Book Reviews


Students, adherents, observers, and critics of Pentecostalism would all agree that belief in healing is a salient feature of the movement. Donald Dayton has argued, in his Theological Roots of Pentecostalism (1987), that it may be “even more characteristic” of the movement than belief in Spirit Baptism and it would seem that, at least in the public’s perception, this may be true. I have proposed in my Pentecostal Healing: Models of Theology and Practice (2006) that while it is this belief and practice that has often been a cause for division between Pentecostals and other Christians, in actuality it may be what most connects us with historic Christianity. In this light, healing can be seen as common ground for ecumenical dialogue. The two books reviewed here make significant contributions to this dialogue and, in effect, move it beyond to one that is interfaith.

Amanda Porterfield, Robert A. Spivey Professor of Religion at Florida State University and former president of the American Society of Church History, has written a sweeping, if somewhat episodic, history of healing in the Christian church. The very helpful introductory chapter explains that healing belief, and especially healing practice, is used as a lens through which to view history and a way in which to establish “continuity amid the jumble of competing doctrines, innumerable churches, disparate behaviors, and historical developments” (3). In fact, Porterfield contends that healing became a “driving force in the construction of Christianity” (4). Porterfield writes with an acceptance of “religious healing as a real biological phenomenon, although one prey to pious exaggeration” (19) and it is this perspective which will be welcomed by Pentecostal scholars.

As would be expected the book examines Jesus as both exorcist and healer in a chapter that often reads more like a survey of literature and recent schools of thought than an actual examination of the texts. Chapters on Early Christianity (Ante-Nicene and Nicene), Medieval and Early Modern Christianity follow. Porterfield astutely points out the importance of healing (and the Christian church’s care of the sick) as an impetus for the growth of the early church in the shadow of the Empire, a cause of much suffering, injury, disease and death. Special attention is given to the role of the Eucharist and interestingly to baptism as “an exalted form of healing” (60) and “protective seal” (83). Often neglected in such studies, but given rather extensive treatment by Porterfield, is the rise of Christian medicine and nursing, as well as the introduction of natural cures and antidotes (those found in God’s
creation) into Christianity, what Porterfield calls a “hybridization of Christian and pre-Christian traditions” in the West. One of the most interesting theological discussions is found in her examination of healing in the Reformed traditions. She concurs with other scholars that the downplaying of the miraculous in Calvinism, for instance, is one impetus for the radical episodes such as the Salem witch trials, the trials being a kind of quest for proof of a spiritual world which was not detached from the material one.

Of particular importance for Pentecostal studies is the chapter titled “Healing in Western Christianity’s Global Expansion” in which Porterfield critically examines missionary efforts of both Protestants and Catholics. This examination of Christianity’s expansion is furthered in the final two chapters that look at the relationship of Christian healing to science, medicine, and technology. The curious and somewhat ambiguous rise of the medical missionary is focused upon. Porterfield points out that there is a correlation of the increase of Medical Science’s authority and a Cessationist worldview. The uncomfortable and often disastrous alliance of the missionary enterprise and Colonialism is also scrutinized. Of special interest in the final chapter is the discussion of rise of Christian Science, Mesmerism, and Spiritualism in the nineteenth centuries. The most extensive discussion of Pentecostal healing alongside these alternative views is presented and, predictably, focuses on the figure of Aimee Semple McPherson. This is followed, however, by an excellent assessment of “Pentecostal Healing as a Global Phenomenon.” Here Porterfield proposes that it is Pentecostalism’s celebration of healing miracles, which most connects with indigenous peoples, offering continuity with traditional healing practices, and that Pentecostalism is itself a kind of mirror of globalization.

The second work under review, Religion and Healing in America, which narrows the dialogue spatially and temporally, ironically broadens it. Linda Barnes (Boston University School of Medicine) and Susan Sered (Harvard University’s Center for the Study of World Religions) have edited a collection of articles on healing practices in America and the collection reflects the religious diversity and pluralism of the country. The twenty-nine chapters are grouped thematically, though there is clearly crossover. The section titled “Sites of Healing” includes articles ranging from the cult of saints and use of relics in twentieth century Catholicism to inner healing in Cambodian American communities to the homebirth movement and beyond to holistic healing in the Episcopal Church.

Another division groups articles around the theme of healing from structural violence and includes an article by Gaston Espinosa on Mexican-American healing evangelist Francisco Olazábal. Also included in this section are articles on healing in Chicano/a, Japanese, Haitian communities. Of particular interests is a study of the healing of immigrants from war-torn African regions (Congo and Somalia). This study traces groups who settle into Muslim communities and those who settle into “healing churches” (Pentecostal/Charismatic independent churches) and compares the level of healing from post-traumatic stress occurring in each group.

Articles focusing on gender issues and healing are grouped in another section. Here Barnes and Sered place discussions of feminist Wicca, the American Jewish healing movement and Evangelical Ex-Gay deliverance ministries. Two articles in this section focus specifically on Pentecostal women (a Navajo healer) who are practitioners or who experience healing in Pentecostal communities (African American).