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REVIEWS

Christian Social Ethics in the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Traditions

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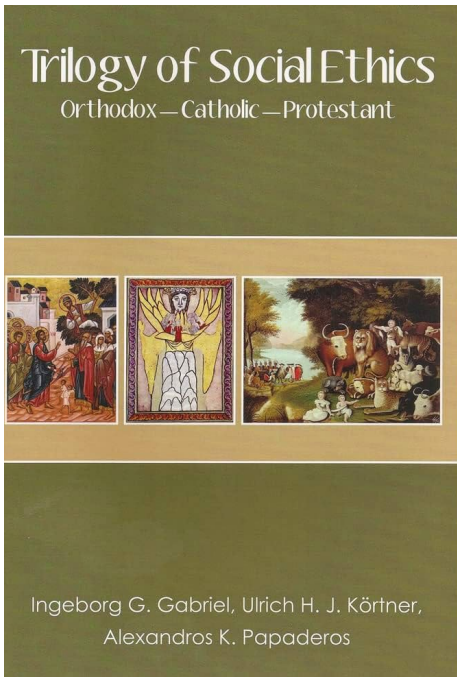

Can a comparative look at Christian social ethics contribute to ecumenism? That is the question posed by a slim volume titled: *Trilogy of Social Ethics: Orthodox – Catholic – Protestant.*[1] While the book has its limitations, it makes a thought-provoking attempt to approach ecumenical dialogue through the lens of Christian social thought.

The dictionary defines a "trilogy" as a "series of three dramas or literary works … that are closely related and develop a single theme."[2] Think the *Oresteia*, the *Divine Comedy*, or, analogously, the three parts of the *Summa* with its overarching *exitus-reditus* structure. The etymology of the term is broader, however, and does not intrinsically include the element of close relatedness. A *trilogia* could literally refer to three freestanding stories or accounts (*tri- + logos, -logia*), collected in one place. That is perhaps the better way to understand the sense in which this book presents a "trilogy" of social ethics. While the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant thirds of the book do each broadly treat a related topic – social ethics – they do so in such fundamentally distinct ways that each third of the book could just as well stand on its own. That would not necessarily be a criticism, if the authors merely intended to present three freestanding accounts of social ethics from different perspectives. But the book's self-declared purpose is higher: It aims to "contribute to bridging the gap between churches in the specific area of social ethics and thus to further greater unity" in both "thought and action" (p. 5). It is self-consciously an ecumenical endeavor, and the authors hope that the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant sections of the book will "mutually interpret each other" and "demonstrate the enriching complementarity of the three traditions" (p. 12). In this higher aim, the book falls somewhat short. But it does present a useful overview of social ethics from three distinct Christian perspectives, and attentive readers should find points of commonality among the three accounts that might serve as broad, if somewhat thin, common ground for some kind of possible future synthesis

To understand the structure and content of the book, a bit of background is in order. This is an English edition of a book that was originally published in German in 2005. At the time, there was a spirit of optimism, as "the European Union was opening itself to countries in the Eastern reaches of the continent, defying older political, ideological, and religious boundaries" (p. 3). All the same, "the authors were convinced that the future of Europe and its institutions was fragile as long as spiritual values were neglected as key elements of European identity and as long as the region's churches failed to promote dialogue between Western and Eastern Christianity" (*id.*). Thus, the three authors – Ingeborg Gabriel, a Catholic theologian at the University of Vienna; Ulrich Körtner, a Protestant theologian at the University of Vienna; and Alexandros Papaderos, a Greek Orthodox academic who studied in both Greece and Germany – set out to write a book about "ethical, and particularly social ethical, reflection in the three main Christian traditions" (p. 5). As that background suggests, the book views its subject through primarily western European, even Teutonic, lenses. European social problems in the early 21st century are top of mind for the authors, and the theological analysis is often of the more modern German variety. In that sense, the book is somewhat limited by its time and context. There is scant treatment of social problems in the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, or Africa, and aspects of the theological analysis arguably lack breadth (apparent especially in the Lutheran-Reformed focus of the Protestant section) and depth (particularly in the Catholic section's treatment of more traditional Thomistic concepts). Of course, the authors can do only so much in attempting to treat an immense topic in just 300 pages. But the context and limitations are worth keeping in mind, together with the recognition that the authors do not necessarily present the only or authoritative way of understanding social ethics in their respective traditions.

