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Book Reviews

BELIEF IN GOD IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE **John Polkinghorne**
London: Yale University Press, 1998/2003 **133 pp £6.99 pb**
ISBN 0-300-09949-5

Gone are the days when science and theology lived happily together. Whereas in former times men like Newton and Galileo read the two books that God had written—the book of nature and the book of scripture' (p. 76), most modern scientists reject religious thinking.

However, theoretical physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne remains convinced that 'there is a Mind and a Purpose behind the history of the universe and that the One whose veiled presence is intimated in this way is worthy of worship and the ground of hope' (p. 1). In this book he issues a simple appeal to his colleagues within science to 'take a generous view of the nature of reality' (p. 19) and consider the 'general hints of the divine presence' (p. 1) in the vast cosmos and the collective thoughts of humanity.

In his opinion it is the scientist' s privilege to ' encounter a world whose large-scale structure and small-scale process are alike characterised by a wonderful order that is expressible in concise and elegant mathematical terms' (p. 2). He cites Einstein's experience of 'joyous excitement' (p. 4) at the sound of nature speaking, Paul Davies' description of the search for scientific truth as a ' reading of the *Mind of God*' (p. 4), and Dirac's dedication to the 'pursuit of mathematical beauty' (p. 2) as evidence that scientists 'are seeking God whether they acknowledge that divine quest or not' (p. 24).

And that search is all the more interesting now we have 'seen the death of a merely mechanical universe' (p. 50). The fact we recognise that the 'world is indeed stranger and more exciting than Newton imagined' (p. 66), in his eyes, marks the coming of age of physics; quantum mechanics, chaos theory and fractals have allowed science to engage theology in dialogue.

Not that he is impressed by every scientific discipline. For instance, the dismissal of moral knowledge as a by-product of genetic imprinting 'only shows the desperate poverty of a ' morality' of sociobiology' (p. 18). 'Did Oskar Schindler take great risks to rescue more than a thousand Jews from extermination

because of some implicit calculation of genetic advantage' (p. 18)?

In his quest for truth, Polkinghorne is willing to draw from science and all religions. Whilst this approach will undoubtedly not appeal to every Christian, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* may make a suitable present for someone who shares his love for science but has ruled God out of the equation.

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REDEEM THE TIME — Sin in the writings of John Owen
Steve Griffiths
Fearn, Rosshire: Mentor (Christian Focus) 2001 312 pp £10.99 p b
ISBN185792655-2

One of the more encouraging signs in contemporary evangelicalism is a resurgence of interest in the greatest of the Puritan theologians, John Owen. Owen's works have a depth, a spirituality (in the old sense of that much abused term), and a theocentricity that makes Christians today appear like gnats next to an elephant. Anything that helps us come to grips with him is welcome, and Steve Griffiths, an Anglican minister in East London, introduces us to Owen's thoughts on possibly the least fashionable subject among twenty-first century Christians: sin and the need for holiness.

Griffiths sets himself three main objectives. First, he explores the claim that the doctrine of sin was foundational to Owen's thought. Here he shows that whilst harmartology did not displace the doctrine of God, 'the doctrine of sin was foundational inasmuch as he understood the effects of the fall to render impossible any effective theological work through human endeavour'. Second, he avoids intensive interaction with the 'Calvin versus the Calvinists' debate, rightly noting that it is anachronistic in that it takes its subjects out of their historical context. In particular, Alan Clifford comes under fire for 'gross methodological error'. Griffiths deliberately refers to Owen as 'Reformed' and not 'Calvinist', commenting that 'to speak of continuity with Calvin as the benchmark for loyalty is to misinterpret the Reformed tradition'. Owen referred to both Augustine and Aquinas more than he did to Calvin. However, whilst there was both 'continuity and disparity' between Calvin and Owen over the

doctrine of sin 'their writings were largely sympathetic'. Third, Griffiths attempts 'to locate Owen's doctrine of sin within his pastoral ministry'. This is perhaps the book's most important and valuable aspect: it emphasises that Owen was above all else not merely an academic but always a pastor, and everything that he wrote was aimed at producing a holy people. In this context Griffiths notes that the polemical context of some of Owen's 'pastoral' writings has sometimes been underestimated: 'it is almost impossible to separate positive exposition from polemic in the seventeenth-century theological context'.

The first chapter sets out Owen's basic theological framework. This was a creative development of the Reformed federal tradition. Griffiths then sets out Owen's understanding of the *imago dei*. With Calvin, but in contrast to Augustine and Aquinas, Owen believed that the image had been so lost at the fall that now it could only be understood as it was seen in Christ. With all three he saw it as an ethical and dynamic principle of relationship with God, located primarily in the rational faculties, making possible man's final end of enjoyment of God. The mortification of sin was the restoration of the image of God in the individual.

