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Book Review

God at Work in the World: Theology and Mission in the Global Church

By Lalsangkima Pachuau
Baker Academic, 2022
192 pages
US\$22.00

Reviewed by Kenneth Nehrbass, Ph.D. Ken is the author of *Advanced Missiology, God's image and Global Cultures*, and *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia*. He is an associate professor of Global Studies for the Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University.

“Without faith in an active God engaging in the world....we cannot talk much about the Christian mission” (p. 4). Missions is a study of how God is at work in the world (as Pachuau’s title states).

However, the title and subtitle may be misleading, as “God at work in the world” and “mission in the global church” suggest that the book will describe ways that God is redeeming people in various cultures. Other than referencing some majority world theologians, the book does not particularly describe the experience of Christians throughout the world. However, insofar as “God at work in the world” refers to the way God brought salvation to the world through the work of Jesus Christ, the title seems appropriate. Soteriology is a central theme in the book. And if “mission” is more broadly defined as “the work of the church,” the subtitle is fitting, because ecclesiology comes into focus in chapter 4, and the relationship between culture and theology is the subject of chapter 5.

Pachuau’s main contribution is the broadening of understandings of

salvation to encompass more than the substitutionary atonement for sins – a concept Pachuau refers to as the “negative” aspect of salvation. The “positive” aspects of salvation include blessing, restoration, and healing. Evangelicals have tended to focus only on atonement—an act that was achieved at the two extreme ends of Jesus’ life (i.e., the incarnation and resurrection). In contrast, conciliar thinkers have focused more on the earthly aspects of Jesus’ ministry. Pachuau synthesizes the two approaches: He insists that salvation must be connected to the historical person of Jesus Christ, from incarnation to earthly ministry, to resurrection. There is “no soteriology without Christology” and vice versa (p. 56).

The book appeals more to academicians than practitioners. Pachuau’s discussion of various motifs of atonement is thorough, as is his treatment of ecclesiology; but often the ramifications for missionaries are not explicit, though they can be inferred.

The audience is those who are familiar with non-evangelical scholars like Barth, Rahner, and Gutierrez. In fact, Pachuau draws on religious thinkers from across the board including Taoists, redaction critics, native American religious thinkers, and liberation theologians, as well as biblically-grounded missiologists like Verkuyl, Tennett, and Tippett. Yet he often abstains from taking a position himself and does not give readers tools for working out which position is more tenable. The result is that non-discerning readers may have a hard time separating the sheep from the wolves. For example, does his mention of “deep incarnation” (p. 45) mean that he sees value in Gregersen’s panentheistic hermeneutic? But if Pachuau rejects the teaching, why not mention its usefulness as well as its weakness when it comes to developing a theology of mission?

Elsewhere, Pachuau does evaluate certain soteriologies and hints at the missiological implications. He outlines the Orthodox motif of salvation as “deification” and then shows how Raimon Panikar’s “theandristic links the concept of deification to the atman Brahman” (unity with god) in Hinduism (p. 85). Pachuau determines that Panikar is “overly symbolic at the expense of a historical Jesus” (p. 86), but suggests that those from Hindu backgrounds may find the concept of unity with God to be a meaningful starting place.

Pachuau recognizes that “theology and mission in the global church” (the subtitle) must answer questions about the fate of practitioners of other religions. He seems to repudiate John Hick’s universalism as outside of the bounds of Christianity. In contrast, he does not criticize the inclusivism propagated by Clark Pinnock and John Sanders (p. 99) and points to scholars who believe that salvation for all may be possible due to postmortem evangelism (p. 105). Pachuau provides what he calls an

“inconclusive conclusion” (p. 108) on the subject, but his position is not inconclusive. He argues that “the good news of God’s salvation in Christ is made known through the revelation in creation” (pp. 108-109), and he asks in light of Romans 10, “Could those who have never explicitly heard the name of Jesus have heard of him and his salvation [through natural revelation?] Is it possible, according to this passage? It seems so!” (p. 109).

Chapter four looks at various roles of the church, and argues that the church has a responsibility for equally “cultivating and communicating the Christian faith” (p. 124). There is a discussion on the church as the body of Christ, possibly making a distinction between what Pachuau sees as authentic letters by the Apostle Paul (Romans and 1 Corinthians) and deutero-Pauline letters (Ephesians and Colossians) (p. 135). He maintains that one aspect of the church is to herald the good news, and this involves both word and deed.

The book claims that Christ is beyond culture and fully in culture (p. 155). Jesus’ message and ministry were particularly aimed at the Jewish people of his day, and yet his blessing is for all humankind. Pachuau ultimately rejects the claim that “Christianity as a universal religion is Paul’s invention” (p. 156).

God at Work in the World will be helpful for missiologists who are interested in honing their soteriology and ecclesiology in response to evangelical and conciliar voices.