
Baptists, constituting a communion of some 110 million adherents, can lay claim to being the largest Protestant grouping in the world. That they are also one of the most geographically widespread – and therewith culturally diverse – brands of Protestantism makes a truly global survey of their history, theological distinctives and ethos both a formidable challenge and a pressing necessity. Combining an insider’s experience and sympathy with a professional historian’s objectivity (the author is professor at Central Baptist seminary, USA), this book is the first major study to address this need on such a scale, without the somewhat self-congratulatory and hagiographical tendencies that mark so many denominational histories. The study will serve well to inform partners in ecumenical dialogue what kind of animal(s) they are dealing with in the Baptists, and will equally well educate any Baptists who assume that their particular plot is to be regarded as the norm for the whole Baptist vineyard.

Indeed, Johnson sets himself the bold task of breaking free of the ‘Anglo American’ dominant view of the Baptist story. Historically, the modern Baptist movement certainly began with the English Separatist congregation of John Smythe in Amsterdam and that section of it which under Thomas Helwys migrated to London in 1609, and in those American colonists of like persuasion from the 1630s inwards. But the extraordinary spread of Baptist life and witness through missionary endeavour and the colonial expansion of the English-speaking world is not a single meta-narrative of replication of those origins. There is not even one single ‘Baptist tradition’ of theology and practice – even in 17th century England Baptists comprised both General (Arminian) and Particular (Calvinistic) churches which to a large extent kept apart from each other – and once ethnic, cultural and linguistic factors enter the scene matters become yet more complex. ‘The cultural shapers of the global Baptist movement are almost as varied as humanity itself’, writes Johnson. ‘Consequently, when the Baptist movement is examined closely one finds an amalgam of traditions – many totally independent of the others – that defies serious efforts genuinely to interpret them as one.’ What follows is therefore very much a ‘post-modern’ reading of Baptist history, seen now as a polycentric phenomenon in which the ‘classic’ white-led Anglo European tradition is but one of a multiplicity...
of stories which only now, in a post-colonial context, are beginning to emerge into the full light of day.

Johnson therefore takes us from 17th century England and North America to the 19th century ‘Frontier Ages’ in the British Empire, the USA, Europe, Asia and Latin America; thence to the age of ‘Proliferating Sources’ in Baptist global development (1890 to the present), covering Africa, Asia, Oceania, the Caribbean and Eurasia, and to newer developments both in Europe and North America. A concluding, and relatively brief, chapter summarises ‘Baptists’ Beliefs and Practices.’

The range of Johnson’s survey of Baptist diversity is impressive. He has studied and travelled widely. To take just two examples, there is a fascinating account of the interaction of social, theological and ethnic factors in the Baptist expansion in 19th century North America (how many of us are aware, for instance, of the ‘Antimission Controversy’?), and equally informative to the uninitiated (i.e. most readers) will be the narrative of how Korean Baptist identity was shaped during the period between the ‘Chosen’ dynasty and Japanese occupation – ‘a time when many Koreans were seeking new answers to basic life questions.’ As would be expected, there is a full treatment of the distinctives of Afro-American Baptists, though perhaps a little too much is claimed for the aspirational and visionary leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr, as being typically Baptist. Where Baptists do not have such a good record, as in Nazi Germany, the failure is at least noted if not analysed in any depth. It is near-inevitable that in dealing with many such specific contexts little more can be given than indicators of the major issues and pointers to where more specialised studies can be accessed. Helpful footnotes are provided but a more extensive, and annotated, bibliography would have been still more useful for the serious student.

In face of what is undeniably such a rich tapestry of narratives and mapping of the scenery, it may seem churlish to remark on where a British Baptist with strong ecumenical interests would have hoped for more attention to be paid. Johnson rightly emphasizes that as well as being decidedly congregationalist in their polity Baptists have also, almost from the beginning and universally, been associational at district and national levels. Associations, conventions, unions are a standard feature of Baptist life. But surprisingly little attention is given by Johnson to associating at regional and still wider levels. There is scarcely a mention, for example, of the European Baptist Federation without which the European Baptist story would have been unthinkable before and after World War II, most especially during the Cold War, and in the construction of the new Europe in the