

Society for Ecumenical Studies

'Unpacking the Gift. Anglican Resources for theological reflection on *The Gift of Authority*', edited by Peter Fisher. ISBN 0-7151-5767-1. £8.95p, published by Church House Publishing. 2002.

Review by David Carter

A key problem for the international bilateral dialogues is the lamentable lack of reception within the two churches concerned. ARCIC has, perhaps, fared somewhat better than others- it is, for example backed up by a much wider range of national dialogues than the mere three such that sustain the equivalent Catholic-Methodist dialogue. The fact remains that much more needs to be done to see that the dialogues are disseminated and studied at every level.

This short book, well edited by the amiable, wise and competent former Principal of Queen's College, Birmingham, should perform a useful function in helping people to assess the most recent ARCIC report. The *Gift of Authority*. In contrast to the earlier ARCIC reports, this has aroused more criticism within the Anglican Church than within the Roman Catholic Church. The two most critical essays within show why. In the opinion of their writers, they did not take sufficient account of the views of important sections of Anglican opinion and churchmanship.

The two essays I refer to are by Martin Davie, theological adviser to the House of Bishops and also secretary of the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England and Dr Martyn Percy of the Lincoln Institute. Dr Davie shows that many of the assumptions in the report are contrary to the teaching of the Articles and the classic Anglican reformation divines. In particular, he stresses that the Report is 'insufficiently realistic about the history and present life of the Church' and that 'it does not give sufficient recognition to ... the inalienable right and duty of the individual believer to exercise their own private theological judgement in submission to the word of God in Scripture'.

His argument is a strong reminder of the theological pluralism of the Church of England, and, indeed, the Anglican Communion as a whole and underlines my own view that the great failure of ARCIC has been to have a really tough debate on the legitimate limits of theological diversity within the Church. The Anglican stance with its emphasis upon 'comprehensiveness' is not necessarily wrong nor is the Roman Catholic strictness unchallengeable, but the matter must be debated, and somehow resolved, if ARCIC is ever to achieve its aim of full visible unity.

Martin Percy also strongly challenges the thought behind the *Gift*, arguing that the traditional ethos of Anglicanism and its contextual understanding of authority in the Church is well out of kilter with the understanding of ecclesial authority outlined in the *Gift*. Important though this insight is, one feels that Dr Percy rather tends to assume the rightness of what he calls 'another kind of catholicity' with its synthesis between lay and clerical power and the continuing role for the State which he affirms. One wonders how non-English Anglicans, none of them 'established', will react to that last point which seems to ignore the rest of the Anglican Communion, and moreover; not be sustained by the sort of tight justification that reformation Anglican theology receives from Martin Davie.

Other essays in the book are much more affirmative of the *Gift* and Bishop Christopher Hill calls for 'an ecumenical hermeneutic of trust'. I think he is right to do so. There comes a time- this is perhaps especially relevant to the presently proposed Anglican-Methodist Covenant- when we have to trust our partners if we are to achieve real *koinonia*, based on mutual fidelity in pilgrimage. This a good and valuable book.

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