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Book Review: R. Scot Miller. Gospel of the Absurd: Assemblies of Interpretation, Embodiment, and Faithfulness (Wipf & Stock, 2017)

Cherice Bock
George Fox University

R. SCOT MILLER. *GOSPEL OF THE ABSURD: ASSEMBLIES OF INTERPRETATION, EMBODIMENT, AND FAITHFULNESS*, (WIPF & STOCK, 2017)

CHERICE BOCK

Although Quakers have long been known as a peculiar people, would we go as far as to call ourselves absurd? R. Scot Miller in his *Gospel of the Absurd: Assemblies of Interpretation, Embodiment, and Faithfulness* invites Christians to try on this identity, arguing imperial Christendom coupled with modernist rationalism has often tamed the radical gospel message of Jesus. Miller does not write to a specifically Quaker audience, but he self-identifies as a Quaker and studied at Earlham School of Religion. Through this text, he presents a Christian ethic based in the Bible and that belies his Friends perspective: made up of active "love of neighbors and enemies, non-violence, service to the poor, and egalitarian relationships."[1]

Miller's main claim is that Christian ethicists rarely base their frameworks in the Bible, choosing instead to ground their theories in logic and supposedly universal moral truths. Pointing out that both the Christian left and right engage in "parallel fundamentalist readings" of the Bible and utilize them for the purpose of political power, he expects both liberal and conservative readers to be offended.[2] Conservatives, he suggests, have bought into a prosperity gospel that is not good news for the poor, and they disregard justice in this life. On the other hand, liberals will be offended by all the references to the Bible, Jesus, and the cross. Overly influenced by the rationality of the Enlightenment and the level of political power and prestige the church has enjoyed for centuries, both sides claim universal truth and exclusive hermeneutical authority. Instead, according to Miller, Christians must live in a way that seems absurd, which he defines as "the turning of the world's manner of thinking and doing upside down."[3]

While Miller tends to speak the language of progressive Christianity, citing left-leaning theologians, ethicists, and philosophers, he also focuses his critiques most strongly against the social gospel movement and the universalist impulses of many liberal people of faith. He at times defends conservative interpretations, or shows how they have an exact counterpart in liberal circles. Both Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel and Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism come under scrutiny; Rauschenbush's heirs for their hope in a liberating political system rather than in Jesus, and Christian realism for its pragmatic rejection of the pillars of the gospel message: neighbor and enemy love through nonviolent means.

Instead, according to Miller, we need to recognize the absurdity of the gospel message, trusting that in living it out we will do our part to co-create the just and loving community Jesus envisioned. It sounds absurd to love our enemies and pray for them; meeting violence with a turned cheek does not sound like it will lead toward system change. Miller entreats us to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to societal measures of success, opting instead for a hermeneutic of faithfulness. While the overarching biblical ethic will remain the same across time, its expression will change due to ever-novel situations. Therefore, continual reinterpretation is necessary.

Importantly, Miller emphasizes one cannot enact this hermeneutic of faithfulness alone, but only within a community reading the sacred text and listening together to discern the Spirit's guidance. An ethic centered around Christ and the Bible will "be gleaned from a faith community's reading and discussing Scripture together, and those communities must be brave enough to have faith that even the absurd produces possibilities, and the most radical kinds of faithfulness are the most fruitful."[4] With clear implications for Quakerism, this communal and contextual deriving of a Christian ethic based in the biblical text extends hope for Friends to discern together in these divided times, and I will return to this idea shortly. First, I will describe the basis for the messianic care ethic Miller constructs, focused on the "absurd" gospel.

I. Building A Messianic Care Ethic

Addressing liberals and conservatives who accept forms of civil religion, Miller acknowledges Jesus's gospel comes across as absurd to those

who idolize safety and pragmatism. Jesus encourages an ethic of care. The first four chapters of *Gospel of the Absurd* describe the problem: liberal and conservative Christians alike construct ethical frameworks based not in the biblical text, trust in God, or the life and ministry of Jesus, but focused on rationality and the desire for political power. He describes the problem of utilitarian reasoning, which often serves the greatest good for the greatest number of those who look like "me".

In chapter 5, Miller turns to a discussion of the importance of narrative: ethical frameworks available in the biblical texts are generally not in the form of theological mandates or laws, but instead can be ascertained through attention to stories. Since truth can often be understood through story and myth in ways different from truth obtained through logic and reason, and since human beings are inherently drawn to tell and receive stories to make sense of our personal and collective identities, it is important to reject the Enlightenment claim that only empirical truth counts. Miller rejects modernism because: "As history has shown, modernity has failed to produce any standardized or universally liberating alternatives to the reality of human suffering, let alone provide us with an account of truth."[5] He emphasizes the importance of focusing on the story of Jesus and the community of faith as a guide rather than as an authoritative support for a truth claim extracted from outside the narrative.

