

**Mudge, Lewis S 1998 – The church as moral community. Ecclesiology and ethics in ecumenical debate**

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**Reviewer: Dr Gafie van Wyk**

The book consists of a preface, six chapters – A Calling to Be Different, Seeing the World through Ecumenical Lenses, Formation: Generating Moral Capacities, Formation: Discerning Moral Possibilities, An Oikoumene of Moral Practices, Horizons of Meaning and the Household of Life – endnotes and an index.

Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote in *Wahrheit und Methode* "Wer verstehen will, muss also fragend hinter das Gesagte zurückgehen. Er muss es als Antwort von einer Frage her verstehen, auf die es Antwort

ist" (p 352). Mudge shares this view of Gadamer's. He is concerned that people are posing questions the wrong way and therefore do not understand some important issues at stake in society and in the church. He believes that some important matters are dealt with in such a way that truly important upstream questions are avoided. At other times questions are put in such a way that they themselves become the question that one has to deal with. He concludes that "conditions of this kind signal a decline in the morality of discourse itself" (p 7). The decline in the morality of discourse signals the decline in morality as such. Mudge describes the morality crisis of our own time when he says: "... our world is not stable. It is deeply threatened by its own frantic pursuit of productivity and profit. Ironically, as our public moral resources diminish the question faced by our planetary civilization deepen. It is not only that persons are left to pursue their lives in a world without norms. In a morally fragmented time, we face questions of such radical scope and import that they can be dealt with only in collective ways. These issues have to do with the very continuation of life on earth itself" (p 22). From where will the wisdom come and the courage to deal with the questions of morality in our time?

Mudge refers to a statement of Konrad Raiser as the heart of the matter that is at stake here. Raiser writes: "What is at stake is no less than the reconstruction of ethics as such. The question is whether there is an independent entry point to ethics starting from the experience and reality of the church" (p 23). Mudge tries to demonstrate "that there is an independent entry point to ethics starting from the experience and reality of the church." He says:

It can be said today that the more one sees moral behavior as depending on specific communal allegiances rather than on publicly available forms of reasoning, the more the *whole* life of the *ekklesia* – doctrine, liturgy, personal spirituality, service, social witness – becomes a moral reality in its own right. If the community of faith is the primary source of moral consciousness, then *everything* about that community's life, not just specific commandments or ethical reflection as such, contributes to that end" (p 43).

Mudge uses the metaphor "household of life" (p 113) to argue his point of view. He describes the household of life as a larger human community, with specific religious communities at its core, where the realisations happen and energy is released for serving the still-larger human community. This strategy does not suggest that Christians should try to tell the world how to think. Rather it offers a context to the world in which it may do its own thinking free of the shallow alternatives the world itself gives. Mudge sees this position as one of moral hospitality in action. "The Christian household offers a sensitivity to the kinds of suffering that lie behind the confident secularity of so many people. It offers a willingness not to give advice, or to argue positions, but to be with other persons in their individual and communal identities, prayerfully including all in the larger context of God's purposes for humankind" (p116).

Mudge's conception of ethics can best be summed up as not only the confutation of several post-modern sceptical objections against an independent entry point to ethics, but also as an objection to any traditional or new principle of universalization in ethics and the grounding of such a principle by any available form of reasoning. This position is contra the whole Kantian tradition (today represented by the position of Habermas in philosophical ethics) and also contra contemporary Lutheran theology that argues that the proclamation of the Gospel frees people in such a way that they can and must use rational arguments to ground their moral positions.

It is crucial that this book be debated in the church, because the controversial point of view that Mudge defends is shared and practised by a broad spectrum of Christians at grass roots level. Its seems as

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if the contemporary church is breaking with its tradition when the question of an independent entry point to ethics is at stake.

