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REVIEWS

Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age

Sallie McFague

SCM Press, London, 1987; 224pp., £8.50 paperback; ISBN 0 334 01039 X

Sallie McFague is Professor of Theology in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University. Her previous book, *Metaphorical Theology*, established her as one of America's leading feminist theologians through its assault on the allegedly patriarchal character of traditional Christian images for speaking of God. The present work is not, strictly speaking, an example of feminist theology; it has a broader concern – the fate of the earth, threatened as it is by destruction through pollution and/or nuclear holocaust.

The question being addressed is this: which metaphors for speaking of the relation of God and the world are most likely to provide a stimulus for human beings to take the responsibility for the fate of the earth? According to McFague, traditional images for the God-world relation view God as king, sovereign or lord and the world as his realm or property. Such 'triumphalist' images are not only unhelpful, but actually harmful because they lead either to attitudes of domination or to escapism. They lead to domination and exploitation if the one using them sees his/her relation to the world as in some way mirroring or sharing in God's power to dominate the earth. Alternatively, they lead to passivity or escapism if one is inclined to believe that the sovereign God alone is responsible for the future of the world, while human beings can do little or nothing to affect the outcome. Either way, the traditional triumphalist images for God are opposed to life, its continuation and fulfilment, and therefore must be replaced. McFague's book is at one and the same time a critique of traditional images and a search for alternatives – alternatives which she finds in speaking of God as 'mother,' 'lover,' and 'friend'.

It is important to point out however that McFague is *not* saying that 'mother,' 'lover,' and 'friend' are more accurate *descriptions* or *definitions* of the God-world relation than those they would replace. It is a complete misunderstanding of metaphor to think that it has the capacity to define or describe reality. Metaphors do not describe reality; they create it in the sense that they are productive of certain ways of being in the world. 'How the metaphor refers we do not know – or indeed even if it does. At most one wagers it does and lives as if it does, which means that the main criterion for a "true" theology is pragmatic, preferring those models of God that are helpful in the praxis of bringing about fulfilment for living beings' (p. 196). In other words, for McFague, the language we use to speak of God may or may not actually refer to something or someone, but we cannot know whether it does or not. The adequacy of a given metaphor cannot be tested by how well it corresponds to God. McFague is ultimately quite agnostic as to what God is *really* like.

Does this mean that to speak of God as 'mother,' 'lover,' and 'friend' is a completely arbitrary act? No, says McFague; some metaphors are indeed

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'better' than others but they show themselves to be 'better' not by referring to God more accurately but by 'imaging' God in such a way that those who hear this image will respond to it with actions that are in the service of peace, justice, and a holistic understanding of the interdependence of all life on our planet. Metaphors thus have an 'as if' quality to them. They invite us to act as if they were true, to live within them for a while and see what kind of life they promote.

Given her pragmatic conception of truth, it is not surprising that McFague says there are many other sources of 'appropriate' metaphors than the Bible. Its metaphors were appropriate for expressing the Christian myth in that age but we cannot simply continue using those metaphors as if there were something sacred about them. In any case, the metaphors of 'king,' 'sovereign' and 'lord' had their place in a mythology that saw '... Jesus as "fully God and fully man," the substitutionary sacrifice who atoned for the sins of the world two thousand years ago and who now reigns triumphant along with all who loyally accept his kingly, gracious forgiveness of their sins' (p. 54). Such a myth is no longer credible. If we continue to hang on to it 'we not only accept a salvation we do not need but weaken if not destroy our ability to understand and accept the salvation we do need'. The idea that salvation comes through one representative individual is contrary to the view of salvation that is needed in our time, *viz.* the de-stabilizing of all patterns of relating in our world that divide us (rich/poor, Jew/Gentile, male/female, white/coloured, straight/gay, Christian/non-Christian, *etc.*). Salvation is not something achieved by one individual two thousand years ago but something we must do in our day. Metaphors like 'mother,' 'lover,' and 'friend' are no more sacrosanct than those they replace but they have the advantage of being more conducive to promoting this view of salvation.

It would be only to state the obvious to say that, from a biblical-Reformational standpoint, there is little in McFague's position that is specifically Christian. In any case, it would scarcely come to Dr McFague as a chastisement. She regards the biblical-Reformational outlook in theology as anachronistic.

More fruitful would be a discussion of which theology (McFague's or the more traditional one) is more conducive of a Christian existence characterized by effective opposition to oppression and exploitation in our world. McFague is right on one point: conservative Christians have all too often taken the escapist position of assuming that only the Lord's return will cure the problems which confront us and thus have opted out of active engagement against the principalities and powers that oppress and divide us. But is escapism (or worse, open participation in powers of domination) really promoted by traditional Christianity? Is it not rather a misunderstanding by Christians of the demands placed upon them by the gospel?

