Review of As One With Authority by Jackson W. Carroll

Vaughan S Roberts

This insightful volume explores the changing place of clergy authority in contemporary church life. It was originally published in 1993 and this revised edition takes account of new work by writers on leadership such as Ronald Heifetz, Peter Senge, Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal; social theorists such as Charles Taylor and Robert Putnam; the author’s own research as director of the Pulpit and Pew Project at Duke Divinity School together with case studies written for this book. His aim is ‘to recover a valid meaning of authority and its relationship to pastoral leadership in an age that generally rejects older, hierarchical notions of authority’ (p x).

Carroll identifies five factors which have brought about a crisis of understanding authority within local churches: (1) relativity of knowledge; (2) globalization; (3) growth of voluntarism; (4) radical egalitarianism; (5) reflexivity or the process whereby social practices are being constantly revised due to the rapidity and scope of change. He explores what notions of authority make sense in this context, arguing there are essentially two: authority of office and personal authority. Authority of office comes through some form of organizational recognition whereby a minister is authorized to represent the sacred; whilst personal authority is rooted in expertise and competence. The relationship between the two forms is complex and overlapping. For example, an important element in authority of office is that of collective identity and the building of trust between minister and church is crucial in this respect. Such organizational trust takes time to develop through personal traits. As one minister noted, one of best pieces of advice he received was: ‘Don’t use your authority until you get some’ (p 47).

Against this background, Carroll identifies: ‘Authority for what?’ as a key question that needs to be addressed. Through his reading of the gospels, he contends Jesus called people into a new relationship with God, which created a new community and empowered followers to be witnesses to God’s love. This three-fold ministry of ‘meaning, belonging and empowering’ forms the incarnational basis for the Church’s ministry and the context for ministerial authority. Carroll argues the role of clergy is as: (i) interpreters of meaning; (ii) formers of community; and (iii) empowering congregations to live as the people of God in the world.
The type of authority needed for this task is what he calls ‘reflective leadership’ and the challenge ministers face is not one of solving problems but of ‘managing messes’ (p 114). Carroll defines reflexive leadership as: ‘the capacity, in the midst of the practice of ministry, to lead the church in reflecting and acting in ways that are both faithful to the gospel and also appropriate to the context and situation’ (p 118). Helpfully he grounds his thinking in practical research conducted for the Pulpit and Pew Project and other ministerial experience written up for this volume. He maps the hands-on experience onto a framework he calls a ‘cultural diamond’ with four points: ‘cultural creator’ (minister), ‘receiver’ (congregation), ‘cultural objects’ (church traditions and insights from elsewhere) and the ‘social world’ (the broader social and cultural context). He concedes that a minister is unlikely to explicitly consider each of these points every time something comes up for discussion but it helps clergy to remember they need to ‘get on the balcony’ on a regular basis and maintain an overview of ministry with their congregation and community.

The concluding chapter returns to his two forms of authority, reflecting further upon the bond between pastor and congregation. Carroll draws on an analogy between performer and audience highlighted by Judy Collins’ discussion of her experience singing ‘Amazing Grace’. She called that interaction ‘mystical geography’, which is a term he finds helpful to describe the bonds of trust which should exist between a congregation and a reflexive leader. In essence, this is a ‘willingness to make one’s self vulnerable, to show empathy, to express care and compassion, to tell the truth, to be just, to seek the good of the individual and that of the community’ (p 193). This is a wide-ranging work which brings together the practice and theory of church leadership in a helpful and creative way. Speaking personally, I found the interaction of theological and secular insights very stimulating. In addition to his detailed analysis of ministerial and congregational life, Carroll employs analogies from the worlds of music, drama and counseling to help us look afresh at these challenging areas. I was surprised – following clear statement that the church ‘finds its identity and purpose in the story of Jesus … [and] the story of the people of Israel’ (p 7) – there was no thorough exploration of Jesus’ life and ministry or the different forms of leadership in the Hebrew scriptures. But that should not detract from the fact that this is a most welcome update for a key text on this subject.
Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick
United Kingdom