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LIVING IN A STATE OF FLUX?

Ecclesiology for change from The Norwegian School of Theology

Abstract

In this book essay, Jan Ove Ulstein presents and evaluates three books on ecclesiology, for the most part written by theologians connected to The Norwegian School of Theology (MF). MF has been the largest theological institution in Norway for over 80 years, and is usually considered a comparatively conservative institution. In these books, Ulstein finds continuity, but also significant changes in the front lines of theological discussion in Norway. Ulstein is a former editor of Tidsskrift for kirke, religion og samfunn, the predecessor of Nordic Journal of Religion and Society. The books reviewed are:


Introduction

A lot has been happening lately that concerns the view of the church (ecclesiology) and church life in general. We have had ecumenical documents that in converging terms attempt to address the old controversies with a view to a rapprochement between the churches. We have many trends internationally with congregations growing in numbers, charismatic and neo-charismatic movements, and with a diversity that does not fit into any particular category. In the midst of this the picture in Norway has change
completely. The lay movement is not what it used to be, and now there is an ongoing debate about the church’s links with the state, with reports on the state church’s position in what is from an institutional point of view a secularized society. In recent years there has emerged in the Nordic countries, and of late also in Norway, a focus on social research into the reality of the church today. All in all this provides a great deal of fresh material for the theological ecclesiology, both in a national and global perspective.

How one views the church has not been among those theological (and political) issues on which there has been great agreement. That is not really surprising. There are a great many dimensions that have to be seen as one, and the pieces do not always fit. It is a well-known fact that about 40 years ago the reasonably homogeneous Norwegian School of Theology (Menighetsfakultet: MF) allowed a fairly broad disagreement in views on the church, with consequences for the ordained ministry of the Church and for ecumenicity. This might be because it was the professors in theoretical theology (theoreticum) who disagreed. For example, the collegium included highly profiled supporters of both alliance ecumenicity (Wisløff), church ecumenicity (Myklebust) and anti-ecumenicity (L. Aalen). The practicum was more ambivalent, depending on the practitioners who were invited there at any one time to prepare the candidates for the practical life of the church. Since then we have seen the appointment of professors in practical theology. And what can be better suited as a common denominator for practical theology than ecclesiology?

There is every reason to congratulate The Norwegian School of Theology (MF) for initiating this broad-based project. It has been the largest theological institution in Norway over many years, the one that has educated the largest number of ministers. The vast majority of those practising theology in the country have been educated there. Not least because of the close links with the lay movement (especially earlier) and with active church people, it is of great interest to know where the school stands ecclesiologically. Recently the school has become more open confessionally, establishing cooperation with both the Catholic church and with the Pentecostal movement. All in all this reflects the wide diversity of trends in the debate on the church today. The project group has also other individuals than members of staff in their special fields, from other institutions, from Master’s Degree research etc. I assume they have not been invited without a specific reason, so that together they represent a tendency that at least a large majority of the MF collegium supports, even though certain names are missing from the list. There are a total of 22 contributors to the three volumes that number roughly 550 pages. The project has been led by Professor Leif Gunnar Engedal and Director of Research Nils Aksel Røsæg. In what follows I will present detailed comments on the work as a whole, and on most of the articles.

The project

According to the project’s own presentation, the first volume (Kirke i oppbrudd og forandring) focuses on present-day empirical material with the aim of illustrating changes and challenges. The second volume turns its attention to the Bible and to material from
New Testament times, not least dynamic movements that provided inspiration to a church in flux. The third volume includes empirical, historical as well as systematic-theological contributions. They give the whole thing topical interest. The project as a whole is presented as the result of interdisciplinary cooperation. To be honest it is more than difficult to see what that consists of, since all the contributors belong to the same field of studies. No mention is made as to whether other subject traditions have been involved in providing professional opponents. On the other hand, there is a distinctly positive attitude to an interdisciplinary approach on the part of several contributors. The notion of empiri is also somewhat overdone and often appears as more of a form of lip-service to the term than a pervading, as it is proclaimed to be.

