ought to do, while science is interested in capability. One example is a car travelling 50 mph in a 35-speed limit zone. The laws of physics show the capability of speed, but the laws of "ought" reflect responsibility to a larger community. The problem

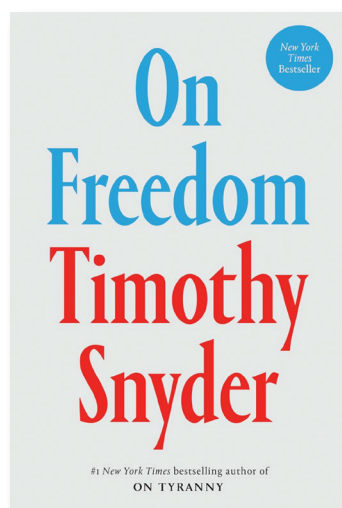


with this model is that the two tracks will eventually converge, begging the question of their interaction.

The author favors the Dialogue Model, calling it the “Kumbaya” approach. People view the same picture but from different perspectives, such as looking at the painting up close or from a distance. As long as science stays with natural observation, while religion is open to supernatural explanations, both sides can admit their limits and yet agree on the journey toward truth. This is like traveling from Chicago to Milwaukee taking differing routes. One takes the freeways, the other the scenic route to arrive at the same destination.

Each of these models is useful in what the author calls the toolkit. Vukov shows his preference by favoring what he calls the “first causes” of the universe view held by those in the Dialogue Model, as well as the “fine tuning” argument that holds it is statistically probable that the earth was designed specifically for human and animal life.

David Coffin
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On Freedom.

By Timothy Snyder.

New York: Crown, 2024. ISBN: 978-0-5937-2872-7. xx and 345 pages. Cloth. \$32.00.

Timothy Snyder, author of a companion book titled *On Tyranny*, is one of the foremost interpreters and defenders of democracy in our time. With the increase of fascist movements across the globe and the elections of far-right governments in

democratic countries, this book is a clarion call that democracy is not a guaranteed inheritance but a project that needs to be reclaimed by you and me.

Snyder operates with a vital distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *to*. *Freedom from* rests passively in assumptions about the freedoms relegated to us by those in authority. *Freedom from* takes comfort that I am supposedly doing better than the others. *Freedom from* disregards therefore the inequities faced by those in society not sharing my identifiers. *Freedom to*, by contrast, holds those in authority accountable for democracy and their policies. *Freedom to* takes responsibility for improving the conditions under which others live. *Freedom to* engages in efforts to improve the conditions that provide a baseline of wellness for others.

Weaving elements from his own biography throughout the narrative, Snyder organizes his argument for practicing democracy according to five pillars: sovereignty, unpredictability, mobility, factuality, and solidarity. Sovereignty involves our investment in the democratic process and advocating freedom not only for me but for others, especially for those on the margins. This requires empathy and an active sense of neighborliness.

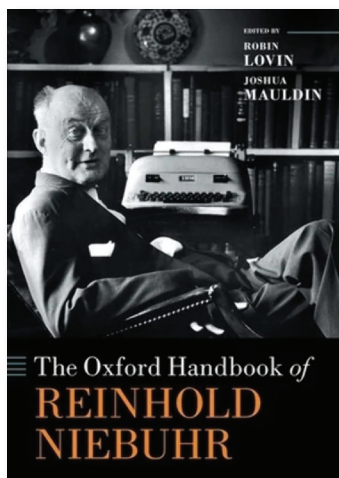
Unpredictability allows for the emergence of unimaginable new developments, rather than hedging security based on the status quo. Mobility refers not just to physical movement but to social and economic mobility. Younger generations have virtually lost the ability to advance themselves by their own education and work. Factuality means having access to reliable information on which to make decisions. The control and dissemination of information by an economic elite threatens our exercise of choice regarding preferred futures. The most urgent instance involves extinction through climate change. Solidarity means choosing values that benefit the wellbeing of others with a horizon for future generations and the habitability of the earth.

