

TONGUES OF FIRE, AN ANTHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS AND POETIC EXPERIENCE,
introduced and edited by Karen Armstrong; Penguin pbk., 1987. Pp. 351. £5.95.

I am soft sift
In an hourglass—at the wall
Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift,
And it crowds and it combs to the fall;
I steady as a water in a well, to a poise, to a pane,
But roped with, always, all the way down from the tall
/ Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein
Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ's gift.

Hopkins' rhyme of 'Christ's gift' with 'soft sift' echoes across the eight intervening lines to acknowledge a pattern that forms as it renders the poet's experience. But that rhyme echoes only faintly, after the many shifting turns of phrase and rhythm, to be marked (as Hopkins told his 'reader' in a note transcribed by Bridges), 'as the indentation guides the eye'; for such changes betray complexities and subtleties within experience that patterns may overlook and struggle to contain. The rhyme is clinched, only at our breath's end. For within the stanza words which the poet fastens upon slip away: 'poise' to 'pane', 'always' giving ground to 'all the way down', as time's pace complicates while it dissolves the self experienced in time. What the eye reads as 'a drift' comes itself adrift on hearing. Beneath appearances and amid similarities there are differences to which Hopkins would have us attend, as through, and despite, physical decay Christ's grace draws us to Himself. Such a style takes issue with the nineteenth century's protestant conviction that in matters of religion, and religious writing, all was, and should be, 'plain'. Newman, attacking Peel for his speech at the Tamworth Reading Room, was of like mind: 'Christianity is faith, faith implies a doctrine; a doctrine propositions; propositions yes or no, yes or no differences. Differences, then, are the natural attendants on Christianity, and you cannot have Christianity and not have differences.'

Hopkins' poetry finds its place in this new anthology with ten pieces including four stanzas from 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', but his pained attention to subtle difference finds no recognition in Karen Armstrong's introduction. Rather, all the poems in this collection are mined for evidence of a single, very basic pattern to both mystical and poetical experience, that which the editor believes plainly traced by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*: she writes that 'when the religious experience of mankind is examined critically, it almost seems that there is one, universal religion of mysticism, while the more dogmatic forms of religion seem irrelevant to the findings of the mystics and even dangerous' (p. 17). Thus we are told in justification of the book's title that 'in the Pentecost story we have an example of Mystical religion based not so much on dogma and organisation as on direct contact with God, which results in ecstatic inspiration' (p. 21). We are informed that 'even a cursory reading of the New Testament shows that early Christianity was essentially an experience of violent religious fervour' (p. 16). The anthology then sets out to show the various common facets of mysticism, with poems by Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic and agnostic writers, grouped in ten sections headed: ' "Existence is Suffering" ', 'Comfort and Joy', 'Vocation', 'Sex and Religion', 'Wise Passiveness', 'Dying into Life', 'The Meddling Intellect', 'Vision and Imagination', 'Desolation and Ecstasy', 'Language and Silence'. Each section is prefaced by the editor, to show how mysticism takes the practitioner beyond merely rational thought, releasing her or him from the confines of the cruel, selfish ego that clamours for dogma and creed to bolster its insecurities.

The poverty of this anthology is not so much its espousal of James, but its editor's dependency on 'cursory readings', heady generalizations, tamely qualified as in the above

quotations by fillers such as 'essentially', and 'almost seems'. All the editor has to say of the piece by Hopkins discussed above, is that with Herbert and Vaughan he is 'wrought up to a considerable pitch of stress before ... surrender to the experience of the Divine' (p. 113). Entitled to expect an anthology of religious and poetic experience, what we discover is a very narrow selection from, or definition of, both poetry and religion, even where the poetry such as Hopkins' exposes the folly of that reductionism. The religious is a narrowly understood mysticism; the poetic a Romantic creation far from the wit and wordliness of Dryden and Pope. Karen Armstrong has been teaching nineteenth and twentieth century literature: this is a book for the Tamworth Reading Room; don't buy it.

RICHARD FINN OP

AIDS. MEETING THE COMMUNITY CHALLENGE. Ed. *Vicky Cosstick*. *St. Paul Publications, Slough 1987. £5.95 p.b.*

As an exercise in pastoral theology this collection of 28 short essays has much to commend it. It is interdisciplinary, or at least multidisciplinary; (for it to be interdisciplinary the contributors would need to have met before producing their essays). It is a sort of community effort, and reflects quite a range of stances. It is a primer rather than an advanced text book, and a primer is what most of us need on the subject of Aids and Christian responses.

One disadvantage of this approach is that one or two important points are made briefly several times, instead of being developed at greater depth. For instance, several people make the point that it is inadequate to view Aids as God's punishment for sin; and several reiterate the view that it is inadequate to change your behaviour merely out of fear. It would be good to see one more thorough development of each of those points.

It would also be valuable, I feel, to conclude the book with a substantial theological afterword which would offer some systematic response to, and articulate some relevant questions arising from the different contributions.

There are groups of essays on the medical facts, on the experience of suffering Aids, on Aids and 'family values', on theological perspectives, on Pastoral approaches (through education, chaplaincy work, the mobilization of the Christian community, and individual solidarity); there are 6 statements by representatives of the Catholic, Anglican, Free Church, Jewish, Orthodox and Quaker communities; and essays on legislative and legal possibilities and limitations. I'd have traded most of the representative statements by Church leaders for a good essay on sociology and one on ethics.

I'm tempted to talk about the essays moving between the positive pole of perceiving Christ in the Aids sufferer, and the negative one of reiterating traditional moral stances without considering the situation of homosexuals or the unwillingly single, (e.g. between David Forrester's 'The Path to Reconciliation' and Douglas Brown's 'The Christian Family and the Media'). But that would be to neglect the clue given in the Introduction that 'there need be no fundamental tension between showing compassion and making moral statements; they ought not to qualify each other since they spring from the same, common and fundamental Christian desire to celebrate our human bodiliness'. While I don't think that Douglas Brown's essay on its own would stand as a very good example of Christian understanding of the problem, the thrust of the book is towards the conclusion that Aids calls us beyond the perceived dichotomy, through a radical conversion, to the com-compassion which makes concern for the other the unifying factor in our behaviour.

But if I speak of a 'conclusion' I may be misleading. The purpose of the book is to alert the Christian community, to promote a debate which has to be carried much further, to indicate some of the many facets there are to any full Christian response to Aids: I think it does this well, and I hope that we shall see a more thorough discussion of the topics it addresses.

COLIN CARR OP