

join 'em' attitude, and the 'co-operation in good works' and 'huddling together for warmth' motives (299,290,21,253,277). That these prevailed in some quarters cannot be denied, but there was something more. Johnson quotes Fairbairn accurately: 'It is perhaps harder to be a Nonconformist today than it has ever been in the history of England. The very decay of the disabilities from which our fathers suffered has made it harder for us than it was to them to dissent'(169). He omits Fairbairn's next sentence: 'But while it has become harder it has also become more necessary: for the need of the testimony to a Church in which Christ is supreme was never so great as now'. No doubt the testimony was inadequately made; but Johnson's failure to give due weight to a more positive understanding prevents him from considering the possibility that Dissenters were right to seek the fulfilment of their Dissenting catholicity in an ecumenism in which the gospel of God's grace took precedence.

'Congregationalism' is defined in this book too much in terms of the autonomy of the local church. No doubt this is a slippery subject, and the oscillation between independence, interdependence, autonomy and catholicity has characterised Congregationalism through the centuries. Nevertheless the assertion that 'The independence of each individual church was *the* cardinal principle of Congregationalism' (91) would have had a different ring in the seventeenth century from what it came to have in the nineteenth when the decibels of individualism were increased in the wake of the Enlightenment. If these subtleties are not teased out, it is impossible to understand why many Congregationalists have regarded the attempts of genuine ecumenism to manifest God's given unity in Christ as worthy of their support, and as consistent with their testimony that the one Lord of the Church gathers his saints into a catholic fellowship manifested locally.

Had there been *no* socio-political disabilities, the questions 'Who is a Christian?', 'Who are the Church?', 'How are the crown rights of the Redeemer to be honoured in his Church?' and 'what are the proper relations between Church and State?' - *the* questions of Dissent - would still have required attention, and they still do. Precisely because of the removal of most of the socio-political impediments, deep theological discussion of these questions is, in principle, possible. Over and above the abiding importance of the questions, such discussion is necessary now when societal marginalisation afflicts all the English denominations; and the confessionally-varied established churches are in international dialogue with those of the Dissenting traditions. Will the questions be raised? This is to ask whether Dissent really has been dissolved, or whether it is simply, and perhaps temporarily, dissolute.

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REVIEWS

Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. £29.50. ISBN 0 19 826686 3.

In British theology since the late nineteenth century there has been a strong tradition of reflection on the suffering of God, challenging - in greater or lesser degrees - the notion of divine impassibility which had been a scarcely ever questioned part of traditional Christian theism since the Fathers. In this respect British (and to a lesser extent American) theologians pioneered a theological development which has since been taken up by many other theologians. So it is appropriate that a British theologian should now have written one of the most thorough and penetrating treatments of this subject, which in his hands becomes a wide-ranging treatment of the doctrine of God and God's relation to the world. He makes, however, rather

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little reference to the indigenous tradition of thought about divine passibility. Rather, his dialogue partners are Hegel, Barth, Tillich, Moltmann, Jüngel, the American process theologians and the 'death of God' theologians of the 1960s. This list indicates (though not completely) the impressive range of modern theological work on which he draws and with which he interacts critically in order to produce his own theological construction. If the central place he gives to the cross, along with a trinitarian doctrine of God, aligns him with recent German theologies of the cross, the seriousness with which he takes process theology prevents one from placing him in a ready-made theological pigeonhole. (Some readers may wonder whether the rather general points he takes over from process theology really required the lengthy explanations of the technicalities of process theology, which he does not accept).

Fiddes identifies four reasons why much recent theology has felt the need to speak of a suffering God: the meaning of the love of God (in which he includes the Old Testament revelation of God's suffering), the central place of the cross in Christian faith, the problem of human suffering, and the world-picture of today (the world as organic process). He sharpens the issue by posing two specific tasks his book must accomplish if the notion of divine suffering is to be fully convincing for Christian faith: 'to speak consistently of a God who suffers eminently and yet is still God, and a God who suffers universally and yet is still present uniquely and decisively in the sufferings of Christ' (p.3). Concern with these issues leads to an account of the redemptive power of God's sufferings, which reach a unique depth in the cross of Christ. By comparison with (say) Moltmann's focus on the theodicy issue, Fiddes does more to relate divine suffering to the traditional concern of atonement theology with forgiveness. But he also goes on to consider with great care the sense in which God might be said to encounter and overcome death (again not exclusively but most fully and effectively in the cross).

