

BOOK REVIEW

LYDIA F. JOHNSON, *LIVED THEOLOGY FOR THE WHOLE OF LIFE*.

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Johnson's *Lived Theology for the Whole of Life* traverses a wide landscape of themes, each rich with insight and provocation. Her work seeks to answer the question of how theology can become relevant and practiced in the lived realities of our world. Johnson is deeply convinced that theology cannot remain within the narrow circle of academia, but must engage with the real, lived problems of people. To undertake such a task, she explains, she must step outside the conventions of doing theology the way Western academia has taught her. Her approach is personal, experiential, storied, multidisciplinary, and many-faceted. She acknowledges the risks of doing theology in this unorthodox, multi-methodological way, but insists that for theology to matter and to engage with the lived realities of people, it is necessary (xi–xiv). In this conviction, Johnson stands in deep continuity with the ‘whole of life’ vision developed at the Pasifika Communities University, where she spent many formative years as a lecturer at the then Pacific Theological College. Her work has grown on soil that PCU has long been preparing, and the influence and appreciation of that tradition is felt throughout the pages.

Johnson starts the first part of her book (3–36) with her theological framework. She grounds her theology in the claim that ‘God is the ongoing, ever-present creating that permeates the universe’ (3). Drawing on the Genesis creation narrative, and its recurring affirmation that what was created was good, she argues that God is inherently and consistently “*for-life*” (4f.). This becomes the ethical foundation upon which the entire book rests.

The theology Johnson embraces does not put humans at the pinnacle of creation, nor at its centre, but in relational equality with all living beings (17, 20). Humans have been given the “divine mandate to be good stewards of nature,” a mandate, she soberly observes, we have failed to honour (8).

Johnson situates herself as both, Christian and American, yet rejects American culture as well as Eurocentric theology (9). She critiques her culture for its over-emphasis of individualism at the expense of the common good (9–11), and the classical Eurocentric theology, for anthropomorphising God as an overpowering, monarchical ruler (11–16). She acknowledges how indigenous communities have long articulated a more holistic understanding of God, that is divinely infused in all things and beings, rather than set apart and above creation (11; 16).

In rejecting classical Eurocentric theology, Johnson offers an alternative she describes as inspired by the *relational theology* of Pasifika theologians. She argues, however, that the term “relational” could be misconstrued as referring primarily to the building of healthy relationships between individuals or between people and God, sidelining its intended deeper interrelatedness of everything in the cosmos. She therefore proposes the term *interrelational theology* (16), which she illustrates through the analogy of the Pasifika mats. A core claim of interrelational theology is that humans are not privileged over other living beings in creation.

Just as every strand of the mat is essential, every living being is equally important and needed to weave the mat of life. God, in this vision, is the whole mat (16f.). Having elaborated this framework, Johnson expresses her desire to give “full credit to (her) Pasifika brothers and sisters whose relational theologies have inspired [her] . . . own theological perspective” (17f). Johnson engages with a range of Pasifika thinkers throughout the broader work, but her acknowledgment at this point would have been strengthened by naming specific Pasifika scholars she builds her theology on.

The second part of the book (37–70) is concerned with the question of what it is that constitutes us as humans. A core chapter of this section (59–61) addresses what Johnson calls the “complacency of the familiar” (60). She argues that humans tend to retreat into small, manageable frames of understanding, contexts that feel safe and controllable, and that in doing so, lose sight of the larger world in which we are connected. The consequence, is that we become ill-equipped to face the pressing realities beyond our immediate horizon (59).

In her chapter, “Lifting the Mat of Forgiveness” (62–70), Johnson wrestles with the important question how we can practice a Christian ethic of forgiveness while remaining attentive to the demands of justice for the marginalised and oppressed. Entailed in this task is a commitment to “widening the circle of justice” (65f.), transforming personal hurt into a broader commitment to right relationships, where one’s own suffering becomes a doorway into compassion and advocacy for all who suffer injustice. Drawing on the Samoan ifoga and the Fijian tabua rituals (66f.), she grounds this vision in Pasifika practices of reconciliation, ultimately calling for a “restorative justice” (69).