Subsequent chapters deal with sin in the individual, society, and the church. Sin had worked in the individual, through the intellect, will, and affections, so that the image of God was defaced. Owen's understanding of the corporate working of sin stands out in contrast to modern evangelicalism. This means that the chapter on 'the church' will make uncomfortable reading for many of us, who would like to withdraw into our parishes and abdicate responsibility for the sins of our denomination. Owen's arguments for separation may not always be convincing; but his deep concern for personal and corporate holiness, and for God to be honoured is a living accusation against us. In these chapters, Griffith's historical approach bears rich fruit, as he shows how Owen's understanding of sin was worked out in his labours as pastor, university administrator, and statesman (of course Owen would have seen the last two as an extension of the first). A final chapter deals with 'Sin and the need for holiness'. Here Griffiths analyses Owen's great works on 'Spiritual mindedness' and 'The mortification of sin'. At the root of Owen's teaching was his belief in the union of the believer with Christ, and the efficacy of personal faith alone in fighting sin.

Griffiths shows a deep acquaintance with Owen's writings and a detailed knowledge of his historical context, including many of the more obscure seventeenth century writers. The book could have done with a little more editing—some of the biographical information on, for instance, Arminius and Socinus could have gone in the (extremely helpful) endnotes. Occasionally his argument, with its structure of points and sub-points gets rather complicated-this is probably an occupational hazard of reading Owen! I would have liked to have seen more on how Owen's harmartology fitted in to his wider theology; for instance, on how it related to his doctrine of the atonement. But these minor complaints apart, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of Owen. Evangelicals have lost our forefathers' sense of the depth of sin and the need for holiness; I believe that this book, in bringing us to Owen's writings, could help us to recover it. It is also most encouraging to find a busy, inner city pastor, much involved in youth work, who takes the time and effort to engage in serious theological work.

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PRAYER, PRAISE & PROPHECY: A THEOLOGY OF THE PSALMS
Geoffrey Grogan
Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2001 330pp £10-99 hb
ISBN 185792-642-0

This introductory overview of the Psalms comes highly recommended on the cover, with glowing praise from such worthies as Dale Ralph Davies, Alec Motyer, John Mackay, and Desmond Alexander. And it *is* an excellent book, a great example of an integrated biblical theology which is aware of questions of textual criticism, doctrine, ethics, historical theology, and pastoral practice, addressing them all at various points, as appropriate.

With chapters of only about ten pages each, it is easy to get through (a great book at bedtime!). It is best read with a Bible open by the side of the book because it is constantly referring to the text of Psalms itself without necessarily quoting texts in full each time, although if one is familiar with Psalms this would not be too much of a problem. It is well-researched, but may be off-putting for the layman with no idea of who Childs, Barth, Mowinckel,

Westermann and others are. Grogan is aware of the history of Psalms scholarship, but has not overburdened the book with *too* much technical detail or heavy footnotes. I'm not sure that many people in the pews would be capable of digesting it, although it would certainly be of use to keen students and well-trained lay readers as well as clergy.

Grogan specifically talks about the Christian use of Psalms at the end of the book, but he usually includes some kind of contemporary application within each chapter (sometimes a bit trite and clichéd but often profound). He never forgets the New Testament; there are a great many comments about the continuity of the testaments, showing how specific texts or themes are taken up from the Psalms later on in the Bible.

Overall, this book is reminiscent of Robert Reymond's biblical theology of Paul (*Paul: Missionary Theologian*) being pitched by the same publisher at the same kind of level. It interacts with all the latest research, distils it, and attempts to show the practical ministry implications. It is excellent as an overview of the longest book in the Old Testament, of much help if such an overview was missing from one's college training or if one is contemplating a sermon series on Psalms. Those who are more familiar with Psalms from years gone by will still find much stimulating material here, including a good outline of the 'Psalms as a Book' approach which is popular among scholars at present.

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WHOSE SIDE IS GOD ON? NATIONALISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Christopher Catherwood
London: SPCK, 2003 112 pp pb £9.99 ISBN 0-281-05154-2

In the context of the Christian faith, this book examines nationalism, 'one of the greatest curses of the century we have just left behind' (p. xiv).

En route to his conclusion that as Christians 'our citizenship...is in heaven and that is where our principal identity should lie' (p. xiv), Christopher Catherwood discusses the emergence of nation as a concept, the complexity of

identity in multicultural society, and the relationship between church and state. His purpose for writing is to challenge the British and American assumption that 'our kind of patriotism would never lead to anything unpleasant' (p. 26), warning that 'patriotism and nationalism are really only two degrees of the same thing' (p. 7). In his eyes, the fact that 'patriotic Britons and patriotic Germans both believed that God was on their side' (p. 6) during the Second World War indicates how easily we fall for 'the most seductive ideology of the past few centuries' (p. 105): the nation.

