Dale Coulter and Amos Yong (eds.)


Dale Coulter and Amos Yong have done renewal studies a great service by drawing together a collection of essays that form a historiography of affectivity in the Christian tradition with a particular focus on the Spirit’s pursuit of the holistic person in spiritual formation. The book includes essays that were given as lectures and presentations at the Regent University Center for Renewal Studies between 2011 and 2013 (p. x). A central claim of the book is that renewal has been present throughout Christianity’s entire existence and even earlier as can be recounted in some Old Testament stories and motifs. Affection can thus be seen in biblical stories and folk theologies throughout history. Mining the history of Christian thought through a pneumatocentric and charismatic lens can “… provide a new window onto the development of Christian ideas about the affective life” (p. 3). So this book not only allows us to revision Christian thought as having always engaged affection as a necessary part of being human, but also allows us to deepen our theological understanding of the Spirit by considering the insight of preceding traditions.

The essays in the book identify seeds of pneumatocentric spiritual holism throughout Christian history that existed before the Holiness and Pietist movements, which are are often cited as the origin of pentecostal and charismatic spirituality. The chapters boast a wide range of analysis beginning with the church fathers, continuing with Eastern and Western medieval theologians, and ending with more familiar dialogue partners such as Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards.

Coulter introduces the book by tracing the language of affectivity in Christian history, highlighting the individual contributions of each chapter. His introduction portrays the book as ecumenical and interdisciplinary, allowing for a number of future research trajectories (p. 7). The first two chapters (Wilkins and Smith) show how the biblical writers and patristic authors allude to the function of _eros_ (even while using terms like _agape_ and _philia_) in godly love towards each other (p. 31), and through artistic expression (p. 44). They consider how the language of erotic love can be used for understanding Christian life (p. 33). The argument here is that what is needed is not a wholesale denial of affectivity, but rather an appropriate directing of the affections towards God.

As Christian history moves towards the Middle Ages, so do the next set of chapters. Eastern and Western thought is brought together as several aspects of faith and practice are engaged. Nassif, for instance, looks at how the church's
liturgical texts and rites shape a person’s religious affections, preparing them
for the Eucharist where they join with Christ in unity (p. 75), while McClymond
discusses the idea of “holy tears”, which acts as a symbol for rightly directed
cathartic affection in the Christian life. This is a practice that allows us to weep
with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. Dreyer looks at two
medieval theologians Hadewijch of Brabant and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio
to discuss their understanding of *eros* in the mystical union of Christ and his
church (pp. 115–116), while Boyd engages the Thomistic idea that grace perfects
human affections (p. 144). In each case the question addressed is how the Spirit
perfects a person’s affections and directs them towards God.

The last set of chapters engages theology from the Reformers to the Revival-
ists, engaging Martin Luther (Zahl), Blaise Pascal (Bom), John Wesley (Clap-
per), Jonathan Edwards (McDermott), and the Quakers and Puritans (Lim).
These chapters all form a dialectic between the positive and negative forces
of affectivity. Each thinker knows that a true transformation requires a change
of affections, but there must nevertheless be an avoidance of powerful and
destructive affections like lust, anger, and fear (pp. 192–193). What follows
then is a discourse as to how a Christian can have his or her soul “warmed
towards God” (p. 282) without falling into worldly emotionalism. Both Wesley
and Edwards use the language of affection throughout their works, but both
see affect as something greater than mere emotion. Religious affections are tied
to our wills and determine how close our hearts and desires turn towards God
(p. 273). Thus it is the religious affection that must be engaged for us to properly
grow in spiritual formation.

Yong then closes the book with a conclusion that asks why the affections
should be studied in renewal theology in the first place. It is because the heart
is “... the locus of the Spirit’s work (p. 298)”, and any serious pneumatology
must “... probe the inner recesses” of the human soul lest it neglect the very
significance of what it means to be a holistic human being (p. 299). So from
beginning to end this book traces the nature, power, and extent of human
affections as they relate to God, spiritual practices, and the Christian tradition
in general.

The strength and weakness of this book is the diversity of historical thought
that it displays. Each chapter does its job of portraying affection as it was histori-
cally understood in the work of significant theologians and showing how the
Spirit is engaged in their respective theologies. In this way it offers something
that is new to renewal studies. But, while this compilation is no doubt an impor-
tant addition to the corpus of renewal studies, it borders on becoming merely a
valuable sourcebook. This book could have benefited from consistent engage-
ment with how these historical teachings help us better understand and engage