What then is so special about this project? It must be the motto "a church in a state of change". The contemporary material presents a set of mechanisms and challenges that provide the impetus for change. The other volumes focus on topics that support this perspective and reveal a programmatic desire to be topical with an eye to the contemporary situation. In other words, a way of thinking in the church in which the changes are the centre of attention, related to the task at hand, and of topical interest. This means that surprisingly little space is devoted to major topics such as the relationship between church and state, or the popular church (folkekyrkja). There is, for example, no more than one reference to important works in Norwegian church sociology, such as Troskollektivet [The faith collective] by Knut Lundby (1987), and Folkekirke og trosfellesskap [Popular church and community of faith] by Harald Hegstad (1996).

A third central contribution, En ganske alminnelig kirke [A quite ordinary church] by Dag Myhre-Nielsen (1998) is not included in any bibliography, as far as I can see. That means that this is not part of a national discourse. The same thing applies to discussions of weighty issues such as theology of (ordained) ministry. This may be explained by the fact that the institutional aspect of ecclesiology recedes into the background, in a more postmodern orientation. But viewpoints and constraints exist and one can see preferences, so it is possible to discern a profile on these issues. Nor is ecumenicity addressed to any great extent, such as church ecumenicity. On the contrary we find a global orientation, with the missionary aspect in a key role. The distinguishing characteristic is then an ecclesiology that draws a picture of the missionary church that is carrying out its task in changing times and social conditions. While discussions that have their roots in a popular church perspective often tend to look back in time in order to consolidate the popular church, we have to do here with a more offensive approach to postmodernity, with an evangelical and slightly charismatic character.

The breaking-up

The first volume starts with Biblical-theological perspective by Hans Kvalbein, as a prelude to the whole work. He expands on the Biblical-theological aspect in a later volume. To be a church means to live in a necessary breaking-up. He finds this Biblical perspective lacking in most dogmatic presentations in Norway. The church is felt to be too static. The breaking-up models (exodus, the desert wandering, the promised land)
are warnings against the danger of the popular church: membership combined with apostasy and enjoyment. «The Way» is an eschatological metaphor for the church: to walk on, not to stand on. This may mean breaking-up from temple to tent, from church buildings and structures to mobility and mission.

In that case the pilgrim must be an ideal. Kjell Skarsetheraugen studies him with the help of newspaper cuttings. The pilgrim can be a weathervane, as the answer to spiritual longing, or have culture, nature, history in his sights. ‘Longing’ and ‘Christian faith’ score the most points in the survey. This may mean that the spirit of postmodernity is best symbolised in the pilgrim’s wanderings, where the individual him/herself can integrate his/her own experiences. This pilgrim will never become the church’s own pilgrim. A spiritual tourist out shopping for religious experiences?

What then about the younger generation, who may be symptomatic of what is brewing? Is a whole generation lost to the life of the church? Kristin Lorentzen reports on a survey from a Ten Sing-environment in Haslum in 1999 on young faith, undergoing change. She discovers a relaxed attitude to both minister, faith and lifestyle. They are afraid of being too Christian and of sticking out. In other words not a pietistic orientation, more a postmodern one. They would not have any problem about becoming pacified, without experiencing that as particularly dramatic. She confirms something of the picture Pål Repstad drew in 1984, in his study Fra ilden til asken [From fire to ashes] about young people withdrawing from organized church activities. She asks whether they are representative, since Ten Sing after all offers a low threshold. I can confirm from other work that it does in fact represent one extreme in Christian youth work. True enough, few members of the pietistic younger generation still exist, it is more a question of the charismatic, and the evangelical, which is actually the strongest trend in youth work at the present time. Apart from this, she finds these young people (in Haslum) to be rather estranged when it comes to church services.

It is therefore a task with all odds against it that Einar Weider has taken upon himself: to renew the church service with a focus on the younger generation. He paints on a broad canvas, with crises and opportunities. He outlines a programme for contextual church service work with young people, working as a team. That can disrupt our sense of the familiar. The aim is to make the church service a place where young Christians’ need to experience the fellowship of a congregation can be satisfied.

