

Martyn Percy. *The Ecclesial Canopy: Faith, Hope, Charity*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 224 pages. \$39.95.

The series to which this work by Principal Martyn Percy of Ripon College Cuddesdon belongs is called “Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology.” Percy’s book, *The Ecclesial Canopy*, fits well with that series’ title, as its sprawling ecclesial vision is indeed exploratory. Percy seeks in this third part of his trilogy on ecclesiology to offer a theological understanding of the church enriched by a key metaphor drawn from the early work of the sociologist of religion Peter Berger—the sacred canopy.

His book fits well in part because the metaphor of the sacred canopy seeks to relate the symbols of shared human life to the structure of the cosmos itself. Within Berger’s work, human beings construct meaning through common cultural labor and in the process render the whole universe meaningful. The sacred canopy refers to that stage of meaning construction whereby the whole universe, now meaningful itself, acts back on the subjectivity of human beings. Percy’s brave exploration is to see how such a powerful view of religion in culture might aid the task of thinking about the church under the conditions of late modernity. Can the church, or any ecclesial vision, suffice to render meaningful the connection between a rickety established entity (the Church of England in particular) and what Percy calls the “twin towers of secularism and commercialism”? How might that act back upon us who are hardly of a single mind, but now participants in a pluralistic world?

Most contemporary theologians are fleeing such efforts. Postliberals in North America are content to let the sacred canopy collapse, circle the ecclesial wagons, and retain identity through countercultural purity. Radical orthodoxy in the UK makes an analogous move by rejecting modernity and trying to reenchant a kind of premodern view of faith: a reheated Augustinian Neoplatonism in a postmodern mode. Percy seeks to offer his ecclesiology as a kind of threadbare way forward for late modern pluralists. It is a vision with certain practical-theological attractions.

This is revealed in part by his conversation partners. In a series of insightful chapters Percy treats the relationship of church to matters as divergent as the market place, consumer religion, sacred space, social Christianity, and the need for a public theology of sin, pluralism, and the many intractable dilemmas of church life. What Percy aims for is an ecclesial canopy marked by “capaciousness,” a term which he uses with some frequency. Yet what Percy’s argument *does* is to *make room* for practical theological reflection in shared public life. Its “canopy” is, despite its threadbare quality, a gossamer beauty to behold.

The book is not perfect. The chapters read sometimes like occasional pieces. They are thus also a little uneven. The chapters on consumer religion, a public theology of sin, and the relationship of church and culture make up for any defects. They will reward careful reading. At its weakest points, the perspective Percy offers reads a little like nostalgic Anglicanism. At such points in particular I would have wished for greater theological clarity—that is, if the gospel involves the church, as Percy claims, well then what *is* the gospel? Or is the gospel ultimately *reduced* to Percy’s cherished church? The question is important because of the ecclesial canopy itself. The underside of Percy’s use of Berger’s metaphor shows through here. It may just be that the church itself is insufficient to bear the cosmos-wide promises of God. The final eschatological vision of Revelation 21 envisions a holy city with no temple; perhaps church even at its best is not meant to bear such cosmic freight as Percy would seem to suggest.

Yet this question does not diminish my admiration for Percy's engaging practical theological vision. We can, and should, explore the relationship of church and world in such ordinary yet risky and vulnerable ways. The author puts it well, "authentic ministry sits in the gap between created and redeemed sociality. It holds the world before God. Like the church, it is the social-sacramental skin for the community. It is not an enclave for the redeemed, but rather a resource for all those seeking meaning and truth in a world that longs for hope" (34). For preachers who are looking for ways of naming God's presence through the riddled cosmic canopy of the church, Percy is therefore an excellent guide. For theologians who have not given up on connecting church and culture in way that is both sacramental and ordinary, Percy is even more; he is a friend.

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