Born in the wake of the World War II victories, my generation was led to believe that freedom and democracy had been achieved for all time. This assumption prevailed even more after the fall of the Soviet Union. Throughout my lifetime, we have been very interested in access to freedoms for ourselves. But as a generation we did not invest sufficiently in the practices that would promote democracy and secure freedom for others.

These practices, to which Snyder refers, would have included early childhood programs, quality public education, access to universal health care, a livable minimum wage, a secured minimum income, affordable housing, support for those with disabilities, care for the elderly, and safeguarding the health of the ecosystem. After World War II, many other countries built democratic systems that were committed to providing these conditions under which all people could live in freedom. While those countries are not perfect, they do approximate a free society in ways my country does not. Just look at us now!

The book closes with this quote from Simone Weil: “We live in a world where people can expect miracles only from themselves” (276). What needs to come next?

Craig L. Nessian
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The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr.

Edited by Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-1988-1356-9. xxvii and 637 pages. Cloth. \$190.00.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was America's theologian, who engaged the ambiguities of our politics and history at the end of

Christendom in the twentieth century. In this regard he might be paired with Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) as America's first theologian as Christendom became established on this continent in the eighteenth century.

Following the purpose of an Oxford Handbook, this volume gives breadth to Niebuhr's contributions to theological discourse in his lifetime and beyond. The book is divided into six parts. "Part I: Niebuhr and His Times" begins with a chapter on his family and church background, which is followed by four chapters divided according to each decade when he was actively at work from the 1930s to the 1960s. "Part II: Allies and Adversaries" devotes chapters to his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, followed by discussion of the interface with seven other contemporaries: Karl Barth, George Kennan, John Dewey, Paul Tillich, John Courtney Murray, Abraham Heschel, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The magnitude of these names pays tribute to Niebuhr's influence.

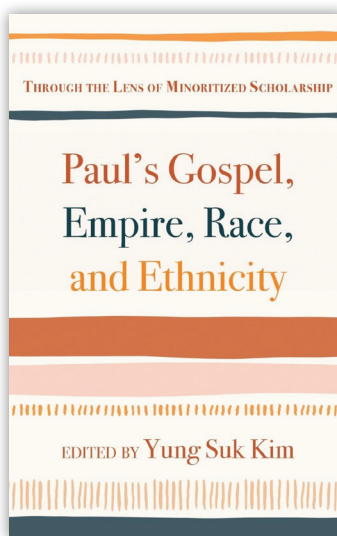
"Part III: Theological Starting Points" focuses on theological loci central to his thought: God, Sin, Love, Christology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology. "Part IV: Ethics" concentrates on themes at the center of gravity of Niebuhr's thought, his concern for America's soul: Moral Realism, Human Nature and Moral Norms, Justice, Responsibility, Tragedy and Irony, Feminism, and Democracy. "Part V: Politics and Policy" addresses eight topics that then and now define the political challenges we face: Violence, Pacifism, and the Use of Force; Economic Justice; Nature and Environment; Racial Justice; Family, Sexuality, and Society; American Foreign Policy; International Relations Theory; and Nations and Nationalism. Finally, "Part VI: Niebuhr's Legacy" provides four retrospectives on Niebuhr's significance by Stanley Hauerwas, Jeffrey Stout, John Bew, and Robin Lovin.

Given Niebuhr's Christian realism and pragmatic arguments to address challenges to democracy over the decades of his life, one wonders how this legacy can provide a resource to engage the influence of white Christian nationalism and incipient fascism as political forces in the U.S. Four authors refer to the first Trump presidency, although none of them could have

anticipated the scorning of the electoral process and rising tide of authoritarianism in subsequent years. The success of fomenting "culture wars" and contempt for "the other" (David True, 306) have exceeded all precedents in American history. The need for counter-voices to formulate "public theology" (Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, 420) becomes increasingly urgent. "Anti-immigrant language" (Traci C. West, 513) now translates into cruel public policies reminiscent of developments in Germany in the 1930s. America now is manufacturing the "crisis of world order" (John Bew, 612) in ways previously known from bad actors during the Cold War.