Break-up also means that something has been broken up, so one must carry on regardless. Several of the articles have been written against this background. The article on the popular church, by Arne Landmark Bakken, is based on a master thesis which has also used informants from Haslum. His aim is to categorise various groups in the popular church, of the passive members, mind you! The picture provides nothing new compared to earlier sociological studies of religion in Norway (Repstad, Lundby, Botvar). Bakken distinguishes five categories. It is interesting to note that when he refers to the popular church, he is thinking of those more on the periphery. It is those who make up the congregation at the high festivals like Christmas and Easter who have a reasonably stable relationship with the church, tradition, the building itself, the rituals – and the minister. This is something they share with those who attend communion. This article differs from the others in its sociological focus. The popular church is thus
far from being a homogeneous group, but in fact they have no real feeling of fellowship. The critical potential in such a typologizing is not discussed theologically, it remains simply church sociology.

A fellowship of beliefs can serve as the keyword to the next two articles. For if we look at the inner core, the fellowship of believers in the church, we do not find a homogeneous group here either. Helge Standal tells a success story from Gand in Western Norway of planting a congregation within the church. Through a new localisation more people are drawn into the community of the church, it becomes easier to establish close relationships etc. He offers a recipe for growth in the church, of building a living fellowship of disciples. And finally he reflects on what is new about the contemporary situation. It may require more differentiated congregations, e.g. in the organizations such as we find in the IMI church in Stavanger and Storsalen in Oslo, with their relative independence of and special agreements with the official Church of Norway (this transition is discussed by Skårheim in his article on the basis of the changes in historical structures within the lay movement); youth congregations, as in England; in institutions; in multicultural and other forms of church services. As we see, there is also a breaking-up in relation to the organisation of the church – can it take place in an orderly fashion, so as to avoid splitting up the church?

Harald Hegstad writes about the church and the state, offering a contribution to the debate on the state church. Freedom of religion – is that for the church from the state, or? He views the relationship to the state on the basis of a sociological theory, on secularisation. He presents the debate, and tries to place the phenomenon in a European context. There the states are secularised in the Bergerian sense, but in several places they have retained their influence on the churches. This limits the place of ecclesiology. Hegstad adds a critical dimension to the debate regarding the issue of power.

In the final article in this volume, Vidar Hånes casts light on ecclesiological conflicts of a hundred years ago, compared to today. Hånes offers a knowledgeable and well-documented presentation of the tendencies around the turn of the century. He points to both the lay movement’s development in the direction of a spiritualistic anti-institutional view of the church, with the personal spiritual community in the centre, and the kinship with the neo-Protestant view that is also working for the freedom of the individual, but not for the institution. The liberal wing worked for a development within what they consider to be the basic Lutheran model, as opposed to dogma and force. The state was idealised as the authority that was to guarantee pluralism and tolerance in the face of those who think otherwise.

Hånes’ article naturally provides parallels to the present day. Some of these parallels are to the point, e.g. the doxa-campaign against the conservative get them to park them in the taboo zone, with a tendency towards totalitarian tolerance in the field of the media; and freedom for the individual, but not for the institution. But I keep on asking myself, with Heraclitus, whether it is the same river. Even supposing there were valid parallels, that would not fairly decide today’s argument, by announcing a victor and a vanquished as it was one hundred years ago. Liberal theology is not what it used to be. If we adopt professor Ole Hallesby’s definition: to have such an attitude to the Scriptures that one comes into conflict with the Creed (Apostolicum), then we can see that
it is not a case of a repeat performance. If we compare it with the recently retired bishop of Oslo, Gunnar Stålsett, who is labelled a liberal, he does not come into conflict with the Apostolicum on one single point. In addition, hermeneutics has lead to a greater openness in the direction of the contextual also among conservative theologians, and thus a perspective around the unambiguous formulation of «the eternal truth». So the front lines are not the same.

