

THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

***New Ecclesial Movements* (Tony Hanna, St Paul's 2006)**

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This book deals with a highly significant contemporary theme: the emergence, over the last couple of generations or so, of many largely lay led movements within the Catholic Church that aim to live the gospel life more deeply and evangelistically. It is written by an Irish layman who is, himself, a founding member of such a community, the Family of God.

Although it only rarely specifically mentions ecumenism, this book has considerable ecumenical implications. It is based on a doctoral thesis and, as such, faces some of the problems common to those who turn theses into books. The author could, for example, have cut back on his slightly long-winded history of the laity in the Church in the middle part of the book, an exercise that was no doubt important for the thesis but could have been taken more for granted in a general book.

The author begins by examining the history and development of three key ecclesial movements, *Communion and Liberation*, the *Neo-Catechumenal Way* and *Charismatic Renewal*. Despite his very proper insistence on their real significance and fruitfulness in many lives and situations, he is not blind to the criticisms that have been made of them and to the very real dangers that can exist in movements of spiritual renewal which may become tempted to see themselves as spiritual élites, regarding their way as the only way, or at least a superior one. At the very end of the book, he makes a telling point, when comparing their role within the contemporary Church with the situation that existed in the Church of the early twentieth century. The Church of today faces a world considerably more secularized and with immense distractions:

‘If people are fed by the average television diet for twenty hours a week, then how can we expect a seven to ten minute homily and a 45 minute Mass each week to have greater influence on the thinking and the affections of even those who go to church regularly?’

In this sense, the Movements are filling a gap for those who feel called to a more strenuous Christian commitment. The problem extends to all Christian communions in the ‘developed’ world. Protestants have much to learn from the new Catholic communities, some of which reflect the values and methods challenged by earlier Protestant revival movements. As a Methodist, I discern much that was so vibrant in early Methodism and its class meetings within the Focolare Movement.

The author discusses in considerable detail the problems and tensions that have arisen for many of the movements within the Catholic Church, detailing for example the problems that the diocese of Clifton had with the Neo-Catechumenal Way. If his book has a particular hero, it is the late Pope John Paul II, whom he credits with affirming the importance of the new movements as expressions of the creative and renewing activity of the Spirit within the Church. He relates this to the theological work of the late Holy Father's favourite theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, with his emphasis upon the co-ordinate importance of the Petrine and Marian elements in the Church, the later relating to the Church's Spirit-filled life and interiority in contrast to its institutional structure and formal leadership. Hanna points to the balanced emphasis upon these mutually necessary aspects of the Church in the late Pope's teaching. He points to John Paul's comments upon the Church of Antioch as portrayed in Acts: ‘this interweaving of the charismatic and institutional elements can be perceived at the very origins of the Antioch community’. John Paul II saw the emergence and growth of the movements as ‘a providential rediscovery of the charismatic dimension of the Church’.

The author mentions the present Pope's view (as Cardinal Ratzinger) that the Pope, in his universal ministry, has a special responsibility to keep alive the dynamism of the Church's ministry *ad intra* and *ad extra*. It is interesting to compare this with the view cited of Dom Giussani, the founder of *Communion and Liberation*, that any local church finds it difficult on its own to stand out against the

dominant culture and this is precisely where the universal ministry of Peter is particularly needed.

From an ecumenical perspective, it is interesting to relate this to the suggestion of world Methodism's leading ecumenical theologian, Geoffrey Wainwright, that the Pope should take the lead in formulating a statement of faith for the contemporary world around which all the Churches can rally to proclaim.

The Pope John Paul II talked frequently about recognising the unexpected action of the Spirit and coming to cherish new forms of Christian discipleship. This naturally relates to his understanding of ecumenism as essentially an exchange of gifts. If the Catholic Church, partly through his witness, though also, as Hanna shows, in logical reception of the prior teaching of Vatican II, has come, albeit with some hiccups, to treasure the new lay movements as gifts of the Spirit, how is it also to relate to the positive charisms of other churches and to receive the teaching of the most recent round of the international Catholic-Methodist dialogue in this respect?

Despite my reservations about aspects of the way the author has presented this book, it is to be commended for raising issues common to the Roman Catholic Church and all others.