

**DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY: AN ESSAY IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY** by Richard E. Creel, *Cambridge University Press, 1986, xi + 238 pp. £25.*

'But do you really love me?' 'Do you really understand how I feel?' 'Does anything ever disturb you?' 'Don't you ever change?' These are common questions in personal relationships. Sometimes they express doubts that the other person adequately appreciates our situation. On other occasions they may express exasperation at an unchangingness which seems like blind, uncaring stubbornness. They are not, however, only questions that arise about human relationships. They also arise at least for some theists, when they try to conceive how the recognition of the proper constancy and ultimacy of God is to be maintained in harmony with appreciation of the divine perfection as total awareness and gracious love. Anselm, for example, in spite of praying 'Look upon us, Lord ... Pity our toilings and strivings ... do thou help us', asserts that God may be experienced by us as acting compassionately but 'does not experience the feeling' of compassion: God is 'affected by no sympathy for wretchedness.' Such assertions of divine impassibility have, however, been challenged by various theologians and in current debates most notoriously (or famously—it depends on your point of view) by the so-called process theologians. Whitehead, for example, maintains that 'the brief Galilean vision' of God, which traditionally has been overwhelmed by images of God as 'the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover,' needs to be restored to dominance. The result will be a concept of God as 'the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands' and whose reality is affected by what happens in the world.

Richard Creel's book subjects the basic issues in this debate to detailed, probing, thought-provoking (and sometimes just provoking) examination. Although his interest in the matter was initially stimulated by Hartshorne's attack on Aquinas' doctrine 'that God is not influenced by the world or what goes on in it,' the treatment is much broader and more fundamental than a commentary on and response to this aspect of process theology. It raises fundamental questions about reference, content and significance of claims about God.

Creel's investigations brought him to recognise that the doctrine of divine impassibility in fact covers a number of distinct—though overlapping—matters. Having considered eight possible definitions of the notion, he identifies the crucial characteristic of 'impassibility' as the state of 'that which cannot be affected by an outside force.' In relation to God as 'an incorporeal personal being' impassibility could thus refer to being unaffected by outside forces with regard to nature, to will, to knowledge, and/or to feelings. Each of these is then discussed. Creel's conclusion is that God is immutable in nature and, because divine omniscience means that God envisages all possible situations and the appropriate response to them, impassible in will. God's knowledge of the total range of potentiality also means that nothing comes to be with which God is not already familiar. Since, however, change is not an illusion and some creatures at least are able to act freely, God 'must be passible in his knowledge of what is going on in the world.' This dependence, though, in no way affects God's happiness. Neither personality nor love nor divinity nor justice nor awareness mean that God is in any way 'passible in feeling'. Rather God is to be conceived of as knowing 'himself as eternally blissful' at the same time as 'knowing the pain, depression, grief, etc., of the other.' In order to sustain this general defence of the doctrine of divine impassibility (with the minor exception of the case of the knowledge of the contingently actual), Creel also considers questions about the purpose and activity of God as creator, time, eternity, evil and freedom. In the course of these considerations he argues that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is incoherent and that God is to be thought of as creating from 'the plenum' as a co-existing 'repository of all possibilities not inherent in God'; that omniscience means that God knows all the continua within which possibilities can be determinate; and that suffering may be adequately compensated for in a post-

mortem state. His penultimate chapter (to guide a cosmic DIY enthusiast?) tackles the problem of 'How to create the best possible world'!

This outline of some of its contents should indicate that Creel stirs a number of controversial hornets' nests. Although he considers (as, incidentally, does Hartshorne) that many of the fundamental problems are to be resolved 'by conceptual analysis', and while many of his arguments display such analysis, there is on some occasions an unfortunate tendency—as in the discussion of divine 'feeling'—to resort to more emotive and hence less convincing modes of justification. Indeed there are places where Creel seems to be frustrated at his inability to convince some of the opposition and exasperated with their views. It may be though, that he comes near the truth about the issue when he wonders whether the disagreements over divine responsiveness express 'an emotional impasse—two people with different intuitions or emotional needs.' If so the conceptual analysis that is required to reach a credible solution may have to extend further than he has gone and investigate the *whole* story of theistic understanding and belief. On more specific issues, it is questionable whether talk about divine creativity is as clear and straightforward as Creel's use of it implies, whether we can be as confident as he seems to be about the applicability of our conceptual analyses to the divine, and whether any future compensation (*pace* American lawyers) can ever be a satisfactory recompense for some of the suffering which persons endure. Finally, I am confident that Creel will not have convinced all the process theologians and that they will come back with their defences. It is to be hoped that they display the same attempt at comprehensiveness and conceptual clarity that Creel does in his stimulating study.

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**UNDERSTANDING KARL RÄHNER—AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS LIFE AND THOUGHT** by Herbert Vorgrimler. Translated by John Bowden. *S.C.M. Press*, pp. viii + 198, £5.95.

Anyone hoping for a 'Rahner without Tears' in potted form would find only a little of that in this book. But there would be compensations, not least in finding out what sort of person Rahner was. Herbert Vorgrimler, his friend and collaborator, shows him to have been just as kindly and open as he appears on the cover photograph. We are told of a book published in 1982 containing 'letters from young people in Vienna on every possible problem of their lives and the answers of a man who was almost eighty'. He liked serving in the refectory because it gave him the chance to take a meal to a down-and-out in the parlour. He organised and typed out the whole of a diploma thesis for a psychology student who 'had such a "block" that she could not get it down in writing'. This sort of thing is not, indeed, extraordinary in Jesuit history, but it becomes staggering when we realize that Rahner's biography contains almost four thousand items—even though the same work may occur in the list several times under different headings. Vorgrimler mentions Rahner's 'characteristic dourness' and his reference to 'my Black Forest temperament... a degree of sceptical melancholy'. He was a restless person and regardless of landscapes. But we are also told of his cheerfulness, childlikeness and even playfulness. He got up very early so as to say Mass undisturbed. He was not in the least stuffy. It is not easy to make a composite picture of all this, but clearly he was a most lovable person. A typical incident concerns the black tie which Romero Guardini, his predecessor at Munich, had asked him to wear. When he was to have a private audience with the Pope in 1979, he thought poorly of the notion that he should put on a clerical collar, so that the usual photograph of the Pope with his visitor was cancelled.

Vorgrimler begins his account of Rahner's thought, which is scattered through the book, by emphasizing the importance of an *experience* of God as fundamental to it. This is certainly right, and, as he says, goes far to explain the value and extent of Rahner's