

Roxburgh, Alan J., and Robinson Martin. 2018.

*Practices for the Refounding
of God's People: The Missional
Challenge of the West.*

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DISCOVERING THE FUTURE OF church in the West calls for a journey of re-founding—not tinkering around with efforts at reformation, renewal or revitalization, or so Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson assert in their first co-authored book. Roxburgh has been writing, speaking and consulting since he contributed to the seminal *Missional Church* in 1998. Robinson is principal of ForMission College in Birmingham, England. The two have been collaborating for several years as lead editors of the online *Journal of Missional Practice*.

This book offers a serious, fresh, and promising engagement with Newbigin's enduring question: Can the West be converted? While answering "yes," the book paints the situation as much more dire than the gloss typically found in ministry titles. Warning

against the reflex to direct missional energies toward fixing the church to make it work in the world as it is, they invite readers to see the missional challenge as grappling with the unviable nature of the modern West. They propose the vocation of the Church in the midst of the unraveling of the West is to join with God in the refounding of an unmoored society.

Roxburgh and Robinson identify the heart of the problem as Modernity's wager—the bet that life and society could flourish without God. While modernity laudably yielded scientific progress and democracy, there is a growing awareness that the modern West is coming apart at all its seams—economically, culturally, socially, and politically.

How did we get here? With an impressive range of citations from sociologists, economists, and philosophers, the first five chapters offer a retrospective. Chapters 1 to 3 chart the emergence, ascent, and crisis of the modern West. Contradicting the secularization thesis, these chapters insist that “the modern is not a radical rejection of the West's Christian past, but a transformation of the location of its meaning an identity . . . a migration of the sacred from Christian structures into the state, the economy, and the Self” (30). With the elevation of the state and individual, the mediating institutions that constituted social life and made human flourishing possible withered. God, meanwhile, did not disappear but was rendered useful, an asset to the individual's self-actualization and the nation-state's legitimation.

Chapter 4 explores the signs of unrest and hope for transformation that bubbled up in the 1960s—but which were ultimately assimilated into a standard feature of West, the quest for self-actualization. Chapter 5 asks “Where were the churches?” during the twentieth century, concluding that in myriad ways the Western church's responses remained locked inside of modernity's wager, anxiously searching for ways to fix the church and make them relevant within a world that had made God a useful tool for the Self.

In framing the nature of the challenge facing God's people, chapter 6 exposes the historical break Modernity represents in its formation of society apart from some sacred frame. Individuals,

the state and the market are now seen as the primary agents in the world. In chapter 7, lessons are drawn from the reflections of a leading Occupy activist who concludes that real revolution requires divine intervention. This intuition of a transcendent other is widespread in the draw of spirituality, and it is among these people, drop-outs from formal churches, Roxburgh and Robinson suggest, that God's people ought to attend to the possibility of refounding.

Chapter 8 critiques metaphors commonly used understand the church's situation—exile, resident alien, diaspora—and proposes *journey*, like that unknown trek of Abram and Sarai, as a more fruitful source of imagination. In addition to unraveling—the primary metaphor they use to describe what is happening to the West—the book evocatively describes the evidence of God's agency as fermenting and bubbling. These metaphors indicate that long before signs rose to the surface, a process began out of the public eye that is now bursting forth all over.

Chapters 9 and 10 offer a sense of a way forward, proposing that the “vocation of the Euro-tribal churches is to fuel an insurrection against the dominant lie of modernity's wager. They can live into that vocation to the extent that they create spaces wherein God's people hear, practice, recapitulate and engage the invitation to awaken to God's agency in the world” (131). While refusing the existence of a blueprint for any future other than the persistent remembering of God's agency, the authors do highlight several practices for the refounding of God's people.

First, they propose a shift in language and practice from congregations to parishes. Churches comprised of Christians living in the same geographical neighborhood are, in their view, “the minimum requisite for refounding” (148). Communal praying of the Daily Office is the second practice they propose as the grounding needed before discernment. Third, they insist on stability, the willing commitment to reside and remain in a place. For stability “provides us a place from which to see, listen to, and dwell with the people around us” and thus rediscover “how to discern and respond to God's agency” (153). The fourth practice calls on Euro-tribal churches to surrender their comfortable positions of

“meeting needs” and instead enter into relationship with neighbors as guests rather than hosts, as God has done. To resist the privatization of Christian life, Roxburgh and Robinson propose making eucharistic liturgies, common meals and hospitality key practices. Finally, seeking the common good of all in the local is proposed as an eschatological way of embodying the hope of Christ’s renewal of all things.

Chapter 11 celebrates the “blessed reflex” of missionaries coming to the West from Africa, Asia and Latin America under the conviction that it will only be through a “humble readiness to become learners and guests among those other Christians that God is bringing among us today—the migrant, the immigrant, the people who were in this land before the colonizations began” that the Euro-tribal churches will find their way (169). Chapter 12 briefly reflects on the role of church planting in refounding, noting that most efforts at innovation remain captive to the impulse to make the church work.

Those familiar with Roxburgh’s *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* will find similarities but this is a much more sober and scholarly account. The former makes a great study in a church group as I can attest. I can also testify that this book makes for great discussion among masters and doctoral students as well as the precious pastor or denominational leader who is looking for relief from the monotony of mission technique publications.

The gift of this book is its combination of unflinching sobriety about the gravity of the challenge facing God’s people and the hope that echoes in the conviction that the unraveling of our time is in fact not simply things falling apart, but the disruptive work of the Spirit in which God is inviting the churches to “come to their senses and embrace this gospel call to join with God in the refounding, the reweaving, the remaking of social life in an emerging West” (5). Roxburgh and Robinson have given a serious diagnosis that I suspect will be widely welcomed. Their prescription, however, is sure to disappoint those looking for a way to adapt their church for success. It is not that the practices they propose are themselves particularly onerous, it is that they are out of step

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with the world in which we live. That is, of course, the point. The
practices are intended to prepare a people to join God in remaking
the world, and in so doing to discover themselves refounded.