

Reviews



Hannah Strømmen and Ulrich Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity: Responding to the Far Right* (London: SCM, 2020), pp. 192, ISBN 978-0334059233. £19.99

Christian identity is a project not a possession and as a project in the twenty-first century it has to include a lived commitment to becoming neighbours to Muslims as a key dimension of practising and participating in an open ecclesiology of challenge towards the new Islamophobic racism of the far right.

These, as I understand them, are the key arguments of Hannah Strømmen and Ulrich Schmiedel's important and valuable study into how Christian churches in Europe have responded and should respond to the rise of the far right. They draw on their knowledge of theological, ecclesial and political contexts in Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom to inform three chapters on The Terrorist Right (Norway), The Populist Right (Germany) and The Hard Right (UK).

The first four chapters were, for me, the strongest in the book, offering a well-researched introduction to the emergence of the far right and explaining their definition of that term in relation to Rita Chin's 'new racism' conceptuality. They work with a positive sense of a *semantic* struggle to contest the implicit and explicit theological claims of the far right. They argue that 'The core characteristic of the new far right is its concentration on culture – and through culture, religion' (p. 16). Specifically, the authors centre the claims to 'Christian identity' made by far-right groups, and their new-racist, othering account of and obsession with Islam as enemy and threat. In Chapter Three they analyse how the Church of Norway has responded to far-right terrorism and in Chapter Four they shift their focus to Germany and the rise of right populism.

While appreciating the breadth of European examples, it does come at some cost to the story they tell, which I felt offered diminishing returns as they moved between countries. Their concentration on the Church of Norway in Chapter Three was most effective, because it charted how one established national church responded to particular terrorist incidents from 2011. The shift to 'populism' in Germany in Chapter Four hugely expands



the domain they are concerned with and their twin focus on EKD and the Catholic Bishop's Conference leads them to concentrate on two significant denominational reports, one Protestant and one Catholic. Two problems develop here. One is that although they acknowledge 'Populism is a contested concept' (p. 67) they opt for an overwhelmingly negative account and don't give much credence to the possibility of 'inclusive populism' which is explored by Cas Mudde and others. This is particularly problematic, it seems to me, in a German context, because of the legacy (which, as they point out, AfD/Pegida try to appropriate) of the populism of the 1989–90 Peaceful Revolution which 'Christianity was central for' (p. 72). The wave of populist protests connected to the breakup of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of new nationalisms and states within Europe are, of course, crucial historical examples for negative accounts of populism to reckon with. I felt their subject matter here exceeded what could be done with it in a single chapter and this led to too thin an account both of populism and of church responses to it. We have lost some of the concreteness of the Norwegian examples and are given a very broad-brush account of the 2015–16 arrival of refugees in Germany, linked to two denominational reports, without much of a sense of the broader role of the churches in Germany's 'Welcome Culture' and in response to the rise of the far right. Add in material on analysing the theology of Pegida and the AfD and the context feels under-analysed and over-interpreted. Over-reliance on the two main reports gives a rather stereotypical and over-condensed feel to the characterisation of Protestant and Roman Catholic responses which is heightened by their using these characterisations to delineate an accommodationist both-sides 'corridor' type of church response (Prot) as opposed to a more active 'resistance' response type (RC).

I have to say that Chapter Five on "The Hard Right" in the UK annoyed me for reasons I think readers of this journal will be sympathetic to. I will follow the authors' positive embrace of the term 'semantic' here. A chapter which talks repeatedly of UK/Britain and 'British' themes, while only dealing with England and the Church of England is semantically unacceptable for anyone, but doubly so for a book written by a scholar who works in Scotland and another who did their doctoral work here. Of course I realise the far right/UKIP and Brexit need to be analysed to a large degree in relation to dynamics within England and English political culture, but it is not OK to do this without a single mention of Scotland,



Wales or Northern Ireland, of the Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church or black-majority Pentecostal/Independent churches. They also focus too much on the personal opinions of Justin Welby, whose *Reimagining Britain* (sic) title is given too much weight in their analysis of ‘Christian/Muslim relations *in the UK*’ (p. 115, emphasis added). Not to realise that they have written a chapter on England in order to analyse the UK is a major semantic own goal in a book on political identity.