Having shown an ethic based on modernity's reason and pragmatism cannot lead to the just society it promises, Miller pivots to the ethical framework in the Bible. In chapter 6, he discusses the topic of revelation: not an uncovering of that which could have been discerned with our other senses given enough time and build-up of knowledge—in other words, not scientific discoveries—but unveiling in a completely different sphere, "a call for the church to act in history with new understandings of brokenness."[6] Miller emphasizes the concepts of eschaton and apocalypse mean the participation in a new era dawning in the present, based on faith in God's faithful actions in the past, and drawing on hope for incarnation and resurrection. He points out that incarnation and resurrection are cyclical or seasonal concepts, rather than the linear interpretation many of us imbibed from the Western concept of time. Rather than an eschatological hope for a future beyond this world, Miller suggests "the eschaton is in fact an opportunity" for Christians in positions of privilege and power to recognize the sin and brokenness they have been participating in, and

to repent and participate in a new incarnation, having died to self.[7] He offers a "case study of sorts" in a chapter 8 excursus on the *Acts of Philip*, a fourth century non-canonical morality tale. In this way, Miller shows that in the time following the church's turn to imperial power under Constantine, Christians continued to remind themselves of the ethic of nonviolence and enemy love that had epitomized their tradition.

In chapter 9, Miller finally comes to his point regarding the biblical ethic he observes: "a messianic care ethic," which he says is necessarily arrived at through communal interpretation and action.[8] Weaving together postmodern, post-structuralist, and deconstruction philosophy with virtue ethics and showing the faults in the traditional Western ethical frameworks exemplified by Nozick and Rawls, Miller describes a messianic care ethic based in joyful obedience. He speaks much on the topic of sin, noting that traditional ethicists miss this important aspect of human existence. He also avers that communities are virtuous based not on belief but on continuous practice, and on continuing to enact care even when all seems lost.[9] He uses the example of several biblical characters to show his meaning. Through this process, Miller claims, the community engages in collective meaning making and creates and reinterprets a narrative about their identity in Christ.

The final chapters bring in liberation theologians, particularly James Cone, as well as feminist ethicists of care. Through these theologies and ethics centering the "other," Miller emphasizes that Christians with power and privilege must voluntarily release privilege in order to enact a messianic care ethic. He also further develops the definition of his ethic, differentiating it from virtue ethics. In care ethics, one chooses to act out care (even if it's not one's first choice), whereas in virtue ethics one must restrain oneself from aggression against another. Care ethics is communally and actively living out one's responsibility based on relationship, whereas virtue ethics is keeping oneself individually pure. In this way, a messianic care ethic is active and relational rather than passive and individualistic.

I would have liked to see Miller further develop his messianic care ethic, particularly centering the voices of feminists and womanists, liberationists, and post-colonial theologians, rather than spending a majority of the book refuting modernism and its assumptions. However, this book offers a helpful critique and opportunity to refocus for Christians engaged in partisan politics, showing clearly

how their ethics do not reflect the Messiah they say they follow, and making the tactical parallels between themselves and their opposing party embarrassingly obvious.

II. Absurdity and Present-day Friends

In today's Religious Society of Friends, the critiques of the left and the right apply to our Liberal and Evangelical Friends, and even within our own meetings and yearly meetings. Many of us fall into traps of authoritarian acceptance or rejection of literal biblical interpretations or other empirically based truth claims, or undifferentiated relativism. Sorting ourselves along political lines, these modernist assumptions have contributed to the fractures in many of our communities. We may claim nonviolent ideals in words, but do we enact pacifism alongside our communities?

Miller advises: "For the peace witness to be received as credible and trustworthy, it must be embodied publicly for the neighbors that you purport to love, and it must be received as trustworthy. Such public embodiment comes with a cost."[10] The cost is it looks absurd and impractical, weak and risky to those in power, but to those without power it looks like care and solidarity.

"I suggest that the church must maintain an ethic that understands the nation-state may reserve the right to act outside of the boundaries of church ethics, and that, in order for the church to be the church, it must nevertheless speak out against such actions and sacrifice privileges in order to be wholly non-compliant," Miller proclaims. While Friends traditionally spoke truth to power, standing outside the power hierarchy while remaining engaged with it, is this still the case today? Miller claims this must be done with Christ at the center of the story, but Friends who speak truth to power often do not center Jesus, and those who center Jesus often do not challenge the status quo of American social and economic arrangements. In this way, Friends do indeed look absurd, but not in the ways Miller recommends.

Miller concludes his book with a series of questions about whether we are really supposed to take Jesus's message seriously, or just "do our comfortable best."[11] Do we engage in the Quaker ethical practices of neighbor and enemy love, nonviolence, equity, and service to the point where it may look absurd to an outside observer due to its vast and overflowing abundance of love, grace, and release of privilege?

Is Jesus's message only spiritual, or is it meant to be lived out? The conviction that Jesus's words are meant to be lived has defined the Friends tradition. Are Friends willing to do this work again, in our generation? It remains to be seen, but I look forward to the journey with you all.

ENDNOTES

1. R. Scot Miller, *Gospel of the Absurd: Assemblies of Interpretation, Embodiment, and Faithfulness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 112.
2. Miller, 2.
3. Miller, 83.
4. Miller, 40.
5. Miller, 62.
6. Miller, 81.
7. Miller, 103.
8 Miller, 116.
9 Miller, 131.
10. Miller, 153.
11. Miller, 154.