

E.A.J.G. Van der Borgh, ed., *Religion without Ulterior Motive*. Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2006, xi + 248pp. \$119.00

This, the thirteenth volume of Studies in Reformed Theology, a publishing series of the International Reformed Institute based at the Free University, Amsterdam, is focused around a discussion of Abraham van de Beek's provocative essay 'Religion without ulterior motive'. The book has a simple structure: a short editorial introduction is followed by van de Beek's essay. Thereafter there are 12 responses to van de Beek from significant Reformed theologians drawn from diverse geographical locations: the Netherlands, the UK, the USA, Jamaica, Germany, Kenya, South Korea and South Africa. The editor concludes the volume with an epilogue. Helpfully, each of the writers approaches van de Beek with a distinctive theological concern, which means that there is a clear structure to the volume and the avoidance of tedious repetition.

Van de Beek's essay has the virtue of brevity and clarity; there is no doubting his argument, nor the theological positions that he is challenging. To state his thesis succinctly: 'We serve the Lord for nothing', just as God loves us for no reason. The author supports this thesis by calling on the Bible, the book of Job, for instance; the Fathers, Irenaeus in particular; and Calvin's writings. Van de Beek's point is that religious faith must not be instrumentalized or it loses its core identity. Religion is an autonomous sphere and we must try not to justify or judge faith with reference to motives and criteria drawn from outside of faith itself. Moreover, since ours is a 'functionalist age' that scorns the notion of intrinsic value, there is a real risk to authentic Christian identity.

The pungency of this thesis becomes clear when applied to particular theological approaches. Van de Beek's perspective suggests, in the first place, the rejection of natural theology in so far as it attempts to justify Christianity as the best or truest religion. The only authentic religious motive is that intrinsic to faith, the desire to serve the Lord come what may.

Secondly, van de Beek criticizes liberation motifs and theologies, as expressed, for example, in the WCC programme Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation. The current ecclesial predominance of the concept of liberation places action for social, political and economic change as the criterion of authentic Christian faith. In this way religion is shaped and judged by a concern drawn from outside itself, since, in van de Beek's view, biblical Christianity is not concerned with changing society, but with the reign of God in Christian hearts and minds. Clearly where God reigns in Christian hearts, then Christians will live as good citizens, concerned, as Calvin says, for the development of a 'balanced' civic culture, but this is quite different from arguing that biblical Christianity is concerned with social change as such. In van de Beek's view the political and social implications of Christian faith are secondary to faith itself; they are often unintended consequences of pursuing a faithful life.

Third, van de Beek points out that the desire for theocracy, as found arguably in Kuyper, reflects the same problems as that found in liberation theology, but now

in an exaggerated form. The issue is the subordination of faith to the desire for worldly power and domination.

Fourth, van de Beek is critical of pietism, by which he means variously a 'prosperity gospel', a self-righteous religiosity that finds pleasure in its own piety, or a faith that legitimates itself as the best means for coping with the sorrows and pressures of life. In each of these variant cases pietism underpins faith by some end beyond itself. In contrast, for van de Beek, faith is not concerned with the alleviation of life's difficulties, but with learning to live joyfully under whatever circumstances one finds oneself in.

Van de Beek's essay aims ultimately to warn of two dangers associated with 'ulterior motives'. Either the church becomes captive to false gods, giving them obeisance rather than the true God, or she is guilty of religious manipulation for personal, social or political ends.

The discussion of van de Beek's essay by his interlocutors tends to the view that an important point is at stake, but that he has overstated or oversimplified the issues. One area of debate is that of the interpretation of Calvin. Van de Beek claims that his thesis is consonant with Calvin's perspective. Hesselink, in contrast, holds that Calvin's view of the 'kingdom' is more ambiguous than van de Beek suggests. True, Calvin's theology tends to emphasize the spiritual character of the reign of God, but there are other shades of interpretation in Calvin, and his own practice suggests a profound engagement with political, social and economic matters.

Smit, from the point of view of Practical Theology, agrees on the danger of ulterior motives, but holds that Christians are to be motivated by the desire to have their lives correspond to the unconditional loving-kindness of God towards all people, which suggests the responsibility to public witness in words and deeds. Moreover it is impossible for Christians to avoid 'ambivalence and ambiguity' in their public witness to Christ; the question of motives is always open.

This is a point that Sell endorses, arguing that we must engage with the difficult task of relating faith to public practice, avoiding both ungrounded activism and a retreat to a godly ghetto. Similarly Mouw notices the dangers of baptizing one's own 'favourite causes' and argues that the development of a 'gratuitous spirituality' is one means of guarding against this.

In Vroom's view Kuyper's claim that all areas of life belong to Christ is correct, and Christian discipleship must involve thinking through the implications of Christ's Lordship for peace, justice and the integrity of creation. The danger of ulterior motives can be guarded against through a keen sense of 'sphere sovereignty'.

Van den Brink approaches the issue from the perspective of the Christian apologist. For him van de Beek obscures the genuine place of historical and philosophical arguments as a precursor to faith and as a means by which faith is made responsible to general criteria of rationality and so safeguarded from sectarianism.

Theron is more affirmative of van de Beek's thesis, arguing, in a profound analysis of the ecumenical movement within the Reformed Church in South Africa, that ulterior motives are only too attractive to the churches for political reasons and that 'unity' must be defined theologically not pragmatically.

Lee, from a Korean perspective, argues likewise that van de Beek's thesis offers a timely warning, and that the church must counter the danger of incipient instrumentalization by the assertion of a radically apostolic, biblical and eschatological theology.

An important contribution to the discussion is found in the essays by Antwi, Kombo and Brinkman, each of whom argue that van de Beek's thesis is broadly consistent with the project of contextualizing theology, though it highlights some possible pitfalls. For these authors, contextualization, when properly controlled by a robust theology, is animated by an authentically religious motive.

Religion without Ulterior Motive is an important volume because it highlights and enables a nuanced theological discussion of an issue that is of immense significance for many contemporary churches. The enormous influence of the various styles of political theology, for instance, may be seen as provoking the temptation to an instrumentalized gospel. This temptation is given added weight by the predominance of a functionalist cast of thought in modern societies, which tends, as Höver *et al.* show in their essay, to view important dimensions of life, for example, the family, from an exclusively instrumental point of view. In this sense, *Religion without Ulterior Motive* discusses a pressing threat both to the integrity of the Christian witness and to human well-being more generally.

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