Change as a dynamic «basic structure»?
The second volume in the series (Slik blir kirken til) has a perspective that is both exciting and challenging and which stretches the bow with a series of questions about how ancient man has experienced and lived in the church. Nils Aksel Røsøg has an introduction about church research on the origins of the church, in a dialogue between then and now. In my opinion this is also a very necessary hermeneutic question if one is to make this research relevant to contemporary ecclesiology – in other words, more than exegesis and Biblical theology on the idea of a church, with examples from earliest times with their own cultural infrastructure. In this introduction questions are asked out of curiosity: did a popular church exist in Corinth? What was the eclectic pilgrim like? Was there a hidden church with Paul? Do we find inner-church protest movements? What kind of dissidents did Paul put in their place? Did anyone leave the congregations? Were there passive members in a church for «everyman»? The decision-making structures? The building? The relationship with the authorities?

So viele Fragen! And there are more to come, from the present-day: on the church of the future, break-up, the pattern of congregations, fragmentation, renewal, the mission church today, in a hyper-complicated society. Here Røsøg includes loads of questions. I can visualise a huge hermeneutic project à la Gadamer, where one can speak openly about one’s prejudices and test them out in the analysis. Røsøg claims that volume 1 offers elements of the contemporary empirical foundation. But ‘church research’ is not simply current empirical material and sociology, least of all that, more history, sources and norms. It is the content of the New Testament, hermeneutically reasoned, that makes the church a proper Church (p.18).

OK, what answers do we get, and what methods are adopted? Røsøg wishes to demonstrate a parallelism in the direction of cultural and religious pluralism, that is that a big city in the year 50 is essentially similar to a big city in the year 2000 (what about the homogeneous ‘rural community’?). Similar features are brought forward. Even so, it is not a question here of preserving the form and changing the substance, but of preserving the substance and changing the form. It is the same church that is constantly changing. This change started way back in the New Testament. That must mean that there is no correspondence between form and content. In other words, a permanent content that is continually changing its form. It is tempting to wax philosophical. Can a form change dramatically without that affecting the content?

I make such a detailed reference to this introductory article because it is here the ambitions are declared and the perspective established. In that case a reviewer is forced
Jan Ove Ulstein: Living in a state of Flux?

to determine to what extent the ambitions have been fulfilled. The ambitions in this volume are to demonstrate how the church was established and how it has changed, not in a vacuum, but in a socio-cultural context, which in turn is to be incorporated into a hermeneutic reflection.

I am a little overcome by the sheer numbers of ideas and questions. I accept that the attempt is exciting, but I am less convinced about how fruitfully it has been carried out. I give it my tentative support on the basis of a Gadamer-perspective; namely that when one attempts to interpret the historical meaning or truth, the interpreter asks his questions on the basis of his own presuppositions (prejudices), which in turn can be deemed invalid if they are confronted with an understanding that can lead to a change in one’s thinking. And not least: the exercise of interpretation always has an inherent application, the understanding of text involves actualisation, since it concerns a subject of current interest. Or to express it more in Ricoeur’s terms: that the then-meaning implies now-significance. A process of self-reflection takes place during the interpretation process that can provide those who jointly are doing the interpreting with new and relevant insight. In this way one can approach the contributions in a positive frame of mind.

The six contributions in this book are presented roughly in historical order, from the Old Testament (OT) (Karl William Weyde: the church in relation to the history of salvation), to the New Testament (NT) (Hans Kvalbein: discipleship and church thinking), to Corinth (Nils Aksel Røsæg: the world at large, culture), back to the NT as scripture (Olav Skjevesland: normative New Testamental understanding of the church employed to interpret the times from the point of), to the Second Epistle of Clement (Eirin Hoel Hauge: ethics’ ecclesiological consequences), to Rome (Røsæg: as a centre in an ‘intranet’).