Turning from context to content, and following the book's order of presentation, we can summarize the main themes, and try to capture the general ethos, of the Orthodox, then Catholic, then Protestant treatment of social ethics. Along the way, we can identify some particular points of strength and weakness in each account. Then, having taken a trip through each third of the book, we can take a step back and evaluate the book as a whole, particularly in light of its ecumenical aims.

Orthodox: The Orthodox chapter, written by Papaderos, is more meditative and even spiritual than it is linear or systematic. In noticeable contrast with the Catholic chapter, the Orthodox chapter does not leave the reader with a clear architectonic sense of the internal logic of Orthodox social ethics. Instead, the chapter immerses the reader in what we might call the Orthodox sensibility, orienting us toward social ethics from within a certain frame of reference rather than systematically mapping out the terrain. The chapter proceeds in five sections, each organized around one or more theological concepts (given in Greek).

The first section lays important groundwork, establishing Trinitarian perichoresis or mutual indwelling as the model and foundation of human relationships in general and Christian social ethics in particular. After noting the cause-effect relationship between *agapē* (brotherly love) and *diakonia* (service or ministry), and meditating briefly on the famous second-century passage from the *Epistle to Diognetus*, which describes early Christians as the souls in the body of society, the first section explores the historical forces that caused modern Orthodox thinking on social ethics to take a different course from that taken in the West. In Papaderos' view, the challenges arising from the Renaissance, Protestant movements, and rapid industrialization forced Western Christians to systematize their thinking on social ethics relatively early in the modern era, while in the East the subjugation of the Church by the Ottoman Empire meant that theological disciplines were cultivated more slowly. That is part of the picture, but there is more, as Papaderos later adds: "Systems of values and norms, as well as official social doctrines, do not belong to the tradition of the Orthodox Church. Generally speaking, the Orthodox hierarchy is not particularly willing to subject society or the individual to norms proclaimed in Church statements on ethical economic, and social questions" (p. 55). This is an interesting ecclesiological claim that could have been developed further as a point of contrast with the Catholic chapter.

The second and third sections return to the concept of *diakonia*. In Orthodox thought, *diakonia* is closely linked to, and flows from, liturgy – understood broadly as the reasonable worship of God, and encompassing not just the sacraments and formal acts of divine worship, but also a general "ethos" or "ethical outlook" (p. 59). In a nice turn of phrase, *diakonia* is conceived of as the "liturgy after the liturgy," as "praxis based on the right faith and the right glorification of God" (p. 65). *Diakonia* can be divided into *microdiakonia* and *macrodiakonia*, the former denoting charitable activity, often private, that relieves immediate suffering, and the latter denoting larger-scale and forward-looking societal efforts to promote justice, peace, and human dignity. There are points of contact here with the Catholic distinction between charity and social justice. Although Papaderos does not explore them explicitly, he does gesture at the common ground in his discussion of concrete examples of *micro-* and *macrodiakonia* in patristic sources.

The fourth and fifth sections finish by considering what we might call political theology. Of particular interest is the section on church-state relations and the principle of *symphonia* in Orthodox thought. Drawing on Justinian and other Byzantine sources, this principle holds that "[t]he temporal power and the priesthood relate to each other as body and soul; they are necessary for state order just as the body and soul are necessary for a living person. It is in their linkage and harmony that the wellbeing of a state lies" (p. 109). In other words, "the emperor and the patriarch" are "at the head of society," not as a "diarchy," but rather as "persons fulfilling a specific institutional function, as servants of the same Christian community," requiring "mutual support and solidarity" (id.). At least on its face, that articulation of the principle of *symphonia* seems compatible with pre-Conciliar Western efforts to formulate a principle of church-state or spiritual-temporal relations. In Leonine terms, for example, that principle required an "orderly connection" between "the ecclesiastical and the civil" powers, each "supreme" in its own domain, "which may be compared to the union of the soul and body in man."[3] That formulation, even if no longer tenable in the post-Conciliar world, sounds strikingly similar to the Orthodox *symphonia* principle, and here might have been another place to explore an intriguing point of historical contact with Western, or at least Catholic, social thought. But the book again leaves that task to the reader.

Catholic: The Catholic chapter, written by Gabriel, reads much more like a short systematic treatise on social ethics. It has a clear logical trajectory and follows a useful three-part pedagogical structure of "see, judge, and act" (p. 133). We first "see" the "signs of the times" by examining the context for social ethical reflection, then consider the criteria and methods for "judging" reality according to social ethics, and finally turn to future prospects for "action."

