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FRIENDS AND GLOBAL FEMINIST THEOLOGY: JENNIFER M. BUCK OFFERS A VISION FOR REFRAMING EVANGELICALISM—AND QUAKERISM—FOR THE TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY

CHERICE BOCK

In *Reframing the House: Constructive Feminist Global Ecclesiology for the Western Evangelical Church*, Jennifer M. Buck places Friends theology in conversation with twentieth century theologians, Karl Barth and John Howard Yoder, and encourages twenty-first century evangelicals to learn from feminists in the two-thirds world. She offers Friends theology from Christ-centered traditions as a bridge between mid-century evangelicalism and current global feminism. For Quaker readers, her book shows a path toward creative and Spirit-filled engagement with majority world Friends.

In this review, I will share how Buck utilizes Friends theology to construct an open-hearted evangelical ecclesiology, and touch on the work of the three feminist theologians from the two-thirds world whose work she uses. I will then describe two of the most important aspects in this text for Friends, offering some thoughts regarding the usefulness of Buck’s “reframing” when it comes to Evangelical Friends, and Friends more broadly.

I. OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Buck builds her book using a confessional and contextual voice, situating herself as an Evangelical Friend. Her theology seeks to engage evangelicals broadly. Buck sets out to explore her “thesis that Third World feminist ecclesiology forms a relevant critique of Western evangelical ecclesiology”; in other words, she is hoping to bring together feminist ideas, non-Western critiques, and the witness of peace churches to evangelical theology, in hopes that it will form a critique that will enhance American evangelicalism (2). While

recognizing it is not a foregone conclusion that evangelicalism can reframe itself, Buck expresses a hope that “the movement is robust enough to respond to contextual issues and that Evangelicalism contains a strong enough identity to form an ecclesiology” (47).

1. EVANGELICAL ECCLESIOLOGY ENHANCED BY AWARENESS OF FRIENDS

Buck suggests that evangelical theology would be strengthened by attention to Friends theology. Due to similarities between early Quaker ecclesiology’s emphasis on holiness and the roots of the evangelical tradition in the United States, she thinks the hundreds-of-years-old ecclesial tradition of Friends may be a bridge to helping evangelicals more readily accept the ideas of feminist and liberation theologies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Friends version of political theology (alongside other peace churches) offers a biblical interpretation and lived praxis of radical prophetic witness, equality of all people, and the desire to share the good news of this liberating message, ideally with humility and cooperation with the present work of the Holy Spirit.

2. PROPHETIC CRITIQUE FROM GLOBAL FEMINIST THEOLOGAINS

While Buck hopes to encourage other evangelicals to adopt an ecclesiology that resembles early Friends, she does not stop there. She also encourages evangelicals to heed the voices of feminist theologians from the Third World. Though she does not state it outright, I will do so: Friends ecclesiology would also be enhanced by encounter with these theologians, namely Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kwok Pui-Lan, and María Pilar Aquino. Although they are not all from evangelical traditions they take “the role of Scripture seriously as a starting point for theological reflection” (81). According to Buck, these theologies could strengthen Western evangelical ecclesiology by helping broaden evangelical thought and action beyond a colonialist mindset.

For Oduyoye, Christianity must be holistic, with no separation between body and soul. This leads to an ecclesiology that includes active work toward social justice and reconciliation, rooted in collaborative community and solidarity. Christian ecclesiology will

always challenge patriarchy for all three of these women. Oduyoye's ecclesiology includes love of one's home place, culture, and value for each individual embedded within the community.

Kwok emphasizes the ways Western Christianity has become too enmeshed with Western culture, so the church often props up or goes along with the status quo power structures. She deconstructs Western Christianity's colonial influences and suggests a hybrid, intercultural theology with a focus on embodiment as the church moves with the Spirit to address injustices due to race, class, gender, and so forth. Her ecclesiology resembles a web including the strands of the Spirit whose life sustains us, the relationships of shared love and suffering between members of the Body of Christ, and the network of all creation.

