

Book Reviews/Recensions/Buchbesprechungen

EuroJTh (1996) 5:1, 71–73

0960–2720

A Christian Perspective on Political Thought

Stephen Charles Mott

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp., (hb)
£45.00 (pb) £22.50 ISBN 019 507121
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RÉSUMÉ

C'est là l'ouvrage sur la théorie politique le plus substantiel qui soit dû à une plume évangélique depuis longtemps. Certes des traités exégétiques et théologiques de valeur ont paru sur divers problèmes politiques—l'ouvrage de Mott lui-même sur l'éthique biblique et le changement social en est un bel exemple. Ici, l'auteur s'engage dans un examen beaucoup plus large de la pensée politique contemporaine. Ce faisant, il soulève plusieurs questions méthodologiques importantes pour tout spécialiste désireux d'apporter une contribution chrétienne aux sciences sociales. La première partie (théologique) vise à présenter la substance d'une théorie politique chrétienne, la seconde engage un dialogue critique avec les principales idéologies politiques de notre temps, à la lumière de cette théorie.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

*Motts Buch ist das seit vielen Jahren bedeutendste Werk eines evangelikalen Theologen zur politischen Theorie. Es liegen zwar bereits viele wertvolle exegetische oder theologische Stellungnahmen zu verschiedenen politischen Themen vor—Motts eigenes Buch *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (1982) ist dafür ein vorzügliches Beispiel—, doch *A Christian Perspective on Political Thought* ist um eine wesentlich ausführlichere Auseinandersetzung mit modernem politischen Denken bemüht. Dabei wirft es wichtige methodologische Fragen auf, die jeden Wissenschaftler betreffen, der um einen christlichen Beitrag in den Sozialwissenschaften bemüht ist.*

Der erste Teil des Buches („Focusing Theologically“) verfolgt das Ziel, das Grundgerüst einer christlichen politischen Theorie zu präsentieren, während der zweite Teil („Observing

the Visions“) dieses Gerüst verwendet, um in einen kritischen Dialog mit den vorherrschenden modernen politischen Ideologien einzutreten.

This book is the most substantial work of political theory from an evangelical theologian for many years. While there have been many valuable exegetical or theological commentaries on diverse political themes—Mott's own *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (1982) (*BESC*) is a fine example—*A Christian Perspective on Political Thought* (CPPT) attempts a far more comprehensive engagement with modern political thought. In so doing, it raises important methodological questions for any scholar seeking to make a Christian contribution in the social sciences.

The first part of the book ('Focusing Theologically') aims to present the substance of a Christian political theory, while the second ('Observing the Visions') employs this in critical dialogue with the dominant modern political ideologies: traditional conservatism, liberalism, democracy, laissez-faire conservatism, marxism, socialism and fascism. (Potent contemporary ideologies such as nationalism, feminism, ecologism and Islamic fundamentalism are not addressed—to have done so would presumably have required a second volume.) Mott seeks to ground his political theory as far as possible in a biblical theology and ethics, expanding the foundations laid in *BESC*. In addition to Scripture, Mott's acknowledged indebtedness to Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Eduard Heimann, leading members of the 'Christian socialist realists' of the 1930s and 40s, is evident throughout. He also draws frequently on the American social ethicist James Luther Adams, and on various liberation theologians.

The substantive argument in Part I is unfolded in terms of the themes of power, human nature, social groups, government, justice, love, and time, and the chapters treating these successive themes contain a wealth of rich exposition and synthesis. Mott seeks to formulate a radically biblical account of the

political demands of social justice, and claims that this ancient vision lends support in the contemporary world to an ethical, participatory, and decentralised form of socialism. Biblical justice points towards a communitarian model of society in which the rights of individuals and social groups, especially the vulnerable and marginalised, are accorded equal protection. While love serves as the central interpersonal norm, the role of government is to guarantee such a social arrangement by instituting justice in social relationships. The 'realism' of Mott's perspective enters not as a qualification of its biblical radicality, but as an integral element of it: Scripture and human experience compel a full confrontation with the depth and incorrigibility of human evil and the potential for the abuse of power both by individuals and groups. It is precisely this realism about human nature that drives Mott to conclude that concentrations of power of *any* kind, but especially political and economic, must be resisted—a 'liberal' politics must go together with a 'socialist' economics. And an eschatological realism about history precludes the kind of utopian aspirations regarding political change typical of marxism.

A book as ambitious and wide-ranging as Mott's is likely to invite critical discussion at a variety of levels. For example, his grounding of economic egalitarianisms or political democracy in Scripture will no doubt be contested, as will his critiques of particular ideologies. Of special interest, perhaps, is the methodological issue of the relationship between biblical theology, theological ethics and political theory, and this merits further consideration. Mott uses various terms to denote his enterprise: a 'Christian political theory'; a Christian 'social and political philosophy'; a 'theological' approach to politics; a 'political theology'; a 'Christian political ethics'; and others. A standardization of this terminology would be salutary, not simply for reasons of linguistic tidiness but because disciplinary appellations disclose what one is really about. Is Christian political theory really just an application of the fruits of biblical exegesis; a branch of theological ethics; or a department of systematic theology? In my experience, where it is treated as any of these it has little to say to students (and practitioners) of politics dealing with issues like electoral behaviour, constitu-

tional change, party systems, democratization, citizenship, welfare policy, and so on. *BESC*, as a work of theological ethics, is certainly valuable as a theological prolegomena for Christian political theory, but only a work like *CPPT* begins directly to assist that enterprise. The object of Christian political theory is not primarily reflection on the Bible or on theology, but reflection on *political reality* in the light of Christian presuppositions (which must, of course, depend on theology).

