

BOOK REVIEWS

Aldous, Benjamin. 2022. *The God Who Walks Slowly: Reflections on Mission with Kosuke Koyama*

London: SCM Press.
ISBN: 9780334061113

Reviewed by Simon Woodman

Many Western Christians are unaware of the work of Kosuke Koyama, the twentieth-century Japanese theologian. Ben Aldous, in this book, provides an introduction to Koyama through the medium of autobiographical theology. Aldous encounters Koyama as a fellow pilgrim, and shares how Koyama's words of wisdom have helped shape reflection on Aldous' own life and ministry. So, in a sense, this book gives us two-for-the-price-of-one: we get to know not only Koyama, but also Aldous.

Aldous positions Koyama as a contextual theologian, one who brings their experience of the past (through the scriptures and church history) into intentional dialogue with their experience of the present (through culture), with both being honoured as the context of God's revelation. Each chapter of the book takes a particular theme from Koyama's writing that speaks to the current climate of mission in the UK, inviting the reader in each case to 'slow down', to attend to what is important.

In "Walking: The Importance of Slowing Down", Aldous introduces Koyama's theological perspective of 'timefulness', noting that for most of his life Jesus only ever travelled at walking pace. Koyama defines this as the God who walked slowly, the "three-mile-an-hour God", and invites us to do the same, to take the time to feel the wind, rain and sunshine. When this idea of timefulness is brought into dialogue with the Western obsession with clock-watching productivity, a timely challenge emerges: we have idolized time, and time has taken that power and used it to oppress us in return. Against this, God calls people to divine time, to a perspective much longer than our own minutes and days. The implications this has for mission, for missional "productivity", and for ecclesial decision-making are explored helpfully by Aldous.

In “Seeing: Notes in the Margins”, we encounter the God who “sees”, who moves slowly enough to see the excluded, the marginalized and the isolated. The challenge here is for each of us to see those whom we often ignore, and Aldous frames this in terms of the church’s colonial legacy of exclusionary and imperialistic violence. Koyama calls people to “neighbourology”, to hospitality toward strangers, to embracing those often unseen because they have been pushed to the margins of society. He says that “extending hospitality” is the beginning of mission: inviting others to the table, both literally and metaphorically. This is a direct challenge to the post-colonial legacy of English exceptionalism, and the populist rise in the “othering” of those who have migrated to British shores. Aldous proposes that the future of the UK church needs to be more diverse, as people learn to live together with difference in a way that reflects the *shalom* of the coming Kingdom of God.

The next chapter, “Talking: Shut Up and Listen, Will You!”, is grounded in the aural attentiveness that the three-mile-an-hour God paid to those he encountered. Aldous considers how evangelism in the UK might learn from Koyama’s challenge that “Christianity suffers from teacher complex”: we are too quick to speak, and too slow to listen, too quick to teach, and too slow to learn. Contrary to the way Christianity often positions itself at the centre of society to proclaim and declaim, Koyama says that it is the broken Christ who heals the world broken by idolatry, and that the church needs to recover the brokenness of its saviour if it is to be relevant to those who live with weakness and pain. The call here is to evaluate evangelism less by numbers and statistics, and more by pilgrimage, soul friendship, deep learning, and reciprocity. Aldous proposes “apophatic evangelism”, which is grounded not in knowledge, but in recognition of ignorance, not in strength, but in recognition of weakness. This is evangelism in mysticism, in silence, in *expectant quiet*, where listening is prioritized over speaking, and where those who have been ignored find their true place of belonging.

In “Surrendering: Nailed Down!”, Aldous reflects with Koyama on the powerlessness of the crucified God. Koyama’s early years were marked by his experience of being in Japan at the time of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so his theology is marked by a profound sense of the fragility of human beings and culture. In the face of this, he advocated a ‘bodily *thisness*’, an embrace of the material and the local as the site at which Christian living and discipleship take place. Against those strands of Christianity that over-emphasize an otherworldly experience or destination as the goal of mission, Koyama points to the fragile humanity of Jesus, noting that God chooses to work slowly and inefficiently, to the point where God in Christ comes to a full stop on the cross: the “nailed down” God. Aldous hears this call to “stop” in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, and asks what mission in human frailty

and vulnerability might authentically look like. Listening to those who have worked in disability theology, Aldous points to the disabling vulnerability of God nailed to the cross, and brings this into dialogue with the technological utopianism of transhumanism: for all of the benefits of technology, God is still an *embodied* God, revealed in the vulnerable and broken body of Christ Jesus.

This is a book that calls its readers to profundity, to hold the context of their lives in dialogue with their scriptures and their faith. As such, it is also a profoundly relevant book, engaging with some of the key questions and challenges of the twenty-first-century Western world. Koyama's insights enable fresh reflection on the real world of our lives, and Aldous brings his own story to bear in ways that generate new insight. For those longing to discover an alternative to the fast-paced, performance-driven, task-focussed, high-energy, hyperactive functionalism of so much of contemporary church culture, this book is the perfect antidote.

About the author

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