

BOOK REVIEWS

HOUTEPEN, Anton, *The People of God: A Plan for the Church*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1984, paperback, US\$10.95, 224 pp.

Anton Houtepen has written with the aim of making his readers look again at the church. At a time when even some believers have become disillusioned with institutional religion, he argues that it is impossible for us to live as people of God without coming together as a church. We need to turn to each other to be nurtured in faith, and to find support in walking the way of discipleship. Yet Houtepen acknowledges that the church may well be marginal to the interests of many in the West, because, in the past, both Catholics and Protestants have failed to do it justice. Roman Catholics have been too concerned with questions of organisation and power to see the church for what it is, as the fruit of God's initiative in history for the salvation of His people, while Protestants have stressed so much the personal relationship between the individual and God that the church has almost completely disappeared from view. Orthodox ecclesiology is not mentioned.

Against the background of these misconceptions, Houtepen sets out to consider what the church must be like if Christians are to live together as people of God. This involves him in discussing a great many issues. Secularisation, belief in God, Christology, soteriology, ethics, the role of creeds, and confessions of faith, in the life of the church, baptism, the eucharist, ministry, ecumenism, and the papacy, are all considered. Obviously, it is impossible to deal adequately with such a range of topics in the space of 200 pages, and there are places where the discussion is superficial and inadequate. On the other hand, Houtepen does manage to say something fresh and illuminating about quite a few of the questions he raises. As a senior lecturer at the Interuniversity Institute for Missiological Research at Utrecht (as well as Professor of Theology at Rotterdam), he is well aware that the church is a universal body, and he does set out to have a global perspective, but, despite this, the main focus is on the church in the West, and on occasions (e.g., the discussion of ministry), it is the

problems of the Roman Catholic church in Holland that occupy the centre of the stage. Liberation theology is mentioned only in passing, and in a way that suggests Houtepen is not really sympathetic.

Granted the limitations of his approach, how successful is Houtepen in making a plea for the church in, at least, his own Western culture? It is important that such a plea should be made, because there is no doubt that, in Western Europe, the church faces a stiff challenge from secularisation. Fewer and fewer people find the Christian gospel credible. This is the root of the problem. The church's message no longer carries conviction, and, as a result, the institution itself appears irrelevant and unimportant. Before the idea of the church as the "people of God" can appeal to the human imagination, there has to be belief in a God, who not only exists, but is capable of acting in the way that Houtepen and the Christian tradition affirm.

Houtepen devotes a chapter to belief in God, and sets out to give us a fresh way of dealing with the question, different from the old Thomist talk, of a first cause, or Protestantism's reliance on God's own self-revelation. Unfortunately, this new approach is too undeveloped for us to grasp it clearly, let alone evaluate it. "Belief in God", we are told, "is surrender to a mode of being, which weaves God's cause, God's initiative, God's guidelines, God's way, and God's kingdom, into the web of our existence". This is perfectly acceptable as a plea of faith that expresses itself in action, but, as an attempt to make the concept of God meaningful to secular-minded people, it does not begin to do the job.

Houtepen's plea for the church is really two-fold. He wants us to see the central place of the church in God's work of redemption, but he also wants us to look with new eyes at how the church should order its life, if it is to be the instrument of God's purpose. Rather surprisingly, there is no attention paid to the church's relationship to culture, and little said about its role in the struggle for justice – two issues that are surely of critical importance to the world-wide church at the present time.

My conclusion that Professor Houtepen has not made a successful plea for the church does not mean that he has written a bad book. On many issues, he is well worth reading. Particularly to be commended, is his sensitive approach to matters of ecumenical interest. Some readers will dislike his vision of the church as a communion of local communities, bound together in love and consultation, and in fellowship with the bishop of Rome, but I suspect that it is one that an increasing number of Christians from different backgrounds are coming to share.

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FABELLA, Virginia, and TORRES, Sergio, eds., *Doing Theology in a Divided World: Papers from the Sixth International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, January 5-13, 1983, Geneva, Switzerland*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985, paperback US\$11.95, 218 pp.

The Ecumenical Association of Third-World Theologians (EATWOT) goes back to discussions between three young theologians from Africa and Latin America, while studying at Louvain in the mid-1970s. It was formed as the result of an international conference of theologians from third-world countries in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in August, 1976. Since then, both regional and intercontinental conferences have been held in Accra (1977), Colombo (1979), Sao Paulo (1980), and New Delhi (1981). Most of the participants had been accustomed to dialogue – albeit, rather one-sided – with their Spanish, French, German, British, or North American “partner” churches; the experience of learning to dialogue with one another, across colonial and confessional lines of communication, and in the face of their enormous cultural and social differences, was a long and painful one. After the Delhi conference in 1981, they felt ready to resume the dialogue with theologians of the first world, but, this time, it was to be on their terms. EATWOT issued invitations to theologians from Europe and North America to meet with third-world theologians in Geneva, but it laid down certain conditions: participants were to be selected, not on the basis of their scholarly attainments, but because of their first-hand