Catherwood argues that, as 'global Christians' (p. 91), we should consider the effect our actions have on our brothers and sisters in Christ living in nations less tolerant of the Christian faith. In light of recent events, 'we should be especially mindful of the consequences for our fellow Christians living in predominantly Muslim countries' (p. 91). He offers a good example of this philosophy in action: since the USA 'grants permission for any religious group, however bizarre, to worship freely, Advocates International (a USA-based organisation) is in a very persuasive position to protect the rights of Christians in totalitarian regimes' (p. 93).

And so, despite being 'a very happy member of an excellent Church of England parish' (p. 90), he is not enamoured by the marriage of church and state in Britain. The phenomenal Christian growth in the first few centuries, and in countries such as China in the twentieth, shows that 'God does not need a friendly state' (p. 90) to accomplish his purposes. Convinced that a 'Christian country cannot exist' (p. 110), he warns against 'seeking political rather than spiritual solutions for the nation's moral woes' (p. 96).

In looking at key historical events in the light of biblical teaching, *Whose Side Is God On?* is essential reading for those who think the 'United States is a city shining upon a hill that is especially blessed by God' (p. xiii), or anyone tempted to romanticise that 'those feet in ancient time [did] walk upon England's mountains green' (p. 2).

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THE ROOTS OF ENDURANCE — Invincible perseverance in the lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon and William Wilberforce
John Piper
Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2002 pp. 175 7.99pb
ISBN 0-85111-289-7

Those who read this book looking for biographies of the three Christian leaders mentioned in the sub-title will be disappointed. Instead they will be given a timely challenge for an age when the so-called 'prosperity gospel' has had its spin-off in making many Christians, even in established Bible-teaching congregations, emotionally fragile. To quote the publisher's blurb, 'we shatter easily when misfortune comes our way. In the face of sustained contention, we have little ability to withstand the onslaught, let alone surmount it with joy'.

This is the third book in a series, based on messages (the author prefers not to call them 'sermons' (because they are not expositions of Scripture) or 'lectures' (because they are passionately personal, and at times will taste like preaching) given at the annual Bethlehem Conference for Pastors in the USA. In earlier volumes the author has focused on the lives of Augustine (of Hippo), Luther and Calvin, and John Bunyan, William Cowper and David Brainerd, and in giving the whole series the title *The Swans are not silent* he is referring to the words of Eraclius on succeeding Augustine, 'the cricket chirps, the swan is silent'. The series is written to prove that that statement was wrong. Piper calls the three characters of this volume 'coronary Christians' to draw attention to the fact that there are 'adrenal Christians' who display a spurt of energy and then experience fatigue, while the heart (like 'coronary Christians') goes on serving very quietly through good days and bad, happy and sad, high and low, appreciated and unappreciated, enduring in a way adrenaline does not (pp. 10-11).

The abundance of footnotes displays the extent to which the author has studied his heroes and their writings, and in an introductory chapter he draws together the threads which are interestingly common to the Christian experience and teaching of all three. This is a timely reminder to our age, where so often the atonement-centred theology of the Scriptures is being replaced by a creation- and incarnation-centred theology, for Piper finds the three 'united in their delight in and devotion to the cross of Christ as the ground of Christ's

righteousness freely imputed to them through faith alone as the root of all righteous endurance' (p. 33). His own testimony is that he depends on 'the life and ministry of men and women whose God-centred, Christ-exalting, cross-focused perseverance inspires me to press on through hardship' as one of the roots of his own endurance in Christian ministry (p. 38).

One of the insights of this volume is the way in which the three men interacted. Although Newton was thirty-four years older than the other two, he knew them both, and Piper calls Newton Wilberforce's cheer-leader (p. 35). It was Simeon's close friend and supporter Isaac Milner who led Wilberforce to Christ and helped the great social reformer to lay the foundations of his faith by reading the Greek Testament together as they spent summers travelling the Continent. A fruit of such study was Wilberforce's book, *A Practical View of Christianity:* this could be a tonic for our own age, which tends to play down the importance of doctrine, just as much as it was for his own, for it shows that 'true Christianity...is rooted in the great doctrines of the Bible about sin and Christ and faith' (p. 156).

From the above it will be seen that these three portraits are more by way of character-studies than biographies, yet in this approach they bring out the tenderness of Newton in his pastoral dealings, which flowed from his own experience of 'amazing grace'. For Simeon we are shown his constant repentance before God, quoting his words (which might be foreign to many of today's Christian leaders) on the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination 'I love the valley of humiliation. I there feel that I am in my proper place' (p. 111), while in all the battles Wilberforce had to fight inside and outside Parliament he found that it was his joy in Christ that was crucial to his living the Christian life (p. 154).

In an age when so many ministers show symptoms of 'ministry burnout' this is a timely book. Make it a present for your clergy. More than this, when there is so much 'spin' around, and integrity appears to be a quality unknown in many political circles, it could make a useful present for any MP who is known to have Christian sympathies.

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