

#764 Book Review – GOD’S REIGN AND THE END OF EMPIRES by Antonio González

This week’s piece is a very recent book review by Ed Schroeder. The book is [God’s Reign and the End of Empires](#) by Antonio González, a Spanish theologian whose author bio can be found [here](#) on the website of Convivium Press. Ed’s meaty review examines what he sees as the “law-shy” nature of Gonzalez’s analysis.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

God’s Reign and the End of Empires.

By Antonio González. Miami: Convivium Press, 2012.

Paper. 377 pages. US\$32.95.

Where to start? A brilliant book. Long too. By a Spanish Jesuit who is now among the Mennonites in Latin America (Is he still a Jesuit? Maybe. See RC story below.) The book’s title tells the story, as Antonio González sees it. God’s Reign, the “Kingdom of God” in all those Biblical texts, is the end of all empires. They are polar opposites.

Empires are the history of the human race: tower of Babel (=Babylon), Egypt, Rome, Constantine, Holy Roman Empire, USA today. Empires are by definition always opposed to God’s reign, even allegedly Christian ones. The Bible’s core story—from Genesis to Revelation—is the story of that primordial and perpetual conflict.

The Jesus story is God-versus-empire, too. It is in the context of the Roman empire that Jesus proclaimed the reign of God as opposed to the reign of Caesar. Within God's reign, God alone rules, with mercy, love, justice, and special concern for the oppressed. Imbued with this faith, a new community of believers developed, particularly among the poor, who lived what Jesus proclaimed, sharing resources and practicing equality and forgiveness rather than retribution, the ironclad law of imperial logic. God's reign eventually wins, but not by overpowering empires. Instead it is "from below," from among the rejects, the outcasts, the nobodies in imperial societies, that God's reign finds good soil and takes root, "living what Jesus proclaimed."

Yet new empires keep popping up as history unfolds, empires generated by the "Adamic logic" endemic in all the children of Adam and Eve. It is the logic of self-justification. What you achieve shows how good you are, so more achievement = more prestige. That is also the logic on which empires run: bigger is better, more makes you superior. Adam (=all of us) and the empires we build long for this. With instruments of death, if necessary, to make it happen. And they always seem to be necessary.

The empire now confronting us is a brand-new sort. It's not a new nation-state gone whole hog. Not even the USA. It's bigger than any preceding mega-nation-state. Fact is, it has other nation-states in its thrall. Even the USA. It is the economic empire of today's global capitalism. Drawing on topnotch socioeconomic diagnosticians, González presents the raw data (and raw it is) in his first chapter, "The Globalized Empire: The Need for Change."

The remedy for surviving empires in biblical history, and now too—for there is no other remedy—is "God's reign," now fully

revealed in Jesus, where the evils of imperial societies, the very fabric of their foundation and the structures erected thereon, are ended in communities of protests and projects. Not just protests against the empire, but also concrete projects down on the ground, “right now and from below” (the author’s constant mantra), where economic equality prevails, where there is no hierarchy and thus no oppression, and where the “logic of the Gospel” has replaced the “logic of Adam” in the fabric of common life.

As González spells it out, the primal paradigm is the Jerusalem Christians in the opening chapters of Acts. In González’s 21st-century version it looks like Mennonite communities I’ve known, now re- morphed by virtue of the mega-urban, cyber-enveloped (cyber-strangled?), global capitalist world we all live in. The world-scene is radically different today, of course, from that of the once-upon-a-time (mostly) rural Mennonite colonies. But the rubrics are the same: two sets of paired terms. First, “protest and project,” where “project” = concrete alternative to the empire’s project. And second, “from below [=from the oppressed and impoverished] and right now.” Do not expect empires to heal themselves. The disease is incurable.

Today as well, “from below” is where God’s reign is present. “Right now,” new economic communities are undermining the global economic empire. González gives examples. And then he gives encouragement for us today, especially for us in mainline churches, where the logic of empire still imprisons us—and, even more tragic, we are blissfully unaware of our chains.

