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# Book Profile: *A Theology of Engagement*

A profile of Ian S. Markham's *A Theology of Engagement*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003. x + 250 pp. $31.95 paper; $68.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-6312-36023.

In his latest book, *A Theology of Engagement*, Ian S. Markham, Dean and Professor of Theology and Ethics at Hartford Seminary (Connecticut, USA), calls for reconsidering the usual divide between liberal and conservative approaches to Christian theology on the basis of the nearly uncontestable fact that Christianity has always learned and even borrowed from non-Christian sources. Building on his previous theological work and his experience working with other faiths, the author calls for an "engaged theology" which makes this historical situation a guide for future theological work. Markham thus takes today's popular theologies of identity directly to task as being unfaithful to the tradition of Christian theology and ethics. In the process, Markham delineates a position on the nature of theology which is opposed to the fideistic tendencies of the early Karl Barth, as well as the postliberal and Radical Orthodox contention that theologies are fundamentally narratives that are effectively incommunicable.

Markham's argument proceeds largely by historical example through thirteen brief chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The book opens with a very helpful introduction to the author and his work which introduces this volume as a kind of report on present findings in the author's continuing journey as an "engaged theologian." The book therefore reads somewhat like a collection of essays, but chapters are introduced and concluded such as to connect the parts together into an effective whole. Of the many chapters only three (Chapters One, Three, and Thirteen) are expressly illustrative of Markham's central thesis that Christianity has, can, and must, learn from non-Christian sources while the others present examples in support. Whereas "engagement" extends to all fields of inquiry, including the sciences, secular philosophy, politics, economics and the arts, this review will deal specifically with the implications of his vision for Christian theology of religion.

In Chapter One the general contour of "engagement" as a theological method-

ology is presented along with an ethical and theological argument for its necessity. "A theology of engagement involves the following: it is an encounter that subsequently shapes the theology itself" (10). This "encounter" need not be merely affirmative or negative but does involve learning from non-Christian sources. Against Barth, Hauerwas and Milbank and their associated schools he asserts that "engagement across traditions is possible," (15) that "the category of 'theism' is helpful when comparing different religious traditions" and that a theology of engagement is committed to "the achievements of modernity." Two assumptions ground Markham's case throughout. The first is the largely unspoken concept that all human beings are potentially aware of at least some aspect of the divine, and the second is the notion that a field of study can only benefit from inquiry from as many angles as possible.

Markham insists that a theology of engagement is necessary because "it opens up a necessary option for the churches" that is neither unquestioningly open to diverse positions ("liberalism") nor unquestioningly closed to them ("conservatism"). Using John Selby Spong and Alister McGrath as examples he maintains that both liberals and conservatives err in thinking that there is a changeless Christian tradition that must either be affirmed or rejected (21-29). In this way Markham comes close to affirming that what is most important for theology is to develop the clearest and most truthful conceptions of God that are possible using whatever "data" might present itself. He comes close to making this point but stops short because his theory of religious symbolism appears to be limited to an affirmation of an undefined or developed "critical realism" (15-7) and the notion that religious language essentially means what it literally says about the religious object at least when addressing moral qualities. For Markham God is not *actually* male but God does appear to really be good.

Rather than speaking of humanity's engagement with God through symbols (e.g. Tillich, R.C. Neville), however, Markham dwells on engaging with symbols. The difference is this: although he seems to want to use "engagement" to learn about God, in the end his procedure only seems suited to learning about human symbol systems and this may be why his later examples (chapters 4-10) are primarily ethical in nature and do not address a theory or conception of God much at all. Underlying this is the classic contention that God is good and therefore what is good is godly but this claim is not supported (89). It serves as an unspoken subtext despite the existence of theologians who deny anything like the literal attribution of goodness to God (i.e. Paul Tillich). Markham assumes that when God is said to be good that this is a relatively straightforward assertion about a being. This assumption keeps him from investigating whether divine goodness might not convey something else about God, such as God's role as freely giving source of all that is good or bad.

Chapter Two presents the methodology of St. Augustine and concludes, with some reservations, that his was an engaged theology. Markham reaches this conclusion primarily on the basis of his embracing of neo-platonic and other non-Christian ideas. The reason for this exposition of the well known fact that Augustine's Christianity owes much (if not most) to non-Christian philosophy is that Markham seeks to illustrate that Christian tradition was not formed in isolation. In this respect he might have used St. Paul or any number of the other Fathers as examples. He seems to think that since "engagement" is what Augustine practiced then no "Christian" criticism of the approach is possible and that it has an irrefutable pedigree.

