Review of Alternative Theologies: Parables for a Modern World

Alternative Theologies: Parables for a Modern World is a collection of short stories, poems, and essays containing a wide variety of ideas and beliefs. The entries explore theological concepts from Genesis to Revelation, from creation stewardship to eschatology (end times). Many of the entries are in response to the religion of nationalism that has flourished in the current political climate, a belief system that claims the cross but cloaks itself in the flag, and casts out all other religions, including many Christians.

As a Christian pastor and student of theology, I especially appreciated the critical insight by many of the authors, and that they dared to ask the questions that theologians have wrestled with for millennia. The Pale Thin God puts on trial the Jesus who would sacrifice himself for the very human beings that would cause atrocities in his name. Dear Mary, are you there? wrestles with the very question that many women struggle with on Mother’s Day in our churches. Where is God when we suffer the most horrific loss of all, while others are celebrated? Maybe God isn’t up on high, but down on the street corner “with a shopping cart full of garbage.”

Perhaps my favorite entry was Ultimate Messiah Smackdown. Which Jesus do we really follow, the smiling white guy in a suit who preaches the prosperity gospel and the religion of nationalism, or the man who challenges us to think and act differently (and might smell bad)? Or which Buddha, for that matter? I’m already planning on using this story as a sermon illustration.

Facing this religion of nationalism, Alternative Beatitudes for the New Right stings in every line the truth of the prosperity gospel. Instead of Jesus’ words that bless those on the margins and challenge others to do justice, these Alternative Beatitudes shrug off the needs of others and end with a common platitude. It turned my stomach to read them and left a bitter taste on my tongue, but I read them over several times because they speak of what many have sadly come to believe, because it is the easy way, affirming the life of those with power and wealth.

I took my time reading this collection of Alternative Theologies. Not every entry struck me in the same way: some made me laugh, some made me shrug, but some will definitely become sermon fodder, or find their way, like Dear Mary, into songs of lament.

I was delighted to receive a copy of Alternative Theologies: Parables for a Modern World, edited by Bob Brown and Phyllis Irene Bradford in exchange for an honest review.