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Book Reviews

THE EVANGELICAL REVIVAL G M Ditchfield
 London: UCL Press 1998 136pp No price pb ISBN 1-85728-481

This book examines the Evangelical Revival in the British Isles in the period 1700-1830. It begins by considering the international dimension to the eighteenth-century revival in England which was so facilitated by transatlantic literary communications. Ditchfield demonstrates that the evangelical revival of 1700-1830 should really be seen as a series of separate revivals each of which appeared to have begun independently. Such was that in the West Riding of Yorkshire under Benjamin Ingham, an ordained clergyman of the established church who had been with Wesley in Georgia. Another of a different kind was prompted by the Kidderminster Dissenter, Joseph Williams.

There is a wide ranging survey of the Methodist revival which, contrary to popular opinion, the author indicates did not take root among the very poor. The appeal of Methodism is seen to include its emphasis on a supernatural form of Christianity and its inbuilt element of entertainment and spectacle. Ditchfield is not convinced by the view that the rise of Methodism was precipitated by an economic crisis and he is of the opinion that the Halevy thesis is at best not proven.

The book concludes with an assessment of the impact of revival. It contributed to the development of print culture, it deepened biblical awareness, particularly through the repetitive impact of hymns, it offered roles for women as preachers and generated missionary expansion. On a negative note the evangelicals attacked the pastimes of the poor but not those of the wealthy.

This slim volume provides a valuable introduction to the literature and scholarly debates surrounding the Evangelical Revival 1700-1830 and there is a detailed bibliography which provides a useful basis for students and others interested in getting to grips with this topic. For me this good book would be enhanced by an attempt to define what is meant by revival.

NIGEL SCOTLAND

**CALLED FROM ISLAM TO CHRIST: WHY MUSLIMS BECOME
CHRISTIANS** Jean-Marie Gaudeul

Crowborough: Monarch 1999 297pp + bibliography £8.99 pb
ISBN 1-85424-427-2

This is a useful, encouraging and challenging book. It is encouraging because it tells the stories of various people who have been converted from Islam to faith in Jesus Christ, despite many reports of traffic in the opposite direction. It is challenging because it spurs me on to remember evangelism among Muslims. But for it to be most useful, we need to know the author and his purpose.

Jean-Marie Gaudeul is a Roman Catholic who has spent time among Muslims and studied Islam, so he writes accurately and convincingly about the subject. His approach in this book can be summed up by a paragraph on pp 153-4, where he is discussing differences between Islam and Christianity.

We certainly believe that God will save members of all religions, but this does not mean that we should paper over real differences of doctrine and regard Islam as nothing more than another version of Christianity. Islam has the right to be heard in its specificity. Only then will it be possible to understand what some of its adherents find in it and what others find missing.

Thus the author is a pluralist, but one alive to the real differences between religions. One senses that he could have written another book called: *From Christ to Qur'an*. So he will not teach us to trust the Bible as God's infallible word, or that Jesus Christ is the unique way of salvation, or that unconverted Muslims face the wrath of God. Nor would his interpretation of conversion find agreement among Evangelicals. Yet the aim of his book makes it one we can use. He aims to show that 'Conversion is Possible' (the title of chapter one) and the ways, humanly speaking, in which this happens.

The bulk of the book is a series of stories and testimonies of conversion, according to the particular emphases of different paths to faith in Christ (being struck by the attractiveness of Jesus, seeing the community of believers, knowing the need for forgiveness etc), with some theological and pastoral reflection interwoven. Many of these stories are heart-warming, and show the

work of God in producing real repentance and true perseverance. They are usually taken from the converts' own words, referenced where possible, but sometimes requiring anonymity. The last two chapters are devoted to the plight of the convert, often rejected by family and friends, and yet not always accepted by the churches as genuine. Here the challenge to Christians is not only to believe in conversion, but to welcome these new believers and care for them, counting the cost with them.

It is a book worth reading if you live and work, as I do, in an area with many Muslims: it will not teach you any theology, but it will challenge you to obedience in evangelism.