Chapter Three introduces three ways of "engaging" which Markham says are grounded in the Christian tradition and are guided by the injunction to do good and to act justly. These are "assimilation" or "the constructive use of a category or…set of categories from a non-Christian source," "resistance" or "when a theologian decides that a certain approach…should be rejected as incompatible with the heart of the Christian revelation," and "overhearing" or "when a theologian finds significant illumination from the arguments and positions of theologians within another religious tradition" (49). These approaches to engagement are again supported on the grounds that such important Western theologians as Augustine and Aquinas used them (50-61). Such appeals to authority and tradition, which form the argumentative glue of the book, are unlikely to convince any but the already faithfully "engaged."

However, Markham introduces an important distinction between the content of the Christian tradition and the process used to arrive at that content. He asserts that the process has been one of engagement and learning from Christian and non-Christian sources alike while the content of the tradition is the result of the decisions made along the way (49). In this way Markham develops a conception of the Christian tradition as a dynamic, responsive instrument for understanding and living with God. One might wonder how it is that in engagement with other religious symbols one could possible know which are right and which are wrong. Markham seems to be saying that although there is no static core to Christianity there are some Christian insights that are not up for review and that constitute points from which to judge everything else. Thus, his approach is decidedly not hypothetical or fallible and therefore questionably open to learning from non-Christian sources. The content of the tradition is and should be refined for Markham but it cannot be thrown out entirely regardless of the data. Again, Markham assumes that Christianity is right in claiming that God is good and somehow wants goodness from us, but he does not seem willing to test this against other positions that place God beyond goodness or evil as the creator of both. In other words, the goodness of God cannot really even be questioned by

this procedure and Markham is therefore not capable of engaging openly with alternative views, even if they are truer to reality.

Markham's approach involves affirming a kind of tense openness to other traditions but ultimately, unlike the theology of R.C. Neville, the integrity of central Christian ideas cannot really be challenged at all.[1] As he says, "engagement might well involve resisting a key idea because it would threaten the coherence and integrity of certain Christian insights" (48-9). But what if the non-Christian insight is better or more truthfully represents reality? Would not theology be better off if it was concerned primarily with first being true and second (if at all) with being "Christian"? Why not find what is true (albeit vaguely understood) about reality first and then develop a practical system of engaging with that reality known through unfettered inquiry with the help of the best symbols available?

If what is good and true in non-Christian traditions is good and true because it reflects or allows interaction with God, as Markham contends, then it would seem to be important to figure out how this is accomplished. The most obvious candidate is that different traditions engage with a single reality in different respects and with different symbols. One need not follow John Hick and company too closely in order to maintain this kind of approach. It is surely not outside of the realm of possibility to think that different symbol systems actually do convey something important about God. Markham *seems* bound by his "critical realism" (15-17) which keeps him from seeing that choosing between theological positions is not necessarily choosing between images of God. Instead, choosing between theological positions can be thought of as a matter of finding what is true (or untrue) about theological symbols.

Chapters Four through Ten support Markham's position through a series of case studies that offer examples of his three types of responses to "engagement." As examples of appropriate assimilation Markham offers human rights (Chapter Four), Black and Feminist Liberationist perspectives (Chapter Six), and the recent "consensus around capitalism" (Chapter Nine). On the resistance front Markham argues that absolute state sovereignty ought to be resisted by theologians on primarily Christian grounds and that there is a religious obligation to intervene in the affairs of others to protect human rights (Chapter Five). Markham characterizes secularism in the West and in India (Chapter Seven) as well as inclusivism and toleration in an Indian context (Chapter Eight) as areas where overhearing can lead to important insights for the Christian theologian and/or

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[1] See Robert C. Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) and *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

ethicist. Though packed with insights and questions for debate, these chapters serve primarily to round out the current state of his thinking about theological method by illustrating what he means by engagement.

Markham may be on the right track when he acknowledges that religious symbols are best evaluated by their fruits, but he reserves veto authority in the name of Christian symbols (55-8). This is curious since the positions that he contends were rightly rejected after engagement with non-Christian ideas were all once (and even today in some circles) considered critical to the tradition. Indeed, without a philosophical grounding of some kind that transcends the traditional symbol systems of the religions and that provides a view of what the Ultimate really is there seems to be no way to know where to stop in refining the Christian symbols. There is little danger that the content of the tradition will evaporate but it does appear that it has no reason to remain anything but the process of "engagement" spoken of as a subject rather than a verb.

