

IN THE STUDY

'The real danger to honest Scripture scholarship is the claim to total objectivity and neutrality. Such a claim usually hides a secret agenda, be it confessional or agnostic'. It is reassuring to find such words in the introduction (by one Roman Catholic scholar) to a recent introduction to the New Testament (by another Roman Catholic scholar)¹. Thereby any putative Protestant aces are professionally trumped in advance.

Readers cross-eyed from traversing the small print in Kummel or stupefied by the relentless prose of Guthrie may emerge cautiously from their burrows and breathe a more refreshing air. This is not another comprehensively critical tour through the writings of the New Testament. It is rather a pass ticket into the New Testament scholar's workshop and an unveiling and presentation of the tools of his trade. Textual criticism and source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism, structural analysis - all these are laid out on the bench, their history and purpose explained, their value demonstrated. Exegesis and its relationship to theology receives proper mention. The story of the formation of the New Testament is traced. The meaning of inspiration is probed.

Value for money indeed. But whose money? The publishers suggest that students and clergy should be among the investors. That seems on the whole a fair judgment since, from the setting of the stage and the careful laying of the foundations with which this book begins to the extensive glossary of technical terms with which it ends, no effort is spared to ensure intelligibility. Just occasionally Raymond Collins nods, as with the introduction of the phrase 'apostolic parousia' long before any explication of its meaning. But the lapses are few.

Equally valuable are the practical demonstrations of the tools in action. Generalisations and abstractions come to life when the scholar not merely talks about his weaponry but deploys it in relation to concrete and specific textual situations. Even structural analysis becomes a trifle less opaque than is its wont, though its application to the stilling of the storm in Mark's Gospel may not be entirely free from the familiar tendency to emerge short on illumination and long on arbitrariness. What is particularly valuable is the clear demonstration via newspaper references that historical critical study is not the artificial nonsense of a sheltered academic playground but the intensified operation of interpretative processes that any careful reader will half-consciously be using in a wide variety of daily contexts.

Of course there are arguable weaknesses. The American provenance of this study means that illustrative folk-tale

¹ *Introduction to the New Testament* by Raymond F. Collins. S.C.M. 1983. £9.50.

references fall flat on British ears. The Roman Catholic allegiance of the author has an inevitable effect upon the way in which crucial arguments proceed; and the fascinating story of papal and curial shifts and starts in the biblical field over the last hundred years may at points become over-detailed for some Protestant listeners. The attempt to tell the story of historical critical study over two centuries seems at times episodic rather than meaningfully coherent. But these are marginal talking points. The pluses outweigh the minuses a hundredfold.

In the end it is the fact of Roman Catholic authorship that gives this valuable survey so much of its penetration and fascination. For the Protestant, historical-critical methodology has been around almost too long. There is detectable an air of weariness, of disappointment, of frustration, a hankering after pastures new. For the Roman Catholic, there is an air of excitement, a sense of recently discovered liberation, an attitude of expectancy. After some hesitant false starts, professionalism is now the order of the day. Yet it is a professionalism that has been able to learn from originating Protestant travail and which has never been tempted to cut Scripture loose from its Church rooting and context. Such scholarship may provide a transfusion of high significance, is indeed already doing so. And could it be that the appearance of this study with its ample bibliography but complete absence of footnotes signals a new trend? Ah well, one is entitled to dream.

Yet another book on christology². This time the initial expectation aroused is of a ringing call to return to orthodoxy. While it is true that Gunton rows against the stream of a good deal of contemporary writing on his theme, it would in fact be fatally oversimple to typecast him with the traditionalists. He inserts too many qualifications for that.

He reviews christologies 'from below' that wear the faces of a Rahner, a Pannenberg, a Robinson, and not to our surprise finds them wanting. Yet christologies 'from above' in the work of an Origen or a Hegel get no higher marks, in so far as they are convicted of operating with a concept of God heavily dictated by philosophical considerations and of fitting into that inflexible frame the inescapable residue of human and historical elements. Only the Fathers and Karl Barth, their lineal descendant, get reasonable grades, in that they at least start with theological judgments about Jesus and are concerned to link christology and soteriology.