DOMINIC WEBB

WHAT IS MISSION? THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

J Andrew Kirk

London: DLT 1999

234pp

£12.95 pb

ISBN 0-232-523326

What is mission? Is it reserved for evangelists, or does it have a wider meaning? J Andrew Kirk, the Dean and Head of the School of Mission at Selly Oak Colleges has given us a valuable introduction to these and other issues too often ignored by Evangelicals.

It is a joy to read a book that unashamedly starts, in Part I, with theology. To theology Kirk gives the task of critically assessing Christian beliefs and practices. He is no relativist; he rejects postmodernism and sees Christianity as a 'grand narrative' in which some beliefs are inadmissible. His definition of mission begins with the notion of *missio dei* which has been influential in the World Council of Churches. Mission is grounded in the nature of God as personal (he is scathing about Don Cupitt) and triune: the God who is active in interpersonal love is mission. The *missio dei* encompasses the whole of history, but the church is central to it, witnessing to the reality of God's Kingdom. This Kirk defines as 'life free from the reign of all those forces which enslave humanity'. Although he says that the kingdom does not equate to human victory over injustice, this definition seems to leave the door open to a form of 'social gospel' which sees the Kingdom primarily in terms of human relationships.

Kirk advocates a 'double listening' to both Scripture and 'the cry of the people' as the sources of theology, and seems sympathetic to a 'political

hermeneutic of the gospel'. He also suggests that Christian experience should measure theology. But then how can theology assess belief and practice? Although he values Scripture, and defends the historicity of the Gospels, I am not sure that he values it as the word of God. His hermeneutics rests on a concept of *sensus plenior*, and although he is aware of the danger of fanciful, solipsistic readings, this is not sufficiently controlled by the *sensus literalis*.

At the centre of Kirk's missiology is the belief that 'following in the way of Jesus Christ is *the* test of missionary faithfulness'. This requires evangelism, justice, compassion, and non-violence; the church must create life, welfare and non-violence. Following the master will mean suffering and maybe even martyrdom – a theme conspicuously absent from much pragmatic evangelical thinking on mission. But Kirk's gospel is incomplete; probably because his criterion is Jesus isolated from the rest of Scripture. God's wrath and the punishment of sin are not mentioned; their importance in Jesus' teachings is ignored. His doctrine of the atonement is unclear. He believes that Jesus 'broke the chains of violence by suffering its full consequences' but doesn't seem to think that he took sin's penal consequences. The emphasis is on restoring human relationships.

Part II explores seven 'themes' in mission: evangelism, culture, 'justice for the poor', other religions, non-violence, and relations between old and young churches. These discussions are excellent, and his actual use of Scripture much better than his theory. The issues are clearly and succinctly set out, without being shallow or trite, and Kirk never gives easy answers. As a typical middle-class Evangelical, I was challenged by his reflections on poverty and non-violence. The chapter on other religions is especially interesting. Kirk perceives that behind the dispute over pluralism is an epistemological disagreement, and that liberal pluralism is a distinct religion from Christianity. He clearly sees the Bible as pointing toward a particularist position.

The problem here concerns evangelism. Kirk gives it an important place in mission; his final page pleads for it not to be neglected. His reflections are valuable: he carefully distinguishes conversion from regeneration. But evangelism is one theme among many; a consequence of neglecting God's judgment. If, like Jesus, we believe that the ungodly will go to hell, then evangelism must take priority in mission. Kirk acknowledges this view, but does not interact with it sufficiently.

Part III reinforces the book's main point that the church is central to mission because 'the restoration of a damaged humanity to wholeness can only happen in community'. Kirk sees this community as characterized by love, trust in God, and a distinctive lifestyle, the latter requiring church discipline. Mission defines the church's essence. This goes too far; the church should be defined by its relationship to Christ, not its ministry. But one hopes that Church of England PLC will heed Kirk's call, and restructure itself around mission. He defends the involvement of the church in politics, and offers some good criticisms of the church growth movement. The book ends with an 'intrepid peep' into the future.

Kirk set out to write a handbook that would help students in their own exploration of missiology. He has succeeded admirably in this aim. There is much to disagree with, and he does not give us all the answers; but this is a good starting point.

