
Some theologians write in an instantly recognisable style, rather like people who speak with a distinct and unvarying accent. They have one ‘voice’. Stephen Pickard writes in several styles, as these collected essays clearly demonstrate. Not that this argues inconsistency. There are common threads, themes and commitments to be discerned in all thirteen of the pieces gathered here. But the timbre and accent varies from the austere and precise voice of his more philosophically inclined essays (e.g. ‘A Future for Systematic Theology’, a study of John Locke’s empiricism, and its impact on theology, past and present) to the much more conversational, even chatty tone of the piece on ‘The New Monasticism’ (‘recently I have been thinking about the submerging church; the church on the way down rather than up.’ p. 186). This diversity is not just a matter of tone, moreover. Pickard exhibits here a readiness to tackle a wide range of theological issues and genres. His work is not to be pigeon-holed. He draws on patristic and modern historical sources, he tackles themes related to sociology, ethics, ecclesiology and Trinitarian dogmatics, he is distinctly Australian but deliberately international in his thinking, he is at once a practical/contextual and a systematic theologian. This is refreshing, and makes the book a meal with many flavours. It might tempt the reader to categorise him as a ‘jack of all trades and master of none’, but to say this would hardly be doing justice to the bibliographical range and depth which lies behind many of the essays. For the most part, one major strand is missing – Biblical theology. But just as we are about to conclude that Pickard ‘doesn’t do this’, he finishes the collection with a reflective piece on Luke chapter 24.

At its best, this collection shows a progressive theological mind of an exploratory and searching character. We see this mind at work on an agenda which is set by the travails and excitements of the contemporary church and world, drawing on material which is extracted from the Christian tradition in all its variety. It is a mind which does not settle for easy and commonplace conclusions. Perhaps it is in the nature of such a mind that it seldom reaches a settled or fully satisfying conclusion. Often these pieces are strong and provocative in analysis and exploration, but then disappoint a little in their final pages. This is certainly the case as regards the essays on John Locke and William Law – which show an attentive focus on their
historical subjects and contexts, and which clearly set out to relate them to questions of contemporary concern. But in both instances this reviewer was left wondering. Maybe some of the gaps that Pickard attempts to bridge are simply too wide.

One of the most suggestive essays in the book is also the least predictable. ‘The Passions: A Cautionary Note for Disciples’ is an essay that draws on several disparate sources. One source is what he terms the ‘ancient tradition’: this involves reference to early Christian writers, especially the desert ‘father and mothers’ and to some medieval writings. Another point of reference is recent philosophical and theological writing on the passions (e.g. Martha Nussbaum, Roberto Ungo, Tim Gorringe, Gabriele Taylor). A third is his own personal experience, in particular his experience of states of feeling that are disorientating and overwhelming. He seeks to draw these threads together in order to form a coherent and therapeutic Christian understanding of human passions. This understanding aims to go beyond simplistic assumptions: on the one hand that negation of human passions is equivalent to extirpating deep emotions and desires and, on the other, that passions are entirely benign. He concludes that ‘the passions are the energies of life wrongly directed and undisciplined. The passions arise when people lose their proper reference to love and mercy’ (pp. 247f). What is required is ‘the baptism of the passions’ – a process that should not be construed as negative, but as freeing: a ‘crucifying’ of destructive self-absorption whereby people can discover ‘true openness to self, others and God’.

The dangers of such an approach are obvious. Only glancing attention can be given to each of the sources that are invoked and there is little room to consider the yawning gulfs in culture and understanding which separate them. Moreover, where deep personal experience joins in the conversation, how often does it allow the voices of tradition and of reason to speak freely? Pickard does not escape the traps entirely. He gives much less close and specific attention to the desert traditions than a patristic scholar would look for; he sometimes seems to treat his modern sources rather as one views pictures in an exhibition, pausing briefly and then passing on to the next (a habit that characterises other essays in the collection, too). But a reader who is ready to engage with a non-specialist theologian, serious in his attempt to go beyond stereotypes in a thoughtful and critical exploration of the pertinence of early Christian writings to our own intellectual and personal concerns, will not be put off by these shortcomings.