
Scholars increasingly view church law as applied ecclesiology. The study of church law, ecclesionomology, provides an understanding of the very character of the institutional church – its governance, ministry, doctrine, liturgy, and rites. One aspect of the renaissance of interest in church law over the last twenty years has been a greater concern to compare the regulatory systems of churches of different traditions. It is axiomatic that the branches of the one church universal are themselves divided by their own systems of polity. Equally, comparative study of church law indicates the common ground that institutional churches share as manifestations of the church universal. *Law, Liberty and the Church*, the first book by Dr Gordon Arthur, does both, highlighting similarities and differences. Ecclesiology, law and history are all present in Arthur’s scholarly work which studies the presuppositions that underlie authority in five ecclesial communities in England, namely: the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, and the Baptist Union.

*Law, Liberty and Church* seeks to examine the concept of authority in these five churches ‘by studying some of the assumptions that underlie its existence’ (p. 3).

Arthur aims to understand authority structures, and what they tell us about the ecclesiality of denominations, within their ‘proper theological context’ and focuses on identifying the secular influences upon the different regulatory systems (p. 3). He argues that although Scripture, and its various models of being church, is a major influence upon authority structures formed by the churches, other influences have also shaped them in different directions. This theme is developed throughout the work culminating in chapter 8, where Arthur elucidates his position on authority and sets out four principles which he then applies to the five churches explaining how each differs from the principles stated and how their current positions may be improved. This is followed by a short final chapter with further final conclusions.

The first three chapters set the scene: the first treats the New Testament on the ‘exercise of power and authority by humans within the Christian Community’ (p. 7); the second outlines the structures of authority in the five churches; and the third examines differences in understandings of judgement and justice, examining juridical systems within four different contexts: Roman law, Greek ethical philosophy, the Torah and the New Testament. The treatment of these topics is impressive; the text is densely written and well
footnoted. However, the extent to which the text is accessible to an interdisciplinary audience is open to question.

Chapters four and five examine the use of authority in the episcopal churches. Arthur concludes that, though Canon Law has been one of the principal means by which secular ideas have influenced Christian culture, the Roman Catholic Church has felt the influence of Roman law resulting in inflexibility and authoritarianism. The Church of England has ‘been influenced by the secular jurisprudence of England, with its emphasis on reason, equity and pragmatism’ (p. 125). In both cases, Arthur’s method is largely historical and he seems less confident discussing modern influences upon the law. Furthermore, Arthur seems to stress the disadvantages that the secular influences have had. For example, it may be true that the law of the Church of England has followed English civil law in its penchant for ‘fudged disputed issues’ but Arthur does not recognise that the lack of certainty may be a price worth paying to avoid overly rigid legal structures which are incapable of subtlety and nuance.

Chapters six and seven examine authority in the non-episcopal churches, including their rejection of canon law, and the influence of Aristotle on democratic ecclesial order. Chapter seven is important in so far as it critically analyses whether alternative structures of authority employed by the Free Churches actually perform the same function as canon law in episcopal churches. He concludes that the Free Churches have embraced secular notions of democracy and, to a lesser extent, individualism (p. 195). Indeed, for Arthur, while the influence of Aristotle upon the free churches is greater than it is often assumed, the Roman Catholic Church is less indebted to him than is sometimes claimed (p. 192). These chapters advance Arthur’s thesis well but again the benefits of the secular influence are somewhat overlooked.

Arthur’s general conclusions may be summed up by a comment made earlier in the book that ‘Churches have drifted away from the ideal’ where law, reason or liberty have been emphasised to the detriment of righteousness (p. 173). This, of course, is based on a value judgement of what the ideal is. It is clear that Arthur sees the ideal as being the patterns of authority found in the Early Church and described in the New Testament. However, he does recognise that the development and growth of the Church required and requires the discovery of new structures (p. 197). Arthur’s identified principles will no doubt help this task but his constant backward-looking stance may hinder progression. The author concludes with a hope that each of the Churches will ‘find both encouragement and challenge’ in his work (p. 198). If the understanding of church law as applied ecclesiology is tenable, it is to be