

Book Review

Crossing Boundaries, Redefining Faith: *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Emerging Church Movement.*

Michael Clawson and April Stace, eds.
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Abstract: The Emerging Church Movement (ECM) has attracted a surprising amount of scholarly attention for a phenomenon notoriously resistant to definition and whose impact and size have been challenging to quantify. This edited volume, *Crossing Boundaries, Redefining Faith: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Emerging Church Movement*, seeks to be a touchstone of the best scholarship about the ECM to date. Across ten chapters with thirteen contributors, the volume succeeds, although it is not without its flaws. Most notably, the relatively small universe of congregations upon which the work in this volume—and broader ECM scholarship—is based raises the question of how to quantify the impact and significance of the movement, something this volume leaves unresolved. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that *Crossing Boundaries, Redefining Faith*—as a single volume—is the best assemblage of scholarship about the ECM thus far. This book makes obvious sense as a core text for any college or seminary course.

Keywords: Emerging Church Movement (ECM), Emerging Church, Ancient-Future, Postmodern, Postcolonial

THE EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT (ECM) has attracted a surprising amount of scholarly attention for a phenomenon notoriously resistant to definition and whose impact and size have been challenging to quantify. While this edited volume, *Crossing Boundaries, Redefining Faith: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Emerging Church Movement* (hereafter *CBRF*), does not seek to resolve every ambiguity or debate surrounding the ECM, its editors wish for the book to be an interdisciplinary conversation (to borrow a popular ECM term) that can serve as a touchstone on the ECM to date. At least one prominent ECM scholar thinks *CBRF* has succeeded: Josh Packard, author of *The Emerging Church*, declares in the Forward of *CBRF*, “This volume is the pinnacle of academic understanding of the Emerging Church Movement” (xi). Across ten chapters with thirteen contributors, *CBRF* largely succeeds in living up to Packard’s claim, although the book is not without its flaws or omissions.

Editors Michael Clawson and April Stace tout the interdisciplinary nature of the volume in its subtitle, a reality born out in its pages. In assembling *CBRF*, the editors enlisted many of the central contributors to ECM scholarship. For example, *CBRF* has entries by Gerardo Marti, James Bielo, and the aforementioned Packard, authors (or coauthor, in the case of Marti) of arguably the three most foundational scholarly books on the ECM.¹ Other contributors include

¹ See James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814789544.001.0001>; Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199959884.001.0001>; and Josh Packard, *The Emerging Church: Religion at the Margins, Religion in Politics and Society* (Boulder, CO: First Forum Press, 2012).

an historian, two anthropologists, and several sociologists, as well as scholars of theology, religious studies, and music. In some cases, the contributions to *CBRF* represent original scholarship regarding the ECM, while in others, the author(s) summarize or build upon existing work available elsewhere. In virtually all cases, the contributors have experienced the ECM firsthand, either as a participant observer, practitioner, researcher, or all three.

The chapters are grouped into two main sections. Chapters 1–5, “Defining Boundaries,” are concerned with the characteristics of the ECM, no small task for a movement defined in part by its resistance to definitions. Chapters 6–10, “Crossing Boundaries”, explore ways the ECM has lived out one of its core intentions, namely revising, reconstructing, and re-envisioning Christian faith. The Introduction by Clawson and Stace, while brief, provides helpful clarity about the ECM and related terms, something vital when dealing with a phenomenon as contested as the ECM. The Introduction pairs well with Chapter 1, in which Clawson sets forward a brief but thorough history of the ECM. Not only do these entries provide a solid foundation, but they are also useful as standalone selections for anyone interested in a primer on the ECM.

The remaining four chapters in the first section include two contributions each from social scientists (Chapters 3 and 4) and theologians (Chapters 4 and 5), although all four entries are based, in one form or another, on social scientific data: ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or textual analyses of ECM literature. In Chapter 2, sociologist Gerardo Marti—in a contribution that is largely a summary of his book with Gladys Ganiel about the ECM—seeks to “conceptualize a set of core processes inherent to the movement” (47). Using his sociological lens, he identifies the ECM as “built on the continual practice of deconstruction” (46), reacting mainly against conservative Protestantism but also against other forms of staid religion. For Marti, the ECM embodies what he terms “collective religious institutional entrepreneurship.” Chapter 3, contributed by anthropologists Jon Bialecki and James Bielo, presents “an ethnographically informed theoretical framework that can accurately apprehend the way Emerging Christians do time” (71), namely “ancient-future” temporality. Perhaps the most theoretical entry of the book, this chapter marries its theoretical sophistication with a visit into actual emerging church space, exploring the practices, images, and symbols employed by one Emerging community in Cincinnati.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn toward the theological, although notably, both authors ground their analyses in interviews, ethnography, and participant observation. In Chapter 4, Xochitl Alvizo—having noticed connections between the ECM and feminist theology—seeks to move past ECM values as proclaimed in its literature in order to assess “the Emerging Church’s faithfulness to its own claims about what it is as church” (94). Alvizo uses interviews and textual study of twelve ECM congregations often-referenced in ECM literature “to uncover the ecclesiology practiced and embodied” (94) by these prominent churches. She observes that while the ECM communities she studied do, indeed, cater to those harmed by Christianity, they also largely lack an explicit critique of patriarchy. She concludes by returning to themes in feminist theology, calling on the ECM to continue to live into the fullness of what it professes.

Similarly, Chapter 5 is a theological reflection grounded in fieldwork. In this case, Timothy Snyder first suggests that “the most interesting reality of the movement is its otherness” (121), and then uses a single-site case study of House of Mercy, an Emerging church in Minneapolis, to explore “the *possibility* present” (121) when an unsettled culture (House of Mercy) comes into contact—and conflict—with a settled one (the Evangelical Lutheran Church

denominations in America?¹⁴ Or would the ECM be like evangelicalism, a cross-denominational identifier that represents adherence to certain core theological affirmations (and later, political ones)? Or would it be like most new religious movements, which do not survive? Over a decade on, it is still challenging to know what to make of the ECM. Although some declared the movement dead long ago, new books and articles about the ECM continue to be written. Clawson and Stace, for their part, name the ECM an “important phenomenon within twenty-first century religion” (11). Perhaps the foremost call to future scholars of the ECM is to interrogate and then quantify this claim. The fruits of such an inquiry can comprise the next volume of scholarship about the ECM another decade from now; until then, *CBRF* will serve as the best single source of ECM scholarship to date.

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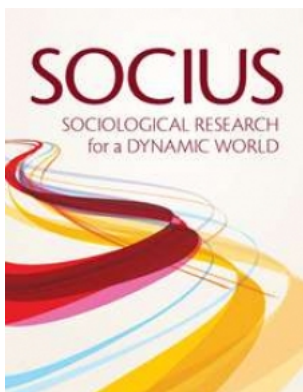
¹⁴ For the trajectory of Methodism, see William Sims Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 71–72.

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