Luxmoore & Babiuch's "Rethinking Christendom: Europe's Struggle for Christianity" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWS


I understand that authors do not always have control over the titles of their books. But I wish there were more rethinking of Christendom in *Rethinking Christendom: Europe's Struggle for Christianity*. In this ambitious undertaking that encompasses the political, religious and intellectual history of Europe, Jonathan Luxmoore and Jolanta Babiuch promise "to clarify [Christianity's] status - past, present and future," to show that "Christianity is still important" for modern Europe (6). Their conclusion, that "in a secular age which glorified mankind, there was no point hoping for the rebuilding of Christendom. But it would continue to exist, nevertheless, in hearts and minds, and in the creative restlessness which had always been Christianity's genius" (215), is hardly an affirmation of Christianity's continuing importance or vitality. The reader will likely conclude, even from the authors' use of the past tense to write about the present, that Christianity's status is passé. I would still recommend reading this book for its contextualization and discussion of the debate about including Christianity in the European Constitution. But the authors' agenda of defining a future role for Christianity in Europe, announced in the introduction and taken up in the concluding chapter, ambitiously titled "Rediscovering the Soul of a Continent," simply falls flat. Had the authors actually "rethought Christendom," as their title promises, they might have obtained a different result.

"Christendom" for the authors, as the subtitle suggests, is the Christendom of (Western) Europe, Christianity "remove[d]...from its original Middle East heartland and ma[de]...a European force, with Rome as its focal point" (15). In line with this understanding of Christendom, and in spite of frequent references to Protestants and Eastern Orthodox, "the Church" remains for the authors the Roman Catholic Church. This narrow understanding of Christendom becomes the foundation for the authors' central argument, their historical narrative, in which "the Church" is the major actor. Chapter One, "The Quest for Europe," chronicles the development of the Christian Europe centered on Rome through the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution and sets the stage for "The Great Divide" (chapter 2) of the nineteenth century between "the Church and the new forces of secular democracy"
The subsequent rejection of Christian values resulted in a century of war and totalitarianism (chapter 3, “Death of a Continent”), the destructiveness of which served as the impetus for a “Rebirth and Recovery” (chapter 4), both of Europe and of Europe’s churches, epitomized by the changes that took place at the Second Vatican Council, in which “Europe’s Roman Catholic Church completed its transition from conservative paternalism to social humanitarianism, positioning itself for a final healing of the rift between Christian social teaching and modern democratic values” (117-8). The story of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, largely, the authors suggest, through the agency of the Roman Church, is told in chapter 5, “The New Spring of Nations.” One would have thought, the authors suggest in the introduction, that after “a century of totalitarianism and war,” which “rid secular forces of their utopian revolutionary illusions, and purge[d] the Church of its association with a reactionary order of power and privilege, as well as its fear of change, [w]hen Europe was reunited, there was, at last, an opportunity to bring both [secular forces and the Church] into harmony.” But this didn’t happen, as “The Millennium Debate” about the place of Christianity in the European Constitution made clear (Chapter 6). Instead, “for all the hopes of religious revival, Europe was still living with its nineteenth-century paradigms, whose modern inheritors persisted in assuming conflict must be inherent between reason and faith. Like a great actor remembered only for his Hamlet, the Church was competing with outdated stereotypes. In some circles, two centuries of change appeared to have passed unnoticed.” (207, in Chapter 7: “Rediscovering the Soul of a Continent”).

In the absence of a resurrected Christendom, the authors appear content in their knowledge that Europe’s “humanistic values – human rights, democracy, pluralism, equality – were the creations of Christianity,” even if they aren’t recognized as such. Even in the absence of such recognition, the authors believe, “Christianity would be [these values’] protector and guardian, their reference point in the absolute” (215). Such a conclusion, however, begs the question and hardly seems warranted by the evidence presented. Europe may be defined by adherence to human rights, democracy, pluralism and equality. And it may be that these values originated in Christianity. But can Christianity be their guarantor in Europe if Europe does not grant such a role to Christianity? This seems to be the question that Europe is trying to answer. And it seems far from resolved. Must a country be Christian in order to be democratic and respect human rights? The answer to that question would appear to be no. But if not, then why should Europe be Christian? It may be, as the authors
hope, that Christianity "continued to exist in hearts and minds" in Europe. But the question remains: for how long, if Europe won't even acknowledge its Christian roots?

