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BOOK REVIEW

Elaine A. Heath. *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 207 pp. Pbk. US$19.99. ISBN 978-0-8010-3325-4.

Heath, who is McCreless Assistant Professor of Evangelism and Director of the Center for the Advanced Study and Practice of Evangelism at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University (in Dallas, Texas), typifies the post-modern allergy to "programmatic evangelism"—familiar to many evangelicals—that (at best) promises numerical and spiritual success in response to a specified methodology or (at worst) trades on specious promises of blessing and overt threats of hell. In conscious contrast to such approaches, Heath roots her own proposals in a proper appreciation of orthodox Christian spirituality (which she prefers to call "mysticism") that has as its twin goals inward transformation and outward action in the form of compassionate mission or evangelism.

Her study is divided into three sections: "Purgation," "Illumination," and "Union." The first of these, consisting of a single chapter, proposes that "A dark night of the soul is descending on the church in the United States" (25). By this Heath means that the American (mainline? Protestant? Evangelical?) church has fallen into numerical and financial decline, spiritual torpor, and moral irrelevance in relation to its cultural context. More specifically, she proposes that such decline is in fact divinely initiated, intended to foster impatience with formulaic religion and inspire a deeper yearning for a more direct and authentic encounter with God.

Each chapter of the second section, "Illumination," draws on the insights of a pair of mystics or theologians. So, for instance,

"Love is God's Meaning" derives from Julian of Norwich a "therapeutic view of redemption" (that original sin derives from prior woundedness, so that redemption entails healing rather than condemnation) and from Hans Urs von Balthasar a non-punitive model of the atonement that hopes for the salvation of all humanity. On this basis Heath offers a narrative reading of Genesis 3 that likens the Fall of Adam and Eve to an experience of sexual abuse (whereby misplaced trust leads to profound wounding, and wounding in turn to dysfunctional coping strategies). One limitation of this illustration, however, is that it explores the nature of the human predicament without further clarifying the implications of a non-punitive or therapeutic vision of redemption.

Chapter 3, "Broken Bread and Poured Out Wine," appeals to Phoebe Palmer, the nineteenth-century Methodist reformer, and a Russian Orthodox priest by the name of Father Arseny, who was imprisoned for twenty years under Stalin. Both of these model absolute consecration to God amidst deep suffering, which Heath sees as the basis for a kind of evangelism that is rooted in the example of personal holiness.

Next are two twentieth-century mystics, the Quaker Thomas R. Kelly and Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest known both for his writing and for his membership in the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto. Both suffered from persistent insecurity, anxiety, and depression, and both found solace via prayer and contemplation in profound experiences of God's love. Just so, Heath contends, North American Christians need to discover their true identity by "soaking in the infinite love of God" (82).

Chapter 5, "Healing the Threefold Wound," relates the painful history of a nineteenth-century African-American evangelist, Julia Foote, as an antidote to what Heath sees as the persistent "patriarchy, racism, and classism"—the "threefold wound"—of North American Protestantism (90). From a much earlier era, Mechthild of Magdeburg (who shares with Foote many visionary experiences) also claimed a powerful a ministry that others in her day believed should be the sole preserve of men. Rather than directly addressing the church's mission, this discussion provides a call to corporate ecclesiastical repentance.

In the final chapter from this section, "Redeeming the Earth," "St. Bonaventure and John Woolman offer a vision of redemption in which environmental ethics and salvation go hand in hand" (102). Added to their examples is that of David Saw Wah, a Burmese refugee who—albeit in non-religious terms—demonstrates a kind of "eco-evangelism" that liberates creation from exploitation.

Heath's vision is wide-ranging and, for that reason, necessarily imprecise. She offers illustrations in place of instructions, an inspiring vision of what the love of God makes possible rather than concrete details or specific directions. This will no doubt prove confusing to some readers, even as others will chafe at the generalized appropriation of insights from practitioners far removed from the needs and circumstances of present-day Western Protestantism.

Part Three, "Union," offers some initial responses to such concerns. Heath is inspired particularly by a small community of the Sisters of Charity in Dallas, whose primary ministry is to pray for the residents of their local community and to serve them with the compassion of Christ. She advocates selflessness and self-emptying (*kenosis*), suggesting the appropriateness of bivocational ministry, the radical down-sizing of congregational ministry, and an emphasis on service and community formation more than the Sunday worship service (137). Much of this is conveyed via the imaginative narrative of "Sam," a thrice-divorced newcomer who finds an unexpected welcome at "First Church."

While there is little to disagree with in her treatment, I found myself wishing that Heath had followed her convictions considerably further. As indicated, her practical suggestions revolve (ecclesiastically) around flexibility in congregational leadership structures and (missiologically) around the need for compassion in our relationships with one another. What seemed missing, however, was a sufficient engagement with the kind of vibrant, passionate, and all-consuming mysticism that is necessary to sustain this counter-cultural vision of church and ministry. In particular, links to the ten mystics and practical theologians described in the previous section seemed rather tenuous.

To be fair, Heath briefly explores aspects of *lectio divina* and contemplative prayer, calling for a "new Pentecostalism [that] would mean radical changes in how the church understands gender, race, and social location" (160). Such a movement, she proposes, "would mean an egalitarian approach to leadership in the church, a preference for new church starts in disadvantaged urban and rural settings, and significant emphasis on ministries that prevent and heal the violence of the threefold wound" (161). Likewise she offers concrete proposals for the practice of eco-evangelism, rooted in a theology of creational stewardship.

But the danger in such discussion is that it risks—unintentionally to be sure—becoming simply another strategy or method, rather than a radical and holistic orientation to the life of Jesus, which is the true focus and source of Christian mysticism. The "Union" to which the title of this final section refers is, after all, first and foremost mystical union with Christ. To say this is does not diminish the value either of this study or of Heath's larger vision, but simply acknowledges that North Americans in particular seem culturally prone to a kind of reductionistic pragmatism, especially so when it comes to matters of church renewal. Accordingly, readers might wish to study *The Mystic Way of Evangelism* hand-in-hand with original works by some of the writers that Heath cites, other classic resources for spiritual discipline and renewal, or (given the intended audience of this book) the works of contemporary Protestant authors such as Henry Blackaby, Richard Foster, or Dallas Willard.

Michael P. Knowles
McMaster Divinity College