STEPHEN WALTON

ISAIAH (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)	Alec Motyer
Leicester: IVP 1999	408pp £9.99 pb ISBN 0-85111-973-5

This volume completes the 'Tyndale Old Testament Commentary' series begun in 1964. Alec Motyer has already published a commentary on Isaiah with IVP (in 1993), and his aim in the present volume is to provide a 'reader's commentary' of Isaiah. While the same divisions of the text are retained (breaks come at the end of chapters 37 (not 39) and 55), the majority of the exegetical and explanatory material is new, resulting in a commentary which can be read through as well as consulted.

One outstanding feature of this commentary is that the 'big picture' is always kept in the reader's mind: in addition to a standard analysis (pp 36-40, which divides the text into the Books of the King (1-37), the Servant (38-55) and the Conqueror (56-66)) there is an introduction to 'Isaiah's message' which sets out in half a dozen paragraphs the flow of thought through the various sections in chapters 1-5, 6-12, 13-27, 28-37, 38-55 and 56-66. Finally, each passage is set within that larger framework before individual verses are commented on. The whole is written very much with the 'reader' in mind.

Another commendable feature is the way the text is brought to life: the historical

context in which Isaiah's prophecy was given and received is brought out clearly by the frequent return to the big picture. The theological context is not ignored either, and the author's gift as a teacher and preacher cannot help but shine through in the individual sections. None of this is at the expense of solid textual commentary (which is sadly too often a casualty of readers' commentaries).

Originally planned for two volumes, the final work is still of a manageable size. Comment is not made on every line of the biblical text, but this reviewer never had cause to question the decisions made in this area. By the same token, there would not be space to comment on the very many New Testament references and allusions to Isaiah: but the accessible format allows accurate looking up of 'spot' verses within their context.

Writing in the 1993 commentary, Motyer compared himself to 'a very small mouse nibbling heroically at a very large cheese' (p 10). We should be very grateful to him for his second endeavour as well. This is a fine commentary and a very fitting conclusion to the series within which it comes.

ED MOLL

**UNWEAVING THE RAINBOW: SCIENCE, DELUSION AND THE
APPETITE FOR WONDER** Richard Dawkins

London: Penguin 1998 336pp £8.99 pb ISBN 0-14-026408-6

In this, his latest book, Richard Dawkins attempts to repair some of the loss of wonder and purpose in nature and the cosmos that his first book *The Selfish Gene* apparently produced. He opens his Preface here with a quotation from Peter Atkins, a physical chemist and his colleague at Oxford, who had written in his book *The Second Law* [of Thermodynamics] (1984):

We are the children of chaos, and the deep structure of change is decay. At root there is only corruption, and the unstemmable tide of chaos. Gone is purpose; all that is left is direction. This is the bleakness we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the Universe.

Dawkins is in full sympathy with this dismal statement of the origin and long-term prospects of our race; the whole universe in fact, all the product of chance, is moving to a cold chaotic heat-death. Both he and Atkins of course are belligerent atheists and very open about it. Dawkins goes on:

But such very proper purging of saccharine false purpose; such laudable tough-mindedness in the debunking of cosmic sentimentality must not be confused with a loss of personal hope. Presumably there is indeed no purpose in the ultimate fate of the cosmos, but do any of us really tie our life's hopes to the ultimate fate of the cosmos anyway? Of course we don't; not if we are sane... To accuse science of robbing life of the warmth that makes it worth living is so preposterously mistaken... that I am almost driven to the despair of which I am so wrongly suspected.

I have quoted this from his Preface because it shows clearly what his book is all about. Science, he maintains, has established that our Universe and our life in it have all come about solely by chance; there is no purpose behind anything. We and it will pass away finally into total oblivion, into absolute nothingness. But it is a great mistake to think that this is a discovery that empties life of worthwhileness! Science has opened to us the splendour of the cosmos and living things as a great gallery of marvels. 'The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable', he writes, all the more effective because it carries the realization that 'the time we have for living is finite'. That then is the message he tries to drive home, and judging by the lavish praise accorded him in the extracts from reviews within and on the rear cover he seems to have won considerable approval for it. What are we to make of it?

