For the healing of the nations: the book of Revelation in an age of cultural conflict

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For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict
Justo L. Gonzalez
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117 pages, $22.25 Softcover

On the way to making the book of Revelation relevant for today this short study gives us new multicultural lenses with which to view the first century biblical world as well the contemporary world.

These chapters were originally a series of lectures given by Gonzalez (sometimes with his wife Catherine) in various theological schools and seminaries in the United States. You may remember Gonzalez as the historian who wrote the standard two volumes of church history that you read, or were supposed to read, in seminary. Here we see his historical mind and cross-cultural heart at work in understanding the book of Revelation for our time.

Gonzalez begins by giving us a brief sweep of modern western history with focus on how it is that we find ourselves at the turn of the century confronted daily with cultural differences in a land that was once much more homogenous (The audience for this work is clearly North American). He asserts here that how we deal with the clash of cultures in the church and in society is very much at the heart of the gospel. Chapter two gives the reader background into the clash of cultures (Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Persian) which came together in Palestine in the first century. Focus is not only on cultural wars but economic and political power plays like the Pax Romana. How the early church dealt with these cultural differences is the focus of the next chapter. Here Gonzalez re-reads key texts from the letters of Paul and Acts to say that the early church felt called to and even “thrived at those edges where conflict was inevitable” (53).

Having given us a firm historical backdrop, Gonzalez turns in the last three chapters to the book of Revelation. John, he contends, is a Palestinian Jew who has gone to Asia Minor to work in the Gentile mission. Not at home in this new culture, John is alarmed at the way Christians have accommodated themselves to the Roman world. As a prophet and poet who is new to the culture, he is sharp with his critique and to the point. Looking mainly at Revelation 13, Gonzalez notes that John was exhorting his fellow Christians to be aware of the evil lure of the Empire and seek rather the slaughtered but triumphant Lamb of God. In the next chapter Gonzales examines those texts in Revelation which speak of every tribe, language and nation coming together under Christ. Here Gonzalez encourages the modern believer, as John encouraged the ancient, to appreciate but not romanticize or deify any one culture, for at the heart of the gospel is its ability to exist in many cultures. His last chapter, entitled “Our Eyes have seen the Glory”, is a study of the throne room scenes in chapters five and seven of John’s
book. Here we are treated to one the best explanations of how knowing God’s promise of the future might move the Christian church to live a life of love with God’s many people today. Wolfhart Pannenberg is never quoted here but Gonzalez explains the “ontological presupposition of the priority of the future” in a language we can all understand.

Gonzalez hits the mark with this book. He is an excellent communicator who uses good illustrations, humour, and personal passion in getting his points across to the reader. His brief sweeps of history are colourful, economical and relevant. His grappling with biblical texts in the context of historical and cultural issues then and now are fresh and highly topical for a church today which finds itself in need of new life in the midst of cultural upheaval. His multicultural reading of the book of Acts and Revelation is especially powerful as we struggle to form churches and communities with many peoples.

While inspiring a re-reading of the biblical text and our own times with new multicultural lenses, Gonzalez is not naive. He uses stories from his own life and from the early church to say that while there is something “sweet” about a multicultural vision of church or society, the “bitter” side is there too: The multicultural church “involves much more than bringing a bit of colour and folklore into our traditional worship services. It involves radical changes...” (92).

This is an excellent short read which brings missiology, history and good Bible study to bear on current cultural conflicts in the church. This is a book for the pastor and for students of the New Testament. What the work is ideal for, though, is adult Sunday School class. You get to hit two birds with this one stone. This easy to read book will gently introduce the church both to a new understanding of Revelation and inspire informed debate of a new vision of a church which does not hide from cultural debates but thrives there where the Holy Spirit is tenaciously working.

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The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride and Empire in the Apocalypse
Barbara R. Rossing
180 pages, $25.25 Softcover

The thesis of Rossing’s work is simple. The two women of John’s