Not all of these articles are constructed in accordance with the overall issue in question. Weyde’s detailed picture of God’s people in the OT does not contribute a great deal to the current ecclesiology. Kvalbein attempts to do just that by drawing parallels from the NT to today in his Bible-theological discussion. E.g. by rejecting that being a ‘disciple’ only refers to ‘persons in authority’ as opposed to ‘laymen’, or ‘the core of the congregation’ as opposed to ‘those foreign to the church’. Or when he rejects the fact that the task of the church is to be responsible for a popular religiosity, without making disciples of those who are ‘poor in themselves’, i.e. without idealising disciples. For the call to break away from Mammon, from short-sighted individualism, in favour of the obligation of being a follower – that applies to everyone in the popular church.

The longest article in the volume is Røsæg’s about the church in Corinth, with its discussion of models of the church in a New Testament context and our own time, in other words a discussion of the models of that time in the light of the current situation. Here I have to confess a feeling of ambivalence. I am both impressed and frustrated. Impressed by the updated knowledge regarding recent research on the period and the context surrounding the church in Corinth. The socio-anthropological approach is here, the sociologic infrastructure etc. There is no end of references to current research. But it is also very disjointed with hypotheses and headlines, all the time trying to be topical.
This results in a high pulse in which the subject is introduced and then dropped far too quickly. Perhaps it is a little unfair to put it that way, since he also links the presentation to five theoretical perspectives and six models: the building, the association, the synagogue, schools, the mystery religions, schools of philosophy and the workplace. And he discusses each individual model, showing which features influence the modelling of the congregation, and where differences exist. He provides a twin approach. The church was at the same time part of the world – and influenced by the social patterns of the world – but also not of this world – which is something that sets it apart. All these models can point to diversity also today. The article makes room for just such a diversity of patterns. And this is the use of the material that is so relevant today, with its normative accent: diversity is the norm. And Corinth is similar to and legitimises a corresponding situation today.

Skjevesland wishes to use the NT to say something normative about the church. Even though the church is continually in a state of being, there exist images of the church’s distinctive character, function and appearance. These will provide guidance, without any of the various church images excluding each other. The article only gives a summary. But Skjevesland has written in detail on the topic earlier. I cannot see that the concept has been coordinated with the previous article, between the picture of the church in the NT and the myriad of church models in Corinth. Is Skjevesland basing his work on (a set of) normative models that do not allow for all kinds of «multitudes» at any given time, thus coming into direct conflict with Røsæg? Or is the idea that just those models that correspond with the set of normative models that are legitimate? Or do they represent a critical question with reference to every period? I would like to have seen a discussion in the book of the tension between diversity as the normal situation (Røsæg) and a set of normative church images (Skjevesland). They are just as likely to be on collision course as to harmonise. What is the line of thought here? Normative images of the church, chronic change and diversity as normality? This cries out for a systematic hermeneutic reflection in a contemporary context.

As regards Hauge’s article on views on the church and ecclesiological consequences in the Second Epistle of Clement, it emphasises what the view of the body and of the body’s actions mean for the relationship to God in the early Christian times, resulting in the extremes of salvation or perdition. The context and the theology are made clear, but what is missing is a hermeneutic reflection, and therefore it remains of little significance for current ecclesiology. Would Luther have called this a straw epistle?

Being a church

In the third volume we find the systematic theology that aims to define the church’s «being and mission», in other words something that has both a stable identity and which is also in movement, where change is more or less a permanent state. This systematic perspective naturally enough also includes the mission-theological, the break-
ing of boundaries, both globally and locally. A characteristic feature of this volume is
the focus on the church as local and universal.

Kjell Olav Sannes has written the principle articles on «being» and «mission». He
does not define the church on the basis of church models, measured in degree of insti-
tutionality, but on the basis of the relationship with God. «The model» for ecclesiology
thus becomes the trinity. His version of Trinitarian ecclesiology is not the ontologic or
analogic, but the «economic». This means that he emphasises the triune God’s deed in
the history of the salvation, where the church in diachronic perspective is the triune
God’s people, who are living in communion with God. The church is the location for
God’s act of salvation, and where His mercies are unfolded and on which the services
are founded. According to Sannes, it is not the people that constitute the popular
church, but the gospel and baptism. Therefore it is misleading to talk about national
churches. That is not where their identity lies.