Niebuhr's legacy, as analyzed by a book of this stature, is tested by its ability to engage the unprecedented challenges we now face. Niebuhr's confidence in "Christian humanism" and the durability of the "democratic tradition" (Eric Gregory, 443) are pressed to the limit. The editors wisely write: "The insights that carried Niebuhr through the middle decades of the twentieth century will often need to be corrected, if they are to bring our times into focus; and Niebuhr himself was skeptical of universal, rational principles that claimed a relevance that did not need that kind of correction" (xvi). Students of Reinhold Niebuhr equipped with resources such as this one are summoned to the task.

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Paul's Gospel, Empire, Race, and Ethnicity: Through the Lens of Minoritized Scholarship. Edited by Yung Suk Kim.

Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2023. ISBN 978-1-6667-3187-3. viii and 130 pages. Paper. \$27.00.

In the editor's words: "biblical interpretation is not an arcane genre in the ivory tower but engages current issues in the real world of America" (2). With this conviction at heart, Yung Suk Kim has gathered scholarly voices from minoritized communities to show how Paul's gospel and theology fundamentally intersect with contemporary experiences of culture, race/ethnicity, and empire.

The book entails articles from six different scholars. Yung Suk Kim's leadoff article ("The Politics of Interpretation") challenges Western understandings of Paul's gospel that



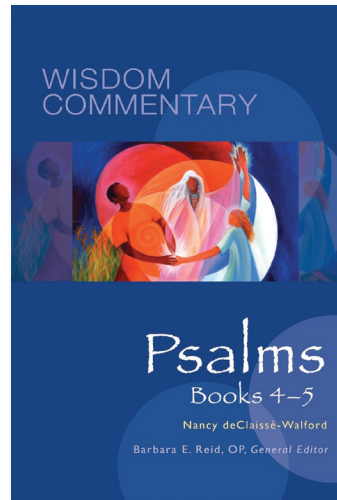
overemphasize unity at the expense of difference. He contends that deeper probing yields a theology that is not imperialist but rather inclusive, affirming of difference, uplifting of minoritized voices, and grounded in Christ crucified. In “Paul the Apostle of the Nations and Pedro Albizu Campos,” Efraín Agosto compares Paul with a Puerto Rican leader—both “travelers for a cause” across physical and ideological borders (37). For Agosto, this approach marks a biblical scholarship that is not “distancing” and “exclusivist scientific” but intentional about engaging contemporary contexts and cultures.

Demetrius K. Williams (“Let This Mind Be in You”) challenges the notion of some forms of white Evangelicalism that the African American quest for social justice stands in tension with the gospel. Using Philippians 2:5–11 as foundational for a new social identity, Williams effectively shows how the Christ Hymn opposes any form of Christianity that endorses unjust oppression. Sze-Kar Wan (“Mainstreaming the Minoritized”) examines how Galatians 3:28 is often used to promote a “tyranny of oneness” that values an oppressive conformity that devalues diversity (68). Critically assessing readers such as Martin Luther, Ernest Burton, and J. Louis Martyn, Wan contends Paul’s words neither abolish nor flatten existing differences but instead give an alternative vision that anticipates the new creation in Christ.

Jeehei Park (“The Pursuit of Impossible Hospitality”) draws upon Derrida to read *philoxenia* in Romans 12:13b as an unconditional acceptance of strangers that disrupts systemic patterns: “the host has no power to select guests, and the guest needs no particular identification or association to be welcomed” (106). In the final article (“From Alienation to Inclusion”), Ekaputra Tupamahu argues that Paul’s identity as a diaspora Jew sheds light on his theology, since “theology is rooted in social relations, social struggles, and social dynamics” (108). Using James Clifford’s work on diaspora, Tupamahu contends Paul’s gospel—as seen in Romans 3:21–26—is more focused on inclusion (vs alienation) than traditional notions of honor and shame.

In substantive ways, this pithy collection displays exegetical work that challenges conventional ideas and showcases the value of reading Paul in dialogue with historically minoritized voices. While the approaches vary, the collective result effectively shows the interplay between theology and social struggle, shedding clearer light on themes such as inclusion, difference, radical hospitality, and diaspora identity in Paul’s writings. *Paul’s Gospel, Empire, Race, and Ethnicity* is a short yet substantive array of articles from insightful interpreters that will inform and enlighten all serious interpreters of Paul.

