

Tanya Riches, *Worship and Social Engagement in Urban Aboriginal-led Australian Pentecostal Congregations*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies 32 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2019). ivx + 308 pp. \$68 paperback.

In this monograph, Hillsong College (Sidney, Australia) Senior Lecturer Tanya Riches persuasively argues that Pentecostal Aboriginal communities are progressively empowering and thus “decolonizing” themselves (233-234, 263, 275) from the collective “shame” that non-indigenous Australian society has historically and continues to hegemonically wage on them (233-234, 247, 253, 265-266). The latter does so through “the Gap,” an Australian phrase referring to ongoing power structures that exclude the country’s indigenous people from an equitable share in the nation’s wealth. By referencing “the Gap,” Riches has thus pursued her research towards addressing “racist”-rooted socially structured exclusionary practices and systemic oppression (5, 55-57, 226) that still characterises not only Australian society but also Australian Christianity, including Pentecostalism (104, 133, 156, 209-210, 273-274).

Yet emerging from her PhD dissertation on worship rituals and social engagement practices of Aboriginal-led Australian Pentecostal churches, Riches posits as her prime finding and thesis how these church networks are “(re)imagining their selves, (re)imagining the Australian Christian church, and (re)imagining their world in Spirit encounter” (7, 221, 246, 248, 275). More importantly, how they are thus “redressing” “the Gap” (248) and its resultant “structural marginalization” (23, 125, 163, 215), “social inequalities” (45, 261), “oppression” (247, 250, 271), and “shame culture” (265-266). She finally concludes that through their own Spirit-birthing “inclusionary” practices that envision an Australian Christianity justly structuring both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians within a common ecclesial life, they are thereby “decolonizing the church” of Australia (275); thereby “building a truly Australian Christianity” (263).

As she beautifully narrates throughout this well-structured volume, Riches reached her thesis and conclusion through an “ethnographic study” on the “ritual” “worship and social engagement practices” (22, 85-86, 260) of three urban Australian Pentecostal churches. These three churches are primarily composed of and pastorally led by indigenous (mainland Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and South Sea Islander peoples) Australians. Yet each exemplifies unique church cultures, ministry philosophies, theological themes, missional aims, and strategies (106-124, 251). Hence, with each ethnically-mixed congregation vastly separated geographically, yet situated in a “lower socioeconomic suburb

of an Australian coastal city (Perth, The Gold Coast, and Cairns) (88), they provide a cross-section of the Aboriginal Pentecostal “network” spanning the Australian continent (103-104, 106, 129-130, 251-252).

Riches brilliantly structures her book’s 11 chapters and additional sections within three main parts: 1. “Research Design”; 2. “Research Findings”; 3. “Summary and Conclusions.” She begins with a Prelude (“Short Political History of Australia”), which situates her research within Australia’s Aboriginal history, culture, and the harm that the non-indigenous, European-colonialist-backgrounded population still inflicts on them (3-8). The Introduction eruditely summarises the research aims and trajectories. Chapter 1, aptly titled Learning to Yarn, narrates her transformation through the research journey. As she vividly states, “This book represents a somewhat fumbling attempt by a white Australian researcher. . . to dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from a shared religious commitment” and hence also, “a story about how” the Pentecostal Aboriginal participants “initiated the decolonizing of the research process, and how this impacted the research design” (25).

As many may recall, Riches was for many years a well-known “Pentecostal singer/songwriter” of Hillsong, most famous for composing the hit chorus, “Jesus, What a Wonderful Name” (26-27). Thus, she originally aimed to explore Australian Pentecostal worship practices via a missiological lens, from the discipline of ethnomusicology” (19, 249), primarily focusing on “traditional culture within Christian worship” (41). Yet, as she submitted to her participants’ request that she learn how to “yarn” and thereby radically encounter “the Gap” (19), she realized how this morally warranted more emancipatory, “decolonizing” approaches (28), foregrounding what the Holy Spirit is speaking to the greater Pentecostal movement through these Aboriginal-led congregations (28-29, 65-69, 247-248, 250, 252, 263, 268; esp. 271-275).

