

*Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism.* Leonardo De Chirico. Bern: Peter Lang, 2003.

Evangelicalism is in a fair state of disarray and we had better go about addressing the situation. De Chirico in a rather technical, occasionally wooden reshaping of his doctoral thesis taken at King's College, powerfully argues that Post-Vatican II Rome has exposed evangelicalism's need for a re-formulation of itself that will regain its ability to successfully critique Roman Catholicism. Standing behind his convictions are a recognition that evangelical assessments of Catholicism have not kept up with the 'sea change' initiated by Vatican II. In other words, evangelicals are out of date. The author compares the approaches of seven evangelical leaders and several dialogic or ecumenical initiatives to prove his point. These latest endeavours, in particular, make an additional point by underscoring the evangelicals' opportunity to provide a fresh look at Rome. Rome is on the march and the evangelical community, if there is one, has the responsibility to understand and respond.

The individual critiques of Roman Catholicism by Abraham Kuyper, G.C. Berkouwer, Cornelius Van Til, David Wells, Donald Bloesch, Herbert Carson, John Stott are compared, along with the work of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) and the on-going dialogue Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT). De Chirico analyzes the approaches made by each in order to ascertain their effectiveness in critiquing Catholicism's historical trajectory, dogmatic structure, theological dynamics, institutional outlook and cultural project. The author notes these as a necessary means for

discovering the real prize in his investigation. His objective is not the accumulation of data concerning Roman Catholicism. It is rather to use the variety of perspectives obtained in order to triangulate the central core of the faith system. In other words, De Chirico wants to identify Post-Vatican II's heart. His evaluation yields two different results.

First, he discovers that no single evangelical approach yields satisfactory results. The best of these, that of Abraham Kuyper, comes closest to success because it addresses pre-Vatican II Rome as a worldview, from the vantage point of Reformed evangelicalism, an alternative world and life view. He is able to assess Catholicism as a system most effectively because he represents an alternative, competing system. Catholicism is catholic; it is expansive, plastic, at points amorphous and inclusive. The author's general critique of evangelicalism is sobering, to say the least. In comparing the seven individual analyses and the several corporate interactions, De Chirico highlights a lack of coherence. None of the critiques are sufficient, either because their scope is too restrictive to assess a broad-based belief system such as Catholicism, their assessment lacks theological rigour, they are too accommodating, or the composite picture is too self-contradictory to be useful.

Derek Tidball's *Evangelical Rubik's Cube* illustrates part of the problem. Tidball identifies three categories, world, spirituality, and denomination, each of which is subdivided 5-6 times into which evangelicalism can be placed. Evangelicalism can, according to the taxonomies noted, be transformational, radical, and denominational, or it can be conversionist, renewal, and denominational or it can

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be any one of dozens of combinations. The author uses this as a powerful way of illustrating an overarching point. Evangelicalism is itself fragmented tremendously. What does the word mean? If the evangelicals cannot agree on who they are or if they lack significant alignment in terms of their doctrines and structure, how can they then possibly hope to evaluate Roman Catholicism? As mentioned earlier, Kuyper comes closest to giving a comprehensive appraisal of Catholicism, but it too fails. It and the theologically rigorous treatments are all out of date. This is De Chirico's dilemma. The only evaluations that come close to understanding the nature of Catholicism were all completed before Vatican II. The remaining attempts fail because they were all too restrictive in their analysis, their theological perspectives were too accommodating or the treatments were too polemical to provide sufficient objectivity for understanding. It must be added that we do not know whether other evangelical choices would have yielded better data. We only know what we have been given to understand.

We must also say on the other hand that De Chirico's use of Tidball makes it likely that a choice of any other group would have yielded similar results. As George Marsden pointed out in his *Reforming Fundamentalism*, evangelicalism's self-understanding has been undergoing radical change. Tsunamis and earthquakes have taken and continue to take place throughout the evangelical world, from the radical shifts in perspective among the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary in the USA to the debates with Steve Chalke over penal substitution, and the growing influence of open and

feminist theologies in missiology or hermeneutics. The tectonic plates continue to shift and produce shock waves that surge through 21st century Protestantism. This shifting landscape provides a singularly deficient platform from which to evaluate other faith systems, whether they are Roman Catholicism or Islam. As the author aptly notes, the last 30 years may have evidenced a renaissance in evangelical thought, but it has come at the cost of greater marginalization. Trends are not dominated by evangelicals, even within their own camp. External theologies and disciplines impose themselves on the creation and implementation of evangelical theology. Additionally, the trend within evangelicalism is to embrace "centred" (reformist) rather than "bounded" (traditionalist) identities, making it, at once, possible to find common identity with highly disparate ideas, but sacrificing precision of thought which makes accurate analysis far more difficult. As De Chirico asserts, while confronting Roman Catholicism, evangelicals have to reflect and act upon their own identity. If you are uncertain about the latter, you will be less successful in identifying the former.

Second, he succeeds in locating the centre that he seeks. De Chirico identifies this Roman Catholic core as shaped by two factors, first, the manner in which relationship and nature and grace interact in the church and second the prolongation of the incarnation expressed as an expansive catholicity. The synergy between the two creates a cohesive institution that serves as a coherent life system. Furthermore, the resultant creation, Post-Vatican II Rome, is a success in terms of dealing with the exigencies of the postmodern world. The author,

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in fact, sees it as being far better equipped to deal with both modernity and postmodernity than is contemporary evangelicalism.