Kwok and Aquino emphasize the importance of telling our stories as part of the process of creating and enacting theologies, and the necessity of hearing stories from a plurality of voices. Lived experiences form the heart of Aquino's theology: the hybrid both/and of the Kingdom of God and the collaborative work of figuring out how to live well together as a community are the main tasks of theological reflection. Central to the ecclesiologies of each of these women is a strong emphasis on the community as a social network for solidarity, performing various roles that are valued by the group, and working together to care for one another.

II. GIFTS AND CHALLENGES FOR FRIENDS

Buck offers a twofold gift to Quakerism in her book, and from these gifts I extract three challenges. The two gifts include showcasing Friends to an audience other than Quakers, and offering a model for how to incorporate voices from liberation, feminist, and two-thirds world theologians in the ways we think about and enact Quakerism today.

From these gifts, three challenges arise: for evangelicals broadly, would they recognize Buck's historical and suggested future theology as evangelical? And for Friends, who will respond and live out this way of interpreting ecclesiology? Thirdly, are we willing to go beyond our valorization of seventeenth century Friends, to see the need for voices from the outside, from the two-thirds world?

1. QUAKERS IN CONVERSATION WITH THEOLOGIAN OUTSIDE THE FRIENDS TRADITION

Buck includes a section about Quakers in a book targeted at a more broadly evangelical, feminist, and Christian audience. She places Quaker practice alongside theologians such as Barth and Jurgen Moltmann, and in the context of political theology. Then she also speaks of Quaker theology in connection to liberation theologians, feminist theologians, and theologians from the two-thirds world. In this way, she brings Quaker theology into the 20th and 21st centuries, suggesting an expansion into areas of concern with more contemporary import.¹

By placing a section about Quakers in a book not directly aimed toward a Quaker audience, she also helps individuals who may not have heard about Quakerism—or at least not been introduced to it as a current phenomenon—to consider Quaker thought and practice as a remedy for some of the gaps in the ways evangelical Christianity is often expressed.

She helps others see the history of Quaker activism coupled with taking the Bible seriously, and shows how this idea lines up with evangelical thought and some of the desires of those within evangelicalism looking for a deeper expression of faith.

2. QUAKERS INVITED INTO TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONVERSATIONS IN GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

Her second gift to Quakers in this book is that of placing Quakerism alongside the current ecclesiology of feminist liberation theologians and women from the two-thirds world. In this way, Quakers are challenged to not only be proud of our past, but to continue moving courageously into the present and the future.

Since Buck is not specifically writing Quaker theology, the concepts she describes of liberation, feminist, and two-thirds world theology can challenge and help update Quakerism. Where in the past most Quakers have come from Europe, the United States, and Canada, it is becoming increasingly important to incorporate the voices of those outside of the so called Western countries or first world. As we likely all know, a majority of Friends live in Africa and Latin America now.² Yet, most of the academic writing about Quaker theology is still done in the first world countries.

Buck presents Quakerism alongside voices from the majority world, showing how they can offer important critiques of Western, evangelical Christian theology's tendency to passively (or actively) participate in colonialist conquest. The question is whether Quakers are willing to continue in this prophetic role, or whether we ourselves have forgotten to live in ways that tend toward justice through radical, Bible-based love.

I come from a similar interpretation of Christianity as Buck, feeling that faithfulness to Christ includes a radical and equitable communal expression of the *ekklesia*, the Kin-dom of God, as our main work in the world.³ I appreciate how the women Buck showcases from the two-thirds world, liberation, and feminist theology challenge evangelicals toward deeper inclusion, humility, radical love, and enactment of social justice: all values we hold dear as Friends.

3. WHO HAS EARS TO HEAR?

These women and others can remind us of our calling: in this case, it is generally not we who are the prophets, but we who need to respond with confession and repentance when faced with the prophetic utterances of others. If we're willing to do this, we might partner with other denominations and traditions listening to the Spirit and enacting what we collectively hear. This is the heart of Quakerism.