Careful attention must be given too to McFague's 'pragmatic' conception of truth. She argues that her choice of metaphors is not arbitrary because there is a criterion which governs their selection. That criterion is their capacity for promoting the ends she values as 'good' and 'right.' But this is only to push the problem of arbitrariness back one step. McFague is frankly utilitarian in justifying her means (new metaphors for God) by her ends. But she is completely incapable of offering a justification for the values with which she

then justifies her means. The values are themselves arbitrarily selected. She would like to believe that the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent, but that there is a power which is on the side of life and its fulfilment (p. 195), and *if* this were the case, it might arguably provide some grounding for her choice of goals. But she herself regards belief in this power as a wager, a 'shy ontological claim' (p. 197). She claims not to *know* whether such a thing exists at all. The most she can say is that the notion that 'God' is on the side of life and its fulfilment is a necessary 'initial assumption.' On close inspection, however, this assumption is not made necessary by any supporting evidence but only by its necessity for promoting her ends. This is of course to justify her values by appeal to the assumption that God is on the side of life and at the same time, to justify the assumption by the values. McFague recognizes the circularity here but is unwilling to consider any other option (p. 192). The arbitrariness of this procedure is unrelenting.

It is difficult to believe that liberating existence will be promoted on such transparently shaky grounds. If the choice of goals is arbitrary, then the choice to oppress has every bit as much legitimacy as the choice for liberating solidarity with the oppressed; the decision to exploit the earth as much legitimacy as the decision to respect and conserve it. The ecological crisis and the threat of nuclear destruction are all too real but we will hardly find theological resources for effective political action here.

Bruce McCormack
New College
University of Edinburgh.

Priesthood & Ministry in Crisis

Terence Card

SCM Press Ltd., London, 1988; 128pp., £6.95, paperback; ISBN 0 334 00277 X

This book addresses the crisis to be found in understandings of the (ordained) priesthood and ministry. Its main characteristic, however, is a philosophically existentialist viewpoint. Though aimed at a wide readership, the popular manner in which it is introduced belies this philosophical content.

Formally, it is helpfully laid out. It begins by pointing to the fact that this is a time of change. It then diagnoses the different problems which are afflicting the ordained ministry, especially, but not only, in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. The main body of the book is made up of an appreciation of three important recent books on the ministry: R.C. Moberly's *Ministerial Priesthood*, written in 1897, but reissued in 1969; Yves Congar's *Lay People in the Church*, written in 1951 and published in English in 1957; and Edward Schillebeeckx' *The Church with a Human Face*, published in 1985. An existentialist critique is then made of some of the presuppositions behind past views of the ordained ministry. Finally, Card attempts to contribute to the new image of ministry which he feels is being discovered.

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The whole is informed by a basically existentialist outlook. One advantage of this is that it sensitises Card to the Idealist emphases of Moberly and Congar, for whom the ordained are the essential Holy Church and the laity are the objects, not the subjects, of ministry. Another advantage is that it enables Card to look at modern problems in the ministry in a pragmatic, contextual and flexible way.

On the other hand, this existentialist outlook leads Card to disparage those who seek to apply biblical norms to the ministry and those who want to learn from church tradition (p. 5). Also, in reacting against an overemphasis on the transcendent, Card almost loses it completely. The worst aspect of this is that it is difficult to see any absolutes, or any place for absolutes, in Card's view of the church or of the ministry.

An interesting book in that it illustrates and clarifies the trends of modern Christian existentialist thinking regarding the ministry, the helpfulness of its constructive thinking is increasingly questionable, the more one holds to absolute norms for the church and the ministry as being divinely ordained and revealed in Scripture.

Colin Bulley
Northumbria Bible College
Berwick-on-Tweed.

Believing in Baptism

Gordon Kuhrt

Mowbray, London & Oxford, 1987; 186pp., £5.95, paperback ; ISBN 0 264 67088 4.

Subtitled more informatively 'Christian Baptism – its theology and practice', this book is an account of baptism which takes the Bible with the utmost seriousness. The author is an Anglican parish minister and experienced lecturer, and not surprisingly argues the case for infant baptism – 'Christian family baptism', as he likes to call it. But he is intolerant of attempts, such as he finds in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, to rely on the witness of tradition, claiming instead that the practice is a 'legitimate inference' from three biblical principles – of the covenant, the family and the sacraments.

At the same time, discrimination in baptismal administration is strongly advocated, and some sensitivity is evident, on this and other issues, to baptist convictions. Canon Kuhrt seems to favour the dual-practice baptismal policy of the United Reformed Church and an increasing number of other churches. Yet he is steadfastly opposed to re-baptism, while accepting that some 'untidiness' is probably inescapable in an imperfect world and church.

Throughout the book a concern to be balanced and fair is evident, as also an endeavour to encompass infant and 'adult' baptism within a single baptismal theology. One could fault its interpretations or reasoning at this or that point (e.g. the use of Ephesians 4:5, and the exaggeration of the parallelism between old and new covenants), but it will prove a useful resource

resource for those involved in teaching about and preparing others for baptism.

Ironically enough for a book of this title, I found the treatment of faith's relation to baptism a particularly disappointing feature, seen, for example, in the short shrift given to the baptist position and also in the repeated use of the vague phrase 'in the context of faith', which a baptist might fairly view as a blurring of biblical evidence.

