Book Reviews

Mickey L. Mattox and A. G. Roeber, with Afterword by Paul R. Hinlicky

Changing Churches: An Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Theological Conversation
$36.00.

This is an unusual book and of unusual interest for all concerned with ecumenical dialogue. Mickey L. Mattox and A. G. Roeber were until recently American Lutheran theologians who have transferred to, respectively, Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Any ambiguity in the title is therefore quickly dispelled: it is about changing membership from one church to another rather than trying to effect change upon any church. There is a hint of this latter meaning, however, given that both writers manifest a concern at the changes they have perceived taking place in the ethos, theology and practice of American Lutheranism as represented particularly by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The seven chapters by Mattox and Roeber reflecting on the continuities and discontinuities they recognize between the Lutheran home they have left and their new ecclesiastical resting places are followed by an Afterword from Paul Hinlicky, a Lutheran who has shared many of their questions about the direction in which the ELCA (a ‘disintegrating church’ in his view) has been moving and who himself seriously considered becoming a Roman Catholic, but who has elected to stay with Wittenberg rather than ‘swim the Tiber’, hoping for a new, more traditionalist Protestant realignment in the USA.

Free of the fervid partisanship which often marks new converts, Mattox and Roeber are engagingly honest and indeed refreshingly irenic as they focus on the key theological issues that have traditionally lain between Lutheranism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The result is a conversation which will repay serious study by all who are themselves engaged in ecumenical dialogue. It will moreover supply useful texts for the teaching of ecumenics, all the more valuable for being written out of personal and existential engagement rather than intellectual detachment. Mattox delves into the central question of the Lutheran insistence on justification as foundational for all doctrine. As a Lutheran he had clearly found encouragement in the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDI) to believe that there was now
no fundamental Lutheran – Roman Catholic incompatibility here, just as there was none on belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist: ‘The ecumenical context, then, of my own decision to come into full communion in the Catholic Church is that of a deep sense of commonality, shared life in Christ, shared purpose in mission’ (p. 59). Where Mattox judges the commonality to falter is, unsurprisingly, on the understanding of the church itself: for Catholics, membership in the – yes, institutional – church is an inherent dimension of salvation, and the church is included in the gospel; for Lutherans (says Mattox) the church is at most an instrument of salvation through the Word and ultimately the true church has an invisibility. Roeber for his part probes with insight the potential correspondence between the Orthodox doctrine of theosis and the Lutheran teaching on sanctification and its relation to justification. Western theology since Augustine, however, has allegedly put asunder that which Eastern theology has always joined together in God’s dealings with humankind and with all creation. A brief review cannot do full justice to the range of matters discussed save to say that the Lutheran ‘marks of the church’, the notion of the Orthodox ‘mysteries’, the role of Mary in salvation, the Petrine ministry (of course a Catholic-Orthodox as well as a Lutheran-Catholic divide), and the sacraments are all brought into relief.

These writers, it is fair to say, are not repudiating their former Lutheranism – or rather what they believed Luther himself to have sought and taught – so much as finding in contemporary Catholicism or Orthodoxy a fuller realization of what their Lutheranism had promised, while recognizing that both Roman Catholic and Orthodox are themselves ‘wounded’ churches so long as Christianity is not united. This inevitably raises the question: given the compatibilities, or at least the degree of continuity, on fundamental doctrine between authentic Lutheranism and/or Catholicism and Orthodoxy, why did either writer feel it imperative actually to change churches? The answers are not entirely clear – or at any rate prompt further questions in turn. Both writers clearly feel that they now have a ‘fuller’ participation in the ecclesial totality of faith and life than hitherto. But they also admit that the tipping point edging them out of the ECLA came with the specific issues of the ordination of women and the permissibility of same-sex unions, while the point of attraction into their new ecclesial homes has not been anything quite so specific, nor indeed any doctrine as such, but a more general hope for stability in a time of theological and ethical flux: ‘both of us gravitated toward Orthodoxy and Catholicism in part because these traditions have a settled teaching on same-gender relations, and indeed that they have settled teachings at all’, whereas ‘the Protestant churches can change their practices and faith willy-nilly at a voters’ assembly, while development in the Catholic and Orthodox tradition