

BOOK REVIEW

MARTIN, David, *The Future of Christianity. Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularization*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. 240pp. ISBN 9781409406693. £16.99.

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This collection of essays gives us vintage David Martin, uniting his historical knowledge, sociological acuteness and willingness to indulge in discreet theological comment. The book largely comprises chapters on secularization and the future of Christianity, followed by a pair of essays on eastern European patterns, and is rounded off by a section on Christianity and politics. Discussion of historical variants of secularization, and of the appropriateness of talking about its reversal, looms large; an important secondary theme is Christianity's relationship to democracy and violence; and alongside Catholicism, Pentecostalism occupies a considerable portion of the work.

The book is in typical Martin style, looking from a great height, assuming vast swathes of global historical and cultural knowledge, and employing roundabout argumentation; a joy to read, but probably not easygoing for post-graduate students, for example. As a series of essays, the book drifts in and out of certain themes, and there is considerable rephrasing of previous work, including that on Pentecostalism, but studded with the gems of new insights. As ever, Martin is neither a Bruce nor a Stark, nor even a Berger; his nuanced and cautious approach, concerned with micro-regions and complex patterns, lends itself less to media attention.

The title leads one to hope for more on Christianity outside Europe than the book actually contains (although China is a fairly significant topic). Even taking its historical importance into account, Europe occupies a disproportionate space. American and “global Southern” readers will notice, for example, that the chapter on “The Religious and the Political” refers only to the old continent. But then, the modern world was “made in Europe”, and Martin is certainly not Eurocentric in his approach.

Martin, as usual, is full of pithy phrases and sly inversions, from the classic (“sociology is the documentation of original sin by those who believe in original virtue”) to the pointed and contemporary (“the multicultural diversity celebrated as right and proper for Europeans is roundly condemned as cultural intrusion among indigenous peoples, as though it were the snake in a hitherto harmonious garden”; or “the cult of apology to those who no longer suffer by those who have

not themselves committed the wrong is restricted to the sometime borders of Christendom”). Martin, of course, sees secularization as neither universal nor unilateral. The very concept has a certain Christian specificity, and internal secularization is endemic in Christian history as faith compromises with the “world”. But desecularization, he maintains, can only be applied meaningfully in two areas of the globe: where secular modes of governance, seen as foisted on the people by the West, are being contested; and where there have been partial reversals of communist attempts to suppress religion.

Martin enumerates possible alternative master-narratives to secularization, such as a long-term advance of monotheism, or a Troeltschian sequence from church to sect to mysticism, or a possible Pentecostal narrative of successive waves of Christian expansion and recession. Martin is, however, perhaps too sanguine in his view that the old “Latin” pattern of conflict died out in 1989; it could be portrayed as reborn in the ever-growing political and legal battles over the family and sexuality, in which the churches regain a hostile political salience.

The book summarizes and restates much of what Martin has written about the paradoxes of Pentecostalism over recent decades. As he puts it, some anthropologists have thought Pentecostalism an inauthentic way to be ancient, while some sociologists have called it a regressive way to be modern. Cautiously, he says it is “as yet unclear” whether to categorize it as a transitional phenomenon or as an alternative way of being modern. He locates it principally among the aspiring poor, in ethnic groups overshadowed by larger civilizations, among the new transnational middle classes, and in China and the Chinese diaspora. As for Pentecostalism’s prospects, whether numerical, socio-political or economic, Martin is guardedly optimistic. With regard to numerical growth, he comments that many observers see it as a major wave of the future, and he himself styles it the natural denizen of deregulated religious markets. But he also recognizes that it lives in tension with resistant forms of (Catholic, Islamic or Buddhist) religion rooted in some sort of union of faith with polity, territory or ethnicity; and he also speculates that there will be an upper limit in the 10 to 20 per cent range in both China and Latin America, because success stimulates competition and emulation. This is a key point, in this reviewer’s opinion. Pentecostalism’s initial comparative advantage in globalizing conditions will not last; to borrow a phrase that Martin himself uses in another context, what is temporarily “recessive” often contains potential for the future; a principle that applies to Pentecostalism’s rivals. But there are also other reasons why Pentecostalism may not be the wave of the future, related to its own limitations. This comes out indirectly in Martin’s discussion of Pentecostal politics. If (or increasingly, in many parts of the world, when) politicians learn their language, Pentecostals know they are now a collective voice to be attended to; but that, inevitably, is also their moment of danger. And the ability of Pentecostalism to negotiate that moment of danger, in such a way that public perception of its political integrity remains intact and its attraction as a salvation religion untainted, is increasingly in doubt. Martin’s assertion that whereas the Spirit can break out in flames in the voluntary sector it can also operate as a “pure and peaceable” mode of governance looks somewhat rosy.

So Martin's guarded optimism on both the major predictions regarding Pentecostalism worldwide (that it will be the major form of Christianity in the twenty-first century, and that it will have a similarly social-reformist effect as, in Martin's terminology, previous "incursions of the Christian transcendent") is still probably too optimistic. Nevertheless, this volume is essential reading for all those who wish to understand better those Pentecostal and Charismatic forms of the faith that will, undoubtedly, play very important roles in the future of Christianity.