

## REVIEWS

HISTORY SACRED AND PROFANE by Alan Richardson; S.C.M. Press; 35s.

A THEOLOGY OF HISTORY by Hans Urs von Balthasar; Sheed and Ward; 10s. 6d.

Two books on the same subject could hardly be more different. Professor Richardson's 1962 Bampton Lectures are massive with footnotes, learnedly allusive and obscure. Fr von Balthasar's slim volume drags no scholarly baggage behind it but is personal, brilliant and profound.

*History Sacred and Profane* is offered as a contribution to the History of Ideas but those who doubt the respectability of that discipline would only be confirmed in their suspicions if they attempted to read it. It represents a vast pile of notes, taken for the most part from other modern writers in the same field, assembled, arranged, but not digested. No very definite, striking or original thesis emerges from the whole to help us forward in our reflection. We range about amongst ideas without being struck by any new judgements or intrigued by any new arguments. This type of historiographical survey has been done so many times already that one wonders why another attempt was thought necessary.

The remarks made about the historical or non-historical nature of the resurrection of Christ contribute nothing new. Most disappointingly, they take little notice, not even to disagree, of all that has been written on the subject recently by Catholic theologians (Schmitt, Durwell, Lyonnet, the *Gregorianum* symposium, Stanley); nor, for that matter, is Archbishop Ramsey given a glance.

The core of the book seems to be the section on Christian Dogmatics as Historical Theology. It contains some excellent remarks, but what is missing is an actual piece of dogmatic thinking. We are taken to the verge of theology, never beyond. 'If our approach is correct, theological statements are historical, not metaphysical, in character.' Unfortunately, it is not possible to escape as easily as that. Theologians had better resign themselves to being called metaphysicians. It is not enough to say 'we are making historical statements' and leave it at that. One must explain the significance of these statements and the way in which they illuminate human life, and as soon as we attempt that, in comes metaphysical philosophy.

One rather self-consciously humorous reference to the Chalcedonian formula reveals the hesitations of the Dean of York (as he is now) where traditional theology is concerned. On another page there is a suggestion that the four adverbs of the formula might possibly be pressed into service by the existentialist theologians. These are hints that he would be interested to read von Balthasar. For *A Theology of History* is an exploration of the way in which, by virtue of the Hypostatic Union, Jesus Christ is 'the centre of the world, the key to the interpretation, not only of creation, but of God himself.' For Richardson, the uniqueness of Christ is seen above all in his resurrection, a uniqueness which he affirms, although he does not explain satisfactorily in what way it is different from that of Lazarus or even Osiris. For von Balthasar, the uniqueness of Christ lies in the

fact that he was both God and man, and his whole book is a demonstration of the illuminating power of that central truth.

'Since Christ all history is basically "sacred", not least because of the Church's presence and testimony within one all-inclusive world history.' (*T.R.*, p. 138). Here is another significant difference between von Balthasar and Richardson. The Dean of York has little to say on this theme; but it must be tackled, for post-resurrection history is the history of the Church, the bearer of the resurrection message and the active community of the risen Christ.

'Christian worship is the response of man in thanksgiving to the disclosure of God's mercy in the history of the world, which is known to Christian faith.' (*H.S.P.*, p. 264). 'When, in the Mass, the Church is granted a true, bodily contemporaneity with her Head in his sacrifice, something takes place not only from the Church's point of view but from Christ's'. (*T.H.*, p. 94). Are the two theologians in conflict at this point? Or may we see here an opening for fruitful discussion? Fr von Balthasar is analysing the objective basis of Christian faith and experience; the theology of the Dean of York does not take him so deeply into the heart of the mystery, but that does not mean that he positively excludes its real existence.

*A Theology of History* has nothing to do with defending a party line. It is simply an example of that kind of genuine theological statement which we need 'to meet the preoccupations of existential philosophy' (p. 20), revealing to us both the meaning of our faith and the demands it makes upon us. 'For the business of theology is not to keep one eye on philosophy, but, with its gaze obediently turned towards Jesus Christ, simply and directly to describe how he stands in time and in history as the heart and norm of all that is historical.' (p. 20). Reassured by that remark, the Dean of York should read von Balthasar and write another book. Let him, like von Balthasar, keep the quotations biblical. For to say that 'the ideal university would be one in which every member of the staff in every department read with intelligence and interest the *Journal of the History of Ideas*', (*H.S.P.*, p. 11), sounds, from the lips of a Christian theologian, like a confession of failure.

MICHAEL RICHARDS

**A NATION SO CONCEIVED**, by Reinhold Niebuhr and Alan Heimert; with a preface by Marcus Cunliffe; Faber and Faber; 21s.

**PERSPECTIVES IN AMERICAN CATHOLICISM**, by John Tracy Ellis, with a foreword by Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan; Helicon; 25s.

The 'reflections on the history of America from its early visions to its present power' of Professors Niebuhr and Heimert were originally prepared for the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, which, from its privileged ramparts in Santa Barbara, has done much to instruct the American conscience,