
‘How might we live together in the midst of pluralism?’ is the question that this useful book tries to answer. It is applied here to our pluralist society in the West, but of course it is also the critical question for the Christian Church today and there is much that can be transferred across from the social to the ecclesial. The book’s premise, one that links political theory and theology, is that Christianity specialises, so to speak, in issues of fellowship, diversity and harmony. By being itself the Church can show the way to true community. What Christian theology offers is not a model of mere toleration, which implies putting up with something of which you disapprove, but a deep engagement with what is other, issuing in a profound unity beyond difference. Johnson engages in a gently critical exposition of a range of authors, beginning with Rawls and ending with Milbank, taking in Augustine along the way – though it could be said that Augustine is the solution.

Rawls’ political liberalism is contrasted with the ‘agonistic’ theorists of difference. For Rawls – as much in the later *Political Liberalism* as in *A Theory of Justice* – difference is a problem for political coherence and is therefore confined to the private realm. Public values are minimal, just enough for political society to hold together on the basis of ‘justice as fairness’. Rawls’ ‘public reason’ is reason stripped of what is particular or unique to participating groups, a lowest common denominator form of reason. All the really interesting, conflicting, passionate ideas are excluded from Rawls’ conception of the public realm. Therefore the common or communal good is separated from a person’s deepest identity and motivation. The public realm is a sterile area that does not facilitate the clash of ideas. This ‘asocial individualism’ has been attacked by the Communitarian school in the persons of Alastair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer. Rawls is fundamentally pessimistic about what can be accomplished by dialogue between passionately committed persons and groups. By way of contrast, we might comment, dialogue is the acknowledged key to both ecumenism and inter-faith understanding. Religious people are passionate people and their communities of faith are hotbeds of argument and debate. Rawls’ ‘Public reason’ has not got much to offer ecclesiology.

On the other side of the political argument are the agonistic thinkers, influenced by Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida – such writers as William Connolly,
Charles T. Mathewes and Chantal Mouffe, and, alongside them but with a different emphasis, perhaps the most subversive of them all, Richard Rorty. For the agonistic thinkers, power is pervasive, conflict is endemic and chaos lies beneath the surface. This is the uncomfortable reality that concepts of unity and harmony attempt to disguise. But in this school of thought, difference still remains a problem and a threat. They postulate an irreconcilable enmity between unity and diversity, harmony and difference, the universal and the particular. There is no hope of ultimate reconciliation and harmony, and without that, there is no hope – full stop. It is clear that how one evaluates difference is related to one’s deepest beliefs about the nature of reality.

Against this background, the author’s goal is to achieve a rich, loving, hospitable interaction among differences, expressed as conversation – not merely verbal but practical and lived – and thus to point the way to true community. Augustine provides the key. In the City of God and other writings, Augustine affirms the ultimate harmony and peace of reality, but he recognises that this is threatened by the human lust for domination. Our loves, our deepest motivating force, must be set in order; our passions must be referred to God. God is the highest good and the supreme common good. So, when we love God, we take thought for the common good. Pluralism and difference are not necessarily fallen and sinful; they may be part of God’s infinitely rich and varied creation, or they may need to be reconciled and redeemed. Creation, divine or human, gives rise to difference and this is not a threat provided it is seen in the light of God’s love and justice.

In Augustine (as in Barth) the political realm as well as the ecclesial realm, the state as well as the Church, come under the Lordship of Christ and are held in relationship with each other in him. The Church finds its proper place in the public realm because the Christian faith is not a set of personal beliefs about individual values, but a form of public statement. ‘Christianity takes shape as an embodied narrative, defined by practices, disciplines, and sacraments that are rightfully and authentically public’ (p. 239). However, Johnson believes that the modern Church has lost the plot. It has capitulated to liberalism, colluding with the privatisation of faith, and is therefore ‘unable to exist within our pluralist society as its own public, social, embodied reality’ (p. 26). I think that that verdict deserves to be further tested.

The notion of lived interaction, named ‘conversation’ here, is a secular analogy to the idea of ‘receptive ecumenism’ in ecumenical theology, in as much as this interactive mode ‘keep[s] open the possibility of honest learning, growth, change, and conversion’ (p. 260). This still sounds like liberalism to me – but