

the New Testament is still normative for Christians in these matters, when our family structures and understanding of sexuality are so different from those of the first century or, indeed, many others of the Christian centuries. Barton tries to find a suitable middle way, between a more or less fundamentalist effort to use texts to justify one particular family pattern, and the opposing rejection of the bible teaching as being hopelessly patriarchal, even though this may be combined with an admiration for Christ and St Paul as life-giving personalities. This leads him to look at the presuppositions of the historical-critical method, the dominant form of contemporary exegesis, and to find them wanting, since simply reading texts as texts falls short of making them effective guides to action. He takes as an example the wedding feast at Cana, which contemporary critics tend to consider simply in relation to the question of the sources of St John's gospel, but which the Latin and Greek Fathers considered as illustrating the sanctification of human marriage by the Incarnation.

The essays included under 'Community' have a slightly different focus. Differences between the gospels, which were once ascribed to different attitudes and experiences on the part of the writers, are now explained by their being the products of different, apparently autonomous, Christian communities. As early Christianity is classified as a 'sect', it is not surprising that it should have a number of potential sects within it. Barton, quite rightly, calls all this into question. Anyone who wants their writings to be read will have some kind of audience in mind, but this does not justify any supposition that the audience either constituted a bounded group with a clear-cut identity of its own, or that it imposed its view of things on the author. The essay on 'Early Christianity and the Sociology of the Sect' is particularly valuable, since Barton shows, very carefully and very politely, how attempts to look at early Christianity as a sectarian movement are extremely naïve, both politically and sociologically. The closing words of the essay point to 'the inevitably political nature of the act of interpretation' (p. 138).

The final essay, 'New Testament Interpretation as Performance' uses an idea advanced in rather different ways by Nicholas Lash, Rowan Williams and Frances Young, that the New Testament can only be understood, not by the meticulous analysis of texts, but by seeing believers put the New Testament into practice. Charmingly, Barton comments on the ideas of Lash, Williams and Young: 'where the Roman Catholic theologian finds in the Eucharist the epitome of the Christian 'improvisation' on Scripture, and where the Anglican archbishop finds it in the festal cycle culminating in Holy Week, the Methodist theologian finds it in preaching!' (p. 237).

I wrote earlier of half-hidden themes not fully developed. One of these would be the way in which the sacraments create community and help us to see community in action. Another would be the 'tradition', in the older sense of the empowerment of the believing community to read Scripture authentically. Another again, mentioned by Barton in a quotation from Frances Young, is the existence of different 'senses' of Scripture, which permits us to give a valid meaning to a passage, even if it was not intended by the original author. Let us hope that this will not be Dr Barton's last book.

ADRIAN EDWARDS C.S.SP

BONHOEFFER by Stephen Plant, *Continuum*, London & New York, 2004, Pp. xii + 157, £12.00 pbk.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) was one of the most provocative of the twentieth century's theologians, and this is a welcome addition to the *Outstanding Christian Thinkers* series. Its text has been organised so that it is fairly easy for the reader with limited knowledge of the man and his world to follow it, and for most of the time Dr Plant has written in an accessible style.

Overall he has succeeded in his aims to introduce us both to Bonhoeffer's life and his theology, and to put these in context. More than once he has assured us that, compared with the major works of reference that have appeared on Bonhoeffer, this book is only going to be of ephemeral value, but here the author is underestimating the usefulness of a book like this. If it makes Christians aware that Bonhoeffer is much more than a cult figure of the 1960s it will have done an invaluable job.

Plant's third aim, however, is 'to suggest a means by which the *consistencies* in Bonhoeffer's theology can be brought into the open'. This is where the author comes closest to confronting the question which readers are almost certain to ask him: Do you think that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a 'great' theologian? It is now sixty years since Hitler ordered him to be hanged in Flossenbürg concentration camp. Enough time has passed to be able to start assessing the man's stature reliably.

It is this third aim which engages the author in controversy. Against the view of theologians (including Bonhoeffer's friend, Karl Barth) who have doubted whether 'his written legacy can be viewed as a coherent totality', Plant argues that ethics are at the core of all his theological thought – 'an ethics of responsibility, lived out in obedience to the God who acts most powerfully in 'the silence of the cross''. Although he was a profoundly loyal Lutheran, Bonhoeffer, unlike the German theologians of his time who were liberal protestants, placed great emphasis on the role of community and communal obligations in the life of a Christian, and he himself tried to live out this conviction. Apparently it was a visit to Rome when he was eighteen that prompted Bonhoeffer to write the dissertation on the Church which became his first book, *Sanctorum Communio*, and during the following years he became involved with various forms of Christian fellowship, including ecumenism, pastoral care and the setting up of a House of Brethren for seminarians.

However, in 1939 Bonhoeffer's pacifism drove him to America, only to return quickly because, in his own words, he became convinced that 'I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this time with my people'. Nevertheless, he correctly 'sensed that if he stayed in Germany he would feel it necessary to be drawn into the conspiracy against Hitler'. According to Plant, if the plot had succeeded nearly five million lives in Europe would have been saved. As it is, Bonhoeffer is seen in Germany (and not only Germany) even today as 'morally controversial . . . to some a martyr and saint, to others a traitor and murderer'.

Mary Fulbrook has said that most of the conspirators 'were essentially anti-democratic in outlook'. Moreover, this included Bonhoeffer, difficult although it is for many of his admirers to accept it. Barth felt that in his last book, *Ethics*, there was 'just a suggestion of North German Patriarchalism'. Now the most widely-read excerpts from his writings are those in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and these seemingly are affirming the maturity of today's world. In fact Bonhoeffer's words here more readily apply to an elite – to people like Bonhoeffer himself. He had an optimistic faith in benevolent autocracy, and, like St Paul, thought that Christians should be content with the social position which they held when they were called to discipleship. Today's Germany would have been inconceivable to him.

I have given so much space to summarising the book's main theme precisely because it raises quite an acute problem. Bonhoeffer was profoundly conscious that church life was going to change, and we are inclined to think of him as a 'modern' who was cut off before he was forty and yet who conveys to us a message for our time, but in certain ways he was not 'modern'. His thinking was formed primarily by Luther and the Bible, not by 'our modern world'. It is easy for us to misread him. Dr Plant handles the problem skilfully, so that by and large this is a rewarding introduction to one of the twentieth century's most influential theologians.

JOHN ORME MILLS OP