
This is Martyn Percy’s second volume (a third is promised) in the series ‘Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology’. It is a major achievement. Anyone who has been involved in any way in the study of religion soon discovers how complex the task is. They must be adept at working in a number of disciplines—sociology, anthropology, psychology and, of course, theology. In addition, they will have to handle a great deal of literature—reports, parish magazines, church newspapers and books which provide the secular history of the period. Dr Percy’s learning makes light of all this. He hops nimbly between the behavioural sciences and theology, writing lucidly and with panache, but not without humour. Behind lie a number of articles, but the book is greater than the sum of its parts.

The book is divided into three parts: Sacrament – Spiritual Life; Church – the Nature of the Body; and Ministry – Practising Theology. Each part divides into three chapters. In these Percy addresses belief, practice and culture; church growth, including a generous critique of Fresh Expressions (the latest in a long line of attempts to enlarge the church); and in the third he discusses what it is to act (particularly to lead) and how to live with the anger that ministry generates. A thoughtful conclusion draws threads together. A useful bibliography and index are appended. There is much original thought in this book and the careful reader will be rewarded with profound insights set in an enjoyable read.

There is one area that Dr Percy might consider incorporating in his further study—that of the unconscious and in particular dependency. Today it is fashionable to disparage dependency in favour of autonomy and it is unfashionable to value the parish system. But the author cannot see any real alternative for a church like the Church of England. I agree with him. Its demise has often been predicted, but it survives. As often with the church, real threats come more from within than from those whom it serves. The breakdown of authority and loss of the perspective that distance gives, are two such issues. Parish priests know this loss of authority and that they were customarily appointed from a distance to bring a new vision. No local ordained ministry here. Church growth has been a topic since at least 35 CE, so not surprisingly, there seems little new to be said. Although much traditional language is used, Fresh Expressions discounts the parish. It seems to determine its own boundaries of space, membership and even creed. It does not matter whether the bishop has approved it or not; each constituent group, especially in the evangelical
tradition, will make its own history and will not easily surrender it. The idealised leader is looked to for care, ideas and guidance. Much of what is done or not done is in response to his thinking. The enterprise is dependent on him and the pattern is replicated in many of the groups that participate. Percy is firm but fair to Fresh Expressions.

Implicit theology may be thought of in relation to explicit theology. Percy uses a blanket as an illustration: spread out it shows a pattern that can be built on. That is explicit. But tossed aside, only about a quarter of it is visible and much seems hidden in the folds. The former is explicit theology; the crumpled cloth is where the human world and church are hidden away, but you know that it can be explored, albeit slowly. This is implicit theology. The study of religion can be done from any academic standpoint. Implicit theology, by contrast, calls for an interpretative stance within the individual, within the church and within the community. Incidentally Dr Percy is not correct when he calls my stance ‘therapeutically inclined’ (p. 117). Like any aspect of religion it may sometimes drift towards pastoral ministry, but it is not therapeutic. The church is essentially and inevitably itself dependent. How dependent people can be on a leader is familiar, and that is also well known of groups. We can extrapolate from this material to the place of church in society, where the key to their interaction is what each represents on behalf of some other. For example, by christening (rarely ‘baptism’) the baptizer acts on behalf of the church and even God. The pervasive, not necessarily malign, role that dependency plays in every aspect of church might add to Percy’s thesis.

Some years ago, two consultants studied the diocese of Chelmsford. They produced a descriptive definition of the parish priest’s activity:

There is inevitably an element of childlike dependency in the relationship to the church, and thus to its representatives, in that to some extent they are asked to solve the insoluble, to cure the incurable and make reality go away. (Gordon Lawrence and Eric Miller)

Percy’s conclusions are sound and certainly not extravagant. ‘The miscible nature of the church … suggests that its hope rests in its hybridity rather than its assumed purity’ (p. 159). At the end of his argument Dr Percy indicates that implicit theology is likely to be by far the largest field in theology because it works with people’s experience, including that of the theologian. In so doing it invites us to let go of thinking that increasingly builds on itself and look more closely at human life in general. His review of the process by which the role of the clergy became increasingly professionalised in the nineteenth