



*Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*

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*"I feel like Rip Van Winkle, who went to sleep and woke up in a changed world. The ways of doing missions have undergone a paradigm shift, and these writers helped me understand it."*

—Tony Campolo, Eastern University, St. Davids, Pennsylvania

## A Postcolonial Conversation

*The publication of Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis, edited by Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha and L. Daniel Hawk, marks the public announcement of an exciting new dialogue between evangelical theology and postcolonial theory. In these essays, evangelical scholars wrestle critically and constructively with the legacy of colonialism in pursuit of a prophetic and liberating understanding of evangelical identity and practice. IVP academic editor David Congdon asked Smith and Hawk some questions about this pioneering work.*

**Congdon: Could you tell me a bit about the genesis of the book? What brought together everyone involved in this project?**

**Hawk:** The vision for the book began with Joe Duggan, founder of the Postcolonial Networks, and his efforts to facilitate postcolonial theologizing within evangelical contexts. Joe found ready collaborators in Judith Oleson and Dan Russ, who secured funding through the Center for Christian Studies at Gordon College to host a three-day roundtable in October 2010. Each of us left with an assigned chapter, a plan to coauthor the chapter with another roundtable member and a list of additional scholars we hoped to recruit for the project.

**Smith:** The roundtable sought to identify and bring together scholars from non-Western or non-Anglo European descent, including women, as well as those from Anglo-European and privileged cultural traditions. Some of us, like myself, had been immersed in postcolonial theory for some time and were convinced that discussions about postcolonial discourse and ways of being were crucial given the large percentage of folks in formerly colonized or missionized regions who were evangelical.

**Congdon: Was everyone at the roundtable convinced about the importance of postcolonial theory, or was there tension over how evangelicals should view this discourse?**

**Smith:** A few of the participants had no real experience with postcolonial theory. They were open to learning about it, but they had not been exposed to it in the past. So part of our journey was to educate each other about what postcoloniality involved and to make a case about its importance for evangelicals worldwide.

**Hawk:** I was encouraged by the sense of mutual respect and genuine listening that pervaded our conversations, and by the shared conviction that we were initiating conversations that really matter. If there was any pushback, it came on the evangelical pole. There was a concern that the term "evangelical" had been so co-opted by dominant Euro-American theological and cultural agendas that it did not accurately reflect our project—and all the more so because, in the eyes of many outside the movement, evangelicalism is associated with conservative sociopolitical sensibilities and inflexible theological paradigms.

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Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or [kkcarnet@ivpress.com](mailto:kkcarnet@ivpress.com)  
 Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or [awissman@ivpress.com](mailto:awissman@ivpress.com)  
 Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or [awright@ivpress.com](mailto:awright@ivpress.com)  
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## Q &amp; A

**Kay Higuera Smith** (PhD, Claremont Graduate University) is professor of religion and chair of the department of biblical studies at Azusa Pacific University. Her specialization is in the New Testament and early Judaism.

**Jayachitra Lalitha** (DTh, Serampore University) is associate professor of New Testament at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, South India, where she is dean of the women's studies department and coordinator of the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary Church Women Centre. She is also co-chair of the World Christianity Group of the American Academy of Religion and coeditor of *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Great Commission*.

**L. Daniel Hawk** (PhD, Emory University) is professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ashland, Ohio. An ordained United Methodist minister, he is the author of several books, including *Joshua in 3-D* and *Every Promise Fulfilled*.

**Congdon: That makes sense. How would you characterize the “evangelical” nature of this project? What positive resources do you find within evangelicalism for pursuing a postcolonial theory and praxis?**

**Hawk:** The vitality and growth of the evangelical movement around the globe makes the evangelical voice a particularly important contributor to emerging postcolonial conversations and movements. Speaking as one, I ask, are we willing to honor the intellectual and cultural resources that non-European evangelicals offer and engage them as co-equal partners in shaping theology and biblical interpretation? Are we open to having our identities and thinking changed by this global dialogue, or will we insist that theology and interpretation must still continue on our terms and on our turf?

**Smith:** Dan says it well. Evangelicalism is a global phenomenon. But too often it is evaluated and conceived of as a uniquely American phenomenon. This is myopic, both on the part of some US evangelicals and on the part of some of their interlocutors and critics. As a global phenomenon, evangelicalism is arguably the most significant global movement within Christianity in terms of its size and scope. In that light, and given the enormous power of colonial discourse to shape the questions we are trained to ask and to impose categories and structuring hierarchies on our thinking, it is crucial for evangelicals to be making ourselves aware of these structures and responding to them. In its early years, evangelicalism was a people's movement. As such, it drew upon very strong social justice values and concerns. We want to draw on that same history as well.

**Congdon: What are some of the highlights in this volume? What do you hope North American evangelicals take away from the conversations in this book?**

**Smith:** We start and end with friendships. In this we consciously choose being face to face with the social/cultural other. The only way that many will question whether they are operating with colonial presuppositions and assumptions is if they hear the stories of their friends who have experienced the social violence and suffering that continues to be wrought by coloniality.

**Hawk:** I'm particularly excited about the way the book showcases how much we have to gain by a theological conversation that honors and listens to a multiplicity of global voices. Together, the contributors reveal the promise of collaborative theological dialogue. This volume demonstrates how the diversity of theological perspectives emerging around the world is best served not so much by debating who's right and who's wrong as by discerning together how to make theological sense of what God is doing in the world and so be better equipped to make faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in all nations and all cultures.

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