Without grounding in an unquestioned fundamentalist or fideistic affirmation of any given religious tradition (some Barthians etc.) or in a hypothetical metaphysical theory of reality (R.C. Neville) that is open to the evidence from all dimensions of life and experience there is simply no way to judge religious symbols. Similarly, without some grounding, there is no way to compare religious traditions. If this comparison is going to seek out the truth, it must seek to answer what religious symbols engage with and how. Only in that way can engagement with non-Christian traditions lead to better understandings of God that do not simply seek out a lowest common denominator or impose one religious vision on all people everywhere.

Chapters Eleven and Twelve provide helpful examples of "engaged" theologians. The first example is the British theologian Keith Ward who is celebrated for his willingness and ability to learn from the world religions, and the second is Pope John Paul II who is credited with willingness to engage but is criticized for not following through fully. The book concludes with a final look at the "Shape of an Engaged Theology" in Chapter Thirteen and a two page conclusion that recapitulates the main theses offered throughout.

In response to *A Theology of Engagement* one might fairly ask: What is theology? If theology is really dedicated to truth about reality as Markham claims, then one would expect an explanation of how theological symbols interact with the object they symbolize that accounts for how they can be right or wrong, but this is nowhere to be found. He seems to suggest that symbols are representations of their objects in relatively straightforward ways but then provides almost entirely ethical examples implying that the information conveyed by a symbol is judged

by its effects and not its similarity to its objects. A fully developed theory of religious symbolism would help tremendously to clarify this issue, yet one is no where to be found. The questions raised by this discussion are inspiring, however, and may lead to fruitful additional research.

Nevertheless, Markham is correct that theology is an incredibly complicated business, and he rightly identifies a central tension in the area of truth seeking and affiliation to a tradition (209). That said, one wonders why Paul Tillich is not mentioned in this regard since he famously spoke of being both inside and outside the "theological circle" at the same time.[2]

Additionally, it is troubling that Markham refuses to take non-theistic traditions into account in ways that remain true to their own stated denial of theism. Apparently, for Markham, if a religion speaks of a kind of higher being then it resembles Christianity enough to be helpful for theologians (17-9). But traditions which do not are apparently not helpful, since they are not discussed. He seems content that there are many theistic traditions which Christianity can learn from and apparently sees little need to learn from expressly non-theistic traditions except to note an ethical position from the Dalai Lama (203). There are indications that Markham thinks that any good tradition is in some way theistic, despite what they say about themselves. This kind of thinking is not only highly suspect for an "engaged theologian," it is often offensive to those who do not maintain the existence of a highest being. This is doubly strange given the often impeccable ethics of such traditions as various types of clearly non-theistic Buddhism.

With Markham's ethical criterion one would expect that any tradition which respects life and fosters compassionate behavior toward all would be on the right track *theologically* as well. This is apparently not the case for him unless the Buddhists are wrong about their own beliefs about the status of a highest being. Markham seems oblivious to the presence of a mediating way to move forward on these issues. One can maintain that the God of Christianity is not an existent being at all and that symbols such as "Father" are meant to carry across something other than an image of the Ultimate. One can see religious symbols as tools, created by human beings in order to describe and convey experience of and with that which is of ultimate importance and which binds all things together, thus allowing differences to exist in the first place.

Markham's call to engage with the broader non-Christian world in theological

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[2] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 8-15.

work presents a timely counterpoint to the tendency toward inward looking theologies of identity and community. He wrestles with a fundamental tension in theology between seeking truth and being faithful to tradition. The book should serve those making a similar journey well. Markham recognizes the dynamics involved in the way theological ideas are crafted and understood, and his work presents important questions for future research and reflection by scholars, teachers, and students a like. His message of openness to non-Christian ideas should serve the churches well as they struggle to remain relevant in a world which is increasingly engaged with different cultures.

It must be noted in closing that the text is littered with minor proofreading errors throughout such as, "It is importance to recognize…" (86) instead of "important." While these errors do not influence the argument of the book they do distract the reader at times and their sheer number is concerning. Despite this and the other difficulties outlined above, Markham has given us an important book at the right time and it deserves to be "engaged" with vigor.

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