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Church, World, and the Christian Life by Nicholas Healy

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Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xi + 199pp.

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This book provides the extremely valuable service of diagnosing why most modern ecclesiology is so very boring and unhelpful. According to Healy, the problem lies in "blueprint ecclesiologies," attempts to provide an idealized "model" of the church which can then be applied in practice. Healy argues that the emphasis on the speculative rather than the practical produces universalizing ecclesiologies that undermine the distinctiveness of the church, fail to engage with concrete others, and gloss over the church's sinfulness in favor of idealized accounts. In response, Healy advocates what he calls "practical-prophetic ecclesiology," which allows the church to maintain its distinctiveness while being open to genuine others, and to repent of its sinfulness while

proclaiming the truth of the Christian claim. Blueprint ecclesiologies typically adopt a word or phrase — such as “People of God” or “communion” — to serve as model, then identify that model with the essence of the church, as opposed to its concrete expression. This twofold schema of essence and expression ensures that ecclesiology remains abstract, and too easily dismisses sin as a superficial flaw that does not pertain to the essence of the church. Another problem is that models ignore context, while the selection of a model and its use in fact depend heavily on the context in which a particular theologian works. Given the plurality of images of the church in Scripture, we should not expect consensus on one supermodel. If used at all, models should be judged as to their temporary usefulness in particular contexts. Theory and practice should form a hermeneutical circle, rather than trying to deduct practice from theory.

If this is beginning to sound like “contextual theology,” fear not. Healy is quick to distance himself from Don Browning and others who advocate assimilating theology to normative humanistic beliefs. Healy’s approach is drawn from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s contrast of epic and dramatic styles of theology. The epic approach takes an external, bird’s-eye perspective on human history, assuming that the action operates according to principles knowable in advance of the action. A theodramatic approach, by contrast, takes the point of view of a participant in the drama. The drama of salvation history takes place in the space opened up between the Father and the Son, so everything is located within the sphere of God’s activity, and yet the human actors remain truly free. Healy draws out several consequences for ecclesiology. Theological inquiry on the church should be practical, open-ended and aware of human freedom and sinfulness. Theology should situate other forms of discourse, but the non-church world is also theologically laden, and the church has much to learn from what is non-church. Indeed, the church itself is penetrated by non-church and anti-Christ elements.

Healy proceeds to examine some epic approaches to the question of the church’s relationship to non-Christian bodies. The pluralist approach associated with Hick, Hodgson and others sees all religions as different expressions of the same underlying essence. The intent is to celebrate the diversity of traditions by denying the superiority of one over another, but in fact the pluralist approach reduces all particularity to an essential uniformity. Pluralism both evacuates Christian claims to the uniqueness of Christ and makes genuine openness to the other impossible, since there really are no others who could teach us something we didn’t already know. Another epic approach is inclusivism, the idea that membership in the church is necessary for salvation, but non-Christians of good will implicitly participate in the church in some degree. Such are Karl Rahner’s “anonymous Christians.” The problem again is that the universal is privileged over the particular, and the underlying essence of “good will” trumps all outward expressions of faith. A theodramatic approach, by contrast, respects the genuine particularity of each tradition, allowing Christians both to witness to, and learn from, others. Here Healy supplements Balthasar with Alasdair MacIntyre, arguing that Christians need genuine others for our pursuit of the truth. Rather than make epic appeals to universal principles, truth is engaged when traditions dialogue, challenge each other, and attempt to provide superior answers to problems that arise within each tradition.

Most modern ecclesiology fails because the epic distinction of essence and expression dissolves the distinctiveness of the church, makes it difficult to acknowledge that the church’s sinfulness is deep, and occludes the real others who have a role in the cosmic drama, others that we need to understand the church’s true role. As an antidote, Healy proposes a practical-prophetic ecclesiology that operates with a kind of “ecclesiological ethnography.” Atheist and agnostic history and sociology of the church are valuable conversation partners, but Healy insists that this primary “ethnography” be thoroughly theological, a kind of “church-wide social prac-

tice of communal self-critical analysis" (p. 178) based on the norm of faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ. It should also be concrete, and often local. Healy offers the suggestion of congregational ethnography, the discernment of failures and opportunities in the life of local communities. The church is a kind of "culture," says Healy, not a closed system but in constant engagement with other cultures. Conflict, error, and sin are all part of the drama. The goal of ecclesiology is not to develop the perfect model of the church, but to discern in concrete practices where faithfulness to Christ lies.

This book was written before the current wave of clergy sex abuse scandals hit the airwaves, but its appearance could not be more timely. One cannot help but wonder if the kind of concrete self-critical analysis Healy recommends could have helped prevent some of the problems. If nothing else, Healy's approach could temper some of the cynicism many feel toward the church now that it has become apparent that the church's practice is often distant from the ideal model. The distinction of essence and expression sets up this distance and allows church leaders to dismiss even grievous sin as negligible because it does not belong to the essence of the church, which is free from sin. Healy's book is a refreshing antidote to such ecclesial pride, but it also maintains the distinctiveness and importance of the church's witness. This is a tough balancing act, but Healy performs it gracefully, clearly and insightfully. I highly recommend this book. □