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George Newlands, The Transformative Imagination: Rethinking Intercultural Theology

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The Transformative Imagination: Rethinking Intercultural Theology, George Newlands, Ashgate, 2004, 0 7546 3827 8, ix+195 pp., h/b £45.

George Newlands outlines in his latest book an intercultural theology which aims to draw on the best elements of the Enlightenment (tolerance, universal human rights, liberal democracy) as well as postmodernity (interactive relationality, recognition of otherness and respect for it, the particularity of cultural identity). He is inspired in this task by Isaiah Berlin's agonistic liberalism and Richard Bernstein's engaged fallibilistic pluralism. This is a liberal rational theology, but not one, he assures us, which will claim to have all the answers.

Newlands accepts that the topic of theology and culture is a 'proverbial minefield of ambiguity and generalization' (p. 11). Many of his own historical sketches and descriptions of debates and authors indeed leave open his position on important questions, or the precise nature of the claim being made at particular points. He states of science and religion, for instance: 'Developments in both will stimulate dialogue, provided that both sides choose to remain open to discussion.' (p. 134) In a subsequent volume, critical engagement with key thinkers on the relation of theology and culture, such as Paul Tillich, would enable crucial theoretical points to be elucidated and probed. In the current one, ideas are not always fully developed before the discussion moves on elsewhere. In one case, we are told that the tension between individual rights and common goals is 'illustrated from the debate about the constitution of Quebec' (p. 63). In fact it isn't, because no further information is given about Quebec and its possible or actual constitution. Later on, Newlands notes that 'many of the framers of the American Declaration of Independence and similar documents had strong Christian connections', but again offers no further analysis (p. 97). Quebec and the United States constitution would, however, provide two valuable case studies for exploring the kinds of tensions between religion, culture and rationality which lie at the heart of the problems surrounding intercultural theology.

Newlands affirms that the concept of rights is important to his project, but does not clearly state whether rights are derived ultimately from human or divine law, or from some combination of these. He recognizes the theological foundation of rights in the notion of humanity as created in the image of God, but doesn't engage, for instance, with John Finnis's use, in *Natural Law, Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), of Aquinas's treatise on law (*Summa theologiae*, IaIIae, qq. 90-97) to explore

the complex historic interrelation between political and religious theories of rights and the impact of this ambivalent heritage on current theological debates about rights. Basic questions about the applicability and effectiveness of rights discourse raised by feminist and many other theologians are left exposed and unanswered, most obviously in the following statement: ‘The Christian tradition has always been an advocate of human rights. There has always been recognition of the creation of man as a creature in the image of God, with his own dignity before God.’ (p. 96)

What, then, is the essence of Newland’s project in intercultural theology? He states: ‘We may need a *theology without frontiers*.’ (p. 17) Christianity needs to be a ‘team player on a level playing field with the other players’ rather than the ‘conductor of the orchestra’, and to work as a ‘contributing partner in a mutual enterprise rather than as managing director’ (pp. 75, 136, 88). The way of Jesus Christ, Newlands ventures, should be brought ‘to the table for consideration’ (p. 102). Theology should seek, more precisely, ‘to be the servant of the sciences’ (p. 153). These statements, and especially the final one, give an idea of the kind of approach which Newlands is advocating, though will by themselves probably be too vague to satisfy some readers.

Fortunately, therefore, Newlands provides clearer indications of the nature of the enterprise of intercultural theology. He notes that it is ‘important to put people rather than structure at the heart of the church’, identifying the task of embracing particularity and difference within Christian communities (pp. 168, 85). These insights are not, however, fully carried through from ecclesiology into theology. Instead, a far more exclusivist model of theological engagement with culture keeps emerging in the discussion. Newlands states that it ‘becomes important to develop a critical frame of mind, a research programme with a built in hermeneutic of suspicion, in order to evaluate and, if appropriate, embrace new ideas’, and that ‘Christian theology has to decide *which* aspects of culture to relate to constructively, and on what basis’ (pp. 166, 128). He later provides an extended description of the logical culmination of his project in intercultural theology: ‘If we were to imagine a comprehensive, full-scale intercultural theology, this would be encyclopaedic in scale, would be constantly upgraded and would occupy a research institute. It would correlate Christian faith with all areas of culture, with the humanities and law, the physical and the life sciences, with applied science, the social sciences, political and economic issues in modern society and developments in the major world religions. It would run comparative dialogue with past cultures and traditions, and it would take

account of the perspectives and interests of many different sub-cultures within the major cultures.’ (p. 165)

Such a totalising project as this is, thankfully, unlikely to become reality. I see the future for theological engagement with other cultures, faiths and intellectual disciplines to lie not in bureaucratic modes of rationality but in creative, spontaneous and even chaotic encounters, whether these be projects, arguments, chance meetings, or rigorous multilingual research. Theologians will employ a wide variety of methodologies in these tasks, with these methodologies being indefinable in advance because the particular challenges will themselves suggest the appropriate tools. Practitioners need to be given the trust and freedom to develop their own interests, ways of working and of testing conclusions. Theology is more than the ‘research tradition of the quest for God’ (p. 184): *fides quaerens intellectum* demands something greater than that. It calls the theologian to a lived impassioned search for truth, directed by the revelation of God in Christ in the world, which destabilizes all epistemologies, research structures and rationalities.

David Grumett

Exeter

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