

Reviews

CHURCH, WORLD AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: PRACTICAL-PROPHETIC ECCLESIOLOGY by Nicholas M. Healy (*Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine*) Cambridge University Press 2000 Pp. xii +199. £12.95 pbk.

This book is concerned with what one might call 'prolegomena to ecclesiology', a cluster of issues affecting systematic theological reflection generally but considered here for their impact on the theology of the church. In place of 'epic' or 'blueprint' accounts of the church ordered around a particular ideal model Healy proposes an approach that applies Balthasar's idea of the theodrama. Two concerns lead him to this preference: a sense that theology needs to consider the church concretely and practically rather than idealistically, and a sense that modern 'epic' treatments of the church run the risk of undermining the distinctiveness of its way of life. Paul's comment that he will glory in nothing except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 6.14) functions as a rule for seeing how faithful the church is in practice to its tasks of witness and discipleship.

How are we to acknowledge the concrete sinfulness of the church while maintaining the conviction that the church is superior to other bodies in pointing the way to truth and salvation? Healy argues that established approaches to ecclesiology fail to equip theologians to respond well in the current situation. They are abstract and idealistic where what is needed, he argues, is an ecclesiology that will be practically and prophetically effective. Balthasar's theodramatic horizon can hold together in tension a number of elements that otherwise may be confused, separated or treated one-sidedly: the divine and human constitution of the church, theological reflection upon the concrete church, the formation of a distinctive identity, the church's superiority to and yet dependence on other bodies, the orientation to ultimate truth of people whose access to truth is limited by their position within the ongoing drama.

From this basis he criticises the pluralist horizon for its failure to respond to contextual developments, especially postmodernism's critique of modernity. Pluralism does not value genuine otherness but tends inevitably to some form of reductionism. The theodramatic horizon will value genuine otherness while refusing to regard the church as one instance of some general human or religious phenomenon. The radical aspect of this is the way it highlights the church's need for others who are different: 'conflicting traditions are a necessity for truth-seeking' (p.146). Alasdair MacIntyre's work is appealed to in developing a response to the challenges of pluralism and postmodernism, rejecting perspectivalism and relativism in relation to religious bodies. These bodies, Healy accepts, make genuine truth claims, some of which are in conflict. They must then engage with one another, and with the 'secular' world, in relation to these conflicting truth claims.

Where modern ecclesiology is not pluralist it tends to be inclusivist.

Healy associates with this the dangers of spiritualising and universalising what is at the heart of the church, neglecting its concrete and practical contextual manifestations, and eventually identifying the church's task with the humanist project in general. Rahner is the main focus of attention here although Boff and Tillard are also regarded as inclusivist in their ecclesologies. There are interesting arguments in support of the view that the current 'religious' context serves to date important aspects of Rahner's ecclesiology which was developed in a time when the world seemed to be becoming ever more 'secular'.

Healy's alternative proposal for a practical-prophetic ecclesiology involves the development of theological forms of history, sociology and ethnography. He is clear that a simple submission to supposedly secular forms of these disciplines is not adequate for Christian theology: while presenting themselves as 'neutral' and 'objective' such secular accounts imply religious and theological convictions. Not that the community of the church can detach itself completely, as a distinct 'culture', from other communities and traditions. Supported by theological forms of these disciplines, however, Healy's prophetic-practical ecclesiology will be constructive and critical. It will enable the church to be an agent for particularity. It is also likely to be confessional as it appropriates a theological narrative of the concrete identity of the church over time and tries continually to re-orientate itself anew to Jesus Christ. Its assessment will be in terms of how well it fosters truthful witness and faithful discipleship within this particular context.

Clearly ecclesiology is very significantly affected by current intellectual debates about modernism and post-modernism. Healy gathers a wealth of interesting material and offers a coherent and provocative argument. I was surprised that there was no mention of John Henry Newman: the first chapter of his work on the development of Christian doctrine, 'On the Development of Ideas', seems like it might support Healy's desire for 'a theological narrative of the concrete identity of the church over time'. At the very least Newman's account of the 'idea' of Christianity could be said to be dramatic rather than epic in its conception.

VIVIAN BOLAND OP

SENSES OF TRADITION, CONTINUITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN CATHOLIC FAITH by John E. Thiel, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000*, pp.viii–256, £33.50.

The perennial question that provoked this work has become ever more urgent since Vatican II: How can the required continuity of Tradition in the teaching of the Catholic Church accommodate the shifts and changes that have manifestly taken place? 'However important a hermeneutics of tradition is to a richer appreciation of Revelation, it cannot fail to respect the integrity of Tradition that is the mainstay of Catholic belief' (p.25) This book claims to find an answer by developing a four-fold 'sense' of Tradition analogous to the mediaeval four-fold sense of Scripture.

So the *Introduction* gives a useful summary of the history of scriptural interpretation, and some valuable observations on the formulations by the