D.F. Wright
New College
University of Edinburgh.

Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians

Frances Young and David F. Ford

SPCK, London, 1987; 289pp, £10.95; ISBN 0 281 04317 5

The third in the 'Biblical Foundations in Theology' series, edited by James Dunn and James Mackey, is both a study of Paul's letter from various angles, and a more general exercise in the science of hermeneutics. It is not a detailed analysis of the text, nor a book about the theology of 2 Corinthians, yet aspects of both are covered. It is a stimulating and in many places exciting book to grapple with, and serves both as a study of the Epistle and as a fairly detailed example of the state of the art of biblical interpretation.

The letter is understood as a self-defence by Paul, giving in his absence an apology for his mission. The main theme is the glory of God and the reputation of Paul (neatly summed up by the single Greek word *doxa*), the letter is regarded as a unity (a view persuasively argued), and less attention is paid to Paul's opponents and to the change of circumstances between 1 and 2 Corinthians than is often the case in commentaries. While arguing each point, general comments are made on the value (or not) of 'background' material, authorship and integrity. A balanced position is given.

As well as other ancient material, the OT is explored for sources of Paul's ideas, and regarded as the most important. Psalms (especially 110-118), prophets (particularly Jeremiah) and wisdom are found to have been an influence, though Moses is Paul's main model. A more detailed exposition of 4:7 - 5:10 is given as a sample of detailed exegesis. Context and background are treated seriously, and an objective rather than subjective analysis is given. Some of the views expressed are refreshingly thought-provoking; *e.g.* that it was Paul and not the opponents who began to make claims about divine revelations, and when this backfired he turned to death and resurrection as the sign of an apostle; also, that 'the God of this world' is not, as convention has it, Satan - but God himself.

The second section of the book (by Ford) underpins the work by considering the theory of hermeneutics. Drawing chiefly (though not uncritically) on Gadamer and Ricoeur, we are presented with a 'hermeneutics of retrieval'. The 'economy of God' is explored as a metaphor - quite fascinatingly, though at times it is a little difficult to see how the ideas are linked together. An excellent social analysis is given, which connects Corinthian society with the themes of reputation and boasting in the letter. It is a first-rate example of

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how 'background' (as well as the recent trends in sociological analysis) can illuminate a text.

The book ends, after a rather disappointing chapter on the authority of Paul, with the theme 'the glory of God' (in the face of Jesus Christ), which is seen as the focus of the whole epistle.

2 Corinthians has been a neglected book (with the outstanding exceptions of the works of Georgi and Barrett). Often seen as difficult to understand, Young and Ford bring an exciting perspective to it. Personally, the first section (by Young) was the more illuminating, but the book as a whole cannot be too highly praised. This is biblical scholarship at its best and most positive. I am glad that the last chapter is the authors' own translation of the text, since the book left me with a great desire simply to read 2 Corinthians. That should be the effect of any book about the Bible. Hopefully, my reading of the text will now be more illuminated.

Let us hope that the chapter omitted due to lack of space, on Paul's theology in 2 Corinthians and Romans, appears elsewhere as a book in its own right. We could benefit from more work of this calibre.

David J. Graham
Bible Training Institute
Glasgow.

Youth in the City

Peter Stow with Mike Fearon

Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1987; 208pp., £2.50, paperback;
ISBN 0 340 41047 7

Youth in the City is an informative and challenging book written by Peter Stow, a youth worker based in Hackney, East London, and Mike Fearon, a freelance writer also living in the East End. Their aim is to show how the love and compassion of Christ can be demonstrated in situations such as the East End of London.

The book is essentially in two parts. In the first Peter Stow offers an autobiographical account of his own childhood and adolescence in East London. He tells movingly of his own conversion to Christ through the friendship and concern of Christians at a time of crisis in his life and through the power of Christian worship at a funeral service. On becoming a Christian he trained to befriend and influence others in youth work; and he tells the vivid, tragic stories of many of the young people he has met both in open youth work on the streets and in the church-based St Paul's Club where he now works. Practical insights in youth club leadership in the urban setting are also given and useful advice about the importance of developing a personal and family life in the midst of what so easily could be an overwhelming situation.

The second part contains helpful sections on how issues such as 'Education and Home Environment' and 'Violence and Crime' affect young people in the inner city areas; and then in the concluding two chapters he offers three

challenges to the church: first, to inner city churches the challenge to use social action as a stepping stone to evangelism; secondly, to suburban and rural churches the challenge to be involved not just through prayer but also through releasing people for service in the inner city – leading from ‘behind the scenes’ as part of a team; and thirdly, to all churches the challenge to pioneer radically transformed modes of Christian worship relevant to people – particularly the younger generation.

Youth in the City has a message for all readers. To those involved in Christian youth work in the urban setting there is much practical advice offered from years of experience; to those outwith it offers an understanding of the powerlessness and hopelessness of so many young people in our inner cities and it offers a challenge to involvement in Christ’s Name.

Douglas Nicol
St Columba Church of Scotland
Kilmalcolm.

