

Book Reviews

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*. Vol. 4 of *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016. 520 pp. \$40.00. ISBN: 9780802868565.

Spirit and Salvation is the fourth of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's five-volume constructive and systematic theological project. I am a former pastor and practical theologian and am fairly well read in biblical studies, but I must confess that I struggled with this text. It is highly technical and the content, at times, poorly edited. I needed to read each paragraph a few times, and I tired of Kärkkäinen's tendency to reiterate arguments already covered. Given that I am a middle-aged, middle-class, white Christian male of North American residency—that is, someone who has been afforded a significant amount of educational privilege—I wonder who Kärkkäinen's target audience is. Consider the following passage:

I argue that the paranoid fear of “works righteousness” of much of Protestantism has to be challenged and corrected by the “synergistic” (Eastern Orthodox) and “cooperational” (Roman Catholic) understanding of (“prevenient “) grace—while at the same time (in agreement of the whole of the Christian tradition) all forms of Pelagianism must be resisted. (352)

Wow! Kärkkäinen is clearly speaking to fellow theologians and keen graduate students; his text is very dense. Some may say, “Of course, it's a constructive theological text! There's a place for that.” And yes, there *is* a place for that. Yet I question how impactful a project of this magnitude (a multivolume systematic) can be when it's written in a way that marginalizes those beyond the academy—namely, the majority of the church. That said, I acknowledge that Kärkkäinen is trying to be as theologically ecumenical as possible. He addresses many of his arguments in dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox community, and he engages Catholic, Protestant, and Charismatic forms of Christianity as well. The contemporary voices of liberation, feminism, and other so-called contextual theologies are also attended to.

The text is divided into two parts. The first explores the Spirit; the second, matters of salvation. In each part, Kärkkäinen engages biblical texts and the history of theological reflection. He also brings in the perspectives of other religious traditions, including Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu voices. Kärkkäinen's exploration of the other religions, I think, is important given the plural contexts many of us find ourselves in. Yet as someone with limited interreligious experience, I find it hard to offer a thoughtful reflection on what is being offered here.

Despite my criticism of Kärkkäinen's overly thick prose, I do appreciate the respectful and reverential ways in which he seeks to position his theological reflections. "All our explanations are humble and modest, and hence viable for dialogue and conversation" (3). Kärkkäinen does not claim definitive understanding. He seeks to learn from and honor a broad array of learning communities. At times, he even strikes very pastoral tones.

Perhaps my struggles with this text are due, in large part, to my lack of interreligious experience. I grew up in the Mennonite community of southern Ontario. I live, for example, in an area where some of the biggest churches come from the Plymouth Brethren tradition. They are Calvinist in their theological orientation. Although we Mennonites live right next door to them, we have had very little in-depth interaction with our Plymouth Brethren sisters and brothers. As a result, I have never learned about their distinctive understandings of "grace" and "works" and "predestination" (let alone "double predestination"!). When Kärkkäinen takes up theological topics like these in his text, exploring the multiple ways they have been understood and contested through time, tradition, and space, I realize that my understandings are shaped and limited by my small circle of Christian experience. I found Kärkkäinen's discussion of these topics, and how other Christians think about such, fascinating. I just wish it were more accessible.

One highlight of the book for me was Kärkkäinen's discussion around peace, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. I especially appreciated his reflections on forgiveness, which engage the thinking of Miroslav Volf, William Klassen, and Don McLellan.

Having received divine forgiveness,¹ an unconditional gift, men and women are called to imitate that act of hospitality. In forgiving, humans mediate the gift of forgiveness they have received themselves. "Failure to offer forgiveness indicates a devaluation of God's forgiveness."² Withholding forgiveness would mean the exclusion of another and would be nothing other than the exclusion of God.³ (284–85)

According to Kärkkäinen, reconciliation is the ultimate aim of salvation. Given his Lutheran heritage, it is not surprising that nonviolence does not play a key part in

1 Kärkkäinen (284–85) referencing William Klassen in *The Forgiving Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 151.

2 Kärkkäinen (285) quoting Don McLellan in "Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation," 13, cited in Célestin Musekura, *An Assessment of Contemporary Models of Forgiveness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 73.

3 Kärkkäinen (285) referencing Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 241.

how he conceptualizes reconciliation. Yet if “we understand peace and peacemaking as an indispensable part of our common faith” (Kärkkäinen 407, quoting the World Council of Churches in “Glory to God and Peace on Earth: The Message of the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation”), then there ought to be more engagement with the Historic Peace Churches and their nonviolent theologies of the Spirit, salvation, and reconciliation. Kärkkäinen doesn’t give any significant attention to such theologies.

In the introduction, Kärkkäinen makes the point that theology is about hospitality—that genuine theology is about giving and receiving gifts. I am still trying to receive the gift he is offering me. It’s still mostly an unwrapped gift. But I hope to return to it again in the future and give it another chance. If I do, I’m sure I will discover much that I was unable to receive the first time.

FRED REDEKOP lives in Elmira, Ontario, located in the contested Haldimand Tract lands of the Six Nations. A former pastor who is still waiting for God to reveal his next calling, Fred is currently using his gifts working for Mennonite Central Committee Ontario.

Helen Richmond, *Blessed and Called to Be a Blessing: Muslim-Christian Couples Sharing a Life Together*, Oxford, Regnum, 2015. 168 pp. \$23.00. ISBN: 9781908355898.

A few weeks ago, I joined some high school students from my church as they traveled to our local Sikh temple. We are a part of a program called *Walking the Walk*, which brings together young people from a variety of faith traditions to learn from one another. We participated in the service, joined a group of Sikh high school students for *langar* (the open meal served at the temple), and then the youth spent an hour asking some Sikh leaders about their lives. They were particularly interested in what it was like for Sikh people to live in Philadelphia as a minority—how they hold on to traditions, how they feel about inequality in our city, what it is like to be visibly Sikh at all times. As a mentor for the program, I am blessed to listen to these youth talk, to watch them work out what it means to care for each other and to share a city.

Of course, we can’t get very far into a conversation before the broader political world breaks in. For the young folks from our church, who live in a diverse city and believe deeply in sharing their lives with people from other traditions, our country’s decision to vote for racist and Islamophobic policies—embodied in the Trump presidency—is scary. As we talked, I heard fear, uncertainty, anger—emotions I share with them. As a millennial (I’m 25) and a person in an interreligious relationship, I often don’t know exactly what to do with people in my church and my country who oppose a vision of faith communities living together.