

BOOK REVIEWS



Mario Manuel Catalino Melendez, *Third Culture Faithful: Empowered Ministry for Multi-Ethnic Believers and Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020). 145 pages. Paperback. \$24.00.

Third Culture Faithful is a resource that advocates for third-culture persons in churches and ministries. Mario Manuel Catalino Melendez defines a third-culture person as “one who does not reflect their parents’ respective cultures nor the culture they live in” (15). He broadens the concept to include terms such as “biracial” (2), those of “mixed backgrounds” (2), “mixed heritage” (15), “multi-ethnic” (15), and “cross-cultural” (15). His hope is to provide space for the question, “Where does a mixed kid find a sense of belonging?” (3). He proposes that a third-culture person goes through their Christian life asking three questions: (1) *Who am I?* (2) *Can I trust?* and (3) *What’s wrong with me?* (26) and needing to answer three similar questions: (1) *Why don’t I feel comfortable at my church?* (2) *Who should I listen to?* and (3) *How does the gospel apply to me?* (26).

The book divides into five chapters after the introduction. Chapter 1, "The Psychology of Third Culture Syndrome," lays out different ways to understand third-culture persons and their inner make-up. It provides insight into the struggles and the experiences third-culture kids (TCKs) regularly negotiate. Chapter 2, "Your Parishioner, the Third Culture Kid," continues the consciousness-raising about TCKs in a mono-cultural congregation. Chapter 3, "Your Ministry for the Third Culture Kid," calls into accountability local churches and the structures they maintain that offer inhospitality or hospitality to ministry for, with, and of TCKs. Chapter 4, "Your Pastor, the Third Culture Kid," aims to further a congregation's understanding on its journey to becoming a site where a TCK minister can thrive in ministry. The concluding chapter provides a review of each chapter. Each chapter contains reflection questions for the TCK and the non-TCK.

Melendez's commitment to this work of making the church more hospitable to the TCK is theo-ecclesial. He commits to this work because he believes multi-ethnic churches reflect "the true nature of the gospel and the nature of God" (5) for they allow for "reconciliation between peoples that the world prefers to keep separate" (5). Similarly, a second commitment is that a TCK-welcoming church is a "picture of heaven on earth" and a "universe" present reality of God's *basileia* (7). Third, he is committed because there is a missional purpose in diverse cooperation. The church's witness is stronger when it bears witness to its peace in diversity without inner turmoil. Finally, there is a future-oriented commitment in that TCKs will better appreciate the church because they find a sense of belonging in it.

Overall, the strength of the book is its desire to raise awareness of this group and the exhortation to the church to adjust its approach for, and with, TCKs. If one is new to the conversation or looking for where to begin with one's faith community, each chapter offers some helpful questions for reflection. Furthermore, the book begins to raise questions that leaders of mono-cultural organizations must ask if they desire to grow in their ability to connect with current realities.

The book, however, has key limitations. The conflation of terms under the rubric of "third culture" raises three complexities: (1) culture essentialism, (2) generalizability, and (3) race and ethnicity as social construction. Regarding the first two complexities, Melendez tries to move between a fixed (cultural essentialism) and a fluid notion of culture, but he tends to imply that culture is fixed and, therefore, essential to a person. That is, if a

person is a Korean American (TCK, in his understanding), they would then exhibit both Korean and American (Western US?) aspects of traditional culture. Cultural essentialism suggests that a person is xy because they are x and y . Therefore, Melendez's cultural chart (18), while perhaps a starting point for conversation, needs to be read with fluidity in mind. TCKs, by definition, are hybrid people, not fixed, and the argument seems to undo its own aspirations by restricting the TCK into cultural stereotypes they must now contend with when, in fact, they make new realities that reflect these cultural traditions while also problematizing them. Is it possible to generalize TCKs into one kind when there are many with different experiences?

A third complexity that arises is the conflation of culture with the social construction of race and ethnicity. A person's cultural tendencies and ways of thinking and being may or may not be tied to their race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity are socially constructed within a specific context. In the United States, where Melendez lives, race and ethnicity carry a long history of racial and ethnic construction and ramification. Race/ethnicity and cultural competency are interrelated but different conversations and should be treated as such. The book's argument would be strengthened if cultural competency and racial/ethnic equity were two interrelated but separate parts of its theoretical underpinnings. Then, the critical analysis needed to adequately address the reasons why TCKs feel so isolated, and how the church might resolve these shortcomings, would be more specifically addressed.

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