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Psalms: Books 4–5.
Wisdom Commentary,
Volume 22. By Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford.

Collegeville, Minnesota: 2020.
ISBN: 978-0-8146-8121-3.
388 pages. Cloth. \$39.95.

This is the twenty-second volume of a massive undertaking titled “the “Wisdom Commentary” that aims “to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible” (xxi) as explained by the General Editor of the series, Barbara E. Reid, OP. The author of this commentary, Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, has written many articles and books on the Psalms and serves as Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages at the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta. This volume, which covers Psalms 90-150, includes the voices of twelve women and men living in South Africa, whom she has asked to contribute reflections on specific Psalms based on their own lived experience. The “Contributors” section details the diverse backgrounds of the commentators recruited by the author while working in South Africa that ground her feminist perspective in a more diverse context than her own middle-class, white American setting.

These brief commentaries, sprinkled throughout the book, serve admirably their intended purpose, to illuminate the text itself and illustrate a range of women’s and men’s experiences. The author demonstrates a deep familiarity with the Psalms, their place in Jewish and Christian religious practice, and contemporary scholarship. Books 4 and 5 of the Psalms each receive commentary in their canonical order, in the larger context of the surrounding Psalms, and as they likely were used for worship according to their genre. Differing interpretations of problematic words and meanings are offered with attention to how texts have been and continue to be heard by women. The

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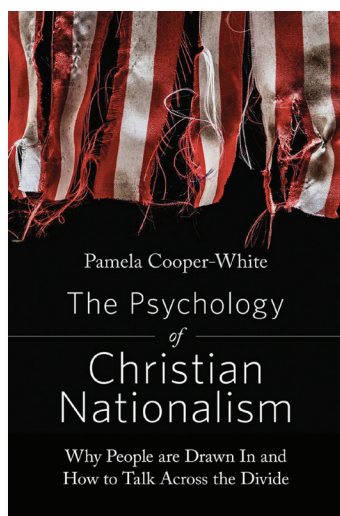
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volume addresses the relationship of the Psalms to other parts of Hebrew Scripture and the occasional use of the Psalms in New Testament writings.

The author does not avoid hard issues. For example, Psalms 137 and 139, which appear also in Christian lectionaries and liturgies, contain in their closing strophes imprecatory language, praying that God wreak vengeance and destruction upon Israel's Babylonian captors. While these verses are often deleted from liturgical use, the author takes care to confront such violent language by reminding the reader that "God does not ask us to suppress these emotions but rather to speak about them in plain and heartfelt terms." "In speaking out to God" she explains, "we give the pain, the helplessness, and the burning anger to God, trusting that God's justice will be done." She adds this feminist insight: "Not to remember and not to speak is to suppress and acquiesce" (249). This is a critical, new commentary from which we have much to learn!

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***The Psychology of
Christian Nationalism:
Why People Are
Drawn In and How to
Talk Across the Divide.***

By Pamela Cooper-
White.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022.
ISBN: 978-1-5064-8211-8.
190 pages. Paper. \$21.00.

Christian Nationalism, more precisely, White Christian Nationalism, is a matrix of beliefs that deeply

affect the religious worldview of many people in the United States. While not constituting a denomination, these beliefs sometimes have become more influential than the confessional commitments of a given church body. Since the early 1980s organized efforts have been made to forge an evangelical voting block to support the Republican Party. Christian Nationalism represents the current state of that effort. Pamela Cooper-White engages Christian Nationalism from a pastoral and counseling perspective, which makes this book unique among the many new titles engaging this movement.

