

movements benefited to a greater or lesser degree from this work, reflecting important continuities in piety across early modern Europe. It is not so much that the *Imitatio Christi* is ‘timeless’, but that it was an ideal document precisely for its time, reflective of the ethics, interiority, and possibility for renewal in a certain time and culture ‘deeply attached to the humanity and suffering of Christ’ (247). Von Habsburg’s rewarding book illustrates this admirably.

Julie Canlis,
Methlick



The Kirk and the Kingdom: A Century of Tension in Scottish Social Theology, 1830–1929, Johnston McKay, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, pp. 128, ISBN 978-0748644735. £45.00

I read this book, Johnston McKay’s Chalmers Lectures for 2011, the same week as was published the report to the General Assembly of 2012 of the Special Commission on the Purposes of Economic Activity (the ‘Munn Report’). The report addresses the inequalities in contemporary Scottish society which perpetuate poverty, and invites the church to become engaged in the ‘transformation of economics’. In the course of its analysis, the report records that the UK has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the industrialised world and notes that the income of the top 10% of earners is approaching levels last seen at the end of the Victorian era.

This last reference is not the only thing that situates the report in direct line with McKay’s study of the development of social theology which begins in Victorian Scotland. That the commission should contain in its membership not only ministers and elders but also representatives from varied sectors of secular society, and that it should engage with political issues without apology or explanation, both acknowledge the innovative theological work of nineteenth-century churchman Robert Flint, who proposed that Kingdom and Church were not identical.

This proposal, which was ultimately accepted as axiomatic, enabled the church to escape from the trap of seeing itself as having sole responsibility for tackling the social ills of the time from its own resources. Flint's belief that secular agencies may have separated from the church but not from the Kingdom, and that the Kingdom's development could be advanced by other individuals and institutions using their own expertise, brought new possibilities to bear. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, the Kingdom of God and the Kirk were effectively considered identical, and leaders like Chalmers, however compassionately engaged with their people, could only see poverty capable of alleviation through individual moral transformation achieved by effective evangelism.

Flint's famous sermons at Aberdeen's East Church on the parables of the Kingdom reverberated through the century encompassed in these six lectures, courting much controversy. However, they also acted as the critical apparatus for the considerable and tireless work on the part of some of the leading parish ministers of the day in addressing issues of poverty, housing and intemperance.

McKay's record of the ongoing theological debate is fleshed out with narrative, as the author pays due honour to those who tackled these issues in pulpit, parish visit, General Assembly, lecture hall, in societies and journals, in philanthropic initiatives, and in lobbying government – and in so doing this book brings back to mind some forgotten saints of the church. Yet for all the ministers who started societies, undertook innovative projects, preached – like Brewster, with startling up-to-dateness – that 'God is on the side of poor', or – like Macleod in the well-heeled Park congregation – that 'social inequality' was blazoned over the majority of church doors, there was a fear that the role of the church as the traditional provider of support for the poor was in danger of being eroded.

An emphasis on the ethical enabled the church to keep the initiative. The chicken-and-egg dilemma – whether intemperance was cause or consequence of poverty – was played out over many Assemblies. A recurring theme was that the church's business was not intervention in politics but conversion, and conversion would lead to better social conditions, when individuals were motivated to seek their own betterment and Christian people were inspired to work to

alleviate the conditions of poverty. The church should be concerned with the ethical dimension, but it was not seen that the conditions that perpetuated poverty had themselves an ethical basis.

This was an individualised Kingdom, one which would not threaten the status quo. Even Norman Macleod of the Barony, warning of the impression the church gave that it had nothing to do with bodies but was concerned only with souls, could say that, come God's rule, societal structures would not physically change. Rather, sickness and suffering would now be accepted as an opportunity to display meekness and faith; wealth and poverty would remain, albeit the relationship would now be affected by love and righteousness.

This is not so far from a recent *Scotsman* response to the Munn Report, which commented on the inevitability of poverty in our fallen condition and interpreted Scripture as calling people to respond personally wherever there is a true opportunity to create wealth and alleviate suffering. Today's continuing tendency to see poverty as a matter of individual morality is noted also in the Munn Report: the public rhetoric which blames the poor for their poverty, reintroducing such Victorian categories (Munn's phraseology) as 'deserving' versus 'undeserving' poor, and stigmatising 'worthless scroungers' as opposed to 'hard-working families'. It is striking how today's more contextual and narrative approach to Scripture, and a more developed incarnational theology (although McKay notes nineteenth-century hints of this), have opened the way to further possibilities of understanding the relationship of church and society.

The author ends on a pessimistic note: the dissipation of the debate in the ecclesiastical politics which increasingly dominated Assemblies (vividly brought to life) as union approached, and lost altogether after 1929 amid the exigencies of establishing the new church. The author has allowed the century to tell its own story, balancing biography, narrative, theological passages, quotation from speech and sermon, the wider social and political context, and touches of humour. He has wielded a vast amount of research with great skill, interweaving, comparing, and contrasting. His own brief commentaries throughout help the reader keep a critical distance and enable the flow.

There is much of which we might have wished more, such as some analysis – from a media person such as is Dr McKay – of the role

and effectiveness of the various Christian journals mentioned which accompanied the debates. However, that would have been beyond the scope of the subject. Intriguing also is the sole reference to liturgy and events within it (Watson of Glasgow's East End) as showing how Kingdom patterns might be formed in the material environment, and how central doctrines, as opposed to moral teaching, could be a resource for change. Again, the necessarily brief references to the role of the arts in social renewal are tantalising.

To close: *The Kirk and the Kingdom* is an attractively presented book, but it is expensive, and inside the colourful cover, the print somewhat closely packed. It deserves a wider readership than its price and its rather 'specialist' appearance suggests.

Douglas Galbraith,
Edinburgh