

Book Analysis - This Here Hope

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Cole Arthur Riley's *This Here Flesh* is a collection of short essays on fourteen different topics, that draws from her life and her spirituality. It is a mix of personal narrative and reflections that she invites her readers into, which she describes as "contemplative storytelling" and "more remembrance than revelation, more maybes than certainty."¹ Many chapters end with a section in which Riley invites the readers to contemplate with her or charges them to think about what she has presented within the chapter. Riley's stated goal is that her book and its words "might serve as conduits for mystery, liberation, and the very face of God" for her readers.² She seeks to reach those who are on their own contemplative journey, those who are thinking about their own stories.

Riley is a compelling writer. She is adept at combining stories from her own life with history and "spiritual meditation."³ Her writing is vivid and creates pictures in one's mind easily and clearly. For those who enjoy poetry and for whom it is a medium through which they connect to God, the book is written in a way that it feeds that connection. Because of these strengths, she is able to discuss hard things without it feeling as though she is preaching at (in a negative way) or condemning her readers. Instead she guides you through difficult topics such as what justice truly is, pairing calling with contending, and the effects of feeling a lack of belonging through the lens of her own personal experience. This softens the blow of the truth without softening its impact. The chapters are also an easily digestible length. The book does not feel too drawn out or as though Riley is belaboring her points. Rather, she leaves you with enough to contemplate and think through without answering all your questions or overloading you.

1 Jacket cover?

2 Riley, 14

3 Riley, xi

That said, I do have some concerns about the theological soundness of some of her statements and points, and the accuracy of a couple of others. For example, she states that she feels that listening to god “alone in my room” is a practice that has “often been co-opted from the wisdom of Eastern spiritualities and diluted.”⁴ While I would agree that in many instances, Christian meditation does borrow from other spiritualities in a way it should not, I do not believe that the origins of the practice are rooted in Eastern spiritualities, especially as the practice can be traced back to the early days of the church. Even with these concerns, the book is useful. It does not bill itself as an instructional book, but a contemplative one. And the invitations to contemplate are well done. There is something for everyone to think through and chew over in the book.

In her chapter on dignity, Riley states “sometimes you can’t talk someone into believing their dignity. You do what you can to make a person feel unashamed of themselves, and you hope in time they’ll believe in their beauty all on their own.”⁵ Often the church and its leadership tries to argue people into believing their identity, and with it their dignity. In developing its leadership, the church needs to remember that this is not always the best solution. I think a similar takeaway comes in her chapter on lament. There has to be room for people to fully lament, to simply both say that we are there in it with them, and that so is God. Lastly in her chapter on memory, Riley discusses Christian storytelling versus Christian conversion testimonies. I agree with her that space needs to be made for more stories than just how people came to Jesus.

4 Riley, xi

5 Riley, viii

One of the largest significances for ministry for me actually comes from the fact that this book is very much not my style. I am not a poetic person, and this book is very poetic. I think facts and data, and this book is narrative. So for me, I have to remember that everyone learns differently, values different things, and finds meaning in different styles. Something like *This Here Flesh*, which did not speak very much to me, might be the very thing that speaks the loudest to someone else. I need to be careful to offer options of all kinds to those I am ministering to and with. Another significance is that I have to make sure that I am giving people enough time and space to tell their story. Sometimes people are roundabout and they need to be in order to get to their destination. I have to make room for them to get there. Lastly, Riley speaks of her grandma being “tethered to [God] by rage,” and seemingly only rage.⁶ While I have had the experience of being angry with God, I have not had the experience of that being the only thing. But there has to be space for that too.

⁶ Riley, 112