After an opening chapter that describes the origins and representative beliefs among Christian Nationalists, the second chapter focuses on why people are drawn in by extremism. Conscious motivations include: "evangelization and the need for

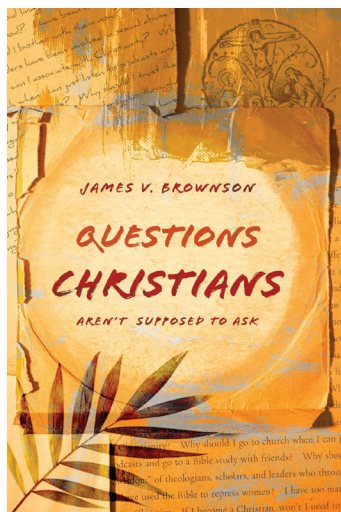
belonging and a sense of purpose; fear of loss of white social status, resentment, and a desire for power; fear of loss of patriarchal authority; and the irrational allure of conspiracy theories" (41). Unconscious motivations include: the magnetism of groupthink; identification with and idealization of narcissistic leaders; and trauma and splitting. Cooper-White writes: "While many of the dynamics, both conscious and unconscious, that lead people to become Christian Nationalists of varying degrees can be identified, there are elements that defy all rational analysis" (99).

Chapter Three is titled "How to Talk Across the Divide: Creating Human Ties Across (Extreme) Difference." Cooper-White never underestimates the challenge of this effort, insofar as Christian Nationalism can constitute "an alternative reality where nationalistic rhetoric, lies, and disinformation look like a last best hope" (103). In trying to talk with "true believers," the author counsels that direct arguments are unlikely to work.

With others who are more open, showing respect and taking time to listen are advisable, grounded in empathy and genuine curiosity. Once a relationship has been established, it may be possible to go deeper by looking for common ground, maintaining kindness, centering one's own sense of self, checking one's own tendency to make assumptions, speaking with "I" statements, avoiding argumentation, and being ready to admit one's own failings. These are practices useful for many kinds of interreligious engagement.

Cooper-White acknowledges that there are many contextual factors that may inhibit or promote constructive conversation. While such encounters can be very challenging, they can also be a form of "holy work" (136): "...if we can hold the badness of the belief together with a belief in the potential for basic human goodness in our conversation partner, then we not only have a chance to exercise the skill of listening. We may also be heard" (137). Given the outcomes of the 2024 elections, the challenges facing those who seek the way of mediation may be all the greater.

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Questions Christians Aren't Supposed to Ask.

By James V. Brownson.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.

ISBN: 978-0-8028-7841-0. vii and 131 pages. Paper. \$17.99.

In this book, James V. Brownson addresses questions that young people often ask about church, specifically questions they feel, or have been told, they are not supposed to ask. It is incredibly important to have

theologians who are willing to take the time to listen to these questions and answer them grounded in the biblical tradition and for our spiritual lives.

The biggest challenge, however, is that the author addresses these questions to the loved ones of those who are asking the questions in the first place. Because it harkens back to times when people in church pray that their loved ones find the faith, this framework seems dismissive of those who want to know more about what biblical teachings have to say on the topics that matter in their lives and the lives of the people they care about. From my experience, many people, especially younger people who have either not grown up in or have left the church, want to talk about these questions. And, they want real and honest answers, even when that means we need to do some research first

and get back to them.

It is helpful that Brownson lays out the intention for the book in the introduction, because the reader can then read, understanding that there is not going to be an expansive answer to any of the questions. Instead, the focus is on one specific biblical passage for each question. While I understand the author's intention and how much more complex this book would become if this was expanded to include multiple passages, that was one of the things that I expected this book would do. It tries to answer so many different questions, seventeen to be exact, that it feels like the reader is jumping from question to question and only gets a brief glimpse into a possible answer.

Although this book only skims the surface on the questions, it can be a helpful starting place for clergy when people in their lives and communities ask such questions. The questions are relevant, and some of them are now being asked with greater frequency than they were four years ago. This book can empower clergy to continue exploring how the biblical tradition addresses these questions and provides useful insight that is not always available in other resources. It certainly does not give all the answers, but it is one tool to be used as we walk alongside people to address the real questions they are asking about what it means to be a faithful person in this day and age.

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2025 Ad Pricing and Specifications

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is now accepting advertisements in our quarterly journal. Please see full details in the ad rate sheet at the end of the Introduction (page 3 of this issue).

Publication Dates and Deadlines

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is published four times per year: January, April, July, and October. Ad deadlines for each issue are one month prior to publication (December 1, March 1, June 1, September 1). Late submissions may be published in the next issue. Issue-specific themes are available from the co-editors: [Craig Nesson](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).