Some details and some afterthoughts:

After a lengthy initial chapter of socioeconomic analysis probing today’s new empire of global capitalism come five chapters of a biblically grounded case for the book’s title. First: a theological depth-diagnosis of the

sociological/economic data he's already given us. And then come four more chapters presenting the gospel alternative to the "Adamic logic" that animates empires from biblical Babylon and Egypt, Jesus and the Roman Empire, up to the economic empire now circling—and choking—our planet. Despite all the hype about the good brought to humankind by global capitalism today, one half of all the world's people still live on less than US\$2 a day.

In these chapters biblical exegesis abounds. Even in the original New Testament Greek! Though González claims to be doing a "canonical" reading of the Bible with no particular "tradition" shaping his reading, it is through Mennonite lenses that he tells what the Bible says. (More on that below.) Also, at key points his (earlier and still present) Roman Catholic lenses show up, I think. Especially with the appearance of "anonymous Christians"—people following Jesus' ethic and practicing the "logic of the gospel," even though they may never have heard of, let alone trusted, the crucified and risen Messiah. They look like Jesus-followers, even though they never encountered the Good News about "God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting trespasses," as Paul the apostle articulates it in 2 Corinthians 5.

A key phrase from that primordial reconciliation text just cited may pinpoint where González's partisan reading of the Bible shows up explicitly, namely, that according to the apostle, apart from Christ, God does indeed count trespasses. In the language that goldie-oldie Crossings folks learned from Bob Bertram, González is "law-shy." Here's how.

God is indeed, for González, the critic of empires organized on "structures of sin," but never once in 360 pages did I read that God is the critic of sinners, and continues to be the critic of sinners not yet connected to Christ the reconciler. González's God is always and only a God of grace. And with that (prior?)

conviction about God, González reads the Bible from Genesis to Revelation with God, as Lutherans might say, operating in the world always with only his right hand—and since Easter/Ascension doing so via the One now sitting at God's right hand. God extends only his right hand to sinners while the law of God's left hand, God the sinner's critic, is simply inactive.

Is that a pre-conviction in Mennonite hermeneutics? Could be. (See story below.) Also a possible pre-conviction in González's Jesuit Roman Catholic heritage? Could be. (See story below.)

The Mennonite story.

In my day, the Mennonite star theologian was John Howard Yoder. He was a dear friend of Bob Bertram. My friend too. We originally connected at annual meetings of the Society of Christian Ethics.

In the first year of the existence of Seminex (1974) Yoder was guest prof at our summer school. One special treat during that summer session was Bertram and Yoder in a public Lutheran/Mennonite "discussion" of Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, the double regimes of God's left and right hands. I remember one exchange. Bob spelled out Luther's left-hand work of God's law, both preserving and critiquing the human race. Yoder's rejoinder was a "yes" to the preservation (that's grace), but "no" to God the critic, and Yoder did so with a patent arch in his big, bushy eyebrows. Bob's response: "John, that arched eyebrow sent a critical message to me, and I'll wager that you think you had divine approval for doing that." People laughed, while acknowledging that the point was serious.

Is God's law the sinner's critic or isn't it? Is God's work in the world *only* grace? With that, we're back in the 16th century where the conflict between the Reformers and the Roman Church—as well as the debate among the Reformers themselves—was about

hermeneutics: How do you read the Bible, what God is doing there? And from that reading, how do you read the world? The Lutherans articulated that at Augsburg (1530) with their claim that law/promise hermeneutics was the right way to read the Bible.

González is law-shy in his reading of the Bible—and he has a lengthy Mennonite heritage backing him up. And is he law-shy from his even more ancient Roman Catholic heritage as well? That could be. The Augsburg confessors put the law-shy tag both on their Roman critics to the right and on the Anabaptist/Mennonite critics to the left. But that's another essay.

The RC story.

For some law-shy signals in the RC tradition, here's another Bertram story, a mid-20th-century repeat of that 1530 hassle. It happened in 1958 at Valparaiso University. I was the new kid on the block in the theology department and had been there only one year. Bertram was our theology-department chair. Somehow he finessed a dialogue series with the theology faculty at Notre Dame. This was long before Vatican II. The first gathering was on baptism at their place. The second was on sin at our place. For that one, both department chairs presented the papers: Bob Pelton, chair of the ND theology department, and Bob Bertram of VU. Pelton presented first: Bertram followed. First response comes from Pelton to Bertram: "It can't really be THAT BAD, can it, Bob?"