My reaction is that it all depends on whether the reader is persuaded of Dawkins' *presupposition* that the entire Universe and all it contains is the product of blind and purposeless chance. If Dawkins wins on that, then this book may well further his cause. But I emphasize that word 'presupposition' because it indicates that his secular Darwinism is itself based decidedly on what he calls 'blind faith'. Were he to challenge me on that I would reply that natural selection, the key to Darwinism, depends on mutations which are only *presumed* to be random (ie due to chance); but that this is quite beyond proof! They may instead be like any sequence in the decimal expansion of say π , where the whole moves purposefully forward digit by digit – in spite of appearances! The biblical account of things can manage the observational data just as well as Darwinism thinks it can.

But I do not wish to end on this negative note. Dawkins has much to give here, and whether one agrees with him or not, his book is a considerable

stimulus to the mind. It is not just a continuation of the truly engrossing story of living things that he has given in his earlier books; it 'stands back' from the subject and surveys it from a more general point of view. If only he were to come to the biblical data as he tries to persuade his readers to come to the scientific, he might begin to appreciate it and give up his ill-thought contempt.

DOUGLAS C SPANNER

**NEW WINE INTO FRESH WINESKINS. CONTEXTUALIZING THE
EARLY CHRISTIAN CONFESSIONS** Bruce Longenecker

Peabody MA: Hendrickson 1999 207pp No price pb ISBN 1-56563-098-X

Professor Longenecker is well known for his stimulating work in New Testament studies, and in his most recent book he takes us through that familiar text in order to point out the presence and the significance of the so-called 'confessional' material in it. When NT scholars use this term they are speaking the language of form criticism, which maintains that there is a confessional 'genre' which can be detected in and behind many NT verses. Tell-tale clues such as rhythmic expression, catalogues of significant events in the life of Jesus and so on betray its presence, and Dr Longenecker wants to show us how widespread and significant this is. His purpose is to demonstrate that the early Christians contextualized their beliefs according to the circumstances in which they evangelized, and he maintains that this is what Christians must do today – hence the reference to the wineskins.

When reading books about the NT it is wise to keep firmly in mind the distinction between fact and speculation. No branch of academic study is more overworked than this one, with the result that most of what passes for scholarly discussion is rooted in speculation rather than in fact. This is the case, unfortunately, with the so-called 'confessional' material. The majority of scholars who have dealt with the subject believe that this material exists, though less use has been made of that belief than one might suppose. Quite probably their belief is correct, at least up to a point. But the problem with the form critical approach is that it defines what it is looking for first and then sets out to find it. This method turns up any number of passages, but it is far from clear that all or even most of them ever formed part of an early Christian 'confession'. Of course (and this is another technique which is so helpful here) if we define 'confession' so broadly that it can include almost any propositional statement of Christian belief, then it is all over the place in

the NT, as Dr Longenecker points out. The result is a stimulating and often challenging study of a wide variety of NT passages, but the reader will probably come away still somewhat bemused. ‘Confession’ remains an elusive concept, capable of embracing many different things but impossible to pin down with any indisputable example(s).

Dr Longenecker is especially concerned with the problem of contextualizing Christian belief today, but he appears to have interpreted Jesus’ analogy of the new wine in an inappropriate way. The gospel had to be put into fresh wineskins in the first century, but then it really was ‘new wine’. Today that is no longer true, at least not in the same sense. The gospel has been around for 2000 years, and it is the same today as it was then. Of course, it has a freshness about it because it has a living and powerful message, but the danger of giving it new packaging is precisely that that message may be obscured or diluted in the process of designing it. If all we are talking about when we say ‘contextualization’ is new styles of worship or modern translations of the Bible there is little problem, but when it comes to new formulations of Christian truth we have to be extremely careful. It may be possible to devise them, but we should not assume that this is necessary simply in order to cater for different ‘cultures’ – a word almost as slippery as ‘confession’ in this context. The true gospel is not conditioned by culture (whatever that means); it transforms it. Western civilization is not perfect, but it is what it is very largely because of the imprint which the gospel has left on it. When other peoples are converted to Christianity they very often adopt Western values not simply because the missionaries tell them to but because it is what they want. Multiculturalism may be alive and well in university common rooms, but it is hard to find at the grass roots level, unless one is talking in terms of language and styles of music. Here there is a real danger that evangelism may fall victim to sociological fashion, and the message of the gospel will be compromised accordingly.

