

Matthew Breay Bolton. *From Militarized Mission to Global Solidarity: The Life and Work of Missionary and Humanitarian Charles D. Neff.* Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2025. 343 pp. ISBN 9781934901298.

Reviewed by Rick Sarre

Two decades ago, Matthew Bolton (now professor of political science at Pace University, New York, but in 2005 a recent graduate from Graceland University, Iowa) wrote a delightfully insightful biography of Charles Neff which was entitled *Apostle of the Poor*, with a foreword by historian emeritus of Community of Christ, Richard Howard. This current title is a second, indeed twentieth-anniversary, edition of this book, with the intention being (as stated by the author) to reinterpret the work “through a post-colonial lens [thereby contributing] to conversations about gender, race, and indigeneity in recent Community of Christ history” (26). It includes the original 2005 foreword and adds a new preface by Barbara Walden and an afterword by David Howlett, both of whom add important historical observations, and, like the author, augment the work with their own critical insights into the political and theological legacies of Charles Neff’s ministry in the church.

I enjoyed reading *Apostle of the Poor* twenty years ago. I enjoyed reading this updated version, too, having been provided with the lens that is offered by Dr. Bolton in his introductory chapter. It is exceptional. He has clearly wrestled with his growing understanding of the way in which “the world remains shaped by the persistence of colonial relations, despite formal decolonization” (29), and has drawn insights from his own experiences while traveling widely over the intervening years throughout the places where Apostle Neff had ministered.

Reading the opening few paragraphs of the Introduction, I got the sense that the author might have thought that his first edition was hagiographical. Thus, I thought, this edition was going to take the “sainthood” out of his subject, and place Charles Neff in the realm of the American missionaries who expected to make those whom they encountered in far-flung nations look more like Americans; proselytizers who arrived with the mindset that “foreign” peoples were somehow deficient until they were fulfilled by the “truths” exported by their religious visitors. But that was not to be the case. Dr. Bolton reminds us of the words of Charles Neff writing in 1972 (at the age of fifty, and with another dozen years of his apostolic ministry yet to run): “To assume that the gospel as understood in America can fulfil the Orient culture but that no reciprocation is possible because the Western cultures are already refined and sanctified ... is arrogance of the first order” (37).

Having reported those words in deference to the man and his mission, Dr. Bolton mounts a case that Charles Neff was nevertheless caught by the standards and attitudes of the time: “As such, Neff [and others] framed their work as a kind

of civilizing mission, enlightening supposedly backward cultures—both in India and the American Midwest” (40).

The author then takes readers into his own reflections, which gives rise to particularly splendid dialectical writing: “I used to admire Neff’s inculturation of the Christian message into local idiom. Now, I see the manipulation and power disparities that underlie this kind of evangelism. I sought to emulate his humanitarianism; now I see how often aid programs patronize those they ostensibly aim to help. I am more aware now of the ‘White Saviorism’ implicit in much of Neff’s career” (46).

Tellingly, Dr. Bolton then turns the spotlight on himself: “But all the criticisms I level at Neff could be applied equally to myself. While I like to think of myself as an activist, I try to avoid arrest at political rallies and enjoy the bourgeois comforts of tenure” (46). This is exceptionally fine introspection.

The Introduction concludes with a strong rebuke from the author to those who may think Community of Christ today has completed what might be referred to as a “decolonization” of the church. He cites the continuing objectified expectations of those who attend World Conference. This is illustrated, he asserts, by the following attitudes that persist amongst Western conference goers: “Hopes that ‘the Africans’ and ‘the Tahitians’ will sing. A desire for ‘exotic’ trinkets for sale at a stall covered with a silk-screened *kanga* and woven pandanus. PowerPoint photographs of children and agrarian workers who need your ‘Tangible Love’” (48).

The criticism does not stop there. It is difficult, the author says, for the church to escape its colonial frontier heritage. “While the church leaders have increasingly distanced themselves from it, the church’s founding Mormon narrative ... ignored the stories of the continent’s actual Indigenous Peoples” (49).

At the same time, the author notes that there has been a backlash from Restoration traditionalists who are of the view that the church, in endeavoring to decolonize, has now lost its distinctiveness. “[T]he current de-Mormonization, if you will, has generated resistance from more conservative American members and led others to wonder what remains unique about Community of Christ” (49).

The author thus underpins the revised edition with the claim that the North American Community of Christ has grafted, indeed continues to graft, its colonial attitudes onto the lives of those across the seas who have come into its purview. It is a harsh review, and progressives in Community of Christ may feel aggrieved, but growth in wisdom typically emerges from conflict, and Dr. Bolton’s challenge is well argued, and is not in any way gratuitous or egregious.

It is at the end of this extensive introduction that the Neff biography begins in earnest, drawing principally from the narrative of the earlier edition. Dr. Bolton interpolates into these pages discussions of the key political issues that confronted the RLDS church throughout the twentieth century. This includes reflections on

the backlash from conservatives (and some church leaders) who confronted the renegade apostle upon hearing of his endeavors in Asia and Africa designed to reinterpret the gospel into a localized theology, and, conversely, to integrate exotic understandings of the gospel into the standard North American narrative.

I enjoyed Dr. Bolton's strong academic framework and clear writing. I hope that he continues weighing in on this subject and challenging those who continue in faith (under the banner of Community of Christ) to speak with a more critical voice "to the social and political issues of our time, building networks of solidarity across the worldwide church and beyond" (50).

Just as this book was a derivative of an earlier version, so I am now calling for another iteration. Ideally, this would not be biographical but would tackle the thorny issue of how the Christian church generally (not just the Restoration) has dealt with and continues to deal with a universalizing gospel claim in a world filled with cultural and religious diversity. It could also address the political tensions that decentralization has generated at the church's geographic core. In other words, the time is ripe for a broader examination, through Dr. Bolton's post-colonial lens, of the potential for ongoing religious hegemony, asking these questions: Is international evangelism inherently misguided? What has been gained in the past? What has been lost? How could the church's drive for religious internationalization be better shaped to ensure that future exercises in multiculturalism are not pushed asunder unfairly by charges from political scientists that such endeavors are typically imprudent, if not plainly wrong?

To borrow a phrase that bridge players often use, this book has both length and strength. It should be essential reading for anyone wrestling with the dilemmas exposed by the church's expansion into non-Western climes over the last seventy-five years. It provides a prescient view of where the church may be headed in the next seventy-five years, too. Let us hope that we do not have to wait two decades for Dr. Bolton's third edition to manifest itself.

PROFESSOR RICK SARRE studied and taught law, sociology, and criminology in universities in Australia, the USA, Hong Kong, Sweden, and Canada in a four-decade academic career. He retired as dean of the Law School at the University of South Australia in 2020. He is a fellow of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology and fellow of the Australian Academy of Law. An honorary graduate of Graceland College (1979), he has continued his association with Community of Christ as a member of the Standing High Council (2013–2025) and convenor of the World Church Peace and Justice Team (2019–2025).