

# ECUMENICAL TRENDS

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*A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

## Editors' Note

For the second year in a row, the May/June issue of *Ecumenical Trends* reflects the fruits of collaboration between Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute and the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network (EI). The first two articles (Paulau and Heller), build upon and respond to Stanislau Paulau's lecture on the same topic (November 18, 2020), at an event produced by EI and GEII in collaboration with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, McCormick Theological Seminary, and the Institute for Ecumenical Studies and Research (Konfessionskundliche Institut) in Bensheim. The next set of articles (Brittain, Hagley, and Hayes-Mota) revise for publication a particularly fruitful panel discussion of "Church and the Common Good," hosted by the Ecclesiological Investigations Unit of the American Academy of Religion (December 9, 2020); another article responding to and expanding on this thematic set (Lledo Gomez) was composed specifically for *Ecumenical Trends*. Finally, following a dispatch on a recent and promising bilateral ecumenical report (Carter), this issue includes an editorial book review of *Changing the Church: Transformations of Christian Belief, Practice, and Life*, a wide-ranging volume produced in honor of Gerard Mannion (1970-2019), the founder of the Ecclesiological Investigations Network. The Editors would like to thank our colleagues on the EI steering committee and at the other institutions who helped to make this collection a reality, and we look forward to other collaborations to come.

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## Book Review

# The Idolatry of Permanence

Review of *Changing the Church: Transformations of Christian Belief, Practice, and Life*. Edited by Mark D. Chapman and Vladimir Latinovic. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. xxiv+376 pp. \$160 (hardcover), \$120 (digital). ISBN 978-3-030-53424-0.

By Aaron Hollander

When the visionary founder of the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network, Prof. Gerard Mannion of Georgetown University, died suddenly just days before his 49<sup>th</sup> birthday, the shock did not subside quickly among his friends and colleagues. In time, the Ecclesiological Investigations steering committee planned a volume that would honor Mannion's legacy while advancing the scholarly and ecclesial convictions that animated him. The result is *Changing the Church: Transformations of Christian Belief, Practice, and Life*.

*Changing the Church* is not a work about Mannion's legacy; it is a work propelled by that legacy. The volume offers a compelling snapshot of the intellectual affinities of a community, a community bound by collaborative relationships more than by discipline or field of study. As Mark Chapman and Vladimir Latinovic observe in their editors' introduction, Mannion's "greatest achievement was drawing together a remarkable group of scholars and people into a network that pushes the boundaries of ecclesiology and ecumenism" (9). Binding this network of voices together is not only a history of collaboration with Mannion himself but also an alignment with Mannion's passion for diagnosing disordered or disoriented forms of life in the churches and imagining viable alternatives to them – as the churches have always needed courageous and compassionate people to do.

The engine of this volume's inquiry, then, is the recognition that change is the natural, constant, and legitimate state of the church, not an extraordinary or aberrant phenomenon. Its analytic backbone – that the church has always been changing at a deeper level than is typically recognized (that is, not only in its aesthetics or its means of articulating immutable truths) – may be irrefutable on scholarly grounds, but it remains a stumbling block of faith for many. However, *Changing the Church* takes as its task less the persuasion of stalwarts of the status quo and more the assessment and articulation of salutary paths by which churches may pursue their mission in new ways for new circumstances. As Mannion believed, meaningful change in the church can be a lifesaving cure when church institutions fail to "feel the needs of the poor and oppressed" or fail to listen "to the spirit of the age in a way that would enable

the church to survive in our modern world" (3); yet, as in the ancient Greek sense of the *pharmakon*, such a cure can be mismanaged or applied in excess, becoming a poison. Change in and of itself is neither a problem nor a solution, and so the wide array of case studies constituting the volume concern themselves less with *whether* the church has changed or will change, and more with how it has done or continues to do so, with what consequences, and with what criteria these consequences are to be evaluated.

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Section I concerns historical and theological topics, and in particular case studies that indicate how seemingly immutable certainties in particular church contexts (such as penitential practice in Cyprian's Carthage or attitudes toward non-Christians in the period leading up to Vatican II) are, under the right conditions, dissolved into a fertile ground for new possibilities to emerge. Vladimir Latinovic's chapter is particularly stimulating in its argument, from within the Orthodox Church and in relation to Orthodoxy's self-articulation as a champion of changelessness, that "there is no such thing as continuity with the tradition and that church often used this continuity as a façade which served only to hide the fact that things had significantly changed" (22). Taking up ancient Christian figures such as Tertullian, Origen, and Pelagius, Latinovic demonstrates that the declaration of their heretical status was less a matter of the errors of their teaching and more a result of the need to personify and scapegoat opposition to evolutions in church doctrine.

