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The Unacceptable Face: The Modern Church in the Eyes of the Historian

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Get this book and read it. Perhaps we can all learn something from the thought and experience of a seemingly insignificant Italian priest.

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The Unacceptable Face: The Modern Church in the Eyes of the Historian

John Kent
London: SCM, 1987
261 pp. 12.50 pounds

Over the past two decades historians interested in almost every period of the Christian past have been faced with a number of major changes, both in the interpretation previously established and in the methods used to arrive at those interpretations. So wide-sweeping have these changes been that it is impossible for most general readers of church history to keep up with them, an experience which is paralleled even among professional historians, who may maintain control over the massive growth in information concerning a particular historical era, but cannot any longer extend such control beyond their specialised interests.

In the face of such a situation John Kent's book serves a particular need. The volume surveys changing interpretations of post-Reformation Christianity in ten areas: general church history, early modern Europe—1500–1800, the English Reformation, the English church from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century—including a good discussion of Methodism and non-conformity, religion in modern Germany, religion in modern France, the church in the United States, Newman and Catholic Modernism, Christianity outside of Europe, and the Ecumenical movement. The changing historiography of each of these areas is well treated and the reader who wishes to extend study is served with highly valuable notes and an important bibliography.

Nevertheless, the volume suffers from a number of limitations. That Kent is writing in Great Britain and that the "eyes of the historian" noted in his sub-title are viewing the world from England and are for the most part directed to English interests is not, in an important sense one of these. His perspective is made clear: in light of the changes he documents he cannot be expected to choose some universal point from which to view the scholarship he chronicles, and in spite of his orientation, his study is remarkably comprehensive.

Where he does fall short, however, is, firstly, in clarity concerning his announced purpose for the book, and, secondly, an issue closely related to the first, in his failure to discuss fully the implications of a number of recent

historiographical approaches which accentuate both the "unacceptability" of earlier church history and perhaps of the church itself.

Kent's study, as already noted, is a *de facto* survey of recent interpretations of church history, but his primary purpose appears to be something other than a mere outline introduction to the topic for the general reader and non-specialist. The issue is taken up in his introduction which bears the sub-title "To serve, rather than seduce, mankind..." and the concluding chapter, entitled "Postlude, or after the barbarians."

In his introduction Kent seems initially interested in attacking a triumphalistic view of Christian history by pointing to the decline of Christianity in the eighteenth century, the results of the French Revolution, and the rapid demise of organised Christianity in the nineteenth century. He then goes on to distinguish between "church historians" (equated later with "conservative historians" and throughout the book with "committed historians") from "*professional* secular historians" (emphasis mine), and further describes the significance of social historians for the reinterpretation of Christian history. At the close of this introduction his explicit "moral" becomes clear: "If religion is to serve, rather than seduce mankind, we need to examine its historical record, its unacceptable face, much more critically than has been done by either the ecclesiastical or the social historian" (12).

What Kent means by the "unacceptable face" of the church is not entirely clear. In part that face is projected in a triumphalistic explanation of Christian history, but on a deeper level it seems to be associated with "sources of human feeling which do not simply reflect changes in social structures [and are thus open to the descriptions of the social historians] but manipulate them," and which Kent comments "*may* still remain" (emphasis mine). He questions whether "such sources of emotion are full of grace and truth." What he is certain of is that "mass revivals of religious excitement [associated with the American "religious right"] must remain under suspicion, and be treated, on sound historical grounds, as potentially undesirable." He appears not to be concerned that by such an approach "sound history" is reduced to function in a subservient polemical role in much the same way as it was for those "church historians" who wished to demonstrate the virtue of a particular orthodoxy against heretical vice and the manifested anti-christ in all which opposed that orthodoxy.

Kent's express moral concern with church history fades after the introduction in the bulk of the historiographical survey described earlier, but it returns at close of the postlude. After a useful discussion of studies by the French historian Jean Delameau and the social historian Hugh McLeod, and their views of the future of Christianity, he closes his book with a rhetorical flourish, the purpose of which, other than to serve as homiletic incentive to recalcitrant Christians, is unclear: A "second death of religious images is coming," he tells us, "not unlike that which took place in the eighteenth century, but more complete....The barbarians have arrived, twilight has descended, and this time when it lifts, the Western churches will probably have ceased to function..." (220).

What is troubling here is not Kent's prediction but his failure to undertake a full discussion of those Marxist, Feminist, and Post-structuralist theories of history which since the early 1970s have forced church historians and theologians fully to re-evaluate—indeed, set aside as unacceptable—*any* face begotten in a historical tradition, Christian or other. The first two are discussed in the volume, but only insofar as they add something to the "content" of historical study. Their serious radical theoretical critiques are hardly noted; those of the Post-structuralists strikingly never arise.

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Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics

Karen Lebacqz
Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986
158 pp. $13.95

In this book Dr. Lebacqz sketches six alternative accounts of justice drawn from major philosophical and theological sources, and she devotes a single chapter to outlining and analyzing each account. None of the perspectives she presents can be regarded as a comprehensive or complete account of justice, since each author tends to be partial and limited by his/her own historical and cultural context. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing these different accounts of justice, Lebacqz intends to assist her reader to develop a more complete understanding of justice as a basis for analyzing and dealing with contemporary issues of social, political and economic justice.

Lebacqz chooses the 19th century philosopher, John Stuart Mill, to introduce the topic of justice. In his *Utilitarianism*, Mill presents the central idea that actions are "right" or "just" if they promote the widest possible common good. Utilitarianism has some implicit popularity today as reflected in the current emphasis on "cost-benefit" analyses used to arrive at public policy decisions.

John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* puts forward a "contract theory" which has dominated philosophical discussions of justice in the last decade. In Rawls' description of "justice as fairness" he attempts to avoid the weakness of utilitarianism by opposing the establishment of any social structures that would allow basic liberties and equalities to be compromised for the sake of social or economic benefits. Rawls also advocates government involvement in bringing about a common good within which the least advantaged in society are benefited.

Robert Nozick in his *Anarchy, State and Utopia* responds to utilitarianism's stress on political equality and to Rawls' emphasis on government