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Will's "A Contemporary Theology for Ecumenical Peace" - Book Review

Paul Mojzes
Rosemont College

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BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Paul Mojzes, Rosemont College, PA

The title of the book is not immediately relevant for a review in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, but the activism of the author and the content warrant its inclusion. James Will, an United Methodist emeritus professor of systematic theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, was a long time member of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe and president of the same during some of the difficult East-West confrontations in the Prague Christian Peace Conference. A significant part of the book is devoted to Will’s discussion of the praxis for ecumenical peace and the challenges of the Cold War, including the effect this has made on his own personal as well as on broader social developments.

In this short, densely packed book addressed primarily to average Christian, Jewish, and Muslim readers, Jim Will traces his own theological growth based on encounters with influential individuals in his own life and on the message of the prophetic aspects of scriptures from the three Abrahamic traditions. Will’s understanding of God is panentheistic, a theological perception of God who is continuously mutually related with the cosmos and human history in its ambiguously uneven but inexorable movement toward a Divinely destined peace (“ambiguous spiritual tide”, p.2). Humans are called to cocreate with God the historical peace (shalom) which is Biblically understood as reconciliation toward the whole. God as Creator and Redeemer calls us to love, justice, and equality, with justice being the structure of love.

Will emphasizes that there are two approaches to dealing with war as the most destructive evil, namely pacifism and just war theory, suggesting that both of these can work
toward God’s ultimate aim of a just peace. He then suggests that the historic religions and denominations need to involve themselves in civil religion (avidly avoiding falling into the pitfall of nationalist civil religions such as Nazism) by transcending nationalism through ecumenical cooperation.

These lofty ideals have to find embodiment in a praxis, which he defines as “putting into practice a strategy, or a theory, or a set of ethical principles.”(p. 26). World War II, and then the Cold War and the threat of a nuclear war, as well as the social inequities that had to be fought during the civil rights movement, provide specific cases of praxis. In these cases (and in others) the church (synagogue, and mosque) must move history toward the universal common good to which God’s spirit urges us. It is in the short expositions of his engagement as a Western Christian in the ecumenical peace movement with Eastern Christians, and his unwillingness to let temporary ideological barriers weaken our common witness that readers will find James Will’s book most helpful and encouraging.