

Cole Arthur Riley. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. New York: Convergent Books, 2022. 224 pages. \$23.20.

“This is not a book of new things or ideas; my thoughts have been thought before. It is more remembrance than revelation, more maybes than certainty. And there is sparse novelty...This is a book of contemplative storytelling” (xi). I would add – *This Here Flesh* is magnificent storytelling with a call to “sacred attention” (x). Riley does theological exploration and theological expression in a manner that both challenges and complements traditional theologies. She writes of a liberating God, liberating relationships, and a liberated self.

Riley invites readers into her world to contemplate the significance of and spirituality within everydayness. It is her life story (thus far) – yet it is a story of the experiences of humanity packaged in poignant language and precise imprecision. The author shares her journeys of wondering, of knowing, of seeing, of being seen. Interrogating a series of life themes, Riley puts her individual and familial experiences in conversation with scholars such as Alice Walker, Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, Audre Lorde, and Julian of Norwich. At the same time, she weaves in cultural references – Baby Suggs, Ms. Celie, Harry Potter, and Brooklyn – all of which converge, laying bare her understandings of personhood and the Divine.

The book is divided into 15 chapters, each of which contains stories oriented around a primary theme. For example, in chapter 1, *Dignity*, the author explores the image of God, the whiteness of God, and the inherent dignity of all persons. “Our liberation begins with the irrevocable belief that we are worthy to be liberated,” writes Riley, “that we are worthy of a life that does not degrade us but honors our whole selves” (15). In chapter 3, *Wonder*, she challenges readers to “reclaim the awe of our child-selves, to allow ourselves to be taken by the beauty of a thing...” (29). She resists the negative connotations of the words *childish* and *juvenile*, asserting that childlike wonder helps us pay attention. “To encounter the holy in the ordinary is to find God in the liminal—in the spaces where we might subconsciously exclude it, including the sensory moments that are often illegibly spiritual.” Whereas a trip to the Alaska Iditarod might provide countless big moments, the memory the author most cherishes is seemingly mundane: she watched a music video on repeat with friends in the freezing night, with “lips cracking, bellies burning, and snow running down my pants as I rocked back in laughter” (34). This memory, and others like it, remind us of our belonging. Wonder is a force of liberation. “If you really want to get free, find God on the subway. Find God in the soap bubble” (40).

Chapter 5, *Body*, is an exploration of what it means that the “creator of the cosmos would choose to rely on an embodied creation” (57). Riley discusses bodies which are Black, diseased, traumatized, and broken, all with an eye on the broken, bloodied, body of Christ. She critiques body-less Christianity, choosing rather, liberation in the form of embodied wholeness. “You want to tell me to love God? Ask me when I’ve last eaten” (68). This is spiritual embodiment.

All in all, the book is ripe with potent language and tender pointedness that takes the reader deeper into themes of liberation. On *fear*: Find those who tell you, *Do not be afraid*, yet stay close enough to tremble with you. This is love (90). On *rage*: It is very important that our belonging before God not depend upon our ability to hide or extinguish truths in and about us...As we allow God to behold our rage, a sacred intimacy emerges (113). On *repair*: If you cut me, I want you to apologize with grave specificity for the blood running down my back...I want your soul to writhe like it was the back of God that was cut. This would make any sorry truer (140). And, on *rest*: When we rest, we do so in memory of rest denied...Rest is an act of

defiance...It is the audacity to face the demands of this world and proclaim, *We will not be owned*...We will be free and we will be dreaming (157).

This Here Flesh is both a nightstand read and a substantive classroom resource.

Contemplative practitioners will find this book engaging and insightful, as will persons who see glimpses of the Divine in everyday life. Teachers of preaching and theology may find Riley's skillful storytelling instructive, as she demonstrates one way to wrestle with theology, spirituality, and the Divine, in view of life's realities.

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