Bob had articulated the Augsburg Confession/Apology Article 2 on sin. He had presented D-3 (diagnosis level three, the sinner's deepest problem, confronting God the critic). Bertram's response to Pelton: "Well, Bob, it must have been that bad if it took the death and resurrection of the second person of the Trinity to fix it, right?"

Law-shy means incomplete diagnosis of the human condition. Too “shy” to let biblical texts of divine criticism have their say. Such texts as these:

- God “visiting the iniquities” of sinners—the very words of the Sinai legal contract;
- Paul in Romans 1:18, “the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness.”
- Or the ominous words at the end of chapter 3 of St. John’s Gospel, the very chapter with John 3:16 in it: “whoever doesn’t believe the Son will not see life, but must endure the wrath of God.”

And law-shyness appears in another format in González’s proposal, where God’s law is not given credit as a resource to support a “civil society,” and in its place “gospel-logic” is invoked in order to create communities that love and care for one another. Not so. “Love your neighbor” originates from Moses, not Jesus. The “gospel-ethic, gospel values” proposed by González are the substance of “the law given by Moses,” not the “grace and truth that came with Jesus Christ.”

The “new” commandment coming from Jesus is something else. Without the soteriology coming from Jesus, it doesn’t work. González’s “anonymous Christians,” so he claims, are already “there.” But with no link to that soteriology, they cannot get there. When González in his last chapter finds such folks “doing the right thing,” he calls them anonymous Christians. There are no NT grounds for this claim. They may well be “anonymous Moses-disciples,” but unwitting Christ-disciples they are not.

And the very principle of reciprocity, which vexes González as “Adamic logic,” is the very “logic” intrinsic in God’s law. God put it there. It has divine authorship, divine authority. So being law-shy here impacts both of the classical “two uses” that God implements with his law. First is God’s law as God’s own

institution for our preservation in a now fallen world. Second is God's law as the voice of God the critic, a voice constantly accusing sinners bereft of any Christ-cover.

González sells the law short on both counts. For him it is not God, but the "logic of Adam," that says "Suum cuique" (to each person what he deserves). That logic is devilish, maybe even demonic, he claims, surely not divine. That's what the serpent whispered into the ear of our primal parents. Adamic logic now plagues the human race. Therefore the offspring of Adam build their social institutions on that logic. As happened with our primal parents, after they fell to the serpent's snare to appropriate that logic, oppression, and death et al. have trademarked human history. Empires, always grounded in that logic, are the mega-monsters inflicting doom and gloom throughout history.

God's reign, the logic of the gospel—100% gratuitous—is God's remedy for this malady, from the exodus, the prophets, the Jesus story, the NT epistles, life in the early church. It's all of one piece. Until the Constantinian takeover in the 4th century where the people of God's reign—willingly, for the most part—were finessed into an empire. So González puts the pieces together.

The deepest diagnosis of the human malady, human sin, that we hear from González is the logic of Adam at work in humans. He does grant the law some validity. At Sinai, so says González, Torah is God's gracious gift, rules and regulations for living under God's reign, all initiated as they were liberated from Pharaoh's empire. Another instance of God's unending gratuitous way of working.

Here we're back at the Reformation era one more, reading the Bible with different lenses and, from some of those lenses,

simply missing the depth-diagnosis texts. For Luther those depth-diagnosis texts exposed the malady of sinners “blessed” with God’s law as worse, much worse, than perverse Adamic logic. It’s enmity against God. “Hating me” is one of the diagnostic specs in God’s Sinai-contract. Even worse than that is the lawful consequences of such unlawful enmity, to wit, encountering God the judge, the ultimate evaluator and critic, whose verdict is lethal for his renegades. God “visits” the iniquitous. God’s law “counts trespasses” against the trespassers. The “wages of sin” get paid out. There is one who is Paymaster, Trespass-counter, Visitor who calls on us, as with Adam in the garden, asking “And where, pray tell, are you?” I.e., where are you hiding? And why?

That is the sinner’s depth-dilemma that Jesus has to cope with in order to become Christ the King in the Reign of God, God’s new operational system. Not to rescue sinners from the oppression of empires, but to rescue sinners from the wrath of God. (Both St. Paul and St. John make that audacious claim. Were they mistaken? Misreading the data? Paranoid? Depressed?)

