Dagmar Heller

Dr Heller is well situated to undertake the task this book represents, given her place in that ecumenical observatory, the World Council of Churches, and her teaching role at Bossey, the Ecumenical Institute. A Guide to the Ecumenical Discussion on Baptism, after all, requires not only a comprehensive knowledge of a complex network of debates and documents spread across eighty years and all over the globe; it also calls for a certain sensitivity, objectivity and patience. There are disciplines to be acquired by those who would further the unity in faith and theology of the churches: they are the equivalent of the scientist’s lab coat and laboratory habits and, though they may seem punctilious and cool to others, they make it possible to handle highly charged interactions with some chance of securing positive outcomes. Geneva has long been, and remains, a great centre for the retention of such knowledge and such disciplines.

As we might expect, the book demonstrates these qualities abundantly. A very wide range of material, drawn from everywhere from Papua New Guinea to Poland, is summarised and discussed. Students of ecumenical ecclesiology may be saved long hours of research in seeking out information about the understandings of baptism held by different Christian confessions and about a host of multi-lateral and bi-lateral conversations between them. The organisation of the book accords with the intention that it will serve as an introduction to the subject for students. The first chapter sets out to summarise the views of baptism held by different churches or confessional traditions from Orthodox to Pentecostal and African Independent Churches. Then there follows a brief overview of the history of baptism from the New Testament to the present day, with rather more detailed attention given to developments in the early church, including extensive quotation from Justin Martyr, The Apostolic Constitutions and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Readers with prior knowledge of the field may choose to pass these chapters by and get straight to ‘Baptism in Ecumenical Discussion’, in which the fruits of conversations touching on baptism from 1927 to the present day are outlined. Chapter four offers an examination of the major themes at stake in dialogue about baptism, and the final chapter looks at ecumenical attempts to get to grips with the vexed issue of the recognition of baptism between churches. Dr Heller has endeavoured to present this varied material fairly and clearly; the former perhaps with more success than the latter.
The pedagogic instinct is not always an author’s best friend. It can lead the writer to summarise and simplify material that is intrinsically complex and resistant to summary. It can also lead to ‘complicating factors’ being left out. The presentation of complex views here is careful and fair-minded, but accuracy and clarity nonetheless suffer a few knocks. Just as the painting of a group portrait involves a high risk – every group member will be hyper-sensitive to the portrayal of their own image – so it is with the attempt to depict confessional stances. This reviewer (an Anglican) was soon tetchy: what did it mean to say that Anglicanism’s ‘rite and understanding of baptism is not really different from the Catholic and Reformation churches’, given that a wide disparity in liturgy and understanding between these churches had already been set out? Why was there no reference to the Book of Common Prayer? Once on the lookout for faults of detail, it is not too difficult to find them, yet, in fairness, the portraits remain recognisable and substantially true to life.

A rather more serious concern arises on consideration of what Dr Heller does not say. This has to do with what may be termed ‘asymmetry’. One form of asymmetry which is discussed is that which arises between dialogue partners when acceptance of the validity of baptism is one-sided: typically, a paedobaptist communion recognises baptism conferred by Baptists, but the same is not true in reverse. Ecumenical asymmetry goes much further than this, however, and it is important in relation to baptism. There is, for example, a major dissimilarity between churches or traditions which authorise set liturgies, and those that don’t. There is a dissimilarity between those that define official doctrine closely and those that don’t. And there is an interesting doctrinal dissimilarity between churches in respect of their apprehension of identity and boundaries. ‘Majority’ or ‘established’ churches may not be impelled to identify themselves and their membership so decisively as ‘minority’ or ‘non-conformist’ churches. For them, in the past at least, the rite of infant baptism may have operated as an agency of melding or solidarity between the worshipping church and the wider community, whilst for the Mennonite or Baptist communities baptism would be a key token of distinctness. There is little or no reference to these kinds of asymmetry in this book, consequently we find ecclesiological apples and bananas being compared, rather as if there were only one kind of fruit. We are also left, in the end, with little explanation of why the churches should find baptismal unity so hard to realise. In part, Dr Heller’s approach simply reflects a natural tendency within the ecumenical movement to emphasise the equal footing or likeness between dialogue partners. But it also betrays something of a documentary preoccupation. The book could have been significantly enhanced had some of these factors – at once complicating