Is it then a reaffirmation of classical orthodoxy that is being commended? Not quite. Negatively, the point being scored is that the conventional division of christologies into 'from below' and 'from above' is a blunt weapon. It distorts rather than reveals. It does not illumine the important

2 *Yesterday and Today* by Colin E. Gunton. Darton, Longman & Todd. 1983. £9.50.

choices. It sets us looking in the wrong direction. Positively, the argument goes something like this. Christology cannot decisively break with its essential roots and still claim to be full-bloodedly christian. Basically it must say the same thing as the tradition. Form, content, and method will be found necessarily to be all of a piece. And what is necessary is also possible. There is in fact no absolute difference between the culture of the Fathers and the culture of the age of the Enlightenment. Of course that is not to say that they are identical. The main difference between the post-Plato context and the post-Kant context is that the first was conditioned to abstract Jesus from history by eternalising him while the second is pressed towards abstracting Jesus from eternity by making his temporality absolute. Distortions at opposite ends, we might say. But these differences are relative. Underlying continuities remain and must remain. Hence the sub-title of the book : A study of continuities in christology.

So where do we go in order at one and the same time to break through the distortions while preserving the continuity? Surely we must search for elements in the biblical presentation that enable us to bring together time and eternity, immanence and transcendence. But not so fast, I hear you murmur. Do we not now recognise that what the New Testament in fact provides is a bewildering diversity of christologies? Indeed we do. Yet all is not lost. For what it is important to discern in the New Testament christological material is not its chronology of development (with all those shifting emphases) but its *logic* of development. Does the New Testament not present a fundamental christological unity of direction and intent? Does it not begin and end with a unified picture of the one human and divine reality of Jesus Christ as the logically primitive reality? Pause a while, gentle reader, and assess whether that claim will stand. For if it will not, Gunton's overall position is flawed at its heart.

At this point the argument has still a long way to go. It has, however, turned the corner. The last formidable fence has been leapt, and the rider has only to keep on his horse for the final furlong. Christological nags have been falling all over the place because they got hung up on a misguided concern with what Jesus *was*. Employ a different concept of the eternity of God - not as timelessness but as the over-arching of past, present and future in such a way that in Jesus what will be is anticipated. Jesus belongs to *all* time. The real question concerns not the relationship between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ but the relationship between the historical-risen Jesus and the *present* Christ. Farewell then to the christological schizophrenia of the centuries, symptom of that false dualism between the divine and human, between eternity and time, that spawned the impassibility of God in the early christologies and God as the unconditioned in their post-Kantian successors.

Part of the fascination of the Gunton journey lies in the variety of the landscape encountered. Familiar battlegrounds

reveal new characteristics as they are approached from unusual directions. More significantly, a number of markers are erected which future work should not neglect. One is the clear recognition that critical investigation of the texts could in principle falsify the truth of the christological core of the Gospel: there is no *a priori* immunity here. A second is that traditional concepts of omnipotence and omniscience and impassibility *have* to suffer drastic redefinition in the light of the christological reality. A third is that a faithful following of the christological control back into the heart of godhead negates that hypostatization of the persons of the Trinity which ever lurks near the surface of popular (and not so popular) trinitarianism.

In the end, a great deal hinges on Gunton's stress upon Christ as the object of *present* knowledge, and on the Spirit-filled community, its worship and tradition, as the locus of our indwelling in Him. So it is that if the ancient hero of this book is Athanasius, its modern hero might be Dietrich Ritschl. At least Ritschl's *Memory and Hope*, so disgracefully neglected by the systematicians for two decades, at last gets something like the attention it deserves.

Gunton believes that classical christology can in some real sense survive passage of the Enlightenment into the present day. The contributors to a new conspectus of theology³ on the whole operate with other assumptions. They stress discontinuities. They are conscious of standing on the modern side of a great divide that has forced fundamental and irreversible turns.

This presentation of theology is sub-titled *An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*. It is an accurate identification. Thirteen writers act as guide in the journey from doctrinal method and basis through the major themes of christian doctrine to the issue of other religions and a summary concluding reflection. With rare exceptions the writing is lucid, stylish, and vigorous.

In general, there is uniformity of treatment in that each survey moves through four stages. The first is a brief statement of 'Where we are'. The last is a brief attempt to point the way ahead. In between, we are given on the one hand an overview of the traditional classic position and understanding and on the other hand a sketch of the basic challenges to that formulation that the post-Enlightenment consciousness and perspective have inexorably levelled. It is a provocative method of procedure.

Does it satisfactorily come off? Judgments will doubtless differ. The voice is that of the United States, and is uniformly in the accent of the heirs of the *Aufklärung*. Others who locate themselves differently might at many points wish to strike through the heading 'Where we are' and substitute 'Where you are', or even 'The mess you're in'. At the other end of the scale, it has to be admitted that the

3 *Christian Theology* ed. P. Hodgson and R. King. S.P.C.K. 1983. £9.50.

pointers for future progress sometimes verge on the uncertain and the scrappy. Yet what in the end impresses is the measure of accuracy and illumination achieved in the potted presentations of classical tradition and contemporary challenge. On the whole they are miracles of comprehension.

