he supports his essentially empirical answer with little evidence; because he
seems to take for granted that religion (any religion?) can and will legitimate pol-
itical power; because he moves easily between the religious and the cultural, as
though their difference were of little consequence; and because his appeals to
sprawling and indiscriminate notions of ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ really tell us
very little. ‘Secularism’, he advises us, ‘should be about using available religious
and cultural references in a given community as a resource to provide content
and legitimacy to its political institutions’ (p 191); that sounds uncomfortably
close to the advice offered by Machiavelli in his Discourses. Readers of this
book should expect to be provoked as well as stimulated.

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doi:10.1017/S0956618X19000589

The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology
Edited by Paul Avis
Oxford University Press, Oxford, cvii + 649 pp (hardback £95.00) ISBN:
978-0-19-964583-1

What is the nature and purpose of the Church? To be provided with a 650-page
‘handbook’ in order to begin to answer that question may seem excessive, but
actually the whole of the book is extremely useful and often profound.
Ecclesiology is complex. Jesus formed a group of apostles and others, thus pro-
viding some guidance as to what might come next, but his preaching about the
future concerned the coming of the Kingdom, rather than the Church. Hence
the cartoon which I have of the Ascension (not in the book!) which shows
Jesus vanishing upwards, with his disciples pleading ‘Don’t go Jesus; we’d
like more specifics on how to run the church’. Christians, while calling on the
Holy Spirit, have had to do their best.

Paul Avis writes a masterly introduction where he tackles one of the most
crucial questions: why do things go so terribly wrong? As he says, the
Churches are ‘visibly fragmented, morally compromised, often dysfunctional’
(p 19). ‘How is that precious sense of identity and that high calling compatible
with the blatant failures, stupidities, sins, errors, and even crimes of the
church as an institution throughout the ages?’ (21). There is, of course,
another side: a Church which is loving, merciful and reflecting the character
of Christ. Yet there is plainly a desperate need for a more realistic, modest
and chastened understanding of the Church. The mystical body of Christ is
deeply embedded in the world. There is a challenge in how to be the Church,
with good examples of ‘inculturation’ on the one hand and the experience of being horribly caught up in social and political tangles on the other. The book does not mention Rwanda, but there the Church was complicit in mass murder.

The handbook has a clear plan, starting with the biblical material (six chapters), then tackling the Christian tradition (nine chapters), followed by a section on major modern ecclesiologists and finally Part 4 on what it describes as ‘contemporary movements’. There are informative sub-headings and many chapters end with a conclusion. The biblical section is comprehensive and includes Israel’s Scriptures in addition to detailed study of the New Testament. Loveday Alexander provides an informative table of the way in which Luke portrays the church in his Gospel, followed by the same features as adapted in Acts. The wilder shores of Revelation do not get a mention.

Mark Edwards starts the ‘Tradition’ section with a scholarly study of the Fathers and of the ascent of Rome. That is followed by Norman Tanner on mediæval ecclesiology, including a reference to the beginnings of the study of canon law in the universities. There are then chapters on particular denominations, including an outstanding one by David Chapman on Methodism: a ‘corpus permixtum’ (p 319), a holiness movement in search of the church. Amos Yong on the Pentecostals writes of the ‘pentecostalization’ and ‘charismatization’ of Christianity (p 339).

There are then studies of major theologians, with Barth and Congar standing out, the first for his great break with Protestant liberalism and the second for his admirable contribution to Vatican II. ‘Eucharistic ecclesiology’ is referred to, especially in the Ratzinger and Zizioulas chapters. And Anglican ecclesiology is addressed in the writings of Rowan Williams, with particular emphasis on his own search for unity in the Anglican communion: the wish for an ecclesiology which leaves space for constructive disagreement on the road to truth.

Many of the most fascinating aspects of ecclesiology are left until the last section. Here are contemporary perspectives which could perhaps have come into play earlier. The feminist critique introduces the idea of a ‘women-church’ and the pursuit of radically different patterns of authority. The same chapter raises the question of the many new types of spirituality which have adherents in the contemporary world, such as neo-paganism and mind–body–spirit therapies. Then comes the chapter on sociology, which investigates what is going on in the churches within which people actually live, rather than studying an ideal as constructed by theologians. What are the issues which the Church has to face, not least the complex matter of secularisation, at least in the West?

The other three chapters in the last section raise equally important questions. First, liberation theology is discussed, shifting the focus of the Church towards poverty, race and justice. The grim past in South America is described, as are the indigenous Christianities which have emerged and which include a staggering increase in Pentecostalism. Finally, there are two stimulating chapters on Asian
and African ecclesiologies which raise the matter not so much of the influence of churches on each other, but rather that of other faiths on ecclesiology. What kind of Church is appropriate in a country where the main focus of religion has always been on the family and the home? In spite of being a Middle Eastern religion in origin, Christianity has often been associated with the West, and missionaries brought Western ways. The question is how inculturation best happens in a place which has traditionally had allegiance to Hinduism, Islam or African Traditional Religion, and which may wish to continue with elements of the spirituality of those religions. Reference is made to Pope Paul VI’s visit to Africa and his use of the term ‘African church’, meaning an African way of living and celebrating the Christian faith. What does that mean in practice, especially now that there are so many million Christians in Africa?

There are gaps in the book; it does not cover some of the work done by the Faith and Order section of the World Council of Churches in pursuit of Christian unity. There is little mention of seminal sociology of religion, such as Paul Harrison’s *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition*. It is strange that the striking history and theology of the Coptic Church does not appear. The bibliography is very full, but the index is sometimes sketchy: for example (highly relevant for the readers of this *Journal*), there are only three references in the index to canon law, whereas I counted six more.

As a whole, however, this is a fine work, an asset to a library. It is a full and accessible introduction to a part of the theological enterprise which is not studied enough. I read it while the news was full of the trial of Cardinal Pell for child abuse on the one hand and of a pastor in South Carolina who had just given his wife a $200,000 Lamborghini on the other. There is much to do on the nature and purpose of the Church.

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doi:10.1017/S0956618X19000590

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**Religious Exemptions**

Edited by Kevin Vallier and Michael Weber


In a universe where secularisation has been accompanied by religious pluralisation and increasingly ambitious equality legislation, new problems of adjudication arise where the boundaries of religious freedom – guaranteed in all democratic states – have to be defined. In the US, the Supreme Court has