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Section II is oriented by the theme of “Society and Gender,” which proves to be somewhat of a catchall, including chapters dealing with ecological crisis and modern art in addition to several chapters on women’s experience and leadership in various (but mainly Roman Catholic) church contexts. Crucially important insights appear in this section, including Cristina Lledo Gomez’s treatment of sexual violence in the church, not as an isolated abomination but as part and parcel of larger systems of abuse and silencing in which church institutions are complicit; and Scott MacDougall’s argument against the commonplace but uncritical association of change in the church with anthropology and sociology, rather than with pneumatology and the promise of sanctification extended through time (that MacDougall’s chapter is situated in the “Society” section rather than the “Theology” section, perhaps, proves his point).

Section III, on “Mission and World Christianity,” narrowly avoids suffering from the unintended organizational presuppositions that often afflict conversations about “World Christianity” (whereby “world” is a euphemism for “ethnic” and Euro-American white Christianity is not pressured to prioritize its contextuality). While such discussions as Stan Chu Ilo’s excellent theological treatment of contested innovations in the African churches could have just as well suited the “History and Theology” section, they make a point of bringing their contexts into the foreground so as to maintain attention on the dependence of theology on contextual epistemologies and politics (a recognition that the “History and Theology” chapters would have done well to make more explicit themselves). Another standout chapter in this section is Roger Haight’s birds-eye meditation on the mission of the church in terms of (and indeed as a synonym for) its *raison d’être*: the reconciliation of (all) creation among itself and with its creator, a reconciliation which is only coherent when carried out historically rather than in the abstract. Insofar as the church asserts or idolizes changelessness, Haight argues, it is slandering its own historicity and abdicating its mission.

Section IV concerns “Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue,” which readers of *Ecumenical Trends* may be most inclined to prioritize. These chapters are a mix of tightly focused case studies (the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions, the 2019 *Document on Human Fraternity*), more theoretical pieces using individual figures from history as a lens on contemporary problems (St. Francis, Lesslie Newbigin), and big-picture challenges to the status quo (liturgical renewal, Christian anti-Judaism). While some of the chapters in this section, as elsewhere, give off the impression of being somewhat incomplete, the section as a whole is successful and indeed cutting-edge. I would consider two of its chapters to be must-reads, not only within the specifically ecumenical readership but for anyone with

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the inclination to pick up the volume: Jason Welle’s study of friendship as a matrix for meaningful interfaith exchange and Mary Doak’s courageous illumination of the extent to which Christian contempt for Judaism has pervaded the church’s self-articulation.

Welle takes up a well-known interreligious episode – the respect and hospitality shown by Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil to St. Francis of Assisi, who had journeyed to the war-torn Levant in search of (depending on the telling) martyrdom or an end to the crusade. Although this episode is frequently invoked (not least by Pope Francis) as exemplifying “interreligious friendship,” Welle develops a theory of friendship that both invites caution in considering the encounter of Malik and Francis to have sparked genuine friendship and, at the same time, continues to draw on the episode as a hagiographical touchstone for contemporary interfaith relations. If friendship denotes “a stable relationship marked by mutual concern for each other’s welfare and an intimacy that shapes the character of each individual involved” (219), then it is difficult to say that Francis and Malik were friends. Nevertheless, the profound shift in Francis’ thinking following this encounter indicates that even a glimpse of the possibility of friendship “leaves a mark” (222), capable of breaking through ossified assumptions of the nature or purpose of intercommunal relations. As Welle concludes: “The call for interreligious friendship is not a call for coffee talk. It is a call to do what a person of virtue does: seek out other persons of virtue as friends, act for their welfare, and walk with them in mutual support, mutual critique, and mutual encouragement toward religious and ethical growth” (223).

