

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

Book Reviews

A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics by Hans Küng. London: SCM Press, 1997, xvii + 315 pp. Paperback, £14.95.

In 1993 a Parliament of the World's Religions assembled in Chicago and issued a prophetic *Declaration of a Global Ethic* (English text published by SCM Press). The main achievement of the *Declaration* was to assert categorically that ethics is not simply a matter of personal preference. A remarkable consensus on morality exists amongst the world's religions, pointing towards some universal constant which determines what is right and wrong.

It is a short step from stating that ethics belong in the public domain to bringing our societies as well as ourselves under ethical scrutiny, and this is what Hans Küng, principal draftsman of the *Declaration* and now president of the Global Ethic Foundation in Tübingen, does in *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. It is a brave move, and one that is sure to draw criticism. Just as there are those who think that religious leaders 'shouldn't meddle in politics', so there are politicians, business people and academics who will think it presumptuous for a theologian to offer opinions on their areas of specialist knowledge. Yet there was once a time when theology was considered 'queen of the sciences', a time when lip-service at least was given to the idea that politics and economics were merely the practical working out of imperatives derived from theology.

Times have changed. The battles that Galileo, Darwin and others fought with the church loom large in the western consciousness. Science's struggle to escape from the status of theology's handmaiden has left academics wary of any hint of intrusion. Among pedlars of knowledge in the western world the official position seems to be that each subject-discipline must stick to its own territory without imperialistic designs.

Yet it is worth reflecting on the dictum of St Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages that it is a *sin* to buy or sell something for more or less than its true value. This idea can seem incomprehensible to us – we are so accustomed to the idea that something is worth what someone is prepared to pay for it. We allow the market to define the value of commodities even when, in our global economy, this means that a Sri-Lankan tea-picker's labour is worth a fraction of a British tea-drinker's. If we think about the matter our consciences may be pricked a little (showing that St Thomas may, after all, have been on to something) but at the end of the day the market still decides. The fundamental problem for Aquinas is how to decide what values things have *apart* from the market. Because this is difficult, we don't in any systematic way try to do it. Küng is particularly good on the way that economics has tended to usurp theology as the new queen of the sciences. Coining the phrase the 'total market economy', he outlines some of the devastating consequences:

The law ... can be formulated and manipulated in accordance with

economic ‘constraints’ and group interests. Politics capitulates to the market and the lobbying of pressure groups and global speculation can shake national currencies. Culture deteriorates into being a contributor to the market, and art declines into commerce. Ethics is ultimately sacrificed to power and profit, and is replaced by ‘what brings success’ and ‘gives pleasure’; and finally even religion is offered as a commodity on the supermarket of ideas along with much that is para-religious or pseudo-religious, is mixed at will into a syncretistic cocktail for the convenient stilling of a religious thirst which sometimes overtakes even *homo oeconomicus*.

It is easy to criticise, much harder to come up with practical solutions. To his credit Küng does discuss in some detail some of the economic and political models that have been applied over the last two centuries. In the realm of political ideas he examines varieties of *Realpolitik* as developed by Morgenthau and Bismarck and their chief admirer Kissinger. This school assumes that nations (and factions within nations) are motivated by interests which, necessarily, conflict. Accordingly, stability (though not necessarily peace) is secured through the skill of politicians balancing these interests. It is a process with no room for the luxury of ethics.

Küng recognises the grain of truth here, but nevertheless criticises *Realpolitik* on practical grounds: the spectacular failures of the Vietnam war, the catalogue of blunders in the Middle East and ultimately the Watergate débacle were all in his view due to a failure to meet ethical expectations. The strong appeal of *Realpolitik* lies in the failure of politics motivated by ideals. Centuries of religious wars, followed by the rise of fascism and communism, have left us wary. On a less dramatic scale, Kissinger derided what he saw as the naïveté of Woodrow Wilson’s utopian hope for new world order based on the League of Nations. Küng is clear that while he believes that there must be an ethical imperative for politics he also believes that this must be balanced by an ethical responsibility for the consequences. It is not enough to intend to do good if the result is nevertheless bad. This means taking a realistic view of human nature – we are neither wholly saints nor wholly sinners. Structures must exist to ensure transparency, to limit abuses of power and to encourage all that is good.

In a similar manner Küng argues that the rise of neo-capitalism as preached by Friedman and Hayek owes much to the failure of more apparently ethically motivated economic systems. Küng discusses both the problems of the welfare state as practised in Europe and the results of ‘Reaganomics’ in the USA. He questions whether there might be some middle way, balancing the ideals of solidarity, care and concern on the one hand with realism about the cost on the other.

The central message of the book is a call for the primacy of ethics over politics and economics, and in this Küng is both convincing and optimistic. He notes with interest that when he wrote *Global Responsibility* in 1990 there was a United Nations declaration on human rights, but no equivalent global declarations on human responsibilities. Now there are three. One is by the UNO Commission on Global Governance (initiated by Willy Brandt with the support of the former general secretary of the UN, Boutros Boutros Ghali, chaired by Ingvar Carlsson, former Swedish prime minister and Shridath Ramphal, former Commonwealth secretary general) which talks of a ‘neighbourhood ethic’ and states that ‘global values must be the cornerstone of global governance’. Another is by the World Commission on Culture and Development, published jointly by the UN and UNESCO under the title *Our Creative Diversity*. The Commission understands ‘culture’ as ‘ways of living

together' and points out that development cannot simply be identified with economic growth, desirable though that may be. This report also stresses what human beings hold in common rather than their differences, and calls for 'a new global ethics' drawing on the great cultural traditions. A third declaration is by the InterAction Council, which consists of former presidents and prime ministers under the chairmanship of former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Under the title *In Search of Global Ethical Standards* they take up the Chicago Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions calling for 'a minimum basic consensus relating to binding values, irrevocable standards and moral attitudes which can be affirmed by all religions despite their dogmatic differences and can also be supported by non-believers'.