Of course it is all unashamedly partisan. Neo-orthodoxy scarcely gets a look in. Liberation theology is nodded to rather than engaged. Conservatism is an unseen spectre rather than a dialogue partner. Schleiermacher and Hegel are the heroes. If anyone qualifies for the role of villain, it might be Augustine. There is a confident assumption that a great many traditional positions and emphases are automatically impossible for those who live post-Kant.

All this is defensible. In the early centuries, as in the later Middle Ages, Christian theology had to take shape within powerful world-views. To opt out would always have been to condemn the whole enterprise to irrationality and to evacuate it of communicable meaning. The real argument is always over the extent to which Christian truth thereby suffered distortion. Yet from that danger no escape was ever possible. The ultimate folly would be to suppose that somewhere an impregnable bolthole could be found. Indeed it is perhaps one of the most significant legacies of the Enlightenment that it put such a powerful eternal question mark over the validity of all the hallowed defences. That exposure to chilling winds has to be lived with.

Yet the acceptance demanded cannot be an uncritical one. That would be a contradiction in terms. To live within that tradition in motion which is the Gospel is always to find contemporary moulds and modes put under challenge. And it is just here that I wonder whether this valuable survey does not become a little too bland, a little too lacking in self-criticism.

If so, Britain has small right to point the finger. With the partial but honourable exception of Scotland we seem to have forgotten what systematic theology means and long since lost the capacity for doing it. A thankful welcome, then, to an impressively competent conspectus, currently without rival.

Two books⁴ of similar length, of overlapping theme, of notable disparity in price. The first is sub-titled *The Economic and Political Task* and moves from the Christian Socialist Movement of the mid-nineteenth century and its legacy, via the politics and economics of the (Western) 'right' and the (World-Church) 'left', to the current dilemmas and challenges facing church and theology. The second moves from an analysis of secular, pluralist society, via discussion of the role of theology and the strengths and weaknesses of folk-religion, to

4 *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century* by R. H. Preston. S.C.M. 1983. £8.95.

Church and Nation in a Secular Age by J. Habgood. Darton, Longman & Todd. 1983. £5.95.

an assessment of the place and functions of a national Church as it relates itself to a range of major issues. They supplement rather than complement each other.

Ronald Preston stands broadly in the R. H. Tawney tradition. His Christian understanding presses him firmly in the direction of an organic view of human relationships and therefore into opposition to any controlling philosophy of possessive individualism. No joy for Thatcherism here. Yet equally, since an organic understanding of human relationships tends to involve high respect for tradition, custom, and the fragile and tenuous complexity of interweavings that carry the life blood of society, we are not encouraged to expect wholehearted approval of revolutionary action in the name of the Gospel. Nor is it provided. Liberation theology gets sensitive understanding but a qualified brush-off. The verdict on theologies of hope is that when the high talk is cashed it tends to come over the counter merely in the currency of what might be called 'a progressive liberal or radical stance'. On the positive side, Preston provides a careful and at many points acute survey of the landscape, summary of positions, and critique of thinkers. He strikes an explanatory blow for middle axioms. He is realistically critical of any over-dependence on human altruism. But he does not pretend to offer specific remedies for our specific ills - though directionally he is for consensus and a Prices and Incomes Board.

Along a slightly different track, John Habgood provides more of the same. We watch a cultured, civilised, and listening mind playing sociological and theological searchlights on to the nation and the Church of England within it. Once more we hear about consensus. We are given a theological defence of compromise. The values as well as the dangers of folk-religion are presented. Church Establishment is cautiously approved. Bureaucracy is rescued from unqualified condemnation. The legitimacy of differing Christian judgments on nuclear ethics is upheld.

To read Preston and Habgood in tandem is indeed a curious experience. The frontiers get strangely blurred. Take two sentences (one from each author) at random. (1) 'In a real world more progress is often made, though with less noise, by those who decide carefully in which direction they ought to move, and then set off one step at a time'. (2) 'The first political task of the church is to strengthen the sense of a common morality in the community'. I am tempted to offer a prize for the correct verdict on who wrote which. Either might have written each. Perhaps both did. I am always worried when I encounter a mirror-image of my own convictions. When I imbibe a double dose, I become even more uneasy. Do we after all need the strident and extremist voices of righteous indignation to call us back from this urbane sense to the madness of the Gospel?

