Ecclesiocentrism

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Main content

Article Preview:
Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction
BY NICHOLAS M. HEALY
EERDMANS, 154 PAGES, $23

Good books on contemporary theologians are rare, good critical books rarer still. This is a very good, very critical analysis of a widely esteemed and powerful Christian teacher, economically written, tightly argued, and purposive. Its major proposals are that Stanley Hauerwas's work is ecclesiocentric, that it does not speak sufficiently of God or of the works of God, and, consequently, that its rejection of the modern traditions of Christian moral theology is only selective.

On Healy's reading, Hauerwas's account of Christianity is "founded upon ... a single locus": the Church. Hauerwas insists that it is constitutive of Christian morals, that its practices form Christian identity, and that it is the corporate enactment of an alternative to the world. This view of the Church is threatened by what Healy calls "ecclesism"--that is, by "a distortion of Christianity consequent upon a reductive focus upon the church as the central and structuring locus for all theological inquiry." The potential distortion is brought into relief by the contrast Healy draws between "traditional" theology (in which God is epistemologically, agentially, and ontologically prior) and modern theology in the person of Schleiermacher, in whose work the object of theological inquiry shifts to become the God-consciousness of the community as it is constituted by Jesus of Nazareth.

In effect, Healy asks his readers to step back from immediate engagement...

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Along with his ecclesiocentrism, Hauerwas emphasizes the Church's visibility and a certain perfectionism, both of which prove difficult to reconcile with an understanding of the Church in time as an unsatisfactory, mixed society. Healy counters this first by ethnographical considerations, which aim to show that the Church is not so much a cleanly separate society of well-formed persons as a messy set of unfinished and half-successful negotiations. Ecclesiocentrism can only be idolatry. Webster doubles down on Barth’s account of witness and argues for an ecclesial “rhetoric of indication,” in which the church ceaselessly points away from itself to Christ. Matt Jenson is associate professor of theology at the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University. 10. Exclusivist ecclesiocentrism—the fruit of a specific theological system or of a mistaken understanding of the phrase extra ecclesiam nulla salus—is no longer defended by Catholic theologians after the clear statements of Pius XII and Vatican Council II on the possibility of salvation for those who do not belong visibly to the Church (cf., e.g., LG 16; GS 22). He argues that the structures are subject to such maladies as jurisdictionism, hierarchism, institutionalism and ecclesiocentrism (190-2). That is why every generation needs to re-evaluate the structures and rediscover the reason for their existence and their relation to the mission of the church (193). In this sense our ecclesiocentrism is more dangerous because it pretends to have a direct divine/biblical endorsement – above any critical consideration. Based on this we have created a “fundamentalist chain” made not only of a fundamentalist reading of the bible but also integrated by a fundamentalist ecclesiology and ethics.