

Robin Meyers. *Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015. 168 pages. \$16.

Faced with waning social influence, mainline Christian faith must reconsider the meaning of discipleship. An honest faith cannot but be a defiant faith. But defiance cannot happen in the abstract. Whom, or to what, does a defiant Christian faith resist? And what will be its relevance? In *Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance*, Robin Meyers responds to these questions.

This monograph expands his 2013 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, and further develops his previous work like *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2009) and *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012). What distinguishes *Spiritual Defiance* is Meyers' sharper focus and address to the diversity of moderate Christians and preachers to live out an honest faith. Meyers calls moderate Christians to seek inspiration in the spirit that birthed the early church through acts of collective defiance, and that nurtured it into a community actively engaged in resistance to imperial power (87). Meyers calls preachers to “collapse piety and policy into a single obligation,” and fight back against the illusion “that faith can be personally redemptive without being socially responsible” (105).

The three main chapters of this work explore defiance as a faith lived out through acts of resistance against the self (ego), culture, and empire. Meyers argues that the renewal of Christian faith is possible not through a return to the unquestionable authority of orthodoxy, or an unassailable faith of unquestionable convictions, but in a radical posture that strives to be “beloved community of defiance, joyful but resilient colony of dissenters from the forces of death...that destroy and marginalize creation” (6). These forces of death take physical and spiritual forms. Whether visible or revealed, the practice of spiritual resistance Meyers proposes “must always be self-conscious and intentional decision to obey, as a disciple, the radical demands of the kingdom of God” (7–8).

Preachers play an important role in stocking spiritual defiance in church-goers as long as preachers shift from seeking to impress to embracing the objective “to draw forth the truth that lies slumbering in all us” (14). For Meyers, resistance is personal—“ministers need to resist self-infatuation.” It must also be theological—pushing back against reducing Christianity to assent to doctrinal systems of belief. Finally, it must also be cultural—pushing back against *empire* (42). It is not intellectual dissatisfaction, but the misalignment between belief and action that drives people to occupy other spaces rather than pews. People are leaving the churches, Meyers concludes, not by their lack of spiritual hunger but “they are fleeing because so many churches now seem bereft of the very spirit that birthed them” (115). A faith marked by “believing through actions,” the deeds of “actors who believe” more than assent to a correct system of belief (51) signals the presence of committed disciples.

Meyers does not call for vague forms of resistance steeped in facile spiritual exercises, he makes bold suggestions. They include daring to remove the American flag out the sanctuary, giving up tax-exempt status to be open to debate political issues in non-patrician ways, claiming the Sabbath as a work-stoppage day in resistance to unbridled capitalism, being conscious consumers and daring to be morally engaged in democratic process apart from personal gain. He asks his readers to push against the preservation of a narrow conception of morality and instead to love in ways that preserve dignity. He asks that Christian adherents and proclaimers resist the media's constant push for distraction and be mindfully present (113–124). The single most

significant challenge Meyers launches at those wishing to live out of a *spirituality of defiance* is to cultivate a radical orthopraxis of three qualities spoken about in churches but often absent: hospitality, diversity, and reflection (132).

In the homiletics classroom, Meyers's book will open a dialogical space for serious consideration of the task of preaching in the 21st century. If the ego has to be overcome for true discipleship and if interpretations of orthodoxy need to transform into efforts to *collapse piety and policy into a single obligation* for proclamation against imperial power and religious entertainment or reductionism, then preachers will find a pulpit and an audience in every place. In so doing, a renewal of Christianity as Jesus followers, more than the embrace of Jesus ethics, is all but certain; not because of intellectual assent but radical living.

Elías Ortega-Aponte, Drew University Theological School, Madison, NJ