Editorial: An Agonistic Ecclesiology

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I am devoting this Editorial to one of the most arresting studies of the Christian Church that I know of: Ephraim Radner's *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*.¹ Spiritually profound and ethically searching, it is also vastly learned and infused with passion. I have found it to be one of the most demanding of the hundreds of books that I have reviewed in various journals over many years. It is not an easy read and is probably best digested in small doses, but anyone engaged in ecclesiology, ecumenical theology or ecumenical dialogue ought to get to grips with it. Essentially it is a plea for rethinking ecclesiology in a way that takes the history of division in the Church – and the tragic and sometimes criminal consequences of division – with the utmost seriousness. Radner argues for a ‘realistic’ ecclesiology, rather than an idealistic one that does not reflect the state of the Church as it is. He has not provided such an ecclesiology – at least not in a systematic way – but he has given us a crucial methodological prolegomenon to it.

Before I come to the specifics of the argument, let me get the downside out of the way. I did not always find it easy to grasp Radner's meaning. Some of his constructions are opaque. He makes little concession to readability, though his passionate message ensures our continued attention. His prose is not always literary. There is a good deal that is jagged, allusive or cryptic. He sometimes struggles to get his meaning across. The summary at the end does not help much. So it takes some dedication to work through 482 pages in that vein. But those who do so will probably never be able to think about the Church – to do ecclesiology – in the same way again.

Radner’s realism means looking at the Church without our customary rose-tinted spectacles. The Church that goes wrong, sins and commits crimes is not other than Christ’s Church. It is not merely the earthly shadow of the real heavenly Church, nor is it simply the visible tip of an invisible iceberg. Neither is it the ecclesial mirror-image of the social Trinity, as in some *communio*.

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ecclesiology. The Church is not a politically uncontaminated mystical body, but is political through and through, inescapably involved with issues of power and justice or injustice. The sinful Church that we see is the Church. The only Church that there is is a sinful Church (p. 464). In Radner’s view, such ecclesiological realism does not eradicate the Church’s potential to be an instrument of the mission of God. The two aspects exist in juxtaposition. As Radner puts it, the fact that ‘disordered failure and redemptive capacity’ coincide in the Church’s life is ‘one of the most anguished centres’ of Christian experience. But disunity, leading to further failure and wrong-doing, constantly threatens to undermine the Church’s God-given raison d’être, because a disunited Church cannot point unequivocally – indeed can hardly point at all – to the unity of God, the most fundamental theological truth of all.

Christian disunity and division is not only an appalling evil in itself but it gives birth to even worse evils. Through an analysis of the late medieval and post-Reformation religious wars in Europe, the Church in Hitler’s Germany, massacres in Burundi (of which he has first hand knowledge) and genocide in Rwanda, Radner shows that the failure of the churches to stand together, to speak and act as one against a common foe, proved to be their undoing and led in some cases to direct involvement in killing, or at least complicity in it. He rejects the sort of recent Roman Catholic apologetic which protests that, while individual members have sinned grievously, ‘the Church as such’ or ‘the Church in itself’ (John Paul II) remains immaculate. He also faults the Barthian, German Confessing Church model which, he argues, evacuated the institutional dimension from the Church (p. 145). Radner’s own approach is not anti-institutional; no body of humans can presuppose that it lacks form (p. 403). He disputes William Cavanaugh’s argument that religion is usually employed as a pretext for violent action by other powers.² No, it is religion itself that is sometimes lethal. The unpalatable fact is that ‘religious violence has a horrendous character peculiar to itself’ (p. 28). It finds opportunity when a distorted version of religious identity ‘empowers evil’ (p. 29). The religious wars in Europe have been characterised as ‘killing people for God’s sake’.³ In the sixteenth century Montaigne commented, ‘There is no hostility that exceeds religious hostility.’ And Pascal’s pensée is well known: ‘No one does evil so fully and happily as when done for the sake of conscience.’ Even in modern times, Christians have

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