That’s why Good Friday was “necessary.” Not to rescue folks from the bane of Adamic logic. How could Christ’s crucifixion produce that? A good counselor could do that without shedding blood. It’s not “change your logic” that’s Jesus’ agenda. It’s getting those folks who are “not reconciled” to God finally reconciled to God, getting them out from under the Visitor, the Trespass-counter, the Paymaster, who is no tyrant, but just the administrator of the law-rubrics of “suum cuique,” the rule of “just deserts.”

Different—yes, better—lenses are needed for such depth-diagnosis, the “final” diagnosis that probes much deeper than the malady of Adamic logic. Namely, lenses that bring the divine death sentence into view. But then, of course, different—yes,

better—lenses are needed for the therapy appropriate to that diagnosis. Needed are therapeutic lenses to focus on that deadly diagnosis and bring the Reign of God into view to heal the patient, especially to view the grand finale of that Reign that came with Christ. The healing must go as deep as the malady, meet that malady, and overcome it. The cross of Christ and its sequel three days later does just that, so the core Christian kerygma proclaims. It heals the God-enmity/God trespass-counter relationship twixt sinner and creator. This gospel finally trumps the law's lethal verdict. Someone Else, God's own righteous Son, "being made sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

God's Reign in Christ for González is God replacing human empires with his own alternative society in world history. But isn't the uniform witness of the NT something else? Namely, that God's Reign is God-in-Christ intervening, encountering "in his body on a tree" and then replacing the wrath of God that spells doom for sinners. That is the Good News that fits the Bad News. Bad news, the baddest of the bad, is not how gosh-awful sinners are, how bad their ethics and logic, how damnable empires are—all of which may indeed be true—but how deadly their dilemma is in being at odds with their creator. That is why God's new regime, God's Christ-grounded mercy-management regimen for sinners, is such Good News.

Despite the plethora of recent academic scholarship (buckets and buckets, especially from NT profs) which claims that God's new operation in Christ is out to replace un-civil societies—and in Jesus' day the mega-society of the Roman Empire (and in our day, you know who)—there are several strikes against that notion, I'd say. One is the "real absence" of any primal texts anywhere in the NT to support that.

Another is that if Jesus was sent by God to undo the Roman

Empire, then he was a colossal flop. There is no evidence anywhere that Rome was any different after Jesus ascended than it was when he arrived. Were his disciples now to make good on that assignment after Jesus failed? Come now! And the irony is this: that when the pagan Roman empire did finally become “Christian” under Constantine, it was Empire that won and the Christian element that was subjugated.

Another strike against this notion is the theological presupposition that regularly goes along with such a reading of the NT. Something like this: since Good Friday/Easter, every sinner’s reconciliation with God is a done deal. Granted, many don’t know about it, don’t trust Christ for it. But all they need is to have their mind changed, their logic renovated. At present they’re in a sort of limbo. God the critic is no longer on stage, if he ever was. God’s grace is now the logic of the world stage. Some folks on that world stage already have learned that and have replaced Adamic logic with Gospel logic. The folks who haven’t need to be encouraged to do likewise. They’d be better for it; but for them already, God the critic no longer exists. If he ever did. Their theological problem is not a God-problem, but a revelation-problem. The theological facts of life are still veiled. They need to have the veil of not-knowing removed.

Biggest contra to the perspective that ever since Good Friday and Easter everything is OK for sinners is the NT documents themselves, all composed years after Good Friday/Easter. None of them says anything congruent with that previous paragraph. Instead, we hear this: “Sinners unconnected with Christ—even now after Easter—continue to be in mortal danger. Therefore, be reconciled to God (Paul’s plea). Believe the Son and have life. Believe not and the wrath of God still sticks to you (John’s claim).”

With such a diagnosis you need a much bigger Gospel, a much more root-of-the-problem-focused Reign of God, a new regime from the very One who is our final critic, a regime that will replace death with life, unfaith with faith.

