Bob Becking, ed.


This volume is the fruit of a symposium, which concluded a grant-funded joint venture between the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Leuven and the Netherlands School of Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) on the subject of ‘Orthodoxy and Adaptation as Conflicting Religious Identities’ (p. 3). The original assumption of this project—that ‘orthodoxy’ and adaptation are mutually exclusive—is rejected in favour of a more nuanced perspective: ‘Not only liberalism, but also orthodoxy should be construed as a form of adaptation. . . . For the current debate the opposition should not be defined as orthodoxy versus adaptation, but as orthodoxy versus liberalism’ (p. 4).

This reorientation comprises the major motif of Staf Hellemans’s insightful introductory contribution. He helpfully complicates the concepts of both ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘adaptation’, arguing that the former has many layers, each of which can be variously emphasized according to circumstance (p. 13), and that its connotation as ‘pointing to rigidity, ill-conceived dogmatism and intolerance’ arose rather recently as a result of the modern conservative-liberal opposition (pp. 25–7). In Christian history orthodoxy’s most original nemesis was not adaptation, but ‘heterodoxy’ (p. 31). Moreover, the ‘adaptation’ of religious traditions is not a one-dimensional process of external input and internal reaction. As recent theories of socialization suggest, ‘adaptation’ is ‘the internal working-through by the subject of his experiences with external realities’; that is, the subject (or group) is also an active agent in the process of changing with the times (p. 15).

The biblical and historical sections (parts 2 and 3) largely illustrate Hellemans’ insights with particular examples. Thus, in the second chapter, Rainer Albertz argues that an accurate understanding of Israel’s development towards full-blown monotheism suggests that, despite certain claims, monotheism is not inherently violent. Jehu’s bloody revolution (2 Kgs 9–10) is a possible outcome of orthodox causes, but so is Deutero-Isaiah’s version of orthodox (exilic) Jewish monotheism, which is entirely peaceful and non-violent. In chapter 3, Jan Willem van Henten retorts that Rainer’s point only intensifies the question of how one chooses which outcome to adopt, namely how one (or a group) interprets texts that contain ‘an intrinsic element’ enabling violent interpretations (p. 58). Then, Adele Reinhartz considers how the notion of ‘common Judaism’ illuminates the separation of early Christians
from early Jews, as is exemplified in John’s Gospel. She concludes that however the Gospel content relates to history, it certainly shows that some early Christians construed their own faithfulness to Christ as entailing a break with Judaism. Further, Dirk-Martin Grube uses Thomas Kuhn’s notion of ‘paradigm shift’ to interpret this rift.

In chapter 5, Ernestine van der Wall depicts the struggle of many nineteenth and twentieth century liberals in reconciling modern scientific advancements with religious heritage. Der Wall focuses primarily on Martin du Gard’s novel Jean Barois, which tells of Jean’s journey from conservative to modernist Catholicism to secular freethinking. Modern liberalism, then, is a strategy that tries ‘adapting religion to modern culture and not vice versa’ (p. 111). Then, David J. Bos makes the same point by tracing several conflicts in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. Marcel Sarot’s excellent piece argues that though Christian fundamentalism portrays itself as the continuation of an unchanged historic orthodoxy, particularly in its defence of biblical inerrancy, it (like liberalism) is inconceivable apart from modern Enlightenment epistemology. That the Bible is ‘authoritative because it is reliable’ rather than reliable because it is authoritative (the pre-modern view) is a concept that depends on the Cartesian criterion of indubitable foundations (p. 262).

Jürgen Mettepenningen argues that the controversy surrounding the rise of the Nouvelle Théologie was a controversy about the nature of truth itself. For critics like Garrigou-Lagrange, truth must be decontextualized, whereas nouveaux théologiens like Henri de Lubac see truth as ever-incarnating into all contexts, and must therefore always be recontextualized (pp. 163–71). What is fascinating here is that both sides claim ‘orthodoxy’; indeed, Nouvelle Théologie revives the ‘sources of faith and theology’ (such as patristics, Bible, liturgy) because they ‘are the most important criteria for calling something or someone’s thought orthodox’ (p. 182). Lieven Boeve, whose chapter opens the systematic section (part 4), takes up the concept of ‘recontextualization’ as a descriptive and normative category for theological work. Peter Jonkers’s philosophical analysis evokes the question latent in the previous contributions: given that it is religious identity that is most fundamentally at stake in the orthodox-liberal opposition, how does one stay faithful to one’s own tradition? Thus ‘the question whether orthodoxy and adaptation are conflicting realities cannot be answered with a simple yes or no’, for the answer depends on ‘faithfulness to one’s tradition’, to one’s identity (pp. 216–17).

If both ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘liberalism’ are forms of adaptation, what distinguishes them and how does one evaluate either’s success? As Jonkers intimates, that depends on which tradition one is attempting to be faithful to. Herein