The Unacceptable Face: The Modern Church in the Eyes of the Historian

John Kent

SCM Press, London, 1987; vii + 251 pp., £12.50, paperback; ISBN 0 334 01712 2.

The newly retired Professor of Theology at the University of Bristol has written a critical guide to the literature on the history of the church since the Reformation. It is an expansion and updating of the survey included in the second volume of the *Pelican Guide to Modern Theology*, published in 1969. Most of the items included are in English, and, though some are in French, none is in German or other languages. Certain books receive no more than a sentence; others are appraised over several pages. There are chapters on general accounts of church history, on the early modern period for the continent and for England, on subsequent English Protestantism, on later continental and American developments, on Catholic Modernism, on Christian missions and on the ecumenical movement.

Professor Kent specialises in trenchant comments. The ‘rise and fall of Calvinism’, we read on page 1, was ‘disastrous’. There was no national spiritual renewal at the time of the Evangelical Revival ‘unless that is what one means by Regency’ (p. 232). In our day ‘the religiously-minded’ can grapple only with ‘impersonal theism ... religion in a valid Buddhist style’ (p. 220). It will already have become apparent that the author does not share the convictions held by most readers of this journal.

It is assumed that ‘the historian’ of the title will regard religion as ‘a matter of the satisfaction of subjective, psychological needs’ (p. 33). That is because history has been secularised since the eighteenth century as part of the deChristianisation that the author sees as unidirectional and inexorable. Historians tend to be evaluated according to whether or not they are ‘uncommitted’ rather than ‘committed’. Those who point out unChristian motives or inhumane attitudes in the churches receive the loudest praise. But

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there is room for doubt about the author's approved perspectives. Should missions, for instance, be seen as attempted compensation for the loss of domestic influence?

Professor Kent's wide-ranging survey will undoubtedly point most of its readers to previously unknown recent books. Yet there are strange omissions, including Patrick Collinson on Puritanism and David Hempton on Methodism. The coverage is in fact highly selective. There are also oddities of organisation, as when works on the Netherlands and France appear in an English chapter (p. 65). The bibliography will no doubt help the undergraduates, candidates for the ministry and practising ministers for whom the book must be primarily designed. They are likely to find it not only informative, but also provocative.

D.W. Bebbington
Department of History
University of Stirling.

Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14

D.A. Carson

Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1987; 229pp., £10.95, paperback;
ISBN 0 8010 2521 4

Professor Donald Carson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, is one of evangelicalism's most prolific writers of recent years. In this book, he deals with one of the most controversial areas of contemporary Christian theology and personal experience; the challenge of the charismatic movement. Aware of the polarization which has taken place in many situations, Carson is concerned to look beyond the caricatures drawn by both charismatics and non-charismatics of those who do not share their views on the Holy Spirit. He believes that we need to study, in depth, the three chapters in 1 Corinthians which are at the heart of the matter, and offers a theological exposition which is not only New Testament exegesis of the quality we have come to expect from the writer, but an attempt to relate the exegesis to other doctrinal matters, and to linguistic, social, historical, practical, and popular issues relevant to the contemporary debate.

The material is dealt with in five chapters, four containing the detailed exposition, and the last reflections on various theological issues which arise from exegetical work, including the nature of the baptism in the Holy Spirit in Acts, second-blessing theology, the nature of revelation, and the normativity of historical precedent for doctrine and experience. He concludes with thoughts on the charismatic renewal in general and offers specifically pastoral advice as to how to deal with potentially divisive issues if and when they arise. This he does from his own pastoral experience prior to engaging in full-time academic work.

The treatment of the subject is scholarly and thorough, and assumes a serious intent on the part of the reader. Yet reference is made to popular as

well as academic literature, and the argument may be followed and appreciated without too much reference to the extensive footnotes which demonstrate Professor Carson's encyclopaedic knowledge of his subject, having researched English, German, French, and other language sources.

The result is a work which commands our attention as convincing, wise, balanced, stimulating, and practical. Here is no magnanimous attempt to embrace every shade of opinion to persuade us that there is really no controversy at all. Yet there is a willingness to 'take flak' from both sides of the debate if need be. Here is a snippet:

In short, I see biblical support for the thesis that although all true believers have received the Holy Spirit and have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the Holy Spirit is not necessarily poured out on each individual Christian in precisely equivalent quantities (if I may use the language of quantity inherent in the metaphor of 'filling').... Although I find no support for a second-blessing theology, I do find support for a second-, third-, fourth-, or fifth-blessing theology. Although I find no *charisma* biblically established as the criterion of a second enduement of the Spirit, I do find that there are degrees of unction, blessing, service, and holy joy, along with some more currently celebrated gifts, associated with those whose hearts have been specially touched by the sovereign God. Although I think it extremely dangerous to pursue a second blessing attested by tongues, I think it no less dangerous not to pant after God at all, and thus be satisfied with a merely creedal Christianity that is kosher but complacent, orthodox but ossified, sound but sound asleep. (p. 160)

We are indebted to Professor Carson, once again, for providing us with honest help with real problems of exegesis and ecclesiology. The concerned reader will find much to help and instruct; the serious student will discover a quarry from which he may dig deeply with great profit.