Rome has, thanks to Post-Vatican II, rediscovered its catholicity. “The basic premise is that the whole of reality, which is already one in essence, though this protological unity is marred by sin, should be brought into a Catholic unity which would re-establish redemptively the harmonious interaction between the universal and the particular.” The author introduces the evangelical reader to a faith system which can, like Islam, incorporate a vast array of discordant, often contradictory beliefs and practices into one evolving, growing, yet stable organism.

The focus of Catholicism after Vatican II is also radically different from its focus prior to it. Roman Catholicism from Trent to Vatican II was characterized by a need to set and enforce its own doctrinal boundaries, particularly in view of the threat posed by the Protestant Reformation. Vatican II changed all that by returning the church to a pre-Tridentine model characterized by imprecision and a growing magisterium that was never fully coordinated or reconciled. Pre-Tridentine Rome served as a sponge, incorporating galaxies of different practices around a basic philosophical core of natural theology and incarnational self-identity. Interestingly, a similar interaction can be seen in the evolving ‘theology from the bottom’ of postconservative evangelicalism. This similarity may also explain why much recent evangelical criticism has been muted or absent. In other words, post-Vatican II Rome and reformist, postconservative evangelicalism may be beginning to resemble each other more than

they differ, at least at significant points. Mark Noll has, in fact, asked the question, “Is the Reformation over?” While it would clearly be going too far to say that it is, the fact that he asked the question as an evangelical writing in a conservative Roman Catholic publication, *First Things*, is certainly significant.

De Chirico’s summary of Roman Catholic theology is helpful. He directly connects the catholicity of Rome to its pervasive incarnational theology underlining the necessity of having grace embodied tangibly and materially. The church itself, the author notes, is the prolongation of the Incarnation, standing *altera persona Christi*. Once again, contemporary evangelical missiology reflects strikingly similar language. Evangelicalism typified by a pilgrim motif, often proclaiming a prophetic message of change to culture, has been replaced by incarnational theology focusing on a Christ working within cultures and, importantly, possibly within non-Christian faith systems as well. Roman Catholic soteriology continues to reflect a conviction that man can, as a corollary to the incarnational presence of Christ in nature, cooperate with grace and contribute to salvation. Once again, the tectonic plates have shifted closer together as open theology opens the door to a benevolent, democratic God, walking along with people not completely fallen. It would be excessive to describe the shift of most postconservative evangelicals as Pelagian, but growing numbers embrace Arminianism, if not Amyrauldianism. The result is that the gap lessens between evolving evangelicalism and post-Vatican II Rome. Finally, this incarnational mediation between nature and grace is the church. Like postmodern

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evangelicals, Rome rejects a radical modernist emphasis on individualism in favour of a corporate context that fuses heaven and earth, every tongue, nation, and people, past, present, and future. As De Chirico notes, "The church is both representative of the union with God and the unity of mankind." De Chirico's judgments are intelligently asserted and troublingly plausible. Roman Catholicism is better equipped than evangelicalism to confront the challenges posed by either modernism or postmodernism. Its inclusive, non-propositional, narrative, liturgical style more closely mirrors the surrounding global cultures than does traditional evangelicalism and its confessional, propositional identity. On the other hand, Catholicism has a united core that competing traditionalist and reformist evangelicalism so evidently lack. Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism have both undergone significant change during the last 30 years, but their changes follow two different trajectories and yield two different results. Catholicism has regained its unity and focus, scandals and hemispheric crises notwithstanding. Evangelicalism, on the other hand, increasingly demonstrates what in fact it always was, not a denomination in any sense, but a loosely gathered body of believers, who define themselves with an increasingly broad catalogue of characteristics. "Together with the loss of the Evangelical cores which have theologically sharp edges (Foundations and essentials with doctrinal convictions not matching current ecumenical correctness), it is

necessary to acknowledge the subtle, yet distinct tendency to shift the centre of the Evangelical faith away from its Reformation formal and material principles and towards its revivalist heritage which has a less pronounced theological profile and a more experiential outlook." The result of this great shift is that Evangelicalism is far less capable of understanding let alone confronting different religious systems. It must be emphasized that, if this is true of Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism, it must be true for every religion as well.

Leonardo De Chirico has convincingly argued that Evangelicalism is at a crisis point. It has done a great deal to address the challenges posed by postmodernism, but the results have made it less well equipped to challenge global belief systems such as Roman Catholicism and Islam.

Furthermore, its very fragmentation and accommodation make it increasingly less influential as a formulator of theology and social change. Stylistically, the book leaves something to be desired. As a former thesis, its superstructure is too exposed, sections tend to be repetitive, and the writing lacks style. It also has to said that it is an expensive volume. Despite these factors, it is an important work. It has accomplished two different and difficult tasks. It has accurately described the genius behind post-Vatican II Rome and it has devastatingly critiqued a drifting, perhaps dissolving, and certainly dividing Evangelicalism. It is an important book.