Mott's use of the term 'theology' is itself ambiguous. He claims that 'politics is about theology', meaning that politics necessarily betrays an 'orientation to reality, nature and human existence'. 'As this orientation is grounded in religious belief, it expresses theology' (4–5). Here we need to distinguish between 'religion' as a fundamental phenomenon of human experience, 'religious studies' as reflection on that phenomenon, and 'theology' as reflection on revelation. In this sense, we can certainly say that 'politics expresses religion', and also that theology has something to say about politics.

He also employs the term 'ideology', though without making explicit its relationship to these other terms. He uses it in the descriptive sense to refer to a comprehensive framework of beliefs about society, or a social 'vision', rather than in the critical sense to refer to the distortion of social reality in the interests of the *status quo*. His sense of the term would allow us to describe his own enterprise as 'Christian political ideology', but this, however, would be infelicitous as the critical sense still predominates in ordinary usage. It is arguable that, from a Christian critical standpoint, liberalism, marxism, conservatism and so on, can indeed be seen as so many distortions of social reality, so that we might reserve the term 'ideology' only for non-Christian social visions. Mott, however, does not explore this possibility.

I prefer the term 'Christian political theory' (or 'philosophy') for Mott's enterprise. His own definition is ambiguous, however: Christian political theory 'clarifies the values of the common life and the range of legitimate alternatives in approaching them'; it contains 'criteria that Christians should use in evaluating political theory' (7). The implication here is that it is merely a framework of ethical values by which secular political theories might be

critically assessed, rather than an alternative political theory with a distinctive content; a filter rather than a substance. Indeed, Part II reinforces this appearance, for in it Mott proceeds by expounding the content of alternative ideologies, and then offers selective evaluative comments on certain aspects of them. However, what he elaborates in Part I often seems to aspire to be a political theory with a distinctive substance, rather than a mere filter; this is what makes the book interesting. Merely to stipulate that, whatever political theory we adopt, it must be compatible with a series of Christian ethical principles not themselves of a distinctively political character (such as love, equality, community, etc.), is of limited help to someone wrestling with the concrete particulars of politics. What such a person needs is not generalised principles of ethics, but institutionally particularised principles, principles of *political* ethics, concerning the nature, source and limits of political authority, the legitimacy of democracy, the purposes of the state, the nature of law, justice and rights, the political implications of liberty, equality, property, welfare, class, and so forth. Mott certainly goes some way towards providing such principles, but his apparatus of social and political concepts is insufficiently developed, making for ambiguity or lacunae at certain points, and for an uncritical appropriation of elements of secular ideologies at others. For example, he endorses an egalitarian, needs-based theory of distributive justice without testing it rigorously enough; and confusion is created when he asserts not only that politics is 'about theology', but also 'about power' and 'about justice'.

Mott could have avoided such problems had he drawn more fully on longstanding traditions of systematic Christian political theory, such as are found in Catholicism (still routinely neglected by most evangelicals, to their loss), or Neo-Calvinism (which is cited but insufficiently utilised). Here can be found Christian scholars deeply immersed in social and political theory and operating with sophisticated theoretical frameworks. By contrast, Niebuhr and Tillich wrote primarily with theological concerns in mind. Mott's book will serve as an invaluable theological source for those seeking a Christian perspective on politics. His contribution invites further elaboration through an intensive encounter with

these and other traditions of Christian political theorizing.

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EuroJTh (1996) 5:1, 73-75

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The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction

H. G. M. Williamson

Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1994, xvi + 306 pp., £35. hb, ISBN 0-19-826360-0

RÉSUMÉ

Comme son titre l'indique, cet ouvrage traite de l'unité du livre d'Esaïe. Il faut préciser que ce n'est pas une unité d'auteur qui est envisagée, mais une unité comme la conçoit la critique radicale: l'unité d'une oeuvre qui est l'aboutissement de tout un processus de transmission et de rédaction (comme l'indique le sous-titre). Il y a une tentative pour concilier l'étude diachronique et l'étude synchronique de l'Ancien Testament. L'interprétation synchronique n'est pas considérée comme une lecture contradictoire avec l'approche diachronique, mais comme lui étant complémentaire. Dans le présent cas, l'analyse du livre considère que le 'Deutéro-Esaïe' aurait rédigé un nouvel ouvrage en utilisant à la fois des matériaux empruntés au prophète de Jérusalem, et son oeuvre propre, et cela à la fin de l'exil babylonien. Ce nouvel ouvrage comprendrait en gros les chapitres 2 à 55. Le 'Trito-Esaïe' est considéré comme plus tardif et n'est pas pris en considération.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Williamsons Buch thematisiert, wie der Titel zeigt, die Einheit Jesajas. Doch mit Einheit ist nicht eine einheitliche Verfasserschaft im konservativen Sinne gemeint, sondern eine Einheit, wie sie neuerdings in der modernen kritischen Forschung zu Jesaja (wie auch zu anderen Büchern des Alten Testaments) vertreten wird, d.h. eine Einheit, die das Ergebnis eines Überlieferungs- und Redaktionsprozesses ist (vgl. den Untertitel des Buches). Folglich geht es darum, diachronische und synchronische Forschung zu den Büchern des Alten Testaments zu kombinieren. Synchronische