Graham Houston
Letham St Mark's, Perth.

Eternal God: A Study of God without Time

Paul Helm

Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988; 230pp., £25, hardback; ISBN 0 19 824478 9.

One of the more exciting developments in religious publishing is the spate of philosophical studies about God which have appeared in recent years. Not so long ago, philosophers were generally dismissing 'God-talk' as meaningless and avoiding theological questions as much as possible. But in the 1980's the pendulum has swung very much the other way. The names of Swinburne, Ward, Wolterstorff, Plantinga, Pike and of course, Helm, testify to the change of climate in which scholars no longer debate God's existence, but rather examine his character instead.

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This change has produced both lively debate and a new consensus of sorts on certain thorny problems. One of these is the question of God's dwelling outside time, a concept which has been rejected by the majority of modern theists on the grounds that it is incoherent in itself and incompatible with other things we want to affirm both about God and about man. In this book Paul Helm challenges the current consensus, seeking to demonstrate that the notion of a timeless God is fully compatible with everything else we know or might want to say about him.

As in many books of this type, there is a large amount of space given to anecdotal argument, a useful device for making abstract ideas intelligible to the general reader. However, it may be necessary to take these passages rather slowly, so as not to lose the point of the discussion! Helm argues that the need to posit divine spacelessness involves an equal need to posit divine timelessness, and then goes on to point out that the objections raised against God's omniscience and omnipotence cannot be satisfactorily resolved if God is thought to exist only within time. The idea that a timeless being cannot relate to a time-conditioned universe is refuted in great detail, and considerable attention is paid to the meaning of the term 'present' in relation to the past and to the future.

Whether Helm's arguments will carry conviction in philosophical circles remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that his case is well-made and deserves to be taken seriously. It is also interesting, and encouraging, to note that he remains faithful to the Westminster Confession as his standard of theology. From the theologian's point of view, it may be regretted that he did not make more use of traditional theological terminology, which might have helped his argument at certain key points. For example, he could have made good use of the distinction between God's persons (*hypostaseis*) and his substance (*ousia*) to explain how God could be both timeless in himself and still relate to his creation. It is particularly interesting to note that Helm recognises the difficulties which the term 'person' causes a philosopher (p. 57) and so doubly disappointing that he does not make use of theological concepts at this point. He could also have employed the traditional distinction between the communicable and incommunicable attributes of God to get across the point he is trying to make in the last chapter, since that seems to be what he is talking about.

However, these are minor points in the context of the whole, and readers will be stimulated and challenged by this book to think through the meaning of theism for believers today.

Gerald Bray
Oak Hill College
Southgate.

Theology and Sociology: A Reader

Edited by Robin Gill

Geoffrey Chapman, London/Paulist Press, New York, 1987; 424pp., no price; paperback; ISBN 0225 66522 0.

For more than a century, theology and sociology have experienced mutual attraction as well as hostility, a love-hate relationship which has provoked a whole gamut of responses. In this reader, Gill wisely avoids trying to survey the whole range and chooses instead to work around a particular understanding of the two disciplines. Theology is 'the written and critical explication of the *sequelae* of individual religious beliefs and of the correlations and interactions between religious beliefs in general' (p. 12). There is no corresponding attempt to define 'sociology', only a declaration of affinity with Max Weber's understanding of the mutual interaction between belief systems and social structure (rather confusingly labelled 'interactionist', considering that this term is most often applied to a school which emphasises the interpersonal basis of social order). The book strongly reflects Gill's personal commitment to both disciplines and the distinctive contribution of his previous work on the social context of theology. It is therefore neither a reader in the sociology of religion nor a purely abstract survey of the problems of theory and method which are of mutual interest to the two disciplines. Instead, it displays the results of 'conversations' between theology and sociology from the classic contributions of Weber, Troeltsch, Durkheim and Mannheim (Section One) up to the present day, with a view to providing the basic vocabulary and understanding for a theology which is fully cognizant of its own context and prepared to face up to its actual or potential effects on society. The sections on 'Implications for Theological Studies' and 'Implications for Biblical Studies' will be of particular interest to students working in these areas. Section Four tackles the difficult issue of how the interaction between the two disciplines can inform practical or pastoral theology and Christian ethics.

The 28 readings, generally critical and exploratory in nature, each have a brief introduction and the book opens with a brief general introduction which explains the logic of the selection. The layout and the numbering of the paragraphs (which some may find too obtrusive) make this, like Gill's *Textbook of Christian Ethics*, an easy book to use for teaching, albeit one which is quite demanding in content. It is likely that the majority of readers will come from the discipline of theology rather than sociology for the simple reason that issues of religion and belief are unfortunately not in the mainstream of sociological theory and analysis at the present time. It should, however, stimulate more self-awareness in the use of sociology in theological education, where courses on modern society, social problems and sociology of religion are often tacked on to the 'core' subjects without a proper consideration of the implications of using a mode of thought which is inherently critical, empirical and reflexive.

