Editorial

A Journey of Discovery: Christian Initiation, Archbishop Rowan Williams and Ecumenism

As the year of 2010 drew towards its end, so did an institution that had served the Church of England for forty years in its theological reflections and ecumenical ministry. The Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG) lost its old identity and, merging with other agencies of the Church, re-emerged as the newly minted ‘Faith and Order Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England’ (FAOC). This is not the place to reflect on what the differences between the old and the new might be – beyond, of course, the formal re-arrangement of two initials and the replacement of a third. What should be remarked is that last year the final project on which FOAG had been working saw the light of day as the very first piece to be published under the new badge of FAOC, and it is fitting that – to mark a new beginning – it should be a collection of essays on the theme of ‘beginning’: in fact, nothing less than the beginning of the Christian life itself.

As a non-Anglican member of the editorial board of Ecclesiology, I believe that this book, entitled The Journey of Christian Initiation¹ is of the highest importance for ecumenism. I suspect (though Anglicans will have to confirm this) that it will also become a formative text for Anglicanism. Its thesis, which is based on prior writings and the opening chapter by its editor, Paul Avis, is that Christian initiation is a process or ‘journey’, of which baptism is the ‘foundation and heart’ but not the whole. Setting themselves against a recent trend in Anglicanism towards ‘baptism as complete sacramental initiation’ – abbreviated in the book as BACSI – which has led to a neglect of confirmation, all its authors affirm that initiation must contain elements in addition to baptism: these are notably Christian

nurture, the act of confirmation as both a strengthening of the Christian
disciple by the Holy Spirit and an opportunity for a public confession of
personal faith, and a sharing in the eucharist for the first time. For those
who find difficulty with the language of either ‘process’ or ‘journey’, the
authors also offer the description of initiation as an ‘extended event’ unfold-
ing in several acts over time. The essays have little difficulty in demonstrat-
ing that this ‘journey of initiation’ has been the clear, basic pattern in the
western church over the centuries, that it is exemplified in the Roman
Catholic Church, in many Protestant communions, and in the history of the
Church of England until the publication of the Ely Report on Christian
Initiation in 1971.

In addition to recalling the Church of England to its roots in a holistic
Christian initiation, this thesis is a timely one on the ecumenical scene.
Thinking about baptism and initiation ecumenically is in a kind of state
of suspension, stretched between the widely-acclaimed past report on
Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (‘BEM’)

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and the widely-desired future completion of One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition (a ‘study text’ still
in progress).

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As Harriet Harris perceives in her chapter of this book, despite
the affirmation of ‘common baptism’ in BEM, mutual recognition of bap-
tism is still either lacking (especially on the part of the Baptists) or has not
resulted in the recognition by the churches of each other as true churches
of Christ. With regard to the first problem, BEM had in fact already noted
that some churches offer ‘as equivalent alternatives’ for entry ‘both a pat-
tern whereby baptism in infancy is followed by later profession of faith and
a pattern whereby believers’ baptism follows upon a presentation and
blessing in infancy’, and it urged that all churches might recognize these
‘equivalent alternatives in their reciprocal relationships’ (commentary on
clause 12). That these equivalent alternatives are not simply different forms
of baptism alone – i.e. either baptism of infants or the baptism of those able
to confess faith for themselves – but whole patterns of initiation was made
clear by the clarification of this clause offered by the official report on the
responses made to BEM (1990):

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Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Faith and Order Paper no. 111; Geneva: World Council of
Churches, 1982).

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Published electronically as a ‘text in progress’, World Council of Churches Faith and Order
Commission, 2006; now published as ‘study text’ (Faith and Order Paper no. 210; Geneva:
World Council of Churches, 2011).