After a brief introduction to the sources of Catholic social ethics – theology, philosophical ethics, and the social

sciences – as well as a nod to the Orthodox conception of *diakonia* as the "liturgy after the liturgy" (p. 134), Gabriel offers an overview of the "signs of the times" from the perspective of "current Western societies" (p. 145). The material here should sound familiar to anyone educated in the West: the dominance of technocratic and economic paradigms with their underlying instrumental view of nature; the social costs and benefits of the dominant models; the effects of globalization and the need for effective global laws and governance structures; the sense of uprootedness and social fragility; the shaky state of democracy and human rights in many parts of the world. From the standpoint of Christian ethics, but also perhaps of anyone of goodwill, the present social context demands a better understanding of the human being vis-à-vis nature, a reexamination of the inadequate individualist premises of liberal economic and political theory, a better conception of progress oriented toward the true end of human life, and a Christian humanism that "offers a holistic interpretation of life that encompasses all dimensions of human existence" (p. 161).

If somewhat Western-focused, this discussion does attempt to take in at least some global aspects of the "signs of the times," which helps give the Catholic chapter a more cosmopolitan flavor. If there is an analytical (and ironic) weakness here, it is in Gabriel's use of impoverished liberal categories to critique impoverished liberal theory. When, for example, "liberal sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf" claims that "the realization of freedom *and* justice" is impossible because "social rights necessarily limit individual freedoms," Gabriel responds that "a political order based on civil rights can be secured only if the basic material needs … are met for the majority of the population" (p. 151). True enough, and a useful practical refutation. But a more theoretically satisfying answer would start by rejecting the liberal opposition between freedom and justice, individual and social rights, and would draw a completely different picture in which the common good is constitutive of *ius* and therefore of all derivative rights, social and individual. Individual rights are shaped by the contours of social rights, and vice versa – there is no Hobbesian opposition. That, at any rate, is a defensible classical and Thomistic view. Of course, it would take more work to present the full argument, but it is a pity that Gabriel does not even advert to it and instead accepts the liberal playing field.

The section on the criteria of social ethics is well constructed and could stand on its own as a brief introduction to the history of Catholic social thought. Gabriel divides the pre-modern era into three phases: the "diaconal" phase, where early Christian communities focused on "assisting their needy members and eliminating poverty"; the post-Constantinian phase, where the official recognition of Christianity "enabled the creation of extensive charitable institutions for the poor and the sick"; and the phase starting in the nineteenth century, when the state began taking over many welfare functions previously performed by the Church (p. 170). Gabriel is a bit harsh in her judgment of the Church's "political," as distinct from its "social," influence in the post-Constantinian phase, condemning its partnership with imperial power in the effort to stamp out heresies. But it is not clear that the Church's "social" and "political" influence can be so neatly disentangled during this (lengthy) period – the Nicene Creed came about for political as well as theological reasons, and the social vision of Louis IX grew out of an understanding of Church, "politics," and "society" as one organic (if ordered and articulated) whole. Gabriel misses a chance here to try to get inside the mind of the post-Constantinian, pre-modern Church, and perhaps explore a point of contact with the Orthodox principle of *symphonia*.

In the final "act" section, Gabriel offers some thoughts on the contributions that theological ethics might make to contemporary currents of ethical thought. In particular, Christian social ethics can enrich ethical concepts (such as human personhood, dignity, and relationality) that grew out of the Christian tradition but lost their roots in the post-Enlightenment period. Of course, to exert such influence, Christian social ethics would need to grapple seriously with the metaphysical challenges of post-Enlightenment philosophy, which tend to exert a powerful background influence in contemporary discussions of ethical issues. But perhaps Gabriel is right to see an opening here for theological ethicists who are up to the challenge.

Protestant: The Protestant chapter, authored by Körtner, is probably the weakest in the book, with less thematic unity than the Orthodox chapter and less structure and organization than the Catholic chapter. To be fair to Körtner, a unified presentation of Protestant social ethics is difficult; it would probably be more accurate to talk about several distinct branches of social ethics, corresponding to distinct branches of Protestantism. Calvinist and Quaker social ethics are different species. (Körtner identifies this difficulty early on and limits himself to speaking "mainly" of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions (p. 250), but even here there are important differences.) Still, this chapter is informative, even if it offers more questions than answers about ecumenical social ethics.

In contrast to the Orthodox and Catholic chapters, the Protestant chapter seems more concerned with identifying points of inter-church agreement and disagreement than with presenting a coherent picture of social ethics. We can identify three examples of such points: ethics and anthropology; ethics and natural law; and ethics and church-state relations.