The range of articles in this collection is broad in terms of both theological and sociological perspectives. Where there are apparent omissions (for example, Marxist sociology and liberation theology) there is reasonable justification. It is an interesting comment on the state of British sociology and not a fault of the book that, with the obvious exception of David Martin,

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there are scarcely any British contributors who represent the flow of ideas from sociology to theology rather than the other way round. This book is an important demonstration of how much both disciplines have to gain from this process.

Howard H. Davis
University of Kent
Canterbury.

Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

(Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, Vol 3),

Tremper Longman III, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1987; 164 pp., paperback, \$12.95; ISBN 0 310 40941 1.

This short book is a clear account of modern approaches to biblical interpretation which are concerned with its character as literature and which help the reader to understand it better in the light of its literary aspects. This type of approach has come to the fore in recent years, sometimes in opposition to the older type of study of the historical context of the writings, and in some quarters it has generated an alarming amount of opaque jargon.

In the first part of his book Longman emphasises that the Bible is a collection of literary texts and offers a helpful guide to the various types of current approach. Approaches like 'New Criticism', 'Structuralism' and 'Deconstruction' are helpfully – but rather too briefly – summarised. Their origins in secular literary criticism and their application to biblical studies are both laid out. Their weaknesses and strengths are listed. The author's own approach is by way of examination of the author, the text, and the readers, and he notes that biblical texts can have a variety of functions, including entertainment.

In the second part of the book the author turns to application of literary methods. He discusses the characteristics of Hebrew narrative and the different ways in which narratives 'work' and illustrates them from two representative samples. Then he examines the nature of Hebrew poetry – considering the use of parallelism and imagery and noting current scepticism regarding the presence of metre.

This is an easily read introductory discussion which whets the appetite. Its weaknesses are two. First, it does merely whet the appetite; its discussions of modern methods are rather tantalisingly brief. Second, when it comes to 'application', we get very little illustration of the modern methods described in the 'theoretical' section.

The author writes from an evangelical standpoint, and he rightly criticises those critics who would argue that the historical basis of the literature is irrelevant and that the text has a life of its own irrespective of its relation to history. But he also affirms that literary methods are appropriate and fruitful for biblical study, and he shows how there is much value for biblical students

in recognising the literary qualities of the Bible. It is much to be hoped that this and other works in the same series may become available in this country – and at prices that students can afford!

I. Howard Marshall
 Department of New Testament Exegesis,
 University of Aberdeen.

Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987; 398 pp. hardback ISBN 0 89870 133 3

The popular press portrays Ratzinger as the head of some new Inquisition, but if this book represents his true mind, he comes through clearly as a humble though formidable Catholic dogmatic theologian offering building bricks for Christendom to create a fresh fundamental theology. To this task he brings an immense erudition, a command of the history of doctrine, and an extensive reading of both secular thought and literature, combining this powerful intellectual equipment with a deep faith and genuine spirituality, all devoted to a concern for the church and its message for the world expressed in biblical and evangelical terms.

In Part One – a Catholic view of the formal principles of Christianity, he gives a masterly, learned and irenic treatment of the key ideas of faith, in relation to church and sacraments, as well as in its biblical content and meaning. In this section he analyses the meaning of Scripture in relation to tradition, and makes a powerful plea for a fresh emphasis and understanding of the significance of patristic study, with less emphasis on *aggiornamento*. He stresses the importance of the dogmatic concerns and victories of the great Fathers in their formulation of the creeds, and offers some refreshing views on the role of modern short formulae of faith. In this section he has some splendid chapters on salvation-history in relation to metaphysics and eschatology. The whole section is an effective explanation of fidelity to 'the faith once delivered to the saints', as he champions Catholic orthodoxy. It is both powerful and persuasive.

Part Two turns to the ecumenical debate in which he discusses Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. He distinguishes the differences, and relates all three to our contemporary situation. He is keenly sensitive to past errors of ecumenical practice, its current difficulties, and to inter-church relationships, and humbly prays for a prophetic break-through (of God, not man), to a community seeking the truth in love and not claiming it in pride. The modest realism of this section is most encouraging.

He continually draws attention to the actual text of Vatican II, now often over-looked, and stresses the importance of its documents for the whole of Christendom. He has an excellent chapter on the ministry and the priesthood, followed by an exposition of the doctrine of the church, again reminding us of the thinking of Vatican II.

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A few misunderstandings of Luther are betrayed, e.g. that Luther considered himself an authority equal to Paul (p. 221); on Luther's doctrine of the church (throughout); on Luther's doctrine of justification by faith (throughout), though there are times when he understands Luther better than some Lutherans.

He concludes his book with a section on theological method. Here he makes the striking thesis that Scripture alone is theology because it has God as its subject: it does not speak of God, it lets God speak. He may or may not know it, but here he is echoing Luther.