Dr Longenecker has given us much food for thought in this book, even if he fails to convince us of the validity of the main point which he is trying to make. It is an eclectic work, taking short passages from almost every book in the NT, and that is how it should be used – for insight and assistance in understanding particular texts, rather than for an overall theory applicable to the NT as a whole.

ASCENSION AND ECCLESIA **Douglas Farrow**
 Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1999 340pp £24.95 hb ISBN 0-567-08676-3

When I was a student at Trinity College, Cambridge, I always made a point of attending the college eucharist on Ascension Day, because I wanted to hear what the dean (then the late bishop John Robinson) would have to say about it. I told him quite openly that there could be no better occasion on which to discover whether he was really a Christian believer or not, because the doctrine of the Ascension does not permit the kind of mental acrobatics so often found in discussions of the Resurrection. Either one believes that Jesus departed this world of time and space and that he now dwells in eternity, or one does not, in which case the ascension is quite literally inexplicable, and I wanted to discover what someone who apparently rejected any form of metaphysics would find to say about it.

The effects of modern, post-Enlightenment thinking have been such that in recent centuries the church has generally done its best to avoid serious discussion of the subject. The fact that the feast falls on a Thursday is extremely convenient for this, since few churches bother to celebrate it and those that do tend to have a very shortened form of service which does not require a lengthy exposition of the doctrine. As a result, the Ascension goes by default in a way that Trinity Sunday (another awkward occasion for many) does not. In this climate, Dr Farrow has done us the inestimable service of bringing the doctrine of Christ's Ascension into heaven back to the centre stage of theological concern. In a work which began life as a doctoral dissertation at King's College, London (and which still bears many traces of that origin), he demonstrates just how important it is to many different aspects of our faith.

The Ascension is the link between the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, being at once the end of the former and the beginning of the latter. It is the essential transition between the earthly and the heavenly work of Christ, and therefore constitutes the theological framework for our understanding of the church (ecclesiology) and the sacraments. Not many people stop to think about it, but our view of something like transubstantiation will depend to a considerable extent on how we look at the Ascension, because it is that doctrine which will determine more than any other where Christ is now 'really' present.

In a breathtaking sweep of the whole of Christian theological history, Dr

Farrow shows us just how closely the Ascension is linked to our cosmology, and demonstrates how changes in the latter can affect our understanding of the former (and vice versa). This is not a book for the faint-hearted or for the beginner in theology; one must have a good grasp of both Christian history and of philosophical concepts in order to follow it in the way it deserves. Inevitably, specialists in different areas will find things to disagree with, since Dr Farrow's global approach means that he has to concentrate on making his point, often at the expense of nuances in particular cases. What, for example, should we make of a sentence like the following: 'The sacramentalizing of icons does appear to have contributed to an inflationary spiral of clericalism, dogmatism and other indicators of a self-affirming church, whose reign as official sanctifier not just of icons, but of the societies of eastern Europe, would be challenged effectively only a thousand years later by the mutant caesaropapism of the Marxists' (p 151). To suggest that matters are a good deal more complex than this would be an understatement, to say the least, and few students of the Eastern Church would be happy with a description like this one, but in the broad sweep of Dr Farrow's argument it can be passed over.

Specialists in Augustine, Calvin and Barth will doubtless be equally dubious of some of the sweeping generalizations about them which Dr Farrow makes in the course of his argument, but these hesitations, valid as they are, should not be allowed to detract from the main point which he is trying to make, viz that our understanding of the Ascension will both affect and reveal what we think about a whole range of other issues, among which the church and the sacraments have a special place. There is no doubt that this book is a major achievement in theological thought, and that it will be the natural starting point for future discussion of the subject. If it succeeds in putting the Ascension back on the theological map, so much the better. The church has much to thank Dr Farrow for, and we can only hope that this book will enjoy the long life and wide influence which it so clearly deserves.

