Article Review

Studies in Ecumenism and Ecclesiology in Honour of J. Robert Wright

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Professor Robert Wright has been teaching church history at the General Theological Seminary in New York City since 1968. He has been a notable and dedicated servant of the church as a historian, teacher, churchman and ecumenist. This volume of essays, with its double focus on the history of the church and ecumenism, is a fitting expression of appreciation, admiration and gratitude from a wide variety of scholars. The quality of their contributions is generally very good. Some are outstanding. Since in a review such as this it is impossible to give a full account of every piece in the book, I shall confine myself to those which, for whatever reason, struck me as of particular interest.

A refreshing feature is the inclusion of a number of pieces of what might be called pure scholarship – refreshing because they are interesting for their own sake and are free from the utilitarian quest for ‘relevance’. One such is a fine study, by the late Professor Richard Norris, of ‘Confessional Formulas in First- and Early-Second-Century Literature’. This looks at the pre-history of later creeds and other summaries of the faith in relation to what happened at and around baptism. Petra Heidt has written an interesting and nuanced study of the use in early Christian literature (up to Origen) of Galatians 4:21-31 (Paul on Hagar and Sarah) in the construction of a sense of Christian communal
identity. In contrast with later writers, the focus of these earlier authors in their use of this passage is not the denigration of Judaism but the establishment of a distinctively Christian identity. In this they are faithful to Paul himself. Joanne McWilliam looks at Augustine’s Christology, reckoning that he was lucky to die before having to take a view on the outcome of the Council of Ephesus of 431. He would have been comfortable with neither of the opposing positions of Cyril and Nestorius.

For this reader the freshest, most exciting and least ‘relevant’ piece in the book comes from Professor John Fleming of Princeton University. ‘The Flight of Geryon’ is a substantial and fascinating close reading of a passage from Dante’s *Inferno*, showing how Dante drew upon and used the resources of biblical and classical texts and their exegesis. The upshot is at once a study of Dante and an exploration of the age-old relationship between those two deep wells of western European culture, the biblical and the classical.

Marsha L. Dutton gives us an insightful study of Julian of Norwich as a theologian of faith seeking understanding, charting her development from the earlier short to the later long version of Julian’s *Showings*. But (to my mind) she spoils her study of Julian by attaching it to an entirely different agenda, namely, an attempt to present Julian as an exemplary ‘Anglican’ lay woman setting the authority of her own judgement and experience against that of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Now of course Julian was an ‘Anglican’ in the now obsolete sense of being an English Christian, a member of the *ecclesia Anglicana*. But it is bizarre to suggest that she was an ‘Anglican’ in any recognizable modern usage of the word. In her use of reason in theology Julian was not being ‘Anglican’; she was a typical theologian of her age. Again, Julian was of course ‘lay’ in the sense of not being ordained; she was a woman. But as an anchoress she lived by a rule under the authority of her bishop, and she had almost certainly entered a religious order when she was still young.¹ Indeed, Julian frequently expresses her reverence for the church’s authority. As a woman teacher ready to express her mind, she was by no means unique in the church of her time, the obvious example being her near contemporary Catherine of Siena, now recognized as a Doctor of the Church.

In her enthusiasm for what she calls ‘the long tradition of lay authority’ in Anglicanism (what does she mean by this? kings and queens? parliaments? Puritan grandees? lay patrons?) Marsha Dutton expresses particular disappointment with the 1991 ARCIC agreed statement *The Gift of Authority*.