Neil Ormerod

Re-Visioning the Church: an Experiment in Systematic Historical Ecclesiology
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This book declares its ambitions from the very start: this is an ‘experiment ... in systematic-historical ecclesiology’ (p. vii). If that sounds grandiose, and unfashionable in an age when diachronic grand narratives are eschewed in favour of small-scale, contextual explorations of lived experience, then it is misleading. The important term within that description is probably ‘experiment’, since the aim is to develop a systematic theology of the Church that is ‘empirical, critical, normative and practical’ (p. 3) – more heuristic tool than lofty abstraction. Neil Ormerod is setting out to develop an ecclesiological framework that emerges out of a constructive and mutually-respectful dialogue between theology and social science in order to be both ‘methodologically grounded and systematically oriented’ (p. 3).

The book is divided into two parts: Chapters 1–5 offer an outline of the dialogical method that is at the heart of the work, which invites readers to envisage social scientific and theological enquiry as two cutting blades which come together in providing a rounded explanation. Without the lower blade of empirical data or contextual-historical detail, systematic ecclesiology remains abstract and idealised. But without the moderating framework of some kind of normative theology of the Church, there can be no critical judgement; or, perhaps, worse still, no compelling vision of reform or renewal.

Ormerod’s own theological compass is firmly set to the centrality of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God and the primacy of the Church’s calling to participate in the missio Dei. The mission of the Church is a continuation of the mission of Jesus; it concerns the fulfilment of his preaching about the kingdom; his redemptive suffering overcomes evil through sacrificial love; the Church’s mission is to transform present reality in ways that promote the coming of the kingdom; the Church is empowered and equipped in this task via the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The influence of Bernard Lonergan’s methodological approach makes itself felt throughout, manifested in a commitment to research that is rooted in empirical reality whilst remaining informed by theological norms. While mindful of recent debates in systematic theological circles regarding the pitfalls of naïve engagement with social sciences, Ormerod robustly insists on charting an alternative course which seeks a more irenic relationship. After all, theologians have had no such scruples about working with philosophy; and traditions of ‘correlation’ are more sophisticated than many of their detractors like to think,
insofar as they have never simply assumed value-neutrality on the part of social sciences. Nor has the correlative method necessarily always confused the dialogical approach with complete capitulation to the secular. Whilst grace may perfect nature, and the social sciences may have been founded on an effacement of the sacred, Ormerod argues for a greater rapprochement. Theology and the social sciences are both involved in questions of value, ends, goods and meaning. This approach offers fertile ground for mutually critical engagement in which ontological realism, a commitment to verstehen and a strong hermeneutic of suspicion can be adopted. Ormerod adopts further elements of Lonergan’s work to effect this in order to generate a ‘scale of values’ – ranging from the biological, social, aesthetic, personal and religious – by which historical manifestations of church life and work can be evaluated. The scale of values permits understandings of change as emerging from above or below, and trajectories of progress or decline. Ultimately, however, the scale of values points towards the importance of the kingdom of God, as it breaks into human history, as the primal source of goods, freedoms, progress and order.

Chapter 4 elaborates further on the core principle of the mission of the Church: its relationship to the proclamation of the kingdom, and thus how judgement might be made regarding the nature of the Church as a social and historical body in time. The primary understanding of the mission of the Church is one of gift, and of the institution as sign and sacrament of the kingdom, emerging out of the events of the earthly ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The second part of the volume (Chapters 6–10) is a series of historical studies which serves to test out the heuristic theoretical framework. Ormerod stops short at any extensive treatment of Roman Catholicism under modernity, although the influence of Vatican II is apparent, not least in the emphasis of a missional Church rooted and oriented, but not determined by, the realities of temporal human affairs – and indeed in its positive valuation of the wisdom to be found in the providential discoveries of the human, social and technological sciences. These historical chapters are necessarily selective, but Ormerod deftly steers his way through the centuries by focusing on the tensions engendered when the Church attempts to mediate the Gospel through changing cultural contexts.

A major theme in this second half of the volume, which resurfaces once more in the concluding chapter, is the shift from a cosmological to an anthropological world-view: of the rise and fall of Christendom and its displacement (at least in the West) by a modernist framework which stresses human autonomy and self-determination. Ormerod is realistic in stressing that this trajectory is not one that can be reversed, that there are positive and negative dimensions