The final two chapters seek to unpack the analysis into a vision of political ecclesiology, arguing for an open ecclesiology of challenge, the identity of whose Christianity is a project decisively informed by postcolonial hermeneutics, liberation theology and interfaith hospitality and dialogue. There is a particularly powerful and heartfelt call for Christians to be good neighbours to Muslims. I am generally sympathetic to this approach and it is vital that the praxis of our churches offers vigorous and unflinching resistance to the hard right and its projects.

In political terms, their highly critical account of ‘corridor’ approaches to public space and dialogical space, seem to me to raise important questions which might encourage us to a new engagement in political theology with our understanding of (political) liberalism. Perhaps the territory previously explored by C. S. Song, David Fergusson and Oliver O’Donovan needs to be revisited in dialogue with Anthony Reddie, Mona Siddiqui and Jayne Svenungsson? (I might also want to contribute something myself about why nationalism and populism should be disciplined, not demonised.) In theological terms, however, despite some thoughtful engagements with the parable of the Good Samaritan, I worried the approach taken in the book tended towards the anthropocentric. I too value churches as places to talk about politics and to dialogue with other faiths, but I found little here on how worship and discipleship might be living and dynamic experiences of formation, conscientisation and confession (Barmen? Belhar?) – perhaps, even, of ‘spiritual warfare’ against fascism. There was not much sense of how God might be present and active, little mention of Jesus and no mention of the Holy Spirit. Given how potent the spiritual, emotional, mythic communal life of the far right is, I wonder whether the measured semantic contestations of this study, although they offer many important points of learning and engagement, overall reflect a certain kind of sceptical-humanistic-liberal-Euro-Protestant church culture. Its intentions are right, its values are strong, its radical credentials are well prepared, but in the face of the demons of the



far right running in our world today, I find myself thinking also on words of Jesus: ‘this kind can only be driven out by prayer’.

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Oliver B. Langworthy, *Gregory of Nazianzus’ Soteriological Pneumatology, Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 117* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), pp. xii + 187, ISBN 978-3161589515. £74.22

Gregory Nazianzen posed a question at the intersection of soteriology and pneumatology: ‘If [the Spirit] is ranked with me, how can he make me God, or unite me to the Godhead?’¹ With this rhetorical question he intends to support a principle, something akin to ‘only a divine Spirit can divinize the non-divine’. *Theosis*, and the Spirit’s necessary role in it, are the heart of the issue. At least this is the belief in the contemporary reception of Gregory.

While the Holy Spirit’s work in human deification is essential to salvation, this is not the whole of the story. The Spirit’s activity (ἐνέργεια) is unique, complex, and ultimately grounded in His relationship to the other divine persons. These theses, among others, are what makes Gregory of Nazianzus’ pneumatology, in part, a soteriological one. In this fine study Oliver Langworthy tells the larger story of Gregory’s soteriological pneumatology. Here I will sketch some of the main thrust of each chapter and conclude with thoughts on a few noteworthy features of the book.

Chapter One approaches the subject synchronically, by examining Trinitarian relations. By starting with the conceptual foundation of Gregory’s soteriological pneumatology, Langworthy also begins at the end of the experiential story: the divine persons model human telos in important ways. Looking to them, we see how the image of God in humanity has been corrupted, and what the restoration of that image requires. Take volition as one example. Langworthy argues that the unity of wills (yes, plural, but more on this below) among the Father, Son, and Spirit brings the corruption of our will into sharp relief. Humankind’s will is free, and freely contrary to those of the divine persons. Salvation, then, must include a restoration of

¹ *Oration 31.4*. Langworthy’s translation from the Introduction (p. 1).

