
Robert Muthiah’s concern is to challenge theologies, structures and ecclesial practices which ‘work against the development of congregations that involve the whole people of God in ministry’ (p. 1). He does this by making connections between trinitarian ecclesiology, church practices and certain representative strands (‘institutions’, p. 87) of postmodern culture. The book is essentially in two halves: Chapters 2 and 3 sketch out the formal theological groundings, in terms of gathering New Testament support for a fairly mainstream reformed view of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ and drawing on thinkers including Miroslav Wolf and Wolfhart Pannenberg to develop a trinitarian ecclesiology. Chapters 4 and 5 then proceed showing how certain ‘institutions’ of postmodern culture mitigate for or against the ‘values’ of the Royal Priesthood, and how in sociological terms such values can be embedded in the fabric of congregational practice.

Muthiah’s theological groundwork is impassioned, but perhaps not thorough enough for a satisfactory treatment of the many important issues raised. For example, the phrases ‘priesthood of all believers’ and ‘royal priesthood’ are used interchangeably, without any reference to the textual and contextual ambiguity surrounding ‘royal priesthood.’ Similarly, Martin Luther is credited with the phrase ‘priesthood of all believers’ although it is highly unlikely that he ever used it. All of Muthiah’s references to Luther are from secondary sources, and there is no sense of Luther’s development of thought over the fairly key issue of ordination, such as after his encounter with the radicals in 1525. Ecumenical consensus would support Muthiah in that there is no single pattern of ministry laid out in the New Testament, but there are many moments in the book when the Early Church is anachronistically (if un-intentionally) cast simply as Antique Protestantism.

The project suffers from a highly selective use of material. There is no reference to the Gospel evidence of demarcation among Jesus’ followers, to Patristic authors or to early liturgical texts. Apart from a perfunctory mention of Clement’s distinction between laity and clergy, we leap straight from the world of the New Testament to Calvin and the Reformation. The author’s discussion of two Vatican II texts is good on its own terms, but none of this analysis is supported by any reference to the rich ressourcement use of Patristic texts and interaction with Orthodox theological writing and spirituality which marks such a turning point for the West in terms of key issues for this discussion,
such as sacramentality, sanctification, corporate holiness and indeed ordination. As a result, the reader could be forgiven for concluding that the theological foundations for what follows are not strong enough given the nature of the topic.

What is so good, however, about Muthiah’s work, is that he relentlessly places charism right at the heart of all Christian ministry. Unsurprisingly he rejects any notion of ordained ontological ‘character’ (p. 29) and, drawing on John Yoder, is deeply nervous of any notion of the ‘religious specialist’ (p. 41). Moving through an analysis of the work of Miroslav Volf, Muthiah works to close what he perceives as the ‘gap’ (p. 45) between the ordained ministry and the priesthood of all believers. So, charisms might not be given for life, and departing from Volf, there is no such thing as the charism of office. Rather, he asks rhetorically, ‘Might not a variety of charisms qualify one for office?’ Doubtless so, but one cannot help wonder whether there are historical and theological nervousnesses at play here which prevent a proper discussion about what office might actually be within the context of the common priesthood of all the baptised.

Chapter Three sets out a Trinitarian ecclesiology which is about ‘relationality, presence, equality, non-domination, unity and differentiation’ (p. 68). Muthiah acknowledges Volf’s nervousness about sketching a Trinitarian theology to fit our notion of the Church, but then proceeds to build on the ontological relationality of the Trinity to argue that relationships ‘push out office as constitutive of the Church’ (p. 59). Whilst we can probably agree that all relationships in the Church are ‘ontologically’ equal it may not be that they are semiotically equal. Muthiah’s Trinitarian discussion is much diminished by no reference to semiotics, or to the question about how presence, non-domination, unity and differentiation might actually be signed in human communities. In discussing interdependance, Muthiah clearly draws on his experience as a pastor as well as on formal theology to insist that all charisms should be at the service of the community (p. 78), and helpfully rules out a ‘do-it-all’ kind of leadership (p. 70). But other conclusions need to be questioned on a practical, pastoral level. Is it pastorally wise to rule out a hierarchy of charisms? Surely all work together to build up the Body of Christ, but just because no member of the Trinity ‘takes on more responsibility than the other members’ can we really then conclude that responsibility for the life of the Church can be shared equally? Similarly is it charismatically or pastorally appropriate for ordination to be seen as a rite to be administered ‘to all the people of God’ (p. 86)?

Chapter 4 represents a substantial gear-change in introducing elements of our ‘hyper-modern culture’ (p. 87) to the conversation and examines how