

## Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

Best, T F & Robra, M (eds) 1997 — *Ecclesiology and ethics: Ecumenical ethical engagement, moral formation and the nature of the church*

Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications

Reviewer: Dr Johann Beukes (Kriel)

This interesting book brings together the results of the 1992-1996 World Council of Churches study on ecclesiology and ethics, conducted jointly by Unit I (Faith and Order) and Unit III (Justice, Peace and Recreation). The book seeks to explore the fundamental relation and link between what the church is and what the church does: the critical stance of its nature and its actions. It explores the ethical dimension of being church of Christ not as a separate component of the church's life, but rather as integrally related to its worship, its confession of faith and its witness and service in the world. It explores how churches practise moral formation (or *training* in ethical decision-making and discernment) through their teaching and church life. It tries, inevitably so in a postmodern realm, to integrate distinct languages and discourses, especially those of theology and ecclesiology on the one hand and contemporary Christian ethical reflection on the other.

The book consists of two parts: Part I deals with reports from the above-mentioned study process, whilst Part II is an exposition or reflection on that process. Part II makes for interesting reading, with Duncan B Forrester, Larry Rasmussen, Elizabeth S Tapia and Viorel Ionita as the main contributors. In approaching these reports (Part I) and interpretative essays (Part II), readers should bear in mind two overarching thematic convictions which seemingly guided the study as a whole and which provided a framework for reflection on the study process and its results. The first conviction is that ethical reflection and action (that is, *ecumenical* ethical reflection and action) are intrinsic to the nature and life of the church. Thus ecclesiological and ethical reflection are considered to be inseparable: accordingly, Christian ethical engagement is an expression of the church's deepest ecclesiological convictions, and ecclesiology must likewise be informed by the church's experience of ethical engagement, by its living out of the gospel in complex situations of civil (and not so civil) reality. The second conviction is closely related: namely, that ecclesiology and Christian ethics must stay in close dialogue, each honouring and learning from the distinctive language and thought-forms of the other. Ecclesologically this means that the languages of *koinonia*, of hope, of memory, of tradition, of homiletics, of eucharist and baptism — the languages of the church — should stay in constant dialogue. For ethics it involves particularly the notions of the church as a 'moral community' (that is, one which wrestles with issues of moral import, *out of necessity* so in light of the gospel) and of moral formation, the 'training' in ethical decision-making and discernment which comes through formal church teaching but, more pervasively, through the whole life of the church, and not least in its worship. This emphasis on the dialogue between the languages, discourses and, to use French philosopher Deleuze's concept, *mannerisms* of ecclesiology and ethics should be welcomed.

Although neither the editors nor the contributors proclaim this directly, this book shows that the church has become part and parcel of a postmodern world: it is simply no longer possible to maintain the

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great modern divide between church and ethics, between sacrament and society, between the immanent and transcendent, between theology and philosophy, between ethics and aesthetics, between subject (God/humankind) and object (humankind/God). The real worth of this study, in my opinion, is to be found exactly in this postmodern quality.

The book is highly readable and wellcomposed. It comes highly recommended and justifiably so. Those who participated in the study process, as well as the editors and contributors of this book could, even though the study process continues, feel content about the direction their study has taken them.

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