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# Descending Like a Dove: Adventures in Decolonizing Evangelical Christianity

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## Book Review

### *Descending Like a Dove: Adventures in Decolonizing Evangelical Christianity*

Tommy Airey

Ypsilanti, MI: Kardia Kaiomene, 2018

Tom Airey's continuing pilgrimage from conservative American evangelical piety to a radical Biblical life journey over against evangelical imperialism, so characteristic of that virtual identity of United States power politics with Bible Belt Protestantism, is infinitely more than a standard apologetics. Far deeper than that, Brother Tom, as I will call him for the remainder of this review, *Descending Like a Dove* is both a powerful testimony of a continuing spiritual journey into dangerous and treacherous waters, the very opposite of either the "born-again" successful Joel Osteen-type or the smug liberal Christianity that hides behind its own sophisticated learnedness. Instead of being a call to think differently, Tommy calls us to live differently, indeed so radically that we adopt descent as a model over against rising in status, wealth, power, knowledge – you name it.



So what else is new about this? Why, nothing! It's as old as those ancient prophets from Miriam to Deborah to Hannah, Isaiah (all three of them), Micah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah onto Miriam, that "kick-ass" mom of peasant radical *Yeshua barJoseph (Miriam)*, whose promised reign focussed on the underside of history, those peasants, fishers, sex trade workers, petty criminals—the discarded of society, useful only to produce the goods to sustain and expand Roman imperial power and continue the proclamation of that "fake news" called *Pax Romana* (or should I say *Pax Americana*). Before I highlight just how this "personal testimonial journey" rocked my very being, I propose a brief summary of the overall compelling character of this work: 1) **its powerful imagery**: Brother Tom calls upon all who would follow Jesus (the pioneer and sustainer of our faith) to adopt the image of the "dove," who gathers and sustains its life by communal loyalty "on the ground" as contrasted with "the Falcon", a rapacious bird of prey who reigns on high always disdainfully looking downward from its perch to exploit and kill. Especially interesting for me was that particular bird of prey (the eagle), which was banner to imperial Rome and is embodied everywhere in the United States—on coinage, in the sports field and throughout the nation's imperial rhetoric. 2) **Brother Tom's use of imagery from the Biblical story(ies) as framework for his own journey**: He integrates most effectively his own continuing journey with such motifs as Creation, Exodus, Wilderness, etc. 3) **His Emphasis on the Margins**: Far more than a personal redemptive story from blindness to a successful form of spiritual awakening (we have an abundance of these), Tom takes a downward journey among life's discards, that very place where Christ dwells among those of little account to Caesar and the imperial chaplains. And he insists, in the name of our radical Biblical faith, we must stay there in full solidarity with these God's special folk. These rejects became Tom's healers and the sole ointment against the continuing lures of imperial success, so easy for a white-privileged guy like himself (oops, myself). 4) **His Open and Humble Discourse**: Brother Tom manages to open himself to his readers without focusing on himself; for him the journey into scary waters to follow the crucified one is what matters most. In other words, the anti-imperial pilgrimage in solidarity with those on the margins takes clear priority over the one making the journey.

The above reasons alone underscore the fine quality of this work, yet I hasten to add how Descending Like a Dove gut-punched me with the Spirit. Its appearance in 2018 could not have proven more timely (and I do mean *kairos*-type timeliness). That very year marked a half century away from Martin Luther King's Poor Peoples Campaign, which has inspired a resurrection of the same entitled "Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival." Co-directed by black preacher activist Rev. Dr. William Barber II and community organizer Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, Dr. King's resurrected model is now sweeping across an increasingly anti-poor, anti-people of color and war-crazy America with its grass-roots direct action model of a "dove-like" alternative. I was immediately captivated and on-board. After all, it was Dr. King's blood poured out on the Loraine Motel's balcony that drove me to my knees and prodded me from my safe academic scholarly, "middle-class" reformism via the route of calm, gradual and safe reasonableness into the troubled waters of radical solidarity with my black sisters and brothers. Given my age of seventy-seven years and my Parkinson's disease setback, I decided to use a fair chunk of time to write a fifty-year memoir journey set in the historical context of these two Poor People's Campaign. So, when I cracked the cover of Brother Tom's book, I discovered almost immediately that I was being enriched by a brother on that road where we cannot walk alone. "Dr. King intimately connected Christian faith to the transformation of socio-economic and political structures," he stated in his "Preface" (p. ii), asserting shortly thereafter, "much of the American Dream is built on exploiting and displacing people over *there* so that the fortunate few can experience comfort right *here*." Parallel to my own journey, Tom laid the claim, "King was the key to understanding Jesus in contemporary American society (p. iii)." By the time he closed his preface with words like these (p. iv) - "The challenge is to embody what is 'great' as defined by Jesus: a ruthless commitment to humility, service and compassion," leaves "only one thing left to do—drop the familiar and commit our time, energy and resources to finding her [a deliberate use of the pronoun *her*], and then follow. This downward mobility is the only way up." Echoing Bell Hooks, Brother Tom calls for continuing that struggle against Dr. King's triplet evils in the form of "*imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* (pp. 6-7)," a commitment beyond deconstruction to decolonization (p. 8). Tom urges us to escape the falcon's lures of "all that is predatory," including "scapegoating, commercializing, corporatizing and commoditizing (p. 18)."

Brother Tom takes his own "decolonizing descent" model by living and working in solidarity with those poor and mostly African-American sisters and brothers in the Detroit-Flint, Michigan corridor fighting the poisoned and cut-off water supplies to these marginalized communities. Even further he acknowledges these vulnerable folk lead and inspire him rather than the other way around. He likens poor and black women leaders in this fight-back mode to the "persistent widow" in the Gospel of Luke 18:1-8 (pp. 124-125); I prefer to call her the "pissed-off" widow. Moving from this direct experience, Tom highlights the role played by militant women in the Civil Rights epoch. Especially chilling is his exposure of how deeply the primal sin of "whiteness" pervades our personhood and societal matrix, so much so that is a lifetime disorder requiring continual and strong doses of anti-imperial community cleansing and resistance. This final and lengthy quote I address to myself, and any other "established folk," who seek to anesthetize our troubled consciences with some "nicey-nicey" use of "love" terminology to turn instead to the more Biblical model illustrated by Brother Tom (pp. 194-195):

Jesus prophetic fire is reflected in Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the Black Pastor who President Obama disowned after his 'God damn America!' sermon went viral. I heard Wright preach a sermon in Detroit on an episode from Luke's Gospel where he compared the seasonal hurricane pathway across the Atlantic with that of the 'Middle Passage,' the route shipping the enslaved from Africa to the Americas—same path. This is not mere coincidence. More like moral consequence. We are caught in a web of mutuality.

Jesus and Jeremiah Wright were no different from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose prepared sermon for the Sunday following his assassination was entitled "Why America May Go to Hell."

It is difficult not to quote almost endlessly from such powerful material. Instead I urge those sisters and brothers who, like me, are drawn haltingly and fearfully away from imperial falcon Christendom to a dove-like militancy with our crushed and marginalized neighbors to pick up Brother Tom's book and join with me to collectively and locally give it flesh and blood by joining with that descending broken Lord who calls us to share the load of the wooden beams of execution called "the cross."

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