Whatever the answer be, it must not be allowed to discard the insights these authors so cogently enshrine. Both recognise the hollow simplification inherent in frantic calls for

the church to speak prophetically to society. Both underwrite the inescapable responsibility of wrestling with the difficult specifics and the intangible complexities of political and economic life in the face of the temptation to hurl absolutes about the place. Both see clearly the dangerous absurdity in slick direct moves from biblical text to contemporary world. But both smack just a little too much of Anglican sweet reasonableness to a barbaric nonconformist gaze. And Habgood at least should not be allowed to get away with any suggestion that an ecumenical division of labour at certain points would properly free the Church of England to rest content with ploughing its own congenial furrows. The wholeness of the Gospel may demand more of Anglicanism - and Nonconformity - than that.

During the nineteen sixties, it was my unhappy lot to find myself reviewing some of the many published Christian works that majored in communicating conviction in modern style. The blood still curdles at the memory. Happily, something has been learned since then, at least in some quarters. To this a recent book bears witness⁵.

R. T. Brooks brings together wide reading and deep reflection with long experience in radio and television in order to set out the underlying principles of religious communication and their application. He treats of principles and practice, stories and pictures, dialogue and worship, message and medium, not to mention cable and video. There is plenty of wit and wisdom, many a good story and apt quotation. It is all practical and down to earth. He who runs may read. And many should.

There are, however, two lurking questions that bear pondering. One relates to theology. This book is patently the work of an informed and cultured mind which is at home in a certain theological atmosphere. Creation and redemption walk amicably hand in hand. The world is sacramental; open to the transcendent. The laws of nature and grace fit together without too much difficulty. Panentheism is the preferred theological label.

Now if that or something like it is the atmosphere you breathe, this book communicates without too much difficulty. It is seen as full of what might be called sanctified common-sense writ large - and that is high praise. But what happens when other theological stances are encountered? That is the initial question that imposes itself. For I suspect that from a different standing ground it is possible to concur without difficulty with most of what is said about, for example, the importance of medium, message and recipient, the primacy of perception over imitation and persuasion, the significance of common frames of reference, the elements composing the decision-making process - and yet emerge with a total presentation remarkably different from that advocated by this author.

⁵ *Communicating Conviction* by R. T. Brooks. Epworth Press. 1983. £5.50.

So what has been/will be 'heard' by those who stand on another side of the theological fence from R. T. Brooks? Will this material really 'communicate' in that sort of situation? Or are its assumptions so foreign that the message and medium do not stand close enough to recipients? I do not know the answer. But I am sure a great deal rests on it.

So to the second question. This relates to the issue of language. Our author treats it with proper seriousness and has some forceful things to say about the difference between parable, allegory, myth, legend, paradigm, documentary, illustration, and example. He clearly stands with what bids fair to become the received orthodoxy of modern linguistic understanding. Yet to what extent all this has much point of contact with the received orthodoxy found in vast concourses of the religious I am not so sure. How many Christians in fact seem to be virtually tone deaf along substantial ranges of the linguistic spectrum? Will Mr Brooks's presentation communicate with them? I hope so. It deserves to.

Two questions, then. You might say that both of them raise fundamentally similar issues. Communication, it will be agreed, involves the illumination of a 'shared world'. But that is true in a number of different ways and at a number of different levels. It may be that communication falters because at crucial points and in a crucial sense a 'shared world' is in fact lacking.

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REVIEW

John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition by Timothy George. Murcer University Press, 1982, pp.ix, 263.

This extremely attractive, well-written and well-researched book makes a fine introduction to the new Dissertation Series sponsored in the United States by the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion. It takes careful and critical note of the previous historiography of the Separatists before surveying the biography and teaching of Robinson himself.

The two main chapters of the book are concerned with the nature of his ecclesiology and of his Calvinism. Robinson, of course, was quite prepared to accept that God had his elect saints even in the Babylon of the Anglican and Roman churches. Nonetheless, he was also sure that while the true visible Church as he understood it was not the *only* way it was, nonetheless, 'the only ordinary beaten way to heaven'. Central for him as for the Separatists generally was the importance of the practice of the discipline (Matthew 18. 15-17, 20). Consequently, in his treatment of the Parable of the Tares, Robinson argued that the field must be the world and not the Church - otherwise notorious offenders in both life and doctrine must be tolerated within it. Hence the act of discipline became, as George says, virtually the third sacrament to the Separatists in general and to Robinson in particular. Nevertheless, he was perfectly well aware, although his opponents like those of the Anabaptists before him refused to recognise it, that the Church on earth could not be perfect. His point was