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Armstrong Empire: A Look at the Worldwide Church of God (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

The Armstrong Empire: A Look at the Worldwide Church of God, by Joseph Martin Hopkins, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974, 304 pages, \$4.50 (paper). Reviewed by William Nawyn, Associate Professor of History and Political Science.

The title given this book by the author, Joseph Hopkins, Professor of Religion at Westminster College, is an apt one. For, indeed, the Worldwide Church of God is the personal empire of Herbert W. Armstrong. His authority and position in relation to this organization is reminiscent of the medieval pope. His empire is, however, a much smaller one, and recent developments seem to suggest that it may be crumbling. His claims to authority certainly do not lack audacity: he alone is God's true apostle and to him alone has been revealed the true meaning and interpretation of Scripture; his teachings are, therefore, infallible and non-debatable. In fact, he asserts, the true gospel was not preached from the days of the early apostles until the beginnings of the Worldwide Church of God in 1934.

This informative volume is a study of Herbert W. Armstrong and the history and teachings of the movement he founded. The early life and experiences of Armstrong, the origins and development of the Worldwide Church of God, the doctrines held and propagated by this organization, the techniques used by Armstrong and his group to gain members and financial support, the recent difficulties and upheavals in the

movement—all these and other matters are dealt with, often at considerable length.

It is difficult to believe that somewhat more than 50,000 people have been enticed into becoming members ("co-workers") of this movement, until it is recalled that there are in existence today other groups whose teachings are equally or more deviant in respect to Biblical teaching and whose membership rolls are much larger. Hopkins seems to have anticipated this type of reaction on the part of his readers and himself suggests a number of reasons why people are attracted to a movement such as Armstrong's.

Hopkins effectively demonstrates that one of the major reasons for the success of the Armstrong organization has been its propagandistic skill in using its magazine, The Plain Truth, and its radio program, "The World Tomorrow," to promote its message. Armstrong's early experience in the advertising business is apparent here. The Armstrong technique represents an extremely effective example of a slick "soft-sell" method—soft-sell, that is, until its target becomes a member. Thereafter, extreme pressure is exerted to attain unquestioning obedience in conduct and belief as dictated by Herbert W. Armstrong and to obtain contributions in the form of first, second, and even third tithes as directed by the organization. The success of the latter is not only surprising, but also saddening when it becomes apparent that a large portion of the funds so extorted are devoted to such questionable causes as high-style living for the church hierarchy and extremely lavish campuses and buildings for the Ambassa-

dor Colleges of Pasadena, California, and Big Sandy, Texas.

Hopkins engaged in an impressive amount of research in order to produce this study. Although extensively using the published Armstrong literature, he was handicapped by the current nature of his subject and more particularly by the uncooperative attitude of the Worldwide Church of God officialdom; but he did succeed in achieving one research triumph—a personal interview with Garner Ted Armstrong, son of Herbert W. and heir-apparent to the empire. The result has been that most of the first-hand information concerning the inside workings of the organization has come from former members and officials who would tend to have a strong anti-Armstrong bias, making objectivity, a prime goal of the author, harder to achieve.

Given the inherent and artificially erected difficulties of dealing with this subject, Hopkins has, however, produced an extremely informative and largely dispassionate examination of the Armstrong movement. To a large extent he has allowed Armstrong and the Worldwide Church of God literature to speak for themselves. He has not refrained, however, from pointing out their errors and misconceptions at various junctures. An example of this is Hopkins' point-by-point demolition of Armstrong's theories on British-Israelism. A valuable feature of the book is a brief summary of the teachings of the Worldwide Church of God (i.e., of Herbert W. Armstrong) and of the doctrines that it shares or derives from the Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons in appendices at the end of the book.

For the most part, the book reads well, but it has a tendency occasionally to become somewhat tedious, as certain points are remade and teachings reiterated, although admittedly in different contexts.

This minor criticism aside, The Armstrong Empire is a solid, well-documented and illuminating study of one of the more important deviant sectarian movements in the United States today.

The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique From the Third World—by Orlando E. Costas. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois, 1974. 313 pages, \$3.95 (paperback). Reviewed by James A. De Jong, Assistant

Professor of Theology.

In a nutshell, Costas' book is a highly informed tour of contemporary positions in theology of missions. En route he subjects the various camps to thorough scrutiny, which is both appreciative of their strengths and critical of their weaknesses. His ultimate goal is to affirm the imperative of the church's mission in word and deed, while avoiding the extremes of a totally secularized version of missions and of a reactionary, other-worldly presentation of the Gospel.

Part I of Costas' study is entitled "God's Mission and the Church's Nature." In three chapters he discusses the church's character, her calling, and her message. Here he defines the church in terms of three key New Testament terms and makes a strong affirmation of her institutional character. While following Johannes Blauw in defending the missionary nature of the church's calling in the world, Costas is more Biblically precise than Blauw. He finds the church to be both a worshipping and a missionary church. The two foci are inseparable, however, since "in the New Testament, mission is understood in liturgical terms, and worship is viewed as mission-oriented" (page 40).

The church worships both through her Sunday, corporate worship in the liturgical setting and through her "incarnational worship" as the body of Christ engaged in her daily work. Both dimensions of worship are missionary in character. Costas' chapter on the message of the church is one of the best in the book. He stresses the concreteness of her message by noting that the Old Testament prophets proclaimed an era of peace, righteousness, and justice which the church proclaims "praxeologically" or through "action based upon reflection" and the "actualization of theory" (page 71). This era is inaugurated by the life and work of Christ and manifested through those bound to Him in a living faith.

In Part II, "God's Mission and the Church's Growth," Costas subjects the church-growth theory of missions to informed, penetrating scrutiny. He finds its ecclesiological-theological locus too narrow and its notion of mission too verbal. He challenges it to re-evaluate its hermeneutic and its views of man and sin. He appreciates its Biblical optimism and reliance on divine promises in its concerted effort to reach the unevangelized people of the world. Costas might have shown more appreciation for the church-growth people's emphasis on estab-