



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Review

P. V. Sorrentino, ed., *A Transforming Vision: Multiethnic Fellowship in College and in the Church* (South Hadley, Massachusetts: Doorlight Publications, 2011).

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We are fast coming to an era in which white Americans will be a minority of the population. With the church still locked into the ingrained habits of racial segregation and with a growing gap between the rich and the poor, the coming years and decades will be a time of soul-searching for the church in America. Christians, and especially white Christians, face a choice: either continue in a state of compromise that conflates Christianity with the discourse of a racialized social order, or embrace a Spirit-animated vision of the Kingdom that imagines new solidarities that blur identities and bridge borders. Fortunately for the Christian church in America (and for the disciplines of theology and religious studies more broadly), such times of transition and upheaval are ripe with opportunities to make these choices: to invite not only a conceptual re-narration of Christian traditions and a re-

evaluation of widely accepted ways of worship and practice, but to move beyond pie-in-the-sky idealism to risky experiments in truth.

This is why I am grateful for this new book by Paul Sorrentino, Director of Religious Life at Amherst College in Massachusetts, who also happens to be a Regional Coordinator with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. It is a book that tells the story of a group of Christians on a small college campus who stumbled into a new way of imagining the Body of Christ. In their struggle to embody new forms of intimacy across lines of race and class, the InterVarsity chapter at Amherst College refused to accept the inevitability of racially homogenous fellowship common to most Christian bodies, while also seeking to transcend the paternalistic multiculturalism of its predominantly white liberal surroundings. While there are many books currently treating the issue of race and various aspects of Christian theology and ecclesial practice, few offer the reader a glance into the inner dynamics of a truly multi-ethnic community. *A Transforming Vision* accomplishes just that. It does so not by offering the idealized portrait of an authoritative participant/observer, but by riskily cobbling together a mosaic portrait from the multiple perspectives of nineteen alumni authors.

The objective of the book is to convince the skeptical and give hope to the cynical that a Christian community made up of “Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free” is not only possible but necessary to the credibility of Christian witness. To this end the book is communal memoir, practical theology, sociological case study, and apologetic all wrapped into one. Sorrentino’s accessible, pragmatic, inter-disciplinary approach is a refreshing departure from the rigidly segregated, rarefied disciplinary orthodoxies characteristic of academia. Conversely, those expecting rigorous, in-depth scholarship engaging the most current ideas and sources may be frustrated by his disciplinary eclecticism along with the apparent parochialism of the book’s context, as many of the cited sources are likely to be unfamiliar outside of InterVarsity circles. But it would be a shame to overlook this book on these grounds, because to do so would be to miss an opportunity to learn from a very human story that is relevant to every Christian community seeking to embody Christian unity within its own context.

A Transforming Vision is organized into two parts. The first half is comprised of personal reflections by Amherst alumni describing how their encounter with the Amherst Christian Fellowship changed their faith and altered the course of their lives beyond college. The contributors include a lonely Chinese-American student who found a place to belong as he explored his cultural and ethnic background and struggled towards a newfound faith and passion for social justice, an African-American seminarian steeped in black liberation theology who discovered that, yes, white people do worship, and the white

male from Orange County who initially resisted admitting that racism existed at Amherst College, but who allowed the Christian Fellowship to challenge him into eye-opening courses and justice work in impoverished neighborhoods.

These testimonies are refreshingly courageous in their vulnerability, in their willingness to delve into the ugliest prejudices and most embarrassing blind spots. We learn that the life that Amherst Christian Fellowship made together was often awkward, uncomfortable, and even painful. But it was also permeated by grace and acceptance. None of these contributors came away from their time there unchanged or unwounded. As Jonathan Perez affirms in the seventh chapter, reconciliation is a risk, but one that is constitutive of gospel witness. It is a journey into a messy common life in which “none of us quite fits in” (90), where the voice of Jesus calls us beyond ourselves to learn an alien song sung in a foreign language. And this is not just a metaphor: anyone who has any experience leading or planning a worship service knows that music is too often a flashpoint of controversy that exposes deep cultural divides. It is no wonder that music is a common theme throughout this book, and is treated to an entire chapter in the second half. The Amherst Christian Fellowship’s struggle to forge a common way of worship is a window into its spiritual journey together across social barriers. Yolanda Denson-Lehman recalls “members really, really struggling to go against what was natural to them” in order to learn the alien songs and dances of their brothers and sisters in Christ, and the effort alone eroded barriers and strengthened the bonds of kinship (57).

The second half of the book shifts into a theoretical mode, beginning with an examination of the social, economic, and conceptual realities of racial inequality in America. For those well-versed in critical race theory and familiar with the statistical disparities in wealth, education, health, and other social indices, Sorrentino’s treatment of race in chapter 8 may seem elementary or self-evident. Given that the primary target audience of the book is white evangelical Christians, however, Sorrentino does not take such consciousness for granted, and seeks to gently introduce readers to a new way of seeing the world while pushing hard enough to destabilize entrenched imaginations.

Each successive chapter moves a step deeper into the practical implications for building a common life across racial and cultural lines. The ninth and tenth chapters are particularly interesting for their treatment of racialized discourses that are implicit in various models of leadership, worship, Bible study, and organizational structure. He moves beyond simply naming these discourses to describing some of the best practices learned through ACF’s life together, with ACF alumni contributing three more chapters filled with nuts-and-bolts wisdom from their experiences as organizational, worship, and

Bible study leaders. The final chapter and conclusion include reflections on the challenges and pitfalls inherent to the journey of reconciliation, and draws lines of connection between the lessons learned in a campus fellowship and their applicability to local congregations. The entire book is meant to be useful for both contexts, while candidly acknowledging the fact that 100% turnover every four years may be the decisive factor (and advantage?) that differentiates a campus fellowship from a congregation. Nevertheless, none of the contributors confine their stories to their college experience, but trace the impact of their respective commitments to justice and reconciliation into their post-college lives. Several authors have continued into ordained ministry, missions, or social service work, and have carried the lessons learned on campus with them into these contexts.

The greatest weakness of *A Transforming Vision* may be its own implicit discourse that Rev. Timothy Jones alludes to in Appendix 3: insofar as the assumed audience is predominantly white and evangelical, the book is addressed to predominantly white institutions that are seeking to be more inclusive. While its argument has important implications for how all Christians think about identity, race, and culture, it would be inappropriate to conclude from this book that all monoethnic institutions are counterproductive to the ultimate goal of Christian unity. Indeed, Sorrentino contends that whiteness insinuates itself into institutional structures by constructing artificial barriers between “core” institutional involvement and various commitments to cultural or racial affinity groups.

Ultimately, the importance of the underlying theological vision of this book far outweighs any weaknesses inherent in its shoot-from-the-hip style of scholarship. It is a work of practical theology that echoes the trenchant, prophetic theological analyses of J. Kameron Carter, Willie Jennings, and Brian Bantum, whose recently published books have laid the groundwork for a new direction in Christian theology. Jennings imagines the Body of the Jewish Jesus as a new space of cultural intimacy, a new form of kinship that assumes and transcends the self-enclosed cultural and racial identity markers constructed within the horizons of Western theo-political imagination. For Jennings, such a space “carries uneasiness and even a discomfort as those within it attempt to negotiate powerful cultural claims of kinship,” even as the intimacy of such a space becomes a mutual enfolding of cultural logics (Jennings, 273). This is the theological undercurrent that Chris Rice identifies in his foreword: “a new mestizo of in-between people whose hyphenated and supposedly “fixed” cultural identities were further hyphenated and confused through their shared social life toward a transcendent end: Christ-likeness” (13). Precisely.