A noteworthy feature of this weighty book is that it combines a brilliant exposition of Catholic theology with a deep concern that it be understood and directed to the pastoral problems of the church today. The author gives a learned account of the true foundation of Catholic theology and the continual need of the ever-expanding expression of its substance. He analyses acutely and concernedly the ecumenical problem of the present generation. He relates faith to the understanding of it expressed in history, not least alongside the development of philosophical thinking. The whole work has a refreshing evangelical thrust, the true mark of a sound Catholic theologian. He seems to see himself as on a quixotic quest for the foolishness of truth.

The book is heavy going, typical of German scholarship and makes demanding reading: it is a scholar's text. Nevertheless, it is handling profound and intractable themes, and constitutes no greater challenge than Christ's simpler words, 'Follow me!'

James Atkinson
Centre for Reformation Studies
University of Sheffield.

God & Evolution: Creation, Evolution and the Bible

R.J. Berry

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1988; 189pp., £6.95; ISBN 0 340 34249 8

This book is an expanded and updated rewriting of an earlier book by Professor Berry entitled *Adam and the Ape*. The book opens by considering the relevance of the evolution-creation controversy – with which Berry has a clear disenchantment (ch. 1). He then reviews the idea of evolution from Plato to Darwin (ch. 2), before considering the biblical account (chs 3-4). Chapter 5 considers evolution and science in this century. Chapters 6 and 7 are essentially an attack on 'creationism'. The book ends with an affirmation of what Professor Berry believes.

The purpose of this book is a pastoral one – to rescue young people from the false teaching of 'creationism'. The basic thesis of Berry is that neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory is a fact which cannot be scientifically disputed. He writes: 'There may be disagreement about interaction or relative importance of particular mechanisms, but there is no viable scientific alternative to Darwinian evolution for understanding nature.' Although he

concedes that: 'Microevolution is a fact, macroevolution is not, in the same sense.'

Berry expounds the idea that God took over a pre-man who became the first Adam. When Adam fell this involved a spiritual death which had no biological consequences as the image of God is spiritual and non-biological.

The book has a polemical tone readily seen in passages such as the following: 'I have no wish or evidence to impugn the integrity of "creationists", but they are enthusiasts and skilled in debating, whereas most scientists are not interested in or practised in debate.' The implication seems to be that creationists cannot be scientists! Berry sweepingly claims that there is now no 'scientific' attack on the neo-Darwinian position as it has developed over the years. He discards the opposition thus: 'The fear that has "creationism" as one of its symptoms produces stunted Christians, unable or unwilling to "leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity", and which encourages a ghetto mentality.'

This book is stimulating yet unsatisfying. Professor Berry falls into a faith-rationality dichotomy. 'God is apprehended through faith, not rational understanding.' Faith seems to be denuded of reason. We see this dichotomy in further statements such as: 'The evidence for evolution comes from science; the evidence for creation comes from faith.' This is inadequate both scientifically and theologically. It ignores the role of faith in scientific activity, and shuts faith up into the gaps left over by science!

Perhaps the greatest problem is his discussion on death. Berry sees the curse of the Fall as affecting man spiritually – but not biologically. Such distinction divides man up in a nature/grace dichotomy. This diminishes the biblical understanding of death as a consequence of the Fall. Certainly there is a primary spiritual consequence. But surely the great litany of Genesis 5 'and he died' is testimony to the physical consequence of the Fall.

*John C. Sharp
East Kilbride South Church.*

Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision-Making

Richard Higginson

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1988; 238pp., £7.95;

ISBN 0 340 41061 2

'Quandary ethics' are frowned on these days; so the title of this book, which inaugurates a new series on Christian Ethics, seems to want to burke a trend. And so it does. Richard Higginson considers the objections currently abroad to discussing dilemmas, and is unimpressed by them. Whatever else may properly be treated by moralists in the course of their duties, dilemmas arise. They are part of our moral experience, and we should discuss them too. But does the author have it in mind to follow a yet more reactionary path, and organise a

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comprehensive introduction to ethics around the subject of dilemmas? Of that I cannot be sure.

After an introductory stage-setting exercise Richard Higginson states his main theme in terms of the opposition between an ethic of consequences and an ethic of obligation, surveying these alternatives first in their most representative modern philosophical guises, and then by asking to which, if either, elements of biblical ethics and Christian tradition conform. Three central chapters then introduce a sub-theme: the difference between public and private moral decisions and whether there is ever no right thing to be done. The final section returns to the initial antithesis, and commutes it into forms which the author thinks more serviceable: the dialectic of love and justice and the ordering of principles in the light of priorities. There are features in this conceptual transformation which I find elusive, and it is tempting to wonder whether the initial problematic of consequences and obligations arose not from the ostensible subject of the book but from the need to give the untutored reader a general orientation to modern ethical theory.

But, after all, how do you write a book simply about 'dilemmas'? If you try to write only about what all dilemmas have in common, you write a very abstract book, while if you write first about this kind of dilemma and then about that, you sacrifice the intellectual unity of the undertaking. In the end, one can only be impressed by the way in which Richard Higginson has balanced the demands of cohesion and concreteness, to produce a book which, intended so or not, will in fact provide a very satisfactory introduction to ethics.