GERALD BRAY

GNOSIS AND FAITH IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Riemer Roukema

London: SCM Press 1999

£14.95 pb

ISBN 0-334-02773-X

This is a short and clear introduction to the phenomenon of Gnosticism in the early church. The author adopts an inductive method, leading his readers gently from broad initial principles to a deeper and more detailed

examination of particular gnostic works and concluding with his own analysis of why Gnosticism failed and eventually disappeared.

He concentrates initially on the discoveries made at Nag Hammadi in 1945, which provides our most extensive direct knowledge of Gnosticism. From there he goes on to describe the other evidence which we have, much of which comes from hostile sources which have been preserved precisely for that reason. But Dr Roukema reminds us that the line between orthodoxy and heresy is not always easy to draw, and that 'gnosis' was used by such people as Clement of Alexandria to describe spiritual maturity in mainstream Christianity as much as in the various sects which we habitually label as 'gnostic'.

As the book progresses we come to see more clearly that Gnosticism was a radically Platonized form of Christianity which had contemporary parallels in other religions. It may well have been an inevitable part of the process by which an essentially Jewish world view was absorbed and adapted into the Hellenism which dominated the intellectual life of the Roman Empire. As biblical Christianity was more clearly understood, Gnosticism's inadequacies became more apparent and eventually they yielded to the force of stronger logic which Christian orthodoxy represented. Dr Roukema makes this very clear in the closing chapter of his book, where he demonstrates that the main gnostic themes simply could not compete with their orthodox rivals. In particular, it was not possible to maintain the gnostic belief that the creator god was a deity inferior to the redeemer God of Jesus Christ. Nor could gnostic myths about the life and teachings of Jesus withstand the spare historicity of the canonical Gospels which present an altogether more credible picture of the Saviour's earthly career. Finally, Gnosticism was inherently elitist in that it maintained that true spiritual knowledge was given only to a philosophically gifted circle which was intrinsically superior to the mass of believers. By definition, such a doctrine cannot have a wide appeal, and it was inevitable that the more democratic orthodox faith would carry the day with the majority.

Dr Roukema has written a very fair introduction which will be a valuable help to students and to all those who are trying to understanding a complex and confusing series of movements in the early church. It is certainly a good place to begin to study ancient 'gnosis' and to relate it both to mainstream orthodoxy and to the neo-gnostic or 'New Age' currents prevalent in our own time.

GERALD BRAY

JOHN CALVIN, STUDENT OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

Anthony N S Lane

Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1999

£16.95 pb

ISBN 0-567-08694-1

Tony Lane has spent a good part of his academic career doing research on different aspects of the life and work of John Calvin, who despite his fame remains one of the least-known of theologians. This book is a collection of essays which Mr Lane has written over a span of about 20 years, and examines Calvin's use of the Church Fathers. An introductory chapter, written especially for this volume, outlines what the pitfalls are for anyone undertaking an exercise of this kind, and it should be read before looking at any of the other chapters in the book. Quite rightly, Mr Lane points out that it is not enough simply to tally up the various quotations and draw conclusions on that basis. In some respects, Calvin knew the fathers of the church almost subconsciously, since their writings were the staple diet of anyone receiving a pre-Reformation education in Catholic Europe. He used them rather as we might use an encyclopedia today, selecting passages which were useful to his purposes at any given moment but leaving large parts apparently untouched. Does this mean that he was unfamiliar with them, or that he quietly objected to what they were saying?

Mr Lane takes us through this material with painstaking thoroughness, demonstrating clearly at every point just what can and cannot be assumed from the available evidence. Augustine figures prominently of course, but so does Bernard of Clairvaux, whose writings provided considerable inspiration for Calvin in his maturer years. It seems in fact that at some point in the early 1540s Calvin 'discovered' Bernard, and that his attachment to the great monastic preacher grew steadily from then on. His knowledge of the Greek Fathers was patchier, and was mediated for the most part through Latin translations, though Mr Lane reminds us that this is not necessarily a comment on the inadequacy of Calvin's Greek. Latin, after all, was almost his native tongue, and it is hardly surprising that he would have found it easier and more convenient to use translations.