But González—along with his colleagues in today's Jesus vs. Empire movement—opt for small change. Literally, a much-too-small change in the tug-of-war at the core of human history. They read all the reign-of-God texts as ethics, references to a human community, real and concrete—"right now and from below"—where relationships and structures operate on the "logic of the gospel," where "love God and love neighbor" really happen. To be in that reign of God, they tell us, is to practice this logic—anti-imperial, non-reciprocal, egalitarian, giving away possessions, trusting God for everything. Eden restored.

Au contraire Luther. Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, second petition. "What is the kingdom of God? Answer: Simply what we learned in the Creed's second article, namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he gave his Holy Spirit to teach us this through his holy gospel and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power." Not an Eden-society restored, but sinners restored back into God's favor. That is already paradise. "Today, with me," Jesus told the capital criminal.

The Reign of God arriving in Jesus is soteriology, not ethics. At Calvary/Easter, God's reign in Christ overrules the law of sin and death for sinners. When trusted, it heals any and every sinner's God-problem. What sinners "render unto Caesar" is another matter. That is also God's agenda, yes. But not Jesus' agenda. When once asked to intervene in a "left-hand-realm"

equity dispute, Jesus responded "Not my job." The Father had sent him on another assignment. Even more herculean than coping with oppressive empires.

I wonder: do Jesus vs. Empire theologians ever read Augustine's *City of God*? What triggered Augustine to write this was the widespread grumbling among non-Christians in the fading Roman Empire that the Christians were responsible for the empire's disintegration. Sounds like González's thesis.

Not so, said Augustine: Christian faith does not urge its adherents to undermine empires. Its concern is to live in faith and love in whatever society those Christians find themselves. Yes, empires are unrighteous, by definition: one people imposes its will on another people—with empires, on many other peoples. That can never been done without grave injustice. The Lord of the universe evaluates all nations, checking on the justice/injustice present there. Long-suffering, yes, but finally God gives unjust nations (and empires always) their just deserts. God authorizes other agents in the world, his left-hand agents—in the Roman Empire case the Visigoths—to execute his verdict and sentence. Christians didn't do it. God's other agents, his southpaw agents, did it. And they didn't even know who opened the door for them to enter and pillage Rome!

The conflict issues of the 16th century are perennial—possibly as perennial as the rise and fall of empires. Times for confessing return over and over again, beginning already in the church's very first generation as verified by the NT documents themselves. What triggers them is *not* incursions or opposition from the outside per se, but variant responses from the insiders, the church folks, to those outside realities—either willingly ingested or warded off.

If today's global capitalism is the juggernaut empire now on the

scene—and the evidence seems compelling to me—then it will generate a time for confessing if (as Bob Bertram compellingly outlines in his posthumous book *A Time for Confessing*) these signals appear within the churches:

- Gospel-plussing: “You gotta’s” being added to the core gospel of God in Christ reconciling the world.
- Authority confusions: Left-hand coercive authority replacing gospel-authority among Christians.
- Church unity grounded on more than the one gospel-and-sacraments.
- Appeals for and with the oppressed.
- Times of ambiguous certitude for the confessors.

Apropos of the global economic empire, evidence abounds (well, for those who have eyes to see it) that God has “Visigoths” already at work to discombobulate it. “Right now” and “from the inside,” where imperial cancer always germinates. And great will be the fall.

González’s book is a tour-de-force proposal for a major movement “right now,” and not only “from below” but widespread “from above (?)” in theological scholarship today. If you want to read just one book about it, read this one. Yet I think it is going the wrong way. Seems to me that González’s reign-of-God theology, as winsome as it is in his presentation, nevertheless diminishes God’s law and proposes an add-on to the gospel. It doesn’t dispute God’s gospel-reign as sinners trusting Christ. But that is not yet a big enough gospel. Undermining empires is also part of the mix, yes, actually the gospel’s very center. But gospel add-ons always also are gospel-diminutions. Adding more, yes, even relocating the center, is diminution indeed. To shift the gospel center from God getting sinners reconciled to God getting empires eliminated is diminution indeed. Most serious of all is that diminished gospels wind up being “other”

gospels.

Is this then a time for confessing? Seems so to me. But not first on Wall Street. Rather, much closer to home, within our Christian fellowship. And if that is so, then González himself—doubtless much to his surprise—gives us the specs for our confession: “protest and (alternate) project...right now and from below.”

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