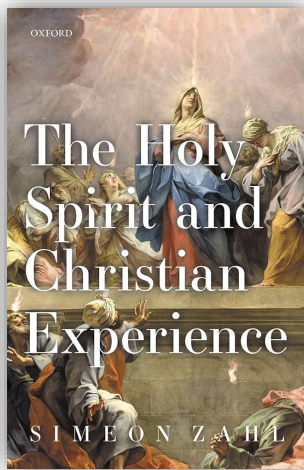


BOOK REVIEW

The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience

By Simeon Zahl

Reviewed by Christopher Valencia



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The theologian Simeon Zahl has written a work of constructive theology that reconsiders the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian experience. For Zahl, the main claims that make up the heart of this book include: firstly a need to include experience in theological studies. He writes, “despite arguments to the contrary, ‘experience’ cannot really be excluded in theological inquiry . . . [Experiences are] foundational in theological reflection, both in terms of how doctrines develop and how they come to have practical effects in the world, but they are rarely adequately examined or acknowledged” (2). The second claim Zahl makes is “the connectedness of theologies of experience to theologies of the Holy Spirit and the implications of this connection” (3). Thirdly, as each chapter develops, Zahl argues for a pneumatology throughout this study that focuses on the Spirit’s work in salvation and sanctification (3).

Methodologically, while this work primarily brings together theology with a particular emphasis on pneumatology, Zahl includes an additional and

strategic focus on “affect theory” and embodied practices (3, 7). Pulling from multiple fields, one can see how Zahl is pushing toward interdisciplinary approaches often adopted by scholars in the field of religion. For Zahl, theologians have remained locked in ontological paradigms and have forgotten the ubiquitous role of experience as it pertains to the Holy Spirit and Christian experience from times past to the present.

Zahl’s book is broken into five chapters. In chapter 1, he provides an initial description of how experience will be explored in his work. In chapter 2, he argues for “a constructive recovery of the category of experience in theology” as best “accomplished through the lens of pneumology” (7). In this chapter Zahl emphasizes a crucial point: that the work of the Spirit must “take forms that are ‘practically recognizable,’ in the lives of Christians in the world” and be possessive of both “temporal specificity and affective impact” (7-8). In chapter 3 and 4, Zahl begins to apply pneumatological and affective dimensions of experience to “the work of the Spirit in salvation” (8). In chapter 4, in a similar fashion, he moves to the topic of the “saving encounter with divine grace, through the Spirit . . . [within] embodied experience,” and places it in conversation with the theology of Martin Luther (8). Lastly, in chapter 5, Zahl develops what he terms an “affective Augustinian,” as a means to explore and interpret the Spirit’s embodied experience in sanctification. He relies on “Augustine’s theology of delight and desire to provide an experientially and effectively persuasive alternative account” (8).

Returning to chapter 1, Zahl first examines a “history of ambivalence about ‘experience’ in Protestant theology from Martin Luther to the present,” noting how certain long held views have influenced how contemporary theologians negatively view claims of experience (7).

Zahl explores how figures like Martin Luther and Karl Barth navigated between experience and reason.

Though Zahl underscores Luther's experiential depth in relation to his justification of faith, he indicates that both Luther and Barth retreated from "enthusiast" practices (20). And even though Barth returned to God as a "starting point" for theology, pulling theology out of "the modern cul-de-sac," following Barth there was a continual devaluation of experience (33). Zahl suggests that this has caused many theologians to follow in Barth footsteps by "erring on the side of metaphysical description, leaving the practical implications [aside]" (78-79).

In chapter 2, with this backdrop of the trajectory of Protestant theology, Zahl insists on the need to reconsider the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian experience. Zahl opens up an interesting topic as he begins to explore "pneumatologies of presence," which are similar to concepts explored by scholars of religion like Robert Orsi, Matthew Engelke and Tanya Luhrmann who also consider the role of presence in religious experience (53). Zahl writes, "To a significant degree, the question of Christian experience of God is the question of God's presence as it is perceived in human lives in various forms and under various conditions and with various effects" (53). Showing how expansive and relevant the Holy Spirit is in fields connected to modern Christianity, Zahl summarizes his point that "for theologians from across a number of Christian traditions . . . 'the Spirit' has come to be understood as the best word for the agency that mediates the presence of God to human beings, by establishing the connection between the risen Jesus and the faith and experience of Christians" (57).

Later, Zahl considers how scholars need to move away from vague definitions of the experience of the Spirit, and suggests that theologians must move from mere metaphysical and ontological ideas, to more recognizable, embodied conceptions. He refers to these as "activities of the Spirit that are *practically recognizable* in the life of Christians and Christian communities" (69, author's italics). Zahl pushes against theological abstraction and for a reconsideration of how "biblical accounts demonstrate practically recognizable concrete outcomes of the Spirit's work, such as the experiences connected with Christian initiation, the kindling of holy affections, specific prophetic guidance, healing, and other gifts of the Spirit, and so on" (75).

Zahl suggests different ways to take notice of this *practical recognizability*—using tools of critical theory and psychological sciences to explore temporal specificity and affective impact (78). Zahl also offers an

insightful comment: that though one may use new tools and terms to explore the "experience of the Spirit," in practically recognizable ways, such terms should not "lead to an overspecification of the Spirit's work." Rather discussions should remain open, especially since the theological concept of the Spirit is contrary to legalism vis-a-vis the "freedom of the Spirit" (79).

Developing the idea of "practically recognizable experiences" in Chapter 5, Zahl draws from "the pneumatology of Augustine in the early anti-Pelagian writings to resource . . . [what he calls] an 'affective Augustinian' account of Christian transformation . . . which is centered on the category of 'delight'" (183). For Zahl, Augustine's perspective matches Zahl's central subject: capturing pneumatological experience that takes account of embodiment and temporality. Again, this is the biggest thrust of the book: to see "practically recognizable experiences" in both accounts of justification and then on-going sanctification.

As a theologian, Zahl does much hard work reviewing biblical accounts of the Spirit and the inadequacies of theologies to do justice to the body.

Zahl concludes this work with the following statement: "an account of Christian transformation that attends to embodied experience must therefore be open in principle to a very wide—almost endlessly wide—range of avenues and tools for critical investigation" (222). Endless possibilities can afford much when studying new faces of Christianity. As a final comment, I think the author could have provided more examples of contemporary ethnographic works that explore issues of the Holy Spirit and embodiment. Though Zahl is asking for interdisciplinary approaches, I noticed that hardly any existing accounts are mentioned. People studying Christianity on the ground, expanding notions of the Spirit and experience, include scholars like Timothy J. Nelson, Matthew Engelke, Naomi Haynes, Glenn Hinson, and Helena Hansen. The work of R. Marie Griffith would also serve as a strong and relevant example. Yet, one must acknowledge that Zahl is pushing for a conversation across fields of theology and the social sciences. Particularly, this work affords much understanding to scholars studying lived religion and lived theology in Christian communities.



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