Sannes views the church as a people constantly in a state of change, with a mission.
It is the disciples who receive it; it is given to the church as a whole, without regard to
the official church or the laity (anti-institutional, anti-hierarchic); in a constantly mis-
sional movement everywhere, working towards an eternal goal, through word and sac-
rament, in ever-changing contexts in which change is vital to survival (e.g. with «func-
tion-oriented church service renewal»). Against this background the way the church is
organized is discussed. This must vary, and is not part of what binds the church
together. It is not so surprising that Sannes therefore distinguishes between «leader and
mentor», whereby the latter is not linked to any formal positions, and thus completes
his rather «un-institutional» ecclesiology in the direction of the view that the expres-
sion ‘laypersons’ is more than problematic. The missionary perspective offers the
chance of a dynamic, flexible and cooperating church with the opportunity for great
diversity.

Sannes’ ecclesiology is then at the same time based on the triune God’s deeds in
history, and with a mission from Him, unaffected by trends and new fashions but still
with an institutional flexibility that matches the postmodern cultural situation.

This cultural situation is the backcloth to Knut Jørgensen’s article on the «mis-
sional» church. That is a church that is aware that she has been given a mission in all
contexts, and where the organisation and services naturally arise from what she is
doing there and then. The ecclesiology of this must be Biblical, historical, contextual,
eschatological, practical. The structure of the popular church can be an obstacle to
seeing this mission. A transition is necessary from a Constantinian identity to a mis-
sional one. Jørgensen is finding his bearings in the postmodern society. The relativisa-
tion of truth he puts down to hermeneutics, without my being able to follow his point
all the way. He also points to the unnatural lifestyle that is individualism, and compares
the thinking of the church as a contrast to it. There is a change of paradigm taking place,
from the educational paradigm (on ‘Christendom’) to an ecumenical postmodern para-
digm. Then we are forced to read the Scripture anew in the world in which we find
ourselves (that is, hermeneutic in the proper sense of the word, I might add). He
includes sharp criticism of the development since the Reformation, calling it restric-
tive. The general clergy must replace the Constantinian church tradition as a church
structure, with Biblical spiritual gifts in its full breadth, with a serving leadership in the midst of God’s priesthood, who are role models rather than managers – of the types cultivator, poet, prophet, apostle.

Tormod Engelsviken does not wish to be so very radical as opposed to the traditional missionary way of thinking. The interplay between recognition and context is difficult to grasp. What is important is that one commits oneself to the authoritative in the Biblical revelation at the same time as one is open to the questions that the social, cultural and religious context raises. But in its deepest sense, mission is a question of salvation or damnation, and with the gospel and faith as good news regardless of station or context. The missional is that the churches do what they are. His study of one such church in Malaysia results in nine characteristics: evangelical theology, the Bible a central authority, Jesus as the sole saviour, the Spirit’s deeds, everything permeated by mission, guidance and gift of grace service, spontaneous testimony service, ministering and economy, education and teaching. Or: Biblical evangelical Christianity, with a charismatic character, missional overall perspective, rooted locally and in the whole congregation.

This volume continues with more concrete elements, or limited topics. An example of a Norwegian congregation is provided by Torbjørn Lied, from Oddernes parish. A strong strategic prioritising of missionary work did not result in less income for their own activities, or a reduction in these activities, but contact with their own missionaries provided stimulation locally. Trond Løberg looks at the bigger picture. Although the topic is «building a congregation in a postmodern time», he devotes a large amount of space to a detailed description of the postmodern state, and a reflection over what it means to understand challenges facing the church. He makes a good and nuanced job of this, even though it does not add a great deal that is new. Consequently it is even more interesting to see how he visualises the strategy for building congregations. In the main he turns to the church growth movement, with criteria for qualitative growth (mostly evangelical). The experience from the USA with regard to the churches in growth is that they live up to the new cultural paradigms, and have strong moral, theological intolerance but with room in the various forms of church service for the need to express feelings. Conversion, going beyond the rational, taking the Bible seriously, decentralised structures and visionary leadership would appear to be the main characteristics. They adopt elements of contemporary culture without importing all the values this represents.