His introductions to major literature are stimulating. Especially useful is the well-judged discussion of Helmut Thielicke on 'sinning boldly'. His display of examples is varied: some hardy perennials (such as poor Mrs Bergmeier, who deserves a rest after all these years), the usual hothouse blooms culled from bioethics and just-war theory, but also some engaging wild flowers, such as what to tell the children about sex and how the news media ought to refer to Colonel Gadaffi. Occasionally one has a sense of things wrapped up too quickly, as in the brief treatment of environmental decisions at the end. But on the whole the chief pleasure of the book lies in the manner in which Higginson proceeds: pleasantly reasonable, judicious, fair to all sides, accessible to any thoughtful reader but without slumming. May we have something more specialised from the same pen?

Oliver O'Donovan
Christ Church
Oxford.

Sexual Integrity: The Answer to AIDS

Jack Dominionian

Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1987; 149pp., £4.95; ISBN 0 232 51750 9

The author of this book is a Senior Consultant Psychiatrist at the Central Middlesex Hospital in London, well-known for his work and writings in marriage counselling. He writes as a psychiatrist and makes use of contemporary psychological insights into sexuality which he regards as congruent with the Christian revelation (p. 136).

The author's response to the problem of AIDS is summed up as 'sexual integrity', which he describes as 'a principle which governs human conduct from the time of conception to death' (p. 149). He avoids the word 'chastity' because of its negative associations. The Press release on the book claimed that he had formulated 'a whole new sexual ethic' with which he hoped to establish the Christian Church as 'a champion of loving sex'.

The book discusses sexual behaviour in the past twenty-five years and the present government AIDS campaign which Dominionian regards as fundamentally misconceived. He makes several statements which are disquieting from a Christian point of view. Having noted his claim to be a dissenting Roman Catholic, we are not surprised to find him rejecting his Church's attitude to contraception. We are, however, surprised to find him arguing that there are circumstances in which premarital intercourse is acceptable (p. 70). He also argues for the permissibility of homosexual genital activity on the basis of natural law and Scripture. He maintains that scriptural guidance is uncertain because we must interpret the relevant texts in terms of their time and culture, which is different from our own today (p. 24).

Dominian concludes on a two-fold note: first, that we can ultimately understand the mystery of sexuality in God himself by realising that the purpose of sexual intercourse is to promote the bonding of two partners rather than procreation. Second, that AIDS is to be regarded as an episode in the long history of dialogue between God and man aimed at promoting a new basis for sexual morality, namely, sexual integrity.

We must agree with the author that those who indulge in unnatural and unethical sexual practices need the compassion and help of Christians. We can agree also that the answer to AIDS is to be found in the adequate preparation of young people for their sexual responsibilities by their training in Christian morality from an early age by their parents, their church and school. We doubt, however, whether the degree of permissiveness accepted in this book forms any part of the answer to AIDS. What is allowed here is much more likely to spread HIV infection than to prevent it.

The book contains no notes and no index.

*John Wilkinson
Edinburgh.*

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The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World

Sinclair B. Ferguson

The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1987, 171pp, £2.50 ISBN 0 85151 5193

In his introduction, the author promises us a 'popular' exposition, non-technical, rather like an *hors d'oeuvre*. The book fulfils the promise. The sermon is seen as a description of the lifestyle of those in the kingdom of God, and we are given a brief commentary on it, section by section. For anyone who has studied Matthew 5-7 in even moderate depth, this book will offer few new insights. It is a starter only.

The book lacks literary considerations and does not engage with the critical questions which the sermon poses. It is accepted as the text of a sermon actually preached by Jesus (p. 149), and the parallel passages are not discussed. Only very occasionally are concessions made to criticism, e.g. where the ending of the Lord's Prayer is described as the early church's own doxology (p. 132).

Typological exegesis is used in places (e.g. p. 15, dealing with Abraham and Christ); some themes such as 'righteousness' are interpreted through Pauline material (p. 28); but above all, we are given a spiritualised treatment of the text: 'those who mourn' is taken to refer to grief over one's sins (p. 18), 'peacemakers' are really people engaged in evangelism and who seek ecclesiastical harmony (p. 38f). See also the comments on 'daily bread'. The rewards promised in the beatitudes are explained as the future kingdom felt now, and little is made of the eschatological aspect.

The commentary lacks a practical or social dimension, and tends to be personal, spiritual and introspective. If this was indeed the text of a sermon which Jesus preached, then he does not appear to have been a man of his time. One other shortcoming is the caricature of Pharisaism (p. 112-116), which is out of touch with modern scholarship on the subject. The Pharisees are seen as the archetypal hypocrites, trying to gain salvation by works. The most useful and stimulating part of the book is the section on Jesus, the law, and the Christian (p. 67-77), which is well worth reading.

Biblical references are numerous, and cross-references are often used to interpret a text. Unfortunately, no index of references is given.

An *hors d'oeuvre* should whet the appetite for the main course. This one does, though if that is all that is served, one is left feeling hungry rather than satisfied.

David J. Graham
Bible Training Institute
Glasgow.