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Review of *The Church on the Margins: Living Christian Community*, by Mary R. Sawyer

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The Church on the Margins: Living Christian Community by Mary R. Sawyer. New York: Trinity Press International, 2003, 288 pp., \$24.00 paper.

THERESE LYSAUGHT

The Church on the Margins: Living Christian Community is at once a challenge to the Imperial church in America, an historical reprisal of various instantiations of Christianity among marginalized populations and a call for white Christians in the United States to be transformed toward an incarnation of faith, which is essentially communal.

Sawyer, a professor of Religious Studies at Iowa State, begins this exploration with an introduction in which she provides an historical outline of various "Models of Christianity." Starting with Jesus and the early church, she reprises 1,900 years of Christian history in four pages following somewhat the narrative of the Constantinian (Imperial) fall of Christianity from the vision of the Jesus. This first chapter also includes a discussion of how the term "community" will function in the book; she notes that what unites the extraordinarily diverse versions of Christian community is one shared characteristic: "anti-establishment" (11). Less succinctly, she concludes, "Christian community may be defined as a group of people coming

together with intentionality to live the gospel values of inclusiveness, justice, and caring in order to create a transformed world" (16).

Part One, "The Imperial Church in the United States," narrates the inalienably imperialistic mindset and practices of white Protestant churches in the United States, the Catholic church throughout the Americas, and the recently emergent conservative evangelical churches. Part Two recounts the histories of six different incarnations of "The Church on the Margins." These include the often conflicted yet important constructive relationships between Christianity and African Americans, Native Americans, Latina/Latinos, Asian Americans, women, and the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered) community. Part Three, "Toward a Renewed and Transformed Church," is comprised of a final chapter that lists the variety of movements in the twentieth century that have sought to foster intentional Christian communities.

Sawyer's work here is helpful for acquainting contemporary Christians with the often submerged histories of groups long marginalized within the Church. Most white, mainline Protestant, Catholic, or Evangelical Christians will not be able to escape the biting indictment of the shape of their own congregations and their own practice of the faith.

However, certain weaknesses hamper what could be the truly powerful impact of this study. Given the nature of the project, the historical accounts, both of pre-twentieth century Christianity and the various churches on the margin, are necessarily too brief and therefore too unnuanced. Second, parts two and three would be much more useful for her stated project—of actually transforming parishes and the lives of contemporary Christians—if she had focused not on history but had rather displayed what African American communalism or Latina/Latino Ecclesiology actually looks like now, on the ground, in practice, in the 1990s and 2000s. What does it look like to "live Christian community?"

Third, Sawyer's notion of community denotes a largely affective rather than a political reality. She prefers theorists who reject Jesus' own "kingdom" language instead of "kin-dom," which effectively handcuffs Christian praxis in relation to the social order. As the title of her last chapter indicates, she understands Christian communities as "Enclaves" (following Robert Bellah's categories [1985]). Consequently, what we end up with is a rendering of radical discipleship (a term she likes) that will never be perceived as a challenge to the regnant social order but rather fits nicely within its own categories. This becomes clearest in her final chapter where she lumps together such widely disparate individuals and groups such as Ched Myers, David Janzen, the Bruderhof, the Catholic Worker, Koinonia Farms, L'Arche, and the Church of the Savior on the one hand (all of whom are decidedly anti-liberal politically and philosophically), and the Social Gospel movement, Call to Action, and the Voice of the Faithful on the other hand, who, with one of the significant theorists behind this work,

Rosemary Radford Reuther (1983), work out of liberal presuppositions. While her inclusion of the first group is welcome and laudable, it remains the case that these groups are decisively different and likely irreconcilable theologically and ecclesiologically.

Also troublingly, all the individuals and groups in the final chapter are white. In the end, her important work on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in the second part of the book does not seem to inform her constructive project. Nonetheless, for the uninitiated, the book provides a helpful starting point for complex givens about one's own practice of the Christian faith and could, therefore, prove useful in a classroom or a congregational adult education setting.

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References

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