

Reviews

THEOLOGY IN THE FICTION OF GEORGE ELIOT by Peter C. Hodgson *SCM Press*, London, 2001. Pp. x + 244, £17. 95 pbk.

This book is an exhilarating and also an aggravating read. The former because Peter C. Hodgson has little difficulty demonstrating that Eliot maintained a keen interest in religious questions throughout her life, one much in evidence both in her fiction and in her correspondence. In that light a reading of her work which addresses 'the religious aspect of her life and writing' is long overdue, especially since, as Hodgson observes, much recent critical literature has been too exclusively focused on her 'feminist and psychological insights'. Aggravating, however, because Hodgson does not convince that Eliot's interest in *religious* questions issues in any coherent *theological* enterprise at all. From the opening pages, he shows himself aware of the problem when he notes that Eliot 'lacked the categories to articulate the theological aspects of this religion very clearly'. (p. 13) [One wonders, incidentally, why Eliot lacked such categories if she really had a theological purpose in mind — few writers of fiction can have been more intellectually capable!] It is Hodgson who supplies the lack with abundant references to other thinkers' categories, viz. , Spinoza, Feuerbach, Hegel, Comte, Schleiermacher (whom Eliot seems not to have ever read). But as Eliot is understood to be sceptical of every 'totalising system' and to be a 'disciple of none of these thinkers', the reader is invited to see her only as anticipating key elements of a postmodern theology — one strikingly similar to that expressed by Hodgson himself in this book and in his earlier ones, *Winds of the Spirit* (SCM Press, 1994) and *Revisioning the Church* (Fortress Press, 1988). What is on offer here is a postmodern reading — 'demonstrating the wide diversity of approaches to the text'— of *religious* themes in Eliot. The *theology* here turns out to be less in Eliot's fiction than in the postmodern style of Hodgson's writing about Eliot.

What would be the religious preoccupations in Eliot's fiction? Hodgson takes us through every one of her major works. What we find in them of religion is not only portraits of numerous clerics and the manifold social tensions between representatives of the established church and various dissenting groups (evangelicals, Jews), but Eliot's repeated use of biblical and spiritual terminology to express the feelings or interior life of her characters. Eliot's language is never more religious than when she wishes to depict the potential for transformation in human lives. To choose but one of the most famous examples, Romola's encounter with Savonarola issues in the conversion of this daughter of pagan and Renaissance humanism to a spirituality of the cross and to a life of selfless service of others, but one which, as Hodgson notes, is

thoroughly demythologised and also, let us add, *de-graced*. Eliot writes that Romola was 'subdued by the sense of something unspeakably great to which she was being called by a strong being who roused a new strength within herself'. Hodgson is quick to point out, however, that there are neither 'mythical nor miraculous elements nor promises of heaven nor hell. . . at the center of the Christian faith'. (p. 90) Presumably, he means at the centre of his own or Eliot's faith — if in fact she had any. Similarly, when we read that Silas Marner comes to discover, after the loss of his gold and the recovery of the foundling child, Molly, that 'that drawing o' the lots is dark, but the child was sent to me:there's dealings with us — there's dealings', Hodgson assures the reader that 'we need not assume, as Silas and Molly did, that these "dealings" are a direct manifestation of divine providence, as though God had planned and directed all of it'. (p. 77)

This is the manner adopted throughout the work: reading takes the form of a postmodern free-for-all in which texts are interpreted first from one, then from other competing points of view — Eliot's, her narrators', her characters', Hodgson's, and not least of all what he assumes to be present-day Christian's. That is why it is so difficult to establish from this book whether Eliot herself had any theological purpose in her fiction. At times, Hodgson seems to think that she does; at other times, he would appear not to be concerned at what *she* was aiming, only what *he* can read out of her writings. Such ambiguity or mere nonchalance is beautifully summed up in a single line from Chapter 2: 'George Eliot herself knew better than to say that her work was not theological (nor did she describe it as theological).' (p. 31) Is it or is it not? Similar puzzlement is prompted concerning Eliot's attitude towards Christianity. Hodgson appears to think that because she made great efforts to understand Judaism (even learning Hebrew and reading the Kabbalah mystics) and showed tremendous sympathy for the Jews in *Daniel Deronda*, that there was therefore a question of Eliot's converting to Judaism. Instead, we are told, she kept her 'association with Christianity — although hers was a nonconformist, noncreedal [sic], nonpracticing form of Christian belief'. (p. 174) If that makes any sense, it would give new meaning to the theological tradition of the *via negativa*.

No question that Eliot's fiction abounds in religious imagery and language. The status she gave to them is just what remains so difficult to determine. A translator (and reader) of both Strauss and Feuerbach, Eliot fully adopted the most radical critical method in her day of approaching Biblical texts and Christian doctrine. Her concern for social and political issues made her unsympathetic to moralising or pious defenders of the status quo, especially since as she depicts them, these are most prone to hypocrisy (e. g. Dempster in 'Janet's Repentance' and Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*). Her profound sense of human tragedy, as witnessed in the lives of all her heroines and heroes, made Eliot resist every form of vulgar utopianism. The religion expressed by her characters principally consists in whatever enables them to endure what befalls them—and much tragedy befalls them!—and to be eventually freed from their self-

obsessions. The stories of a Romola, a Dorothea, a Gwendolen, show us that Eliot had no illusions about the *via dolorosa* to be travelled if a human being is to be converted from a life of self to a life for others. She seems to have been aware that because the road is hard, most people do not follow it, hence perhaps her surprising conservatism. For her characters who do take that road, some kind of religious experience seems to be the only explanation. Lacking, however, any conviction of the ontological reality of the divine, religion in Eliot's literature can seem a mere literary prop, a way of justifying the otherwise unexplainable conversions effected in some people's lives. (Without them of course, there would be no *story* in Eliot's novels.) A prop, so then perhaps a projection in the manner of Feuerbach, except that the reader is warned against 'overemphasizing the influence of Feuerbach. . . on her thinking'. (p. 11)

What seems clear is that Eliot had little or no theology. By definition perhaps, if Hodgson is again correct when he says that religion was for Eliot 'an affective as opposed to a cognitive form of knowing'. (p. 58) What she had rather was her fiction—some of the most powerful in the English language. And it is that which Hodgson takes to be theology, since they are much the same for him: 'theology itself is a kind of fiction, which very much like the work of the novelist, creates imaginative variations on what history offers as real in a quest for the mystery beneath the real.' (p. 29)

The central thesis of this book was originally presented as the Samuel Ferguson Lectures at the University of Manchester in March of this year. Peter C. Hodgson teaches in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University in America. *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot* thus nicely testifies to the ever growing interest in the study of literature and theology on both sides of the Atlantic. It is to be welcomed when a theologian takes an interest in novels; it balances the domination by literary critics and exegetes of so much theological study. One only hopes that more theologians become interested in literature since if Hodgson's 'theology is a kind of fiction' is the only approach, then with this book that domination has become all the more aggravating.

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EVIL AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS by Gordon Graham (New Studies in Christian Ethics Series) *Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xviii + 241, £40.00 hbk, £14.95 pbk.*

Gordon Graham, a moral philosopher who is also a Christian, argues that the humanistic and rationalistic accounts of human behaviour offered by contemporary secular thought are inadequate to its own purposes. It is only by invoking older, theological, conceptions that these deficiencies can be remedied. Specifically he is concerned with the question of evil which is best accounted for in some cases in terms of a spiritual agency intent on seducing human beings into wickedness. Graham describes his work as an amplified version of Kant's 'moral argument' for the existence