

Book Review

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

**Michael Clawson and April Stace, eds.
Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016.**

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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

in America). With his contribution, Snyder seeks to remedy what he says is a lack of attention in ECM scholarship to the ECM's conflict with more conventional forms of Christianity.

Section two of *CBRF*, "Crossing Boundaries", contains five chapters that are also balanced among disciplines, with two chapters from sociologists, two from theologians, and one from a scholar of music. In Chapter 6, sociologist Lloyd Chia explores how the ECM maps itself in relation to others. Primarily using ECM events, books, publications, blogs, and websites (141), Chia argues that the ECM seeks to occupy "Borderlands" (162), spaces in which it can encounter difference. Chia's contribution would have been stronger had it drawn more explicitly on the extensive fieldwork from his dissertation, in which he—like Alvizo in Chapter 4—goes beyond the rhetoric of the ECM to see if it is actually inclusive in its practice.² Nonetheless, it is valuable to understand "how the Emerging Church imagines itself in relation to others" (162).

The next three chapters—contributed by a sociologist, theologian, and scholar of music, respectively—fit nicely together given their foci on the practices of Emerging congregations, specifically in the realms of worship and community life. In Chapter 7, sociologist Jason Wollschleger first establishes that the ECM is a "reactionary movement committed to radical authenticity" (166), and then—based upon fieldwork at Church of the Apostles in Seattle—argues that what the ECM is primarily reacting against is the differentiation of social spheres into sacred and secular. April Stace follows in Chapter 8 with an exploration of the use of "popular-secular music" (181) in worship, based upon her fieldwork as participant observer at five ECM congregations in the greater Washington, DC area. Like Wollschleger, Stace emphasizes the discarding of the sacred-secular distinction among the churches she studied; she argues this is not a "secularization" of sacred space, but the reverse: a "'sacralization' of all of life experiences" (189). In Chapter 9, Heather Josselyn-Cranson—a scholar and practitioner of sacred music—seeks to "shed light on worship within the Emerging Church" (192). She hypothesizes that Emerging churches, as communities shaped by postmodernity, should reflect "the inclusive and juxtaposed musical approach" (198) of postmodern music. However, her previous study of three Emerging church congregations in the Midwest found little musical variety; so, for this chapter, she found one that did: a joint congregation, St. Andrew and All Souls, in Portland, Oregon. In her analysis of about six months of services, she found the expected musical diversity—a "messy vitality"—and proposes "five principles of musical variety" (210) for other congregations to consider.

It is fitting—and indeed, necessary—that Clawson and Stace use the final chapter of *CBRF* to counterbalance the book's almost exclusive focus on American ECM. In Chapter 10, theologians Juan José Barreda Toscano and Dee Yaccino explore the ways in which "a Latin American theology of integral mission" (215) has impacted that region and converged with broader trends in Christianity. They begin with the legacy of colonialism, posing the question of what a postmodern theological turn looks like in places "not yet seen as modern" (219). Latin American Emergence, while synergistic with American ECM, must be understood contextually, "in the sense of looking at their own contexts from a postcolonial vantage point" (219). Toscano and Yaccino then document the *Red del Camino*, "a network of churches and ministries committed to the promotion and practices of integral mission at the local church level" (221).

CBRF should be of interest to several audiences. This volume makes obvious sense as a core text for any college or seminary course about the ECM. Further, certain chapters would

² See Lloyd Chia, "Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-Building, Inclusion, and the Emerging Church Movement in America" (PhD diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 2010), <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/10278/research.pdf?sequence=3>.

be useful in a wide range of other undergraduate or graduate courses across disciplines: social and religious movements, late twentieth and early twenty-first century American Christianity, the sociology or anthropology of religion, feminist theologies, church music, and comparative religion, among others. While scholars of religion should consider adding this volume to their personal collections, interested laypersons might find some chapters more engaging and accessible than others. That said, the Introduction and Chapter 1 would be useful for virtually any reader interested in a thorough treatment of the basic outlines of the ECM and its history. Given the volume's academic bent, pastors and teachers looking to introduce parishioners to ECM teachings or practice are probably better served to look elsewhere, but there is little doubt that—as a single volume—*CBRF* is the best assemblage of scholarship about the ECM to date, even if not every chapter is for every reader.

A single volume of ten chapters can only cover so much ground, so despite the commendable reach and range of contributions, there are a few additional topics that deserve attention in order to give a fuller sense of existing scholarship on the ECM. Concerning the inclusion of nondominant perspectives, while there is an analysis of the ECM from the perspective of feminist theology, discussion of race is conspicuously absent for a movement often critiqued for its whiteness.³ Similarly, with the notable exception of the final chapter, the volume is almost wholly focused on the ECM within the United States, despite the fact that some of the earliest ECM thinkers and expressions derived from elsewhere, a fact Clawson acknowledges in Chapter 1.⁴ Another welcome addition would have been more discussion of the ECM in light of contemporaneous cultural and religious trends—like the rise of religious “nones” and growing disaffection toward the Religious Right—although that has now been addressed in a newly published scholarly collection.⁵ Finally, a scholarly treatment of the ECM's entanglements with American politics on both the right and left would have seized upon another long-running debate within the ECM and beyond.⁶

Within sociology, there is a developing critique stating that what people think about poor neighborhoods comes from an oversaturation of research on a few over-studied cities, which happen to host major sociology departments that train ethnographers.⁷ A related concern can be raised about scholarship on the ECM, which has had an almost exclusive focus on

³ See for instance, David Fitch, “Why the Missional/Emerging Church is so Young and White,” *Missio Alliance* (blog), January 16, 2009, <https://www.missioalliance.org/why-the-missionalemerging-church-is-so-young-and-white/>; Tony Jones, “How White Is the Emerging Church?,” *Theology*, May 8, 2012, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/tonyjones/2012/05/08/how-white-is-the-emerging-church/>; Soong-Chan Rah and Jason Mach, “Is the Emerging Church for Whites Only?” *Sojourners Magazine*, May 2010, 16–19.