Scholars looking for detail will find it here in abundance. Mr Lane includes several tables indicating what Calvin's sources were, and he has several extensive discussions about the manuscripts and printed editions to which Calvin had access. He even gives a full list of Calvin's quotes from Bernard, in

the original Latin. Information of this kind obviously puts the book beyond the reach of the general reader, but it will be an invaluable aid to students who need to know this kind of thing and who would otherwise have to spend long hours of research trying to find it for themselves. Both Mr Lane and the publishers deserve our thanks for their efforts in putting this material together, and they may rest assured that their labours will be appreciated by specialists in the field for generations to come.

GERALD BRAY

ON CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Rowan Williams

Oxford: Blackwell 2000 310pp £50/\$64.95 hb ISBN 0-631-214399

£16.99/\$26.95 pb ISBN 0-631-214402

It is a brave man who would sit down and write a meditative book about Christian theology in a day and age when few people seem to be able to agree even on a basic definition of what that is. Despite infinite nuances, however, the main line of division is between those who regard Christian theology as revealed truth and those who think of it more as a tradition of contemplation about the deeper meaning of human life. Neither side would completely exclude the other of course, but in either case there is no doubt about what the fundamental starting point is. Bishop Williams, it can be said without fear of contradiction, quite clearly belongs to the second group. There is little sign that he has any great hostility towards those who believe that theology is the explanation of a revelation from God, but it is clear from everything he writes that he has little sympathy with people who think in that way either.

Looking at what he has written on his own terms, Bishop Williams must be regarded as fairly 'conservative'. He is concerned to explain traditional Christian concepts in ways which he hopes will be accepted by the leading minds in contemporary academic theology and philosophy. He even manages to say that the empty tomb is an essential part of belief in the Resurrection, a statement which would seem to be perfectly obvious to anyone who believes that the Bible is revealed truth, but which is widely denied in modern liberal thinking. He also has a remarkable chapter on the sacraments in which he defends the approach to them taken by the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, although he accepts that in many ways it is a product of its time.

The book is divided into five parts, each of which is further subdivided into

three or four chapters. In the first part, entitled 'defining the enterprise', Bishop Williams tackles the fundamental question of methodology, and it is here that traditional believers will find themselves most at sea. The chapter on the 'discipline of Scripture' in particular is not like anything they would expect to find. Far from dealing with such issues as infallibility and inerrancy, Bishop Williams looks at the Bible as a source of vocabulary and imagery which helps us to focus our thoughts about human nature and destiny. There is nothing wrong with that of course, but it is a very long way indeed from what more robust believers would normally expect to find.

Much the same can be said for the other sections as well. The second part, called 'the act of God' deals with creation but says little or nothing about the sin which has come to mar it. What we get instead is 'alienation', that strange notion which is fundamentally self-, rather than God-centred. The third part, 'the grammar of God' investigates the Trinity, but again in ways which will mean little to anyone who is accustomed to Christian orthodoxy. The fourth part, 'making signs' and the last, 'living the mystery' open up the whole dimension of mystical theology, which is clearly where Bishop Williams feels most at home. The remarkable thing is that he does his best to deal with the subject within the context of traditional Anglicanism and resists the temptation to recommend either Roman Catholicism or (more fashionably these days) Eastern Orthodoxy as an alternative to it. Evangelicals in particular need to rediscover the mystical dimensions of their own beliefs, and if Bishop Williams can help them do so then his book will have done the church a great service.

Unfortunately, the style and content are such that much of what he writes will be hard going for anyone outside a university common room, and we can only wonder how many of the inhabitants of those privileged islands of civility and radical disobedience to the Word of God will be interested enough to read what Bishop Williams is offering them. The world out of which this book has come and which it addresses is a small one, and it would be surprising if it manages to reach out beyond its confines. Nevertheless, within its own context and on its own terms it has much to challenge us with, and those who make the effort to get into its subtler arguments will be well rewarded by the effort.

GERALD BRAY

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Another advantage is free membership of the **Church Society Book Club** which offers members both current and classic books on theology and related subjects at reduced prices. It provides substantial savings in building up a reference library and also allows the opportunity to keep abreast of current thinking.

Church Society Trust exercises patronage in over 100 parishes and seeks to provide gospel ministry and biblical teaching by spiritually minded men.

More information about the Society, its work and details of subscription rates will gladly be sent on request. Church Society's office is at

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