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Ecumenical Perspectives

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ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, eds. Nicholas Lossky, Jose Miguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb: 1991, World Council of Churches/Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland, 1212pp, £44-95.

The list of editors is a foretaste of the book itself: male and female, catholic, protestant and orthodox, north and south. Whilst a considerable number of articles have been written by WCC staff members and regional ecumenical bodies, the editors have collaborated with some five hundred authors from the different regions and confessions and outlooks within the Christian family. Many are authoritative, for example Clovdis Boff writing on Church Base Communities, John Mbiti on African Theology, Lesslie Newbigin on Organic Union. Readers of this journal will recognize the names of Paul Rowntree Clifford (on Labour), Alec Gilmore (Christian Literature), Morris West (the Lund Statement and Toronto Declaration), and Glen Garfield Williams (Conference of European Churches), amongst some ten Baptists. The dictionary not only meets the requirements of the Trade Descriptions Act, for it offers a masterly introduction to the modern ecumenical movement, but, more than that, provides raw materials for writing the history of the contemporary church, as well as giving an ecumenical perspective on Christian doctrine and teaching at the end of the twentieth century. The various entries on the different continents, broken down into sub-regions, contain helpful summaries and interpretations of recent developments, though not of a uniform nature, for some are more ecclesiastical, some more social-political in their interests. Taken together they make up a remarkable chapter in church

history. The *Dictionary* can also be used as a kind of concordance to late twentieth-century concerns. Recently I wanted a precise definition of Minjung Theology and found this hard to come by; but here the subject is clearly explored in three columns, complete with bibliography. Here too are useful analyses of the forces which have shaped and are shaping the modern world: for example, articles on consumerism, population explosion, struggles for liberation, transnational corporations, pollution, the cold war. At the opposite extreme are articles dealing with that shaping of Christian faith and practice in the apostolic period that is essential knowledge for all subsequent ecumenical debate.

On the whole the editors have gone to the major officers of different organizations to tell their own story, or at least to somebody clearly recognized as of status within that body, though there are exceptions. Thus the article on Methodism is written by Father Francis Frost, Roman Catholic lecturer at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, perhaps a proper balancing act for Methodism having two seats on the editorial board. They have not suffered in the process for, whilst the article is warmer towards certain elements in the Methodist tradition than others, consider this summary judgment: 'In . . . focusing all his teaching on the doctrine of grace, Wesley made Anglican credal orthodoxy incandescent with the love of Jesus in the Spirit. Herein lies the heart of the Wesleyan spiritual heritage.'

Whilst Cecil Robeck of Fuller writes on Charism, the articles on the Charismatic Movement and the Pentecostals are by Peter Hocken, a Roman Catholic. The latter is a good article, but I wonder whether it would not have been wiser to have an author from institutional Pentecostalism. Robert Coote is responsible for a large number of entries relating to evangelical bodies, but the main article on Evangelicals is by the Nazarene scholar, P. M. Bassett. Emilio Castro himself contributes the article on Evangelism. The article on the House Church is too brief, granted that it is written by Raymond Fung and Roger Foster and embraces both the experience of China and the Anglo-Saxon world. Perhaps of most value, however, are those articles which expound what those traditions most distant from our own hold most dearly; immersion in this volume will provide an instant cure for ecclesiastical parochialism.

Not all the entries will immediately yield what an Evangelical reader from the UK might expect. The article on Authority is more interested in ecclesiastical than Biblical authority, and the same is true of that on Infallibility. Similarly the article on the Brethren is concerned with the Church of the Brethren, one of the historic peace churches of a baptistic outlook (they used to be called German Baptists but found that too ethnic; doubtless they are currently wrestling with gender connotations!) rather than the Anglo-Saxon originated Plymouth/Christian Brethren. Nor are readers from different traditions and regions likely to be able to accept all that is written here, whilst others will be more interested in what has been omitted! For example, it is difficult for a British Baptist to regard the article on Baptism, together with its bibliography, as a comprehensive statement. Nor are all the articles of equal merit: some omit the difficult questions, some will seem partisan. Others have had to write at the wrong moment in time. Some of the biographical studies are full and interpretative, whilst others read more like directory entries. But it would be remarkable if this were not so in a multi-authored volume.

Inevitably such a volume will become dated, and was in certain respects at the date of publication - the entry on ethnicity with its lack of twentieth-century reference, and the statement that only two African Instituted Churches are members of the WCC is clearly obsolete and will become more so as more churches in this tradition seek wider fellowship. Indeed, it would be a tragedy if this book did not become out of date, for only a static church could guarantee its continued timeliness; but the education it provides will be an exceptionally useful tool for change.