

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Chrissy Stroop & Lauren O'Neal (eds.), *Empty the Pews. Stories of leaving the church*, Epiphany Publishing, Indianapolis (IN), 2019. (an Eos Award winner)

This is a book that will make you sad. Then angry. Then sad again. Perhaps this is a book that will make you despair of Christianity.

I first heard of this publication on the podcast *Sorry Not Sorry* by Alyssa Milano (actress of *Who's the Boss?* and *Charmed* fame, and Democratic political activist). In one of the episodes she had as her guest Chrissy Stroop, one of the editors of the anthology. Ms Stroop, herself an exvangelical, spoke about the *#EmptyThePews* she had launched via Twitter on 17th August 2017 to gather together the stories of people from Evangelical milieus who wanted to be heard about the bigotry and intolerance they had witnessed and lived through.

The blurb of the book reads,

Twenty-one timely, affecting essays by those who survived hardline, authoritarian religious ideology and uprooted themselves from the reality-averse churches that ultimately failed to contain their spirits.

The term 'reality-averse' immediately struck me as a very effective term I will be using myself in the future when describing and discussing fundamentalism, extremism, Christianity, and radicalisation: not just devoid of reality, outside of reality, but actively averse to it.

In 5 sections, each section with 4-5 contributors, 21 testimonials in total, this book illustrates the negative experience people have had inside groups and organisations -some with cult-like characteristics- that espouse forms of Christianity which are very strict and oppressive, conservative in their ethics, mostly Republican to extreme right politically, heteronormative and patriarchal, Rapture obsessed, theologically as well as culturally proselytising and neo-colonialist, self-professed capitalist and anti-socialist or anti-marxist, mostly Islamophobic and pro-Israel, anti-ecumenical, anti-abortion, anti-euthanasia, homo- and transphobic, with theocratic-nationalist traits, and almost exclusively white with racist undertones if not ostensibly racist and fascist. And while Evangelicalism in the USA is experiencing a steady and rapid numerical decline, its political clout stays disproportionately strong.

The 5 sections in the book are about human sexuality, family values, abuse within the Christian unit, American supremacy and missionary zeal, and anti-intellectualism.

The fact that there is a chapter titled 'Trauma and Abuse in Christian Contexts' feels counterintuitive, but these testimonials -a term often used in Evangelical circles as part of their liturgy- do exactly that: they testify, they witness to the persecution the contributors each in their

own situation have had to endure; they were being persecuted for their doubts, their biological make-up, for their gender, their sexual orientation, some of them simply because they exist. In the Christian tradition, someone who is persecuted for their witness is called a martyr.

The struggles the contributors experienced did not end when they decided to leave the church they belonged to, and most left the faith behind altogether. This includes the occasional disaffected Roman Catholic. On the contrary, the real struggle, the ongoing struggle for some, is the fact that leaving the church also meant leaving family, social support, and Evangelical culture behind. I can imagine that for some contributing to this publication was part of their grieving process, part of the way by which they could come to terms with their loss, a way to mourn the uprooting.

As one person puts it,

“Growing up, much of my life was defined by Christianity; it was my religion, but it was also my social and cultural world.” (p. 58)

Another person adds,

“The thing about religion is that when you have it, it feels good, and, like any opiates, the withdrawals are painful.” (p. 71-72)

Because, comments a third person,

“Fundamentalist culture is ingenuously designed to retain membership.” (p. 271)

A few of the authors struggle with having left God behind, but the connection of God with the church they liberated themselves from is too painful, too raw, to actively include God in their post-Christian lives. It struck me how very little to nothing the figure of Jesus Christ features in these stories.

In a way, some testimonies are also a confession of guilt for the zeal some of the authors displayed while desperately trying to fit in their religious community, while at the same time trying to cover up their insecurities and doubts, while trying to come to terms with the fact that they had so many questions they would never be allowed to ask.

This testifying approach of the anthology is both its strength and its weakness. Strength because of the heart-wrenching candour with which the contributors share their story, and the possible emotional bond a reader might develop with them. Weakness because as a reader who might not be Evangelical, exvangelical, or even American, the testimonies might not go beyond sad and angry biographical essays. This most definitely is not a self-pitying self-help book, but an opportunity for educating outsiders was missed. Reading between the lines there is a lot of information to be found of course, however a lot of the details are easily overlooked for someone who reads about this side of Christianity for the first time. The reader might simply not have the theological, cultural, or

national tools to place the individual narratives in a larger framework and fully recognise the baggage people carry. The 'Introduction' offers some elements, but a short closing, summarising chapter might possibly have helped readers from for example Europe to grasp on a deeper level what is going on in the mindset of the churches they encounter in the book.

The word 'Evangelical' itself is problematic because confusing to many. An old school chum of mine inquired the other day if people in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are Trump voters. Probably some of them are, but the ELCA is known as a progressive denomination and the word Evangelical in its name indicates 'of the Gospel' or 'of the Good News', *euangélion* in Greek, not as belonging to the particular theological framework one would associate with the groups and organisations talked about in this book.

I would argue that the goodness which the word Evangelical intrinsically holds, has been hijacked by groups who distort the message of the Gospel, and that we need to reclaim the word. Some of the claims these church-groups make about the Bible and the Church and God borders on heresy (heterodoxy if you want to be politically correct), and it cannot be left unchecked.

But reclaiming is not the intention of the contributors, even of there is the occasional longing for a past life, for a church and faith that are and for now remain in the past. This book will not vindicate a softer, kinder edition of (American) Evangelical Christianity. There is no real and consistent hope in this anthology for a different (American) Evangelical Christianity that is open and embracing.

Jo Jan Vandenheede  
(PhD-researcher)