One aspect of the book which is perhaps unhelpful is the antagonistic tone taken towards the present papal administration. Küng no doubt believes his comments justified, but considering the negative view that the Catholic hierarchy takes of him it might have been wiser to say nothing. The contents of the book are too important for it to be tainted by a dispute which has its origins elsewhere.

MICHAEL LOWE

Methodism in Russia and the Baltic States: History and Renewal edited by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, 253 pp. Paperback.

In July 1941 the Rev Martin Prikask was arrested at his Methodist parsonage on the island of Saaremaa off the Estonian coast and interviewed by the KGB:

Q: Where did you preach?

A: In private homes, community houses and in the countryside. Later I joined the Methodist Church.

Q: Did you get a salary?

A: I was supported voluntarily, later I worked as a bookkeeper.

Q: To which political organizations did you belong?

A: I did not participate in any of them, not in the National Guard, not in the Political Organization of Estonia, not in the national-socialist union, only in the Red Cross. (p. 146)

This exchange has within it all the main characteristics of the story of Methodism in Russia and the Baltic states: an indigenous Methodist, courage, a 'pietistic' avoidance of political activity either for or against the state, engagement in humanitarian relief.

In March 1942 Martin Prikask was tried. He was charged with disparaging the Soviet authorities, praising German machinery, organising Christian political activity, 'owning a personal church' and three houses. For these subversive activities he was shot on 12 August. In a book overwhelmed with detail, stories like this bring one back to the point.

Methodist church work began in Russia and the Baltic states in the late nineteenth century. Kimbrough reminds readers that since that time political, linguistic, ethnic and religious boundaries have been tidal. Though one chapter details Methodist missions in Siberia and Manchuria from 1920 to 1927, broadly speaking Kimbrough's interest is in the western countries of the former Soviet Union.

The ten chapters are made up of several kinds of material. Some chapters

reproduce articles by historians. Other chapters are near-contemporary accounts of Methodism in a particular place by those involved. One consequence of this arrangement is frequent repetition of material. Kimbrough indicates the origin of sections of text adequately enough; but the juxtaposition of styles – an ill-educated writer of a primary source and a historian telling roughly the same story for an academic journal, for example – gives the book a disjointed feel.

Methodist initiatives in Russia and the Baltic states did not follow a simple pattern. In Lithuania a congregation in Kaunas was formed from disaffected German Lutherans. Only some years after the congregation had come into existence, in 1900, did it ask to be affiliated with the German Methodist Church. In most of the region Methodist activities ceased early in the Soviet period when Methodist sponsoring bishops in America lost heart, when Methodists were forced by the Soviet authorities to merge with other Protestant churches, or when German-speaking Methodists were forcibly expatriated. Only in Estonia did Methodism survive. In 1974 there were still 2363 registered members with a larger community roll.

This last fact touches on a delicate problem: numbers. Russian Methodism spilled over initially from Methodist work in Finland. Early in this book there is an account of the work of B. A. Carlson, a Swedish missionary sent to Finland: 'Carlson ... exercised a strong influence. Wherever he went people of all circumstances streamed to hear him. In 1885 the district had three preachers and 174 members' (p. 27). However significant Methodist revivals and Methodism were to those who (sometimes literally) gave their lives for the faith, the numbers of Methodists were always small. Kimbrough writes that 'The insights to be gleaned from these pages are extremely important for church history and the history of missions, ecumenical theology/studies, political science, and the contemporary mission of the church.' Of interest they certainly are, but their importance must surely be placed firmly in the wider context. During the 1917 revolutions Methodism in St Petersburg was in severe danger. Because of American links, it was associated in the minds of the Soviet authorities with American imperialism. The admirable work of the church with orphans and the medical faculties run by the church struggled on in the worst of circumstances. But such details become 'extremely important' only insofar as they cast a beam of light onto the wider tragedy. At times what this book resembles is the kind of local church history one can buy for fifty pence in so many church porches.

The fact that these stories were published in 1995 is hardly coincidental. The attempt to establish Methodism's historical credentials in the region surely has something to do with making sure it qualifies for the renewal of that mission today. In the late 1980s Methodism reappeared in Russia when a man converted in a Methodist church in Estonia took his faith home to Samara. Subsequent contacts between American Methodism and the Russian Orthodox authorities were welcomed. The United Methodist Church put significant sums of money into humanitarian relief in Russia. The Methodists rebuilt an Orthodox seminary closed by the Soviet authorities. A United Methodist University in Alaska presented Patriarch Aleksii II with a doctorate in Divinity to mark the bicentenary of Orthodox missions in Alaska. But such examples of Methodist ecumenical spirit sit uneasily with the views of some of the heroines and heroes of faith whose stories are told. In 1921 Methodist Bishop Lambuth dreamed of 'converting the Russian people to Christ' (p. 79). The real question, unanswered by any critique in this book, is whether his dream was of Christ, or of the Devil.