

**THE MORALS OF JESUS, by Nicholas Peter Harvey. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991. pp.xliii—112. £6.95.**

This book demands not so much to be read as to be experienced. DON'T read the *Introduction*: start by perusing the main text and see what happens to you. Only after you have reflected on that, go back and read the *Introduction* for a possible interpretation of the experience. The result is likely to be confusion, a confusion never wholly dispersed. The author is trying to express a perception of Christ, and what he came to show us totally at variance with the conventional one: 'There is little evidence to suggest that Jesus was all that interested in morality' (p.6.)

The case made for the invalidity of the conventional picture is very convincing, supported by expressions and word-pictures which are both shocking and attractive: 'Jesus is taken to have been so obviously worthy and virtuous a person, a man whose watchwords in theory and practice were love and peace, that his crucifixion cries out for an explanation... It is this starting-point that must be called in question. What has such an image of Jesus to do with the man who said, 'I come not to bring peace but a sword', 'I have seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven', 'You brood of vipers' and 'Get thee behind me, Satan' — this last addressed to a very favoured disciple? The Jesus of the Gospels is an extremely disturbing figure, frequently impatient, capable of intense anger, more than ready to give as good as he gets in polemical engagement with Scribes and Pharisees, unpredictable in terms of his availability to others and his responses to them; and finally committed to a seemingly self-destructive course which nobody around him could begin to understand.

He seems to come at the whole business of living and loving, hoping, fearing and dying, from a place in himself which transcends universal and endemic anxieties but is as yet inaccessible to anyone else. A person who encourages a radically immature humanity to grow up by becoming like little children is not in the least comforting, reassuring or worthy of admiration to those wedded to their immaturity' (p.56). The point of course is to provoke us, the readers, to grow up. In some very frank autobiographical glimpses the author reveals the sort of stimuli that provoked his own maturing. He briefly describes a suicide that affected him deeply, and comments on the aftermath: 'This persistently problematic world, flecked with nightmare, would insist on becoming a radiant dwelling-place' (p.13.)

His thesis is that 'following Jesus' must be understood not in terms of imitation of his supposed virtues or heroism, but of identification with his life-story which, by his will, has become our story. Ours should be the experience of the first disciples: '... a strong sense that weakness and powerlessness were by no means to be identified. Seeing in the explicit and total weakness of Jesus on the cross the hinge of humanity's story enabled them to transcend their own lack of any obvious moral wisdom or virtue... There is a morality here, in the shape of trust in the gifts and

the Giver'(p.26) This thesis is given a loose framework by serial consideration of the so-called 'hard sayings' of Jesus, which blatantly contradict any saccharine picture of Sermon-on-the-Mount spirituality or morals, and it certainly compels attention.

The book is in various ways very frustrating. The dense and convoluted style of writing in places makes a complex theme even more difficult to follow. The framework is too loose to provide the rational mind with the sort of ordered progression it craves, and the devastating, illuminating and liberating insights which the author seems to be grasping at are never expressed fully or clearly. One is reminded of the deluding effect of methane over the marshes at night. This is no doubt all of a piece with the theme and intention of the book; the 'answers', if there are any, to the contradictions and paradoxes so brutally expressed by the author, are not to be presented to us on a plate. We must find them for ourselves through our own, painful experience. All that the author has done for us is to turn our familiar Jesus-world upside down, so that we cannot help looking at it from a different angle.

S. M. CECILY BOULDING, OP

**A SEPARATE GOD: THE CHRISTIAN ORIGINS OF GNOSTICISM** by Simone Pétrement. *Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1991.* Pp. 542. £35.

The strange group of early mystical texts known as gnostic exert a fascination on the restless modern mind. One of the superior Sunday papers published an article suggesting that they express a superior form of Christianity to the one which prevailed. Others have interpreted the movement as a 'new age' or a feminist religion, or even a Heideggerian philosophical system.

The first problem in writing about gnosticism is to decide whom to include. Although Irenaeus applies the term 'gnostic' to Valentinian and other heretical sects, Clement of Alexandria appropriates it as a description of loyal members of the Church who have learnt the secrets of allegorical exegesis. It is only in modern times that historians have given the term a systematic application to a whole range of second and third century sects which sought salvation from an alien material world in esoteric knowledge. However there was no coherent gnostic movement with an organisation or even a sense of identity; it has been suggested that gnosticism was an 'atmosphere' of thought rather than a school.

The title Simone Pétrement has chosen for her study indicates what she regards as the distinguishing feature of the group of writings which are appropriately called gnostic, namely the belief that the creator God, often described by the Platonic title of Demiurge (i.e. craftsman), is distinct from the supreme God and inferior to him. This group includes works which are modifications of mainline Christian or Jewish belief, as well as the pagan Hermetic documents and the Manichean and Mandaean writings.