What remains of Christianity, it seems, is "the creative restlessness which had always been Christianity's genius." This is quite a reductionist view of Christianity. No vision of the world, no direction for thought and action, just a creative restlessness. And yet such a reduction appears inevitable in the authors' historical schema. From vision transforming culture to political structure to system of values divorced from both vision and structure to vague feeling of restlessness, the trajectory the authors present provides little hope for a Christian Europe or for Christianity. For the authors the crux of the historical drama was the conflict between a progressive rationalistic humanism and a reactionary idealistic Church. Humanism has perhaps been disabused of its utopian illusions, and the Church has repented of its reactionary impulses and embraced the humanistic causes of human dignity and social justice. But while these changes might appear to presage the kind of reconciliation the authors hope for, it also might appear that the Church has come late to the game and now finds itself chasing after a secularized humanity, trying to show its relevance. "After two centuries of radical secular pressure, the Church could claim to have returned to the 'perpetual centre'...by rediscovering the true democratic, egalitarian spirit of Christian teaching... purging itself of its associations with power and privilege and standing alongside common humanity. By then, however, secular forces had moved further along their own separate trajectory..." (210).

Perhaps the "transition from conservative paternalism to social humanitarianism" is what the authors mean by a rethought Christendom. But this transformation is only one of external attitude. The authors' historical narrative suggests another crucial dynamic that concerns the internal structure of "the Church," the conflict between authority and freedom. Papal authority is at the heart of the Christendom the authors presuppose. The preservation of papal authority was the driving force in the long conflict between sacred and secular power that shaped the history of Europe. It was the central factor in the division between Eastern and Western Christianity and in the break-up of Western Christianity in the Reformation. It determined the Church's resistance to liberal political movements throughout the nineteenth century. It is this aspect of Christendom that needs to be rethought.

Fortunately, there are other ways of thinking about Christianity available. Even at its inception, the Christendom the authors presuppose was too narrowly conceived. Christianity
was never a purely European phenomenon. The way that European Christianity came to think about itself is not normative for Christianity as a whole. The papacy’s self-image was not developed in agreement with the whole Church but in the relative isolation imposed by the barbarian invasions of Western Europe. This self-image separated Rome not only from Christians in the East but also from its own late-Antique heritage. Christians who remained outside of “Christendom” developed other ways of thinking about freedom in the Church in which no bishop, however revered and important as a symbol of unity, is above or apart from the Christian community as an authority circumscribing freedom within the community. If "the Church" wishes again to be the soul of Europe, it must first return to its own first principles of love and unity and equality.

Vatican II sought to do more than find a place for “the Church in the modern world” (Gaudium et spes), the conciliar document Luxmoore and Babiuch cite most frequently. It also sought to find new ways of thinking about the Church itself (e.g., in Lumen gentium). In particular, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum concilium), which is not cited by the authors, attempted to effect a diffusion of power in the Church among territorial conferences of bishops. But while the popes since the council have tried to present a face of repentance, humility and solidarity to the outside world, within the Church they have pursued an unprecedented consolidation of power. From Humanae vitae’s regulation of the marriage bed to Liturgiam authenticam’s attempt to deny the competence of territorial conferences of bishops in matters of liturgical translation, within the Roman Church “conservative paternalism” is alive and well. Is it any wonder that those outside the Church would be reluctant to play along?

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Zoe Knox’s Russian Society and the Orthodox Church is the first major English-language monograph to analyze the relationship of Russian Orthodoxy to democracy in the