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The Lion Book of Christian Thought

by Tony Lane

(Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992 edition) 256 pages.

The discipline of Historical Theology seems to be experiencing an embarrassment of riches these days. Jaroslav Pelikan's recently completed five volume history of *The Christian Tradition* represents one of the most ambitious treatments of historical theology in our time. Useful surveys (with accompanying books of primary readings) by William Placher and others are finding an appreciative audience. Yet there has been a need for an evangelical work that is more compact than Pelikan and more detailed than Placher and some of the other surveys.

Tony Lane, lecturer in Christian Doctrine at London Bible College, in *The Lion Book of Christian Thought* offers the interested reader a work that meets this need. He offers a compelling and well-told story of the great thinkers and ideas that have shaped Christian theology, not only in the west but to a significant extent in Africa as well.

This new edition is an update of his *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*, published in 1984, a book which has enjoyed some success with the selling of over 20,000 copies. There are a few important differences in this new edition in addition to the name change. The layout has been altered dramatically. The original edition was small enough to fit in a breast pocket which meant that the print was smaller and not always easy to read. This new edition is larger and well-laid out. The bibliographies have been updated (e.g. Hans Küng's *Theology for the Third Millennium*, 1988 is included as is John Mbiti's important *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 1986). Lane also includes coverage of recent theological developments in the both the World Council of Churches (Canberra, 1991) as well as global evangelicalism (Manilla, 1989).

Professor Lane discusses some hundred or so individuals and movements covering both the broad time span of Christian history as well as the equally broad spectrum of theological opinions. Heretics and orthodox, eastern and

western theology, Roman Catholic and protestant, evangelical and liberal--all are given a hearing. Lane's primary objective is to "introduce leading thinkers from the past (and present) and to whet the appetite by giving extracts from their writings (p 6)." Lane divides the book into five parts, discussing the "Church of the fathers", "The Eastern Tradition", "The Medieval West", "Reformation and Reaction" and "Christian Thought in the Modern World." He groups the individuals and theological developments that he deems significant under these larger headings and in the estimate of this reviewer Lane seems to have avoided any major omissions. Indeed, Lane generally succeeds throughout the book to blend graceful prose, excellent historical introductions and summaries with superb quotations from original sources. His evangelical perspective is clear throughout. If he falters at all, I would see it in his evaluation of certain theologians of the post reformation period. The inclusion of evaluation in the modern period is appropriate but his judgment is questionable at some key points--the most consistent evangelicalism receives the most criticism while liberal and neo-orthodox movements receive little. But first the strengths of the book.

Lane has written a book that is a pleasure to read. There is a freshness to his description and analysis throughout that is a fine feature of the book. Two examples out of many possible ones can be given. One is his discussion of Peter Abelard where (after a fine historical introduction) he skillfully surveys Abelard's positions and traces his heterodoxy to his theological method: "Doubt is not so much a sin...as the necessary beginning of knowledge (p 91)." This Cartesian perspective (400 years before Descartes) is ably described and its significance noted. The second example is his inclusion of Charles Wesley, noting the theological themes that fill his 18th century hymns which have had such a profound impact on evangelical protestantism all over the world (pp 169-170).

Other strong features of this survey include: 1)The coverage of the Eastern tradition which is sometimes slighted in historical theology texts; 2) his discussion of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith is sharp and well-explained ("Justification concerns my status rather than my state...God accepting me rather than changing me", p 130) (though his statement that Luther did not arrive at a forensic understanding of justification until after 1521

is highly debatable); 2) his analysis of Peter Forsythe, Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann which is informed and appreciative at key points.

On the negative side two criticisms can be mentioned. The first concerns method. Lane has adopted the common method of organizing theology by time rather than by topic (he surveys people and movements by historical periods and not by doctrinal topics). This has the obvious strength of setting theology in its proper historical context. Yet there is also a drawback to this approach. One loses the thread of development of particular doctrines. Luther's breakthrough on justification is so much more understandable when one surveys the historical development of that doctrine from the early fathers through Augustine, Scholasticism and late medieval nominalism. We need a treatment of historical theology that combines more skillfully the topical and the historical approaches (Donald Guthrie's approach in his *New Testament Theology* comes to mind as a model).

A second criticism is Lane's treatment of Calvin and post-reformation protestantism. Lane reserves his sharpest criticisms for evangelical calvinists such as John Owen, William Perkins, Jonathan Edwards and B.B Warfield. He assumes a certain understanding of Calvin that sees later calvinists (reformed scholasticism, puritanism.etc) as distorters of Calvin. This line has been argued by some neo-orthodox theologians and has been picked up by Basil Hall, Perry Miller, R.T Kendall and a host of others. Yet this is a highly debated point and recent studies by J. Bray, Jill Raitt, Richard Muller, David Steinmetz and others point in a different direction suggesting that Calvin really was a calvinist and that those who followed in his path did not betray but deepened and developed (in positive ways) Calvin's original understanding.

In spite of these criticisms, Lane has written a highly useful and interesting account of the roots of Christian faith. For African Christians concerned with their own theological roots this would be a valuable place to begin that search.

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