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Review of Ondrášek and Modoroši's "Cirkev a spoločnosť: Smerom k zodpovednej angažovanosti [Church and Society: Towards Responsible Engagement]"

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Lubomír Martin Ondrášek and Ivan Mod'oroši (eds). *Cirkev a spoločnosť: Smerom k zodpovednej angažovanosti* [Church and Society: Towards Responsible Engagement.] Ružomberok, SK: Verbum, Katolícka univerzita v Ružomberku [Verbum, Catholic University in Ružomberok], 2015. 410 pp., paper. ISBN 978-80-561-0311-1.

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If there is one thing that is becoming increasingly clear in our global, multicultural and technological era, it is the undeniable interconnection between politics, theology, law, ethics and religion. The authors of *Church and Society*, a team of world-renowned scholars in their corresponding disciplines, courageously confront the question of church and society guided by the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in 2014. “Believers should not separate from the world, but neither should they accommodate or attempt to dominate it” (194). *Church and Society* is grounded in the enduring questions between church and society at the heart of Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* (The City of God) and offers both the Slovak and English-speaking public an opportunity to access the ideas of these important public intellectuals.

Church and Society consists of thirteen chapters. Yale University’s Miroslav Volf begins by focusing on four features of contemporary societies analyzed through the contrast between ‘church’ and ‘sect’. Volf notes inadequate ways of Christians’ engagement with society, admitting that there will be elements of the culture that need to be both adopted and rejected, but then again pointing out that Christians should always engage while opposing total transformation and saying no to accommodation. In chapter two, Lubomír Martin Ondrášek identifies Augustinian themes in the thought of the late University of Chicago professor Jean Bethke Elshtain, pointing out that a particular anthropology undergirds every political theory. Politics is not only a result of human sinfulness but also of the human need

for sociality. Political realism (Reinhold Niebuhr) is a second theme and is undergirded by limits, responsibility and hope. Eldin Villafañe, in the third chapter, calls for a Pneumatic political discipleship. Using Lehmann, Yoder, Hauerwas and Costas, Villafañe urges Christians to engage in the world against “dehumanizing and demonic systemic values and structures” (234) while always aware of the “seduction of Constantinian projects” (234). Christians’ actions should make evident ‘God’s preferential option for the poor’ – a concern marked by the reign of God and shaped by reconciliation, justice and shalom. In the fourth chapter, Harvey Cox focuses on the present relationship between Christianity and the values represented by the emerging global market culture by employing Paul Tillich’s theology and culture. Cox urges Pentecostals to develop a critical theology of culture. These first four essays underscore that enduring relationship between Athens and Jerusalem, echoed by Tertullian. What is significant of these four voices is not only their outright public, open, and unapologetic call to embrace faith and consider its theo-ethical implications, but their strict and careful vigilance and conscience regarding the promises of this needed engagement and the temptations and pitfalls to which the church and the Christian is susceptible.

Czech Roman Catholic priest and philosopher Tomáš Halík in chapter 5 claims that church and secular culture ought to be closely studied if western civilization as a whole is to have a future. Papacy and empire, while at times in conflict, sustained the coexistence of the ecclesiastical and secular powers. The division of western Christianity and the emergence of modernity has led to serious and extreme errors that are of fundamental value to understand present secularization. David Fergusson decries the decline of traditional markers of Christian identity and its eclipse of Christianity or ethical fragmentation, faces criticisms embedded in counter-cultural approaches to Christian moral formation and calls for moral formation by the retrieval of classical texts of the Christian tradition, namely: The Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. Professor of Religion at the University of Zilina (Slovakia),

Michal Valco, examines the reality of a world and culture that is beyond narrative and the need to bring meaning to it. The church must play a role in bringing about this meaning through a re-appropriation of the so-called metanarrative (creation, redemption, and renewal) and in the political situation of Slovakia there must be not only an exposure of false solutions and their origins, but also a legitimate public theology by a church whose task is the “intentional cultivation of empathy and charity through education, public debates, and above all, real projects of service” (282). These three chapters markedly identify the errors and malformations that transpired when religious foundations are uprooted or muted. Scholars also here demonstrate the power and meaning-making, and morality function and formation, that undoubtedly is essential to religion.

Czech theologian and professor Pavel Hosek considers the challenge of radicalism for secular Czechs and calls on Czechs Christians to mediate between secular Czechs and Muslims by attending to some issues in the Christian-Muslim conversations and to corresponding potential complications. Hosek calls on Christians to be responsible, catalysts of change, and agents of Christian literacy. Michaela Moravcikova focuses on the historical role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the development of the centralized state and in the crucial and present role that Orthodoxy plays in the identity and mission of Russia. Professor Ivan Mod'oroši introduces us to the basic history, theology, and philosophy that defines and nurtures the relationship of church and state in the Russian Orthodox tradition. These two chapters speak of the past rich history of the Russian Orthodox tradition and the present challenges that afflict the Russian soul. The healing and renewal of the Russian soul is part and parcel of being and acting as a bridge of responsibility and a space for dialogue for both the Russian tradition and universal values.

The last three chapters are a window into some of the brilliant American political and legal minds on church and state. Emory's John Witte, Jr. posits that if the Christian church is

“to transform itself from a ‘mid-wife’ to a ‘mother’ of human rights” (331) then it “must confess its past wrongs against rights” (331) and “must be open to a new human rights hermeneutic” (331). Princeton’s Robert P. George considers ‘basic human goods’ as the starting point of all ethical reflection by examining the difference between just and unjust law, underscoring the crucial role of reason in the quest for spiritual truth and by reminding us that seekers of religious truth and the liberty to do so ought to be respected and only restricted in cases where a heavy burden is passed. The final chapter is an essay by Jean Bethke Elshtain who asserts the reasons and character that makes Václav Havel a man for this season (current political possibilities and solutions). Havel was able to navigate between “the boundaries of various commitments and modes of thought and inquiry” (358) while taking care to “locate himself and the politics of his own society, and of our time more generally, in a permanent agon, a never-ending contest between tradition and transformation” (358).

Church and Society is a thoroughly enjoyable read. Here is a collection of essays from a diversity of perspectives and contexts and yet united by the common good, the theme of responsibility and, yes, that undeniable interconnection between politics, theology, law, ethics, and religion, to the surprise of some secularists who may have prophesied the end of religion and to the joy of others whose calling and convictional beliefs shaped not only their professions and institutions, but also who they are as creatures made in the image of the Creator.