Doak, in her chapter that concludes the section on ecumenical/interreligious affairs, carries out what may be the single most significant intervention in the volume, interpreting the legacy of anti-Jewish self-understanding in the churches not merely as a painful history but as a basic distortion of the logic of communion and covenant in which Christianity is – or should be – grounded. Doak argues that “each generation must be taught anew to recognize and to reject the construction of Jews as Christians’ abjected other, in contrast with whom the superior goodness of Christianity is defined. Especially with regard to Christian antisemitism, the church must indeed be a church reformed, always reforming” (236-37). While many of the volume’s chapters

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raise important questions but do not have the space or time to submit a plausible answer, Doak follows up her own clarification critique with a proactive and pragmatic ecclesiological vision of Christian self-understanding that is inclusive of Judaism's ongoing and positive role in the economy of salvation. It is in this context that we get one of the volume's few direct references to the life and work of Gerard Mannion, drawing on Mannion's contention that ecclesial reform can only be authentic when it knits together a large-scale vision with day-to-day life on a congregational level. While certain (apparently) anti-Jewish sentiments of the New Testament and church history can be dispelled through more accurate translations or a better appreciation of the cultural context, Doak reminds us that a measure of contempt for Judaism is baked into the self-articulation of Christianity as something new that repairs and replaces the old. Yet the history that follows is enough to demonstrate that such a "repudiation of the Jewish difference" (239) is ethically wrong and a barrier to Christian peacemaking in the world *even if* it is a historically accurate reading of early Christian self-understanding. When considering "change in the church," this recognition is as profound a challenge as is leveled in the volume.

Finally, Sections V and VI of *Changing the Church* are both, in essence, ecclesiological oriented – not surprising given the community of authors and the center of scholarly gravity of the volume's dedicatee, yet somewhat oddly insofar as the "Synodality and Participation" chapters are richly ecclesiological in their contents and implications, while two thirds of the "Ecclesiology" section's chapters are studies of synodality. This curiosity notwithstanding, the chapters of these two sections (like those throughout the volume) succeed most fully when they are bold enough to tackle arenas of change in the church that remain uncertain, controversial, and occasionally wickedly difficult. Standout arguments here include: Paul Avis' psychological turn in suggesting that "certain recognizable types of Christian mindset are congenitally receptive to being taken over for evil purposes" (249); Miriam Haar's discussion of how both enactments and interpretations of change in the church are bound up with topographies of authority, such that one and the same development will be assessed and ultimately received differently depending on how it is institutionally validated; Andrew Pierce's suggestion that a more inductive, descriptive, listening approach would better attune church authorities to the interpretation of changes that are already taking place, rather than subjecting those changes to the well-meaning "fiction" of top-down efforts (270); and especially Sandra Arenas' unflinching appraisal of the several reasons that the Roman Catholic Church's "loss of trust and credibility" (in her Chilean context) can be considered not only reasonable but necessary if new grounds for that institutional credibility are to emerge (315).

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As an edited volume, and a *festschrift* no less, *Changing the Church* is at its best when its contributors not only reflect on the fact or dynamics of some instance of change but are willing to stick their necks out and proactively work to catalyze a needed change in a particular church context. The chapters which do not make this a priority risk coming across as a smorgasbord of otherwise unrelated insights; one shortcoming of this otherwise outstanding collection it is that, as Chapman and Latinovic articulate in their introduction, "change" is so fundamental and omnipresent a reality in the church that there is little that could *not* have been included. The core theme of the work, in other words, does little to bind together and render explicit the connections between disparate topics. A greater attentiveness to Gerard Mannion's own dynamic ecclesiology would have made a difference in this respect, but this was not the objective of the volume; the dedicatee of *Changing the Church* remains more of a spectral presence (for instance in Leo Lefebure's engagement with the specifically Irish contribution to the Parliament of the World's Religions) than a *cantus firmus*. Readers should not approach this work looking for greater understanding of Mannion's own substantial contributions to ecclesiology, ecumenism, and ethics (indeed, another volume on exactly that would be well-warranted), yet it is clear that *Changing the Church* delivers in spades on its core conviction: that Mannion's great achievement was assembling a new kind of network – international, interreligious, and interdisciplinary – defined more by its members' shared values and by their care and commitment for one another than by any fixed intellectual agenda. Mannion's presence was an integrative force, bringing people together without either overdetermining or dissolving the boundaries between their varieties of labor. And in this respect, the multidirectional quality of the collection may be precisely the point of its significance in an academic climate that too readily prioritizes tunnels of excellence and individual prestige over fearlessly open-ended exchange and collaborative experimentation for the common good. 