

between conception and birth, abortion is always immoral. But could one not also argue that the conventional Christian understanding of marriage is true—whether recognised by secular thought or not—and foundational to the state's regulation of sexual conduct, precisely because its very male-female complementarity tells us something about the nature of God (cf Genesis 1:27) and his relationship to his people (Ephesians 5: 31–32), and hence about human worth? In short, is abortion simply an issue of human worth, not human well-being, and homosexual conduct about well-being, not worth? The distinction is hard to maintain. Epistemologically, Perry's argument trades heavily on the possibility that secular (rational) knowledge is more reliable than revealed (biblical) knowledge. While acknowledging that 'fundamentalist' Christians are going to have problems here, he does not acknowledge that it also turns Thomist epistemology, at least as traditionally understood, on its head. Granted that our interpretations of canonical texts and religious traditions will be flawed, Perry does not seem to accept that secular knowledge will be at least as (St Paul might suggest, more) flawed. And in matters of fundamental ethical controversy, can one distinguish between 'secular' and 'religious' arguments so easily anyway?

Although deeply implicated in the American debate about law, politics and religion, these books are highly relevant to the United Kingdom. Both of them demonstrate the theoretical difficulties facing anyone who would seek to disentangle religion from public life on a principled basis. With the Human Rights Act 1998 in force, principles of religious liberty and equality will be clearly enshrined in our constitution. In the minds of some, this will represent such a principled disentanglement. The contortions of American political theory over the past few decades in pursuit of this disentanglement—of which Perry's book is the latest offering—make salutary reading. Among other things, the principle of religious neutrality which could be taken to inform the European Convention on Human Rights might cast doubt over the existence of the United Kingdom's remaining established churches. While some conceptions of religious establishment are clearly incompatible with religious liberty and equality, if the search for full religious neutrality is as chimerical as Smith suggests, space remains for the maintenance of other, more liberal, conceptions of establishment, the Scottish and English models included.

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*CHURCH AND ORDER—A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE* by P. COERTZEN, Peeters, Bondgenotenlaan 153, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium, 1998, vii + 104 pp ISBN 90-429-0569-7.

The book is the text of the lectures that Pieter Coertzen gave in the Onclin Chair for Comparative Church Law at the Canon Law Faculty of the Catholic University of Leuven in February 1998. Professor Coertzen draws mainly on Church Order in Presbyterian churches in the Netherlands and South Africa. However, his work transcends this Presbyterian text and his prayer in the foreword that it will 'help the Church of Jesus Christ to come to a deeper understanding of its own existence and a fuller obedience to its Lord' is answered in the text. Coertzen rightly notes that it is a *sine qua non* for Church law and Church government that it is government 'by Christ through word and spirit'. Christ is the head of the Church and the Church must be faithful to the Word of God and to being guided by the Holy Spirit in the interpretation and application of the Word. This reviewer is a Baptist and deeply struck by the congregational emphasis of Coertzen's work. On page 33 he says that the Church can only succeed by 'team-work and all the members being filled with the Holy Spirit',

on page 29 he notes that Church discipline ‘comes from Christ through the congregation’, on page 49 he states that in the Church there must be office bearers and that they ‘must be elected from and by the congregation’, and on page 27 he states that it is ‘in the local congregation that the one and universal Church of Christ is revealed’.

Coertzen also helpfully challenges congregationalists like myself not to become insular, and he goes on on page 27 to say that there is a ‘call to each individual congregation to join the other congregations in the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as the image of the Church as a multiplicity of members but one body (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12) is a Scriptural guideline for mutual interaction in the local congregation, so it is also a guideline for the mutual interaction between congregations’. Coertzen goes on to note that congregations must also ‘preserve their unity in relation to one another, exercise the authority granted to them by Christ, and subject themselves to this authority’.

Most of the book is taken up with a fairly technical analysis of Church order and how that should be interpreted. Coertzen is rightly anxious that in some Churches the Church order is applied as ‘a purely non spiritual management skill without any sense that it gives proof that Jesus Christ is the only Lord and Head of His church’ (p 46). Coertzen recognises that Church order cannot simply be lifted from the text of Scripture. The Church order must be consistent with Scripture, and once adopted by the Church applied by the Church in a fair and consistent manner. Coertzen stresses, however, that the application of the Church order is not simply a legal matter but is something that must be ‘undertaken continuously and genuinely in fulfilment of and authorised by the Holy Spirit’ (p 61). The most important guide to interpretation of the Church order is a spiritual one. In this context it is the purpose of God’s order for his Church. God’s order for his Church is found in the Scriptures and, to quote Coertzen, is that ‘the Church must grow to the full extent of Jesus Christ, that it must be built to bear the fruit of the Spirit’ (p 65).

Coertzen is rather sidetracked into the importance of human rights for the drafting of a Church order. Certainly there is scope for some kind of natural justice within the rules of Church discipline in any Church order. No satisfactory basis is given by Coertzen as to why the relationship between members of the Church and the Church should be seen in terms of human rights. Much more interesting are his references on page 93 to Scriptural positions on the impartial administration of justice and on Church discipline and disputes between members. These do not, however, point towards a rights based approach to Church order. In the end Coertzen seems to rely on other people’s ideas about human rights and jumping on a fashionable bandwagon. Sadly the conclusion does not say more than that the reformed Church law should consider human rights.

The book is refreshingly orthodox in its devotion to Jesus Christ as the Head of the Church, to the authority of Scripture and the necessity of listening to the Holy Spirit in making any decisions within the life of the Church. The parts of the book which dwell on that orthodoxy are by far and away the most convincing parts and it is rather a pity that the author felt the need to meander through a rather secular human rights agenda as a possible influence on the development of Church order. He would have been better sticking to his orthodox credentials and teasing out Biblical principles, guided by the Holy Spirit, as to how Churches should be run in the twenty-first century.

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