

Lawrence D. Folkemer, *No Mere Dialogue: Engaging World Religions*, 2009, ISBN 978-1-57747-147-9, 128 pp., pb

Are sincere Christians precluded from bearing witness to Christ when engaging in interreligious dialogue with non-Christians?

The professor emeritus of systematic theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg offers a personal answer consistent with his own encounters in Japan, Madras, and Washington, D.C.; informed by his study of Patristic theologians; and aware of a tendency on the part of God the Holy Spirit to lead us where we might never have intended to go. In Prof. Folkemer's words:

It is the Spirit which leads people into such dialogue and it is the Spirit which, if given the fullest opening, will fructify that involvement.

This slender book does not push into new territory the 60-year-old Protestant and Roman Catholic discussion on the place of other religions in God's Providence. With Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Folkemer puts his hope in the Teacher of mankind, the Expression of the divine initiative, and our responsive human participation in Christ, the Model. The seriousness of human sin and the prophetic call for exclusive loyalty to our covenant relation with God are omitted.

At the same time, Folkemer appreciates the challenge other living religions present to our understanding of God's self-disclosing and liberating activity in relation to humanity. He cites a North Indian Hindu leader addressing a World Council of Churches consultation in Ajaltoun, Lebanon in 1970:

What would you say yourselves if all our understanding of Christianity were based on the superstitious customs of Italian villagers or on the recent happenings in Ulster?... Now you want to have dialogue with us. You tell us very nicely you have to learn from us. You begin to speak a great deal about our Scriptures, our traditions, the religious experience of our mystics.... You should not be surprised therefore when not a few among us suspect your "stretched out hand" and your sweet invitation to dialogue... I wonder sometimes whether it is not a small minority only of believers – in any religion whatsoever – who do not make use of God and of religion simply to assert their own identity...

Against this suspicion that mission at its core is self-aggrandizement or insecure self-replication, Folkemer insists that dialogue and proclamation for Christians are inseparable. Serious biblical hermeneutics, he suggests, equips a Christian for serious interreligious dialogue, because we have taught ourselves to make the uncomfortable effort to ask first, "What does this voice out of the Bible want to say?" and second, "In what way does that historic yet living Word of God speak redemptively to my situation and age?" By this account, it is not good fences but good exegesis that makes good neighbors.

-- Richard J. Jones



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