When Løberg is to present challenges and models for the church in the postmodern world, he discusses these first on the basis of the expression «culturally adapted anti-cultural», not subcultures. There are many types of congregations side by side in big cities, with a loosening of ties to parishes. This results in a more open popular church, in reality with an opening both for Grundtvigians and charismatics. There follows challenging talk, of conversion and transforming relations with God; the spiritual dimension as experienced reality (i.e. progress for charismatic Christianity); to prepare for being in a minority position; with a ministering dimension; with fellowship; flat structure and the building of relationships; qualifying leadership.
Lars Råmunddal then explains growth strategies in Norwegian non-conformist churches. These churches represent diversity. He narrows down the perspective by referring to the historical roots in revival and associations, which excludes the Catholic church. Ecclesiologically what is important is proximity to the New Testament congregations, in other words the Biblical ideal of organisation with a focus on local congregations and personal faith – with certain special confessional issues, and expansive activities. He sees a new growth paradigm, in which the conventional issues have paled, the forms of activity are outdated and the leaders tired, with problems of fatigue. They were products of the modern. Now it is a case of being relevant to the contemporary world without entering into compromises. He also sees an ecumenical (and post-modern) trend whereby special confessional features are changed from being what distinguishes to representing an offer of diversity.

Jan Opsahl sketches briefly the religions of the world, and their activities in Norway, and summarises what challenges these represent for the church. Fair enough, it updates the context, but in this case it contributes nothing new to ecclesiology. Neither does the article by Arild Romarheim. He investigates the way weekly magazines cover religion, and finds a very mixed picture. I interpret this contribution as also offering a brief glimpse of the context, what religiosity in Norway consists of, if weekly magazines are used as a barometer.

Tendencies

This final volume (Hva vil det si å være kirke?) presents a reasonably unified ecclesiology. Sannes, Jørgensen and Engelsviken design the structure, but they are well supplemented by Løberg and Råmunddal. I have presented in some detail the descriptions of the church, and the observant reader will see that there is a common identity and kinship between the elements even though the form of expression may vary. They are all moving in the same direction. The same can be said of many of the articles in the first two volumes. Those who outline the church view most clearly are Kvalbein and Røsæg along with a number of authors thinking strategically in the direction of congregation building of various types. These tendencies strike the basic chord in this ecclesiology, they are dynamo that is driving the completion of the assignment.

If we look at several of the usual index words in the ecclesiology, the overall impression is however rather unsystematic. This involves the more traditional issues in ecclesiology, summed up in the Ancient Church symbols (especially the Nicene creed – one holy, universal, Apostolic church). They do not provide much guidance on the idea here (is it considered to be too static?), even though this is where the third article of faith is formulated, and no mention is made of primitive Christian (and modern) charismatic life. The historical models of the church do not attract any attention. The new cultural situation is the horizon, so there is more emphasis on different social models in the church’s early days than on the formation of dogma in the articles of faith and on the historical models of the church and the way it organized its ministry. This happens in a context in which the families of churches have formulated a confluent
draft proposal of a faith based on the Nicene Creed («We confess to the one faith»), and try out the tripartite ministry from the time of the Ancient Church as a model for ecumenicity in the future.

And this applies to the question of the popular church. That is more often than not referred to in critical terms. It is partly neglected because the focus on the national element is lost. It is partly exceeded by emphasising the breaking-up, the change, as a permanent movement historically speaking in the ecclesiology, almost as a sort of permanent revolution. There is little focus on the idea of tradition. If so, there must be a radical renewal in keeping with the change in culture. The most positive is in fact Løberg, who allows the term ‘open popular church’ a postmodern content: the diversity, but fairly free-standing in relation to institutional structures.