Fiddes rightly maintains that if God suffers he must be changed by the world. His relationship with the world is a reciprocal one in which he not only influences it but is influenced by it. This is the free choice of his love, in which he chooses to open himself to unpredictable suffering. Moreover, this means that there is a sense in which he is incomplete in himself and needs the world for his perfection, but only because he chooses to be himself in this way. Fiddes goes a long way in conceiving of the reciprocity of God and the world, criticising Moltmann for not allowing the world sufficient real freedom as co-creator with God and as contributing to God's suffering and joy. Whether he has gone too far in this direction is a matter for delicate and complex judgment. His God remains God in the sense that his final triumph over evil and suffering, through the power of his suffering, is assured. But the claim that 'the transcendence of a suffering God can only be understood as a transcendent suffering, not a transcendence beyond suffering' (p.143) seems to me to reduce God to his relationship with this world. This is a style of theology which leaves little place for negative theology. If we are not careful we begin to suppose we know what it is like for God to suffer.

My other main reservation concerns Christology. Paradoxically enough, though Fiddes justifiably criticises the Alexandrian Fathers for their attempt to preserve the impassibility of the divine Son in the suffering of the cross, his own 'Antiochene' Christology in another sense makes him less able than they were to take the suffering of God in the cross fully seriously. Alexandrian and Chalcedonian Christology could say (and indeed was very concerned to say) that God suffered and died on the cross, meaning that God the Logos was the subject of the human suffering and death of Jesus. Fiddes can speak only of God entering empathetically into the suffering of the man Jesus. Thereby he misses what for other theologians is the fundamental difference between God's unique suffering in the cross and his suffering generally:

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that on the cross God does not merely enter by empathy into the suffering of his creatures, but actually suffers the human suffering and death of Jesus as *his own* human suffering and death. It is the difference between suffering with us and suffering as one of us.

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Alan P. F. Sell, Defending and Declaring the Faith: Some Scottish Examples 1860-1920, Paternoster Press, 280 pp., £8.95.

Dr Sell, Theological Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, has given us a very valuable entrée into the lives and thought of eight notable Scottish divines, J. Kennedy, R. Flint, J. Caird, A. B. Bruce, J. Iverach, J. Orr, D. W. Forrest and J. Denney. All of these recently neglected men are not presented here merely as figures of historical interest. Rather they are shown to have important contributions to make to current theological debate. Dr Sell does this by giving a chapter to each, containing a brief biography (at first reading, the best part) and a longer summary of their thinking (which calls for a little more effort on the part of the reader). Each is allowed to speak for himself, through a number of well-chosen quotations. These were important days, when difficult questions were being tackled in the realms of philosophy (Kant, Hegel, etc.), science (evolutionary theory) and biblical criticism. These theologians were all men of faith, as well as being men of reason. They wanted passionately to believe in Christ and to preach him to others ('defending and declaring the faith'), but it had to be a Christ who could command belief by the mind as well as the heart. Theirs was not the rarefied theology of the ivory tower. They were all pastor-theologians of the best Scottish kind. But neither was theirs the 'instant theology' devised on their feet, which is not uncommon today. They have helpful words for us on such subjects as biblical inspiration (Orr and Denney), on tolerance (Bruce), and on the important fundamentals of the faith. Such theology is not only personally helpful, but is a vital contribution to the ecumenical sharing of insights. Dr Sell has served more than his own church in opening up doors which were closed to many. If a book like this is to be judged by whether it makes you want to go back to the originals, then the judgment will surely be positive, and the extended notes and references make this easy.

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Geoffrey Breed, *My Ancestors were Baptists*, Society of Genealogists, revised edn. 1988. 51 pp, £2.20 or £2.55 with postage.

We welcome the reissue of Geoffrey Breed's pamphlet, first published two years ago, and noted in our April 1988 issue, but now reprinted with minor amendments, and some expansion, particularly the addition of two new appendices relating to Strict Baptist records. Its useful compendium of addresses and other sources for further study have also been updated.