

Review of Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger, eds., *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

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At 560 oversized pages, this volume is a substantial contribution in more ways than one to the proliferating discourse on Christianity and empire — a discourse for which the pioneering postcolonial theology of one of the editors, Kwok Pui-lan, has been an important catalyst. The volume is made up of discrete essays on twenty-nine “theological figures” dispersed through Christian history, ranging chronologically from Paul of Tarsus to the contemporary Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye. “Far too often theological concepts are presented with only bare hints about the concrete circumstances of the theologians who produced them”, the editors note (p. xiv). In this volume in contrast, and with differing degrees of success, contributor after contributor takes on the daunting task of situating a specific theologian in what is at once the most concrete and most elusive of contexts, because so ubiquitous as often to be intangible, namely, that of empire. The “Theological Figures” section of the volume, which makes up its bulk, is prefaced by an “Introductory Perspectives” section composed of excellent essays by each of the three editors. Don Compier’s essay includes a suggested eight-step procedure that students can employ to analyse Christian authors not treated in the volume in their relations to empire — which further enhances the effectiveness of the volume for classroom use.

The twenty-nine contributors are described by the editors as “vary[ing] in their degree of personal religious commitment and com[ing] from a variety of religious backgrounds and cultural traditions—Asian, African, Baltic, Western European, African American, Asian American, Hispanic, Latino/Latina, and Euro-American” (p. xiii). Not surprisingly, therefore, the “theological figures” treated are not the all-male, all-pale parade characteristic of more traditional theological and church-historical tomes. Anselm and Aquinas are obliged to rub shoulders with Mechthild of Magdeburg and Julian of Norwich, Luther and Calvin with Bartolomé de Las Casas and Sor Inés de la Cruz (this is where a single-authored volume could have outperformed this multi-authored volume: the theologies of these diverse figures could have been brought into direct dialogue with each other). Fredrick Douglass marches in behind Schleiermacher, Hegel and Kierkegaard to bring the nineteenth century to a close. Barth is among the twentieth-century figures to be considered, but one will search in vain for the other two persons of the systematic-theological trinity, Tillich and Rahner. Moltmann too is conspicuous by his absence, as is Bultmann, who would have made a fascinating study for his contradictory relations to Judaism and the Third Reich. But Reinhold Niebuhr is in there, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil; and the twentieth-century (and hence the volume) closes out with M. M. Thomas, Juan Luis Segundo, John S. Mbiti and Oduyoye — seeking, as Compier’s introductory essay explains, “to point to an imminent future history of Christianity in which Western voices will no longer predominate” (p. 35).

This is not to say, however, that every theological figure included here seems an eminently logical choice. The six-hundred year gap between Augustine and Anselm, for instance, is filled only by Wynfrith-Boniface and Theodore the Studite. Of the six twentieth-century European/Euro-American theologians treated, two are Hendrik Kraemer (an entirely new name to me, I must confess) and William Temple, and of the latter we are almost immediately told: “Although Temple was a national leader in Great Britain during a crucial period in the history of the British Empire, his work shows little concern with the global reality of the British Empire” (p. 324). Nor do all of the contributors

succeed in rising to the challenge posed by the volume's topic. In particular, reading Roger Haight's essay on Juan Luis Segundo out of context one would never guess that it is part of a volume on *empire* and Christian tradition. At the other end of the spectrum (where, fortunately, most of the contributors cluster) is Marion Grau's essay on Wynfrith-Boniface, which manages to make postcolonial hay out of singularly unpromising material (see especially pp. 106-109).

Biblical scholars will naturally tend to gravitate toward Tatha Wiley's essay, "Paul and Early Christianity". The essay is effectively written and would work well for classroom assignments. Through a series of bold strokes, Wiley delineates an anti-imperial Paul whose "proclamation of Christ destabilized and decentered the [Roman] empire's claim to absolute power" (p. 15), meticulously disentangling this Paul from both the Deutero-Pauline Paul and the *adversus Judaeos* Paul, both of which have "served imperialist interests" (p. 55). In other words, Wiley follows the Elliott-Horsley line on Paul and empire, and is consequently vulnerable to the successive challenges that line of interpretation has incurred during the past decade.

But these are small quibbles. "Christianity can hardly be understood apart from empire" — so begins Joerg Rieger's introductory essay (p. 1). No other single volume to date has made a more significant contribution to tilting our understanding in that direction. The editors are to be commended for taking on such an ambitious (and, no doubt, exhausting) project.