⁴ For an example of a comparative perspective, see Mathew Guest, “The Emerging Church in Transatlantic Perspective,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 1 (March 2017): 41–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12326>.

⁵ Randall Reed and G. Michael Zbaraschuk, *The Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion*, vol. 1, *Prospects and Problems* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

⁶ See for instance, Tony Jones, “Is Emergent the New Christian Left? Tony Jones Responds to the Critics,” *Christianity Today*, May 23, 2006, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2006/may-online-only/is-emergent-new-christian-left-tony-jones-responds-to.html> and Brian D. McLaren, “The Politics of Joy,” *Sojourners: God's Politics* (blog), December 15, 2006, sojo.net/articles/brian-mclaren-politics-joy.

⁷ Cf. Mario L. Small, Robert A. Manduca, and William R. Johnston, “Ethnography, Neighborhood Effects, and the Rising Heterogeneity of Poor Neighborhoods Across Cities,” *City and Community* 17, no. 3 (September 2018): 565–89, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/cico.12316>.

congregations—and to a lesser degree, key leaders—especially a relatively small number of ideal type communities.⁸ Unfortunately, *CBRF* reinforces this critique. Excluding Chapter 2 (Marti’s summary of *The Deconstructed Church*), the six chapters of *CBRF* that employ fieldwork cover a total of twenty-one congregations, twelve of which are in Alvizo’s Chapter 4.⁹ In fact, the same three congregations were studied in more than one chapter of *CBRF*, reducing the number of unduplicated congregations across the whole volume to just eighteen.

Case studies and small samples are certainly justifiable for a given project, but as this volume unintentionally shows, most work about the ECM considers a small number of homogenous communities, creating a research tautology in the process. Scholars want to study the ECM, but because there has been little institutionalization, researchers are left to examine existing ECM literature to identify congregations for study, thus ending up with many of the same communities.¹⁰ Future research on the ECM should not only explore other communities, but perhaps more importantly, it should consider alternative units of analysis, such as individuals, organizations, gatherings, and quasi-institutional campaigns.¹¹ Other units should include seminaries, denominations, and judicatories, as well as overall society itself, at least insofar as the ECM has had some impact on broader cultural, religious, and societal institutions.¹² Given how elusive the ECM has been for researchers, future work might also consider innovative methodologies, such as network analysis and other indirect ways of measuring the ECM’s cultural diffusion. Perhaps the ECM—in its own way—will bring out the most creative methodological and analytical impulses of future scholars.

The relatively small universe of congregational research subjects within ECM scholarship raises a final point, namely the challenge of quantifying the impact and significance of the movement, something with which scholarship about the ECM has long wrestled. As Packard notes in the Forward to *CBRF*, they are still open questions as to how wide the impact of the ECM really is or how lasting it will be, queries that *CBRF* does not directly attempt to answer. Ten or fifteen years ago, when scholars first began studying the ECM, the future of the movement was very much undetermined, but expectations were high that a generational change was underway in which “Emerging Christian” might soon be an identifiable and viable religious identity.¹³ Would the ECM mirror Methodism, which began as a non-sectarian, grassroots revival movement and within sixty years had institutionalized to become one of the largest

⁸ Ideal type is a concept attributed to sociologist Max Weber that refers to the creation of a mental or theoretical construct possessing all the essential properties of the entity under consideration with the understanding that such constructs serve analytical purposes and do not exist in the real world. Cf. Rolf E. Rogers, *Max Weber’s Ideal Type Theory* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1969).

⁹ Marti’s book, *The Deconstructed Church*, is based upon participant observations at six different Emerging congregations, supplemented with materials from other individuals, events, and congregations.

¹⁰ There are exceptions to this ethnographic, congregational focus, such as two pieces by Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, “Emergent Church Practices in America: Inclusion and Deliberation in American Congregations,” *Review of Religious Research* 57, no. 1 (2015): 1–23, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s13644-014-0157-2> and “An Emergent Threat: Christian Clergy Perceptions of the Emerging Church Movement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 1 (2017): 26–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12324>.

¹¹ See the socio-psychological and philosophical analysis by Darren M. Slade, “The Logic of Intersubjectivity: Brian McLaren’s Philosophy of Christian Religion” (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2019).

¹² For example, one paradox that persists within the ECM—and which could be studied at the institutional level—is how the ECM is at once a reaction to conservative evangelicalism while also being intertwined and even dependent upon mainline Protestantism. There is debate as to whether the ECM has been assimilated into mainline Protestantism or remains a challenge to evangelicalism, which seems like fertile ground for future scholarly research.

¹³ Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 26.

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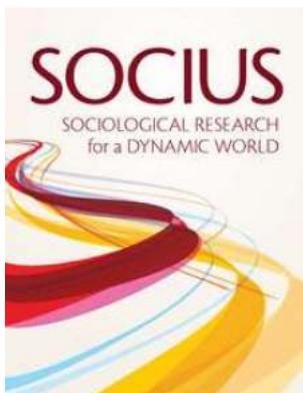
¹⁴ For the trajectory of Methodism, see William Sims Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 71–72.

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