In the third part of her book (71–135), Johnson applies her *for-life* ethic to a wide range of contemporary relational, social, and political issues, grounded in a commitment to the common good, set in deliberate contrast to the individualism she identifies as a defining and limiting feature of American culture. Each chapter takes up a specific issue and asks, with consistent ethical seriousness, what a *for-life* response might look like in practice. The topics covered in this part include abortion, (75–79) disabilities (79–82), racism (82–87), gender (88–91), suicide and euthanasia (91–97). This section also makes visible one of the inherent challenges of Johnson’s ambitious project. Each of the topics she addresses constitutes, in its own right, an extensive field of scholarly debate, and her commitment to engaging with the ‘whole of life’ means she casts her net wide. At points I found myself hoping for a more extended treatment of these particular themes.

Johnson then engages with three broader issues that she considers essential to any *for-life* ethic: poverty (98–109), border politics (110–121), and the human relationship with the natural world (122–135). On poverty, she draws on the words of Jesus, “blessed are you who are poor,” to argue that “the poor will only be blessed when *we* bless them” (109), grounding her discussion in a call to address the structural causes of marginalisation. On borders, she challenges the fear-driven narratives surrounding immigration, arguing that a *for-life* ethic demands both the welcoming of the stranger and a critical reckoning with the imperial policies that force people to flee their homes in the first place. On nature she draws on the Fijian concept of vanua and the practice of vanua sauvi, the temporary closure of land and sea areas to allow ecosystems to recover from abuse, as a model for the kind of restraint and reciprocity that the global ecological crisis urgently demands.

Having worked through how *for-life* ethics ought to be actualised in specific social realities, Johnson turns in the final part of the book (136–223) to what she describes as a necessary confrontation: The reality of empire, and more specifically the empire, that is her native country, the United States of America. She begins this section by reflecting on the difficulty of accessing reliable information within an imperial context of control (139–145), outlining how government and corporate interests shape mainstream media, feeding the public the “empire narrative” (141). From there, she turns to the structural logic of empire itself (145–

148), arguing that it rests fundamentally on *unequal relationships* between the imperial power and the countries it seeks to dominate. Central to her critique is the myth of “American exceptionalism” (148). Americans, she argues, have long been nurtured on a false narrative of their country as an exceptional beacon of freedom and democracy. Johnson reshapes this narrative, asserting that American exceptionalism has been constituted through “exceptional . . . violence, . . . exceptional exploitation of peoples and resources, . . . and exceptional willingness to militarily intervene” in other countries (149f.).

Turning to an ethical consideration of war, Johnson engages seriously with both pacifism (163–167) and just war theory (167–168), ultimately embracing pacifism, not as a passive withdrawal from the world but as an activist commitment to non-violent resistance, grounded in the teachings of Jesus. Her take on pacifism is what I consider one of the strongest and most theologically compelling sections of the book and one that invites the reader’s serious engagement.

Before her visionary closing chapter, Johnson engages with the “evil of empire” through two of the most complex geopolitical conflicts of our time, the war between Ukraine/NATO and Russia (168–188), and Israel and Palestine (196–213), offering in both cases a counter-narrative to the dominant Western perspective. She frames both as examples of the “for-death” ideologies of empire and exceptionalism. The war in Palestine and Israel is one of the most divisive conflicts of our time, with many feeling that taking a clear position is both necessary and morally urgent. In my reading, I found myself wishing that Johnson had more fully drawn on her own framework of restorative justice, one that holds the suffering and humanity of all parties in view. This is, of course, a matter of interpretation, and others may read her engagement very differently. But it seemed to me that a perspective which acknowledges the complexity and the inhumanity on all sides might have sat more comfortably alongside the ethical vision she develops throughout the rest of the book. A bold position and a compassionate holding of all parties need not be mutually exclusive, and I believe Johnson’s own theology has the resources to do both.

Her book ends with a visionary outlook that she calls “What if” (214–223), where she dares to imagine a world that actually lives according to interrelational *for-life* ethics, focusing on her native American context. She invites readers to be courageous enough to imagine how such a world might look in their own contexts.

While the book raises points of controversy, I want to acknowledge the committed and inspiring task Johnson has undertaken. Her vision of making theology relevant to every aspect of the ‘whole of life’ is admirable and needed. Her willingness and courage to bring theology into conversation with the most pressing, painful and controversial realities of our world often puts her on a less accommodating path, demonstrating intellectual courage. Her *interrelational theology*, rooted in Pasifika wisdom and animated by a consistent *for-life* ethic, enriches contemporary theological discourse and her final prophetic envisioning reminds us that theology is not only called to analyse the world as it is but to imagine and to help bring into being, the world as it could be.