

Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

Van der Bent, Ans 1995 — Commitment to God's world: A concise critical survey of ecumenical social thought

Geneva: WWC Publications. 243 pages. Price: US \$22.50

Reviewer: Dr Gafie van Wyk

The book consists of an introduction, four chapters on the history of ecumenical social thought in action, one chapter that deals with three different ecumenical conceptions of society, as well as several chapters in which the major areas of social thought are discussed. After devoting a chapter to Roman Catholic social thought, it ends with a rather long chapter in which the author spells out his tentative conclusions. The book is well documented: a bibliography of basic literature on ecumenical social thought written between 1910 and 1991, a list of WCC meetings and international gatherings from 1924 to 1995 and a comprehensive index are added to the text.

What is the purpose of writing a concise survey on any topic? Is it not so that a survey must be comprehensive to be meaningful? In general this is the case. I do not think it was Van der Bent's intention to write a survey only, with a few critical remarks added to it. The critical element of the work in fact forms its point of departure and shapes its structure. Van der Bent's main intention with the writing of the work seems to have been not only to fill a gap in the account published so far on the history of the ecumenical movement. Rather, he uses his account of the origins and development of the engagement of churches in social, political and economic life as an instrument of critical reflection on the ecumenical movement. One can simply not understand the current state of the ecumenical movement without taking notice of its history. The current ecumenical movement is what history has made it. To be able to understand the current ecumenical movement, one must understand its history. Van der Bent expresses his concern with the ecumenical movement in the introduction to his book. He writes: 'The ecumenical movement is in danger, due to the fast-changing world, of forgetting its past (p vii) I hope this reference work will sharpen the ecumenical memory, identify present ecumenical trends and assist in the elaboration of future ecumenical options' (p ix).

The author is not only concerned with the above-mentioned danger, but also with the 'persistent ecumenical division of conviction, and therefore tension and conflict' (p ix). He is aware of the differences in the theology and lifestyles of the North and the South, as well as the difference in the North American and European points of view. Van der Bent's conviction is that these tensions can only be resolved in one way: 'Throughout this book it will be seen that only by living in continuous local and worldwide dialogue can the tendencies towards utopian, sceptical or defeatist thinking be avoided and the possibilities of making sensible ethical choices enhanced' (p x). In this sense the book is an account of the struggle to come to terms in ethical discourse with God's intentions and people's desires in turbulent social situations.

In the final chapter of the book the author discusses the reasons why the ecumenical movement does not have the same credibility today as it once had. He considers measures not only of restoring the lost credibility of the movement, but also of helping the movement to succeed in its prophetic task.

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One might not share the point of view of the author in all respects, but that does not change the fact that this is a book not only rich in information, but also one which confronts the church with many important problems. Some of the author's own answers to these problems may seem one-sidedly critical. 'Yet', he says, 'they are meant not to bias issues but to encourage readers to make their own independent evaluation from their own perspective' (p ix).