Human anthropology is the foundation of individual and social ethics, but Körtner asserts that it would be an "oversimplification" to speak about a single Christian view of anthropology, and he insists that the "ecumenical discourse on ethical questions must take this circumstance into account" (p. 253). He then adds, however, that "the controversial expressions of Luther's anthropology" – *simul iustus et peccator* (and, we might add, the Calvinist notion of total depravity) – "remain problematic for the ecumenical dialogue" (p. 257). Indeed, "the conventional model of consensus-based ecumenism has reached its limits in both dogmatic questions and ethics" (*id.*). It is not clear where to go from here.

The ecumenical prospects for natural law are a bit brighter. Although Protestantism from Luther to Barth tends to take a dim view of the capacity of natural human reason, Körtner sees potential for common ground with Catholic social ethics in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's attempt to recast natural law in Christological terms. In church-state relations, too, Bonhoeffer points the way toward possible common ground and its impli-

cations for social ethics. In response to the Lutheran doctrine of the "Two Kingdoms," which tended to sharply divide the realm of faith from that of politics, internalizing and subjectivizing the former, Bonhoeffer rejected a theology of "cheap grace" and insisted that temporal things "do not stand autonomously and unconnectedly next to the gospel and faith but are, rather, the place that readies the way for the coming of God" (p. 274). This may not go all the way to a body-soul picture of society and church, but Bonhoeffer's avowal that (in Körtner's paraphrase) "the gospel as such possesses a political dimension" (p. 285) seems like ground where Protestants, Orthodox, and Catholics could all meet.

Does the book succeed in "bridging the gap between churches in the specific area of social ethics" (p. 5) and "demonstrat[ing] the enriching complementarity of the three traditions" (p. 12)? To some extent, yes; the prominence of certain fundamental concepts, such as *diakonia*, throughout the three traditions is noteworthy. And, of course, "biblical premises constitute the basis of all Christian social ethics" (p. 12). While the three traditions do not fully share an understanding of how to interpret those premises, they do broadly share a view of man as made in the *imago Dei*, of human dignity and equality flowing therefrom, of care for the poor, of the "dialectical relationship between justice and love" (p. 13), and of the independence, in some sense, of the Christian community from the state or temporal power.

Moreover, as suggested above, the traditions may be even closer to one another in certain respects than the authors explicitly acknowledge. This seems particularly true of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, which often appear to use basically the same concepts under different terminology. The main substantive difference is in the Orthodox reluctance to promulgate universally binding social teaching, in part due to the general apophatic character of Orthodox theology, in part due to the autocephalous structure of Orthodox ecclesiology. Even here, however, Catholic and Orthodox approaches to social ethics may be slowing converging, as the Orthodox Churches increasingly recognize the need for pan-Orthodox teaching in a globalized world, and the Catholic Church increasingly recognizes the need to teach social principles at an appropriately generalized level in a highly varied and fast-moving global context. The closeness of the Protestant tradition(s) to the Orthodox and Catholic is less obvious, but Gabriel is probably right to suggest that the three can join forces in contending with liberal modernity and a secularized context in which concepts like nature and grace, goodness and justice, "have to be reflected and made plausible to Christians before the fine differences of the theological traditions make sense to them" (p. 15).

In the end, though, the book still presents three fairly siloed approaches. Most of the work of finding possible points of commonality is left to the reader, who is likely not equipped to judge, at least without further research, whether apparently similar concepts are *faux amis*. Even the book's ecumenical aims are ill-defined. When the Protestant chapter describes the goal of ecumenism as "reconciled diversity" (p. 248), one suspects that this does not sufficiently capture the Orthodox and Catholic ecumenical visions (or at least that they would not mean quite the same thing by it), and one can rightly wonder just how these three solo performances advance a coherent ecumenical vision. Still, there is something to the idea of simply getting people into the same room to talk things out, and this book does make a contribution to that end.

As the Christian world celebrates the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, it is especially appropriate to hope for fresh and creative approaches to ecumenism. Perhaps Christian social ethicists can take up and continue the project begun by the *Trilogy of Social Ethics*.

NOTES

1. Gabriel, Ingeborg G., Ulrich H.J. Körtner, and Alexandros K. Papaderos, *Trilogy of Social Ethics: Orthodox – Catholic – Protestant,* Ecumenical Press, Philadelphia, 2012, 1 vol., 310 pp., ISBN 978-0931214165.
2. "Trilogy." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trilogy. Accessed 20 May 2023.
3. LEO XIII, *Immortale Dei* §§13-14.