While I'm grateful for the gifts this book gives us as Quakers, I also have a couple of concerns—not necessarily about the text, but about our willingness and ability to enact it. First, Buck selected evangelical voices from the fairly distant past (namely, Karl Barth) as exemplary of evangelical theology. Barth is certainly a solid choice theologically, but would his evangelicalism be recognizable to many who currently call themselves American evangelicals? Since she shows historical Quakers and the twentieth and twenty-first century liberation feminists and two-thirds world theologians in the stream of the evangelical tradition as expressed by Barth, her argument may not convince many present-day evangelicals. This is not Buck's problem, but it is a concern as we think about attempting to encourage the current Christian church toward more faithful expressions.

My second concern regards this book's message in relation to Friends. Which Friends can be the intended audience for this book? Here I ask the question: "Is it possible—or at least likely—that Evangelical or other Friends might be willing to reframe their theology

in a way that reflects this constructive feminist global ecclesiology?” While Friends groups in the United States are splintering, as well as converging in exciting ways,⁴ can we listen to Buck and find the balance of remaining firmly within the Christian tradition while also holding to convictions regarding peace, social justice, and equity? I hold out hope that we can.

4. LISTENING FOR PROPHETIC VOICES FROM THE TWO-THIRDS WORLD REGARDING THE ENVIRONMENT

The most important part of Buck’s work for Friends who are trying to live within this creative tension is the necessity of listening to those from the two-thirds world. I feel this is a major area where Friends need to grow in the coming decades, which leads to one more concern: whether we’re actually willing and able, as evangelicals and/or as Friends, to live in a way that radically meets the needs of our current time and place: namely, concerns about the environment, climate change, and the intersecting justice issues that go along with environmental issues.

Hidden within Buck’s volume is a critique of evangelicalism—and I would also apply it to Quakerism—that we are not yet doing what needs to be done to shift away from the destructive use of creation, emblematic of our use and abuse of people from so-called minority groups. We as Friends talk about our past social justice action; are we willing to do what needs to be done today? As a participant in this Western culture and as one who benefits from it, am I willing to hear the critiques and enact the ideas of women from the two-thirds world and live more communally, living networked within creation rather than trying to control it? Are we as Friends willing to shift our practices and assumptions so that we can help meet the particular needs and challenges of a world facing catastrophic, anthropogenic climate change? Are we willing to listen to the voices of those who are most vulnerable to climate change’s impacts, and adjust our own lives as an act of faithfulness?

III. CONCLUSION

Reframing the House is addressed to evangelicals. My heart is concerned with how to re-focus evangelical Christians broadly, and Evangelical Friends specifically, on the message of Christ's love, rather than the siren song of populist fear and hate. I fervently hope that Friends will read Buck's book and see hope for reframing their understanding of Christianity, and humbly open themselves to the prophetic critique of women and others from the two-thirds world. I am excited to see the house we reconstruct together.

ENDNOTES

1. It is less unusual for Friends to come into contact with the political theology of John Howard Yoder, but a step in the right direction to bring Friends practice into conversation with the broader field of political theology, a field which, in my opinion, has much in common with what Friends have been doing for centuries, to which we would have much to contribute, and from which we have much to learn.
2. According to Friends World Committee for Consultation, 49% of the world's Quakers live in Africa, 14% hail from the Carribbean and Latin America, and 6% are from Asia and the West Pacific. Only 22% of the world's Friends are from the United States and Canada, and 9% live in Europe and the Middle East.
 "2017 Finding Quakers Around the World Map," Friends World Committee for Consultation – World Office, London, UK, 2017, accessed January 22, 2019, <http://fwcc.world/fwccworld-map2017>.
3. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th edition (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994); Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Kin-dom of God: a mujerista proposal," in *In our own voices: Latino/a renditions of theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 171–189.
4. C. Wess Daniels, *A Convergent Model of Renewal: Remixing the Quaker Tradition in a Participatory Culture* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015).