

Book Review

The World Leadership Opportunity: Resolved Christianity and One Education System. Douglas J. Thom. London: Ming-Ai Institute, 2001, 144 pages.

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We are two of many Christian academics in Canada. Like other Christian academics, we often feel as if we must tread softly. On one hand, we believe our own belief system helps us explain and live efficaciously in our world—especially the world of education that, when you are a teacher of children and young adults, calls for constant episodes of grace in action. And with humility and when confronted with others of our colleagues with greater insight into areas where we have little understanding, we realize how tolerant we must honestly be. Still, with the cacophony of cosmologies that bubble around us, we constantly hope to be able to applaud apologetics for our own faith.

With this in mind, we want to like this book. Alas, we do not. It is not that Thom's book fails to present a number of ideas worthy of discussion. It is more that the narrowness of the discussion does little to extend the topics discussed. Fortunately, the ideas Thom grapples with can be found more rigorously addressed in other sources, thus saving readers the time and effort required to go through this book. Sadly, we simply do not recommend Thom's book as a worthwhile addition to the debate.

For the purposes of this review, we look at the pertinent issues first, offer alternative sources a reader may investigate, and then briefly critique the tone, content, and format of Thom's work. We would spend more time on discussing the book itself, except that we are left with the impression that Thom's work is little more than an anthology of his past work combined with an introduction to some weighty topics worthy of their own study.

Perhaps the aftermath of September 11 leaves each of us, formally or informally, engaged in our first postmodern war. Like any scholar, Christian religious educators grapple with the issues of war, culture, belief, and identity. Most prominent among these are issues of leadership, the role of religious education, and the construction of a caring, just, and faith-filled society: what Christians call building the Kingdom of God. The events of these last months have not changed the topic of discussion; still, they have suddenly expanded the discussion into the wider field of our society.

It is painfully evident that we are a people in desperate need of leadership. We can, of course, plaintively bemoan the failures of our elected political leaders, our sports leaders, our entertainment leaders, and our church leaders.

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This misses the point completely. The criticism must begin each time we look in the mirror. What am I (are we) doing to provide the leadership needed in these times? For many this challenge means digging deeply into our own faith roots. Are we living true to the essential components of Christianity? As Christians do we try to live the promises of our own baptism to be priests, prophets, and pastors to others?

From a faith perspective, leadership is a difficult challenge in our contemporary, secular society. It is difficult to express your beliefs openly in many areas of our society, much less to disclose that your actions actually flow from the values and beliefs of Christian conviction. Self-preservation seems to force perplexed Christian leaders to retreat into denominational "hives." This dilemma is far from new, and an attractive alternative for such retreat is found in Donna Markham's book *Spiritlinking Leadership* (1991). Markham describes how to work through resistance to facilitate organizational change. Although the book deals with secular issues and examples, the trajectory of Markham's thoughts is clear. She states, "It is crucial to keep in mind that resistance always occurs when organizations face a powerful invitation to transform themselves to respond with greater fidelity to their mission" (p. 30). So too is the case with each individual person of faith and each religious educator.

Once the stance on leadership has been solidified, an individual religious educator can begin to look at ministry in a new light. How should the message of faith, hope, and love be presented in a way that is both true to the historical tradition of Christianity and applicable to the experiences and needs of students? Any experienced religious educator knows how easy it is to stand in front of a class and flap one's jaws and how equally discouraging it is to face what seems to be the constant blank stares of students.

It does not have to be that way. Thomas Groome's recent book *Educating for Life* (1998) offers practical solutions. Groome's personal vignettes, historical reflections, and practical advice deliver a message of hope for Christian educators. Once you decide to assume the leadership role, there is a way to make a difference in religious education that is both practical and meaningful for teacher and student.

We continually encounter students distant from every aspect of our efforts. How can we teach, care for, love alienated students? More than anything, these alienated students are individual humans painfully devoid of community. They struggle in the most basic areas of human relationships and personal identity: Who am I? Who are you? How should we relate? If we are going to become spirit-linking leaders who educate for life, we need to build institutions that are communities. Loughlan Sofield (1998) lays out a comprehensive blueprint in his book *Building Community: Christian, Caring, Vital*. He reminds religious educators that "God calls us to community. Through community we can be helped to discover our truest and deepest selves. Relationships in community help us to discover the fullness of who we are" (p. 17).

The three resources recommended here are scholarly, readable, and practical books. Together they provide religious educators with a sense of hope in their ministry. They are well written and edited. And in their simplicity of standards, they stand in stark contrast to the book by Thom that is (ostensibly) under review here. In contrast, Thom's work seems to be a personal journal of

his own discovered knowledge published quickly for a small, already appreciative, and uncritical audience.

If one tends to be suspicious of authors who seem to cite only their own past works and provide extensive lists of their own previous publications, conference presentations, and professional activities and then name newly discovered theories and ideas after themselves, one would be highly suspicious of Thom's *The World Leadership Opportunity*. Thom does all of the above abundantly. In addition to what we see as these notable failures, his work rambles through a variety of subjects from Christian apologetics to educational administration to social criticism: all in 64 pages of text! However, Thom claims well in his introduction that "knowledge is not necessarily wisdom" (p. xiii). We agree. If you care about this topic, especially from a faith perspective, skip Thom's book and read the other three.

Reference

Groome, T. (1998). *Educating for life*. Allen, TX: Thomas More.

Markham, D. (1991). *Spiritlinking leadership*. New York: Paulist Press.

Sofield, L. (1998). *Building community: Christian, caring, vital*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.