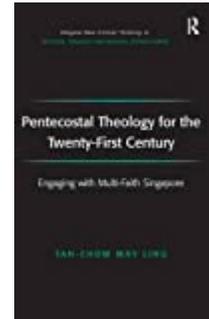




**May Ling Tan-Chow.** *Pentecostal Theology for the Twenty-first Century: Engaging with Multi-Faith Singapore.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. xix + 203 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5718-7.



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### LoveSingapore–Stone Soup?

*Pentecostal Theology for the Twenty-first Century* is a rare book, probably the only one that provides a critical analysis of a transdenominational Pentecostal charismatic movement in Singapore. LoveSingapore is linked to the Global Consultation on World Evangelization, which in 1989 launched a global network called AD2000 and Beyond. Started in 1993 at the initiative of former Fuller missiologist Peter Wagner, LoveSingapore is the local expression of this network. What makes LoveSingapore significant is that nothing of its scale has been seen before in Singapore. It involves up to 120 churches and attracts a number of leaders of megachurches as well as key denominational leaders, including the former Anglican bishop of Singapore Moses Tay. Headed by Lawrence Khong, the pastor of the more than ten thousand-member Faith Community Baptist Church, the movement at its height organized “prayer walks” that attracted tens of thousands of Christians.

May Ling Tan-Chow’s book, which began as a Cambridge University PhD dissertation, seeks to develop a Pentecostal theology using the “critical resources” of scripture and Pentecostal history. Using Singapore as a

case study, the author believes that Pentecostal theology can adequately address a multi-faith context. Tan-Chow divides the book into two parts. Part 1 (chapters 1-3) is descriptive. Chapter 1 explores the sociopolitical landscape of Singapore—a small state marked by engineering efficiency. Its government plays a critical, if not interventionist, role in practically every aspect of life, setting out clear long-term goals and visions to ensure the country’s continued economic prosperity. The state has “absolute hegemony” and does not permit any rival authority, although it projects a “benevolent paternalism” (p. 7). Chapter 2 locates the church within this context and shows how the political culture has shaped the church. In the following chapter, Tan-Chow examines the historical resource by revisiting three “Pentecost events,” namely Acts, Azusa Street, and LoveSingapore. Each has its glorious and dark side. In Acts, conflicts and exclusion vitiated the ecumenism of Jewish and Gentile unity. The transcending of the racial barrier at Azusa in 1906 was quickly replaced by the raising of the racial divide epitomized in the formation of the all-white Pentecostal Fellowship of North America in 1924. LoveSingapore, too, is seen as potentially “a peaceful harbinger of pluralism”

and “human flourishing” (p. xvi). Tan-Chow appreciatively notes its ecumenical outlook, the use of its massive resources to reach out to the needy, and several other positive features. But its grandiose vision (Singapore as “the Antioch of Asia”) and strategies turn out to be almost a mirror image of Singapore’s political culture (p. 15).

Part 2 is constructive. Chapter 4 provides a devastating critique of the LoveSingapore movement. Tan-Chow notes that its effective contextualization of the gospel adopts policies and methods that closely parallel those of the Singapore government. For example, its pursuit of unity and reconciliation is similar to what the government hopes to accomplish for the nation. And, like the government, LoveSingapore pursues unity and reconciliation with the goal of achieving a practical end: the salvation of Singapore that was prophesied to occur in a “Grand Harvest” in 2001. Both the government and the movement are “instrumentalised” (pp. 80, 82). Reconciliation becomes “the strategic practice” to effect unity which is aimed at Christianizing the nation (p. 80). In the words of Khong, “we do not seek unity for unity’s sake. Attaining 100% involvement means little without progress toward our vision of a nation won for the Lord” (p. 80). Tan-Chow has some strong words for this, but they are entirely appropriate: “The destiny of the nation is a God-problem. Taking it out of God’s hands is a real temptation in the efficiency-minded society of Singapore, a theological idolatry” (p. 81). Tan-Chow notes the theological shallowness of LoveSingapore’s “strategic practices,” including “identificational repentance,” where a representative of an aggressor nation, a Japanese, says sorry to a representative of the victims; prayer as a tool to destroy spiritual strongholds; and “acts of kindness,” which are a barely disguised “form of market ‘exploitation’ and materialism” (pp. 86-88, 93). These practices function as a means of control and power hegemony—something similar to what is found in Singapore politics.

One wonders, at the end of chapter 4, whether there is anything left of the LoveSingapore movement for a Pentecostal theology. Tan-Chow, surprisingly, thinks that

there is and offers her reasons. First, LoveSingapore has bequeathed to the churches important “deep symbols,” such as love, unity, shalom, the kingdom of God, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, which could be retrieved for a solid Pentecostal theology even if these symbols have become “atrophied” (p. 99). But given the critique that exposes the vacuity of these symbols, one must ask if they could still be regarded as “deep symbols.” Second, Tan-Chow believes that the two “critical resources” of scripture and history could reshape “empirical Pentecostalism” and realize “LoveSingapore’s potential for good” (p. 119, 99). Scripture provides an integrated pneumatology while early Pentecostal history reveals many positive elements (chapter 5 cf. chapter 3). In chapter 6, Tan-Chow offers her own theological proposal for a constructive Pentecostal theology using these resources. The key concept is “pneumatological eschatology,” which involves remembering and embodying the constructive elements of early Pentecostal history and the Spirit’s work of orienting the church to “new” things, including the religious “other” (pp. 125-126). The concluding chapter offers practical suggestions on the “ethic of negotiation,” which operates on the principle of embracing the “other” without compromising one’s own integrity (p. 157). This last proposal will probably stretch Pentecostals to their utmost limits. Pentecostals would be hard put to recall any historical precedents on negotiating with the religious other. The whole Pentecostal tradition has been quite unanimous that the gift of the Spirit is for Christianizing the world rather than dialoging with it.

Although Tan-Chow’s theological construction holds great promise, I am not as optimistic that it would help LoveSingapore effect the necessary transformations, given the fact that its basic operating assumptions are not deeply rooted in scripture or the Christian tradition but in pragmatism. Furthermore, LoveSingapore is very much conditioned by the prevailing culture. LoveSingapore has as much potential for embrave inclusion as stones have the potential of becoming the proverbial “stone soup”—if all the other ingredients for good soup are added. Tan-Chow has provided excellent ingredients, but, then, why bother making stone soup?

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