

Reviews

Recent Theology

Since the Enlightenment, Dr Hampson argues, in *After Christianity* (SCM Press, 1996, 326 pages, £14.95 paperback), we have known that Christianity cannot be true. It depends on there having been a uniqueness about the case of Jesus, whether or not it is spelled out in terms of traditional doctrines of incarnation, resurrection, God as Trinity, etc., but such a particularity in history is simply unacceptable. 'Thus Christian belief', she concludes, 'becomes a matter of faith' (page 12). 'Christianity', she repeats, 'is a matter of faith' (page 34), and there's an end on it. What might seem a platitude is, for Hampson, a damning observation. Secondly, once people see that it is a religion that legitimizes patriarchy, they must see that it is also unethical. Hampson finds it 'a matter of bafflement' that anyone who believes in human equality should continue to cling to the 'empty shell' of Christianity, rather than beginning to be a spiritual person. In the third chapter she surveys feminists ethics: however diverse it is principally to do with conceiving the self as self-in-relationship, and not as a discourse about autonomy, assertiveness, rights etc. Many theologians (Hampson cites John Zizioulas and Colin Gunton), seeking to break with the self-enclosed monadic self, hail the doctrine of God as Trinity as liberatingly 'relational' and thus capable of incorporating feminist insights. In chapter 4, however, she argues that the Trinity is still modelled on an outpouring of the self rather than on reciprocity and mutuality. Chapter 5 discusses the great variety of the images of women in the gendered symbol system, particularly of Catholic Christianity (mother, slut and bride). In chapter 6, working with Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*, Hampson develops a conception of God as 'the fullness of our potentialities': 'in being most fully ourselves we are also realizing God in the world' (page 250). This would be overcoming the dichotomy, 'fundamental to the major tradition of Western thought, whereby God's greatness is at the expense of our weakness'. Finally, in chapter 7, Hampson considers what a post-Christian theology might be like, and cautiously (very cautiously!) mentions Plato as one with whom she might associate her 'theology ... predicated upon human awareness' (page 282).

Those who have never doubted that Christianity is a matter of faith will have difficulty in following Dr Hampson all the way, but that does not mean that she does not have a great deal to teach them. The thirty pages of notes begin to open up the immense range of her reading. Karl Barth treated his wife 'like dirt' and had a relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum that was more than just one between a professor and his amanuensis (page 309). Geoffrey Fisher, an archbishop of Canterbury who regarded the revision and implementation of canon law as the 'most

absorbing and all-embracing topic' of his episcopate, had an extremely sadistic way of beating boys when he was headmaster of a public school (page 310-11). Such perhaps superficially trivial points become worryingly uncomfortable questions about male-dominated Christianity once one has been alerted by Hampson's perspective. The centrality of feminine-bridal-maternal analogies in much church-politically influential Catholic theology is even more questionable than anything she describes in chapter 5: she makes no mention of Adrienne von Speyr. If she remains baffled at anyone's continuing to believe in the God of Christianity, others might be baffled by her insistence on having a *theology* of experience. We need 'ways of speaking of connectedness and relationality which, while leaving us with our full autonomy, allow us to conceptualize the self in relation to that which is more than the self' (page 284) — for sure; but if the 'objectivity in religion' is that which 'consists in healed lives', how is it not better simply to abandon the language of 'God' altogether? But no theologian should evade the very deep metaphysical issues in Hampson's book, particularly her insistence that 'there is a regularity to nature and