Conversely, Chapter 2 (A “Corroboree” of Literature; referring to an indigenous term for “sacred dance”) narrates how Riches’ induction in Aboriginal “yarning” re-oriented her Literature Review in manners congruent to concerns and aspirations her participants raised towards her engagement with the scholarly literature about “the Gap” and Australian Aboriginal culture (43-45, 80). Riches’ review thus revealed “that Aboriginal people and cultural symbols have been systematically excluded to the benefit of non-Indigenous peoples,” and that “the Australian church resists self-examination on this issue, due to its internalization of European and North American cultural symbols” (80).

Riches’ third chapter (Methodology) provides a well-structured overview of her research strategy that clarifies her main disciplinary premises, systematically outlines her research questions, and surveys her

research procedures. Driving her study was the main research question: “How are the worship and social engagement practices of urban Aboriginal-led Pentecostal congregations linked, if at all?” (83-84), where the key term is “linked.” Through disciplinary reliance on Randall Collins’ “Interaction Ritual Chain Theory (IRCT)” (51-54, 81-88), her research demonstrates how “interaction ritual chains operate within the three communities, generating “affect or ‘emotional energies’” that “charge collective symbols” a community uses for “(re)imagining” their identities, thereby causing transformed futures (84-87, 209-210, 221, 247-248, 264, 275). By “symbol” she means anything living or non-living that “meaningfully expresses” a person or group’s present or aspired “experience” (282).

Accounting for her main theological concerns—foremost evident through her notion of “(re)imagining” —Riches further triangulates her methodology by utilizing Amos Yong’s “pneumatological imagination” concept (also known as “Pentecostal imagination”). By doing so, she stresses “a congregation’s worship ritual and history as a site of illumination of the Spirit”; Yong’s concept thus enables Riches’ robust perception on how indigenous culture functions as a fertile site for theological production (21, 70, 209, 261). Throughout her study, she examines how Aboriginal Pentecostals appropriate within their congregational life their indigenous practice of “yarning”; an informal conversation mode that accentuates dialogical listening for fostering relationships (30-32). Riches thus insightfully forwards this practice as an important contribution that the Australian Aboriginal Pentecostal community proffers for both Australian and world Christianity; namely, an Australian Aboriginal theological practice of engaging human differences throughout hospitable dialogue characterised by an ethos of welcoming inclusion (252-253, 262-263, 275). Importantly the aim of “Pentecostal yarning” moreover anticipates the Holy Spirit’s reconciling “involvement” within this practice (253, 263).

The six chapters delineating Riches’ “Research Findings” (Part 2) expansively narrate several major discoveries she made about the empowering role of Aboriginal worship practices across Australia towards “social engagement” yet more importantly, “social transformation” (174, 265, 271). The book’s final section (Part 3: Summary and Conclusion) helpfully identifies “limitations” to Riches’ research (237-246) yet also research recommendations for further research (272-274).

In conclusion, let me point out four outstanding features of Riches’ monograph. First, throughout this well-organized book, doctoral students—particularly those engaging empirical and/or ethnographic research—will find exemplary trajectories of methodically clear

dissertation structure, highly engaging prose enjoyable to read, and perhaps most importantly—a “story” on how the researcher found herself transformed through the research journey (19, 25-28, 30). A second profound feature is its robustly triangulated yet tightly linked disciplinary scope, innovatively integrating liturgical, missiological, postcolonial, and anthropological concerns albeit in highly readable and focused manners and outcomes. This study thereby functions as a seminally excellent contribution to the field of Pentecostal worship and liturgical studies.

Third, Riches’ work demonstrates moral, missiological, theological, and methodical warrants that should prompt researchers within Pentecostal studies to increasingly orientate their awareness and focus towards the research concerns of postcolonialism, decolonization, and critical theory for addressing the ongoing realities of “whiteness ideology” and systemic racism worldwide.

Finally, this volume grants readers on one hand a fascinating autobiography of paradigm shifts, and on the other a storied vision of Australian Christianity undergoing decolonization. Namely, through the empowering promise of Pentecost—erupting from the peripheral of dominant power structures, foregrounding marginalized voices, and thereby causing movement towards a more just world through the miracles of “Spirit encounter.”

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