And here we see yet another characteristic feature: the lack of focus on the institutional aspect. This is the result both of a conscious orientation from the outset, along with the postmodern ideal, perhaps a congregational fundamental orientation. The institutions are in a state of flux. That also leaves the traditional questions about the ordained ministry rather homeless, a fact that might make an interesting point of departure for the discussion. On the basis of elementary sociology it is possible to register a fairly clear tendency towards institutional decline in postmodern society, a fact that most of the contributors seem to be able to live comfortably with. The ministries then become the expression of an ever-changing diversity in shifting conditions, but with a new interpretation of biblical motives. The clearest tendency towards a traditional confessional Lutheran view of the office of the minister is presented by Løberg, with reference to CA 4-5, where the (ordained) minister is placed in a special position, also referred to as shepherd. But there can be a gradual transition to the role of shepherd in freer assemblies. For Sannes the view of the ministry is «functional», without his discussing the point here.

This corresponds to the ecumenical approach. Volume 3 mentions in the foreword the Porvoo agreement and the Lima document as relevant background material. But nobody discusses the main issue there: an understanding of baptism and communion as divisive or unifying, and not least the issues of ordained ministry, which require analogous wording in order to promote fellowship between the church institutions. It is alliance-ecumenicalism à la Lausanne that corresponds to this ecclesiology, with its elements of charismatic Christendom.

This sketch of the tendencies is not meant on my part to be a criticism, or a ‘disclosure’ that does not require more witnesses. I am trying to discern the outline of an ecclesiological approach for the MF, what it is that motivates this project. They do not make it any the less clear with the selection of articles they have commissioned, and the co-authors that have been invited to contribute. Again: not criticism, merely a statement of fact. We are given here at times spirited contributions that look at the church from inside of the mission, from the mission perspective, and that do not discuss the negotiation and revision of institutional positions nationally, to say nothing of church law – where we are now starting on a new round of debate in connection with the White Paper on the State and the Church in Norway (NOU 2006:2). This can be perceived as refreshing theology that begins with the basic (read: biblical) universal (read: global)
ecclesiology and what innovative change means in the global cultural context (read: postmodernity), with consequences for the local congregations, with the building of close relationships and all the rest (read: evangelical, charismatic church life with a basic congregational element). Against that background, the state church debate is the most provincial of them all.

Nevertheless it is possible to interpret as a narrowing of the field of interest in relation to the immediate context, which is Norway. And then we are getting close to an objection. Does this mean that the environment surrounding the MF will avoid participating in the coming process and say no more than that the state ought not to administer the church on the basis of an external policy and liberal ecclesiology? If that is the case, one withdraws from the current context in which there are also questions from people who have a less clearly defined faith as to whether they may enjoy an open, including church. The answer is that they will be able to have that, but also with an opening for all the conservative or charismatic groups that can form their own congregations – and all other groups? Perhaps I am making the tendency too unambiguous, the authors too much of one voice, and I interpret it as being more representative of the MF than it actually is. Perhaps this is just one of a number of ecclesiologies there.

In conclusion I would like to say that we have been presented with a work of uneven quality, which is normal in the case of such anthologies, but with a well-informed and enthusiastic presentation of certain attempts at finding one’s bearings in the contemporary cultural context with something they define as an unchanging task. The content is the same, but the forms vary according to the culture (something I find difficult to accept: form without any relevance to the content? formulated content without the necessary form?). It is important that this choir strikes a proper chord in a Norwegian context. It is part of a strong international trend. Nevertheless I still want to question this concept, and link this to Sannes’ dogmatic presentation of the church on the basis of the Trinity. It is usual to refer to the fact that different church traditions have different characteristics in relation to the three articles of faith. Some are influenced by the Pentecostals, others concentrate on salvation through Jesus. In this project the evangelical (2nd article) and the charismatic (3rd article) are pondered. But what about the first article of faith? What does one have to say to a popular church and youth work with a low threshold – based on the dynamics of the concept? Are these things that have been left out of the contextual repertoire? Are they not part of the understanding of the true church, or ought it to be expanded on behalf of the first article of faith, without anchoring the ecclesiology there? Without making the context «liberal democracy with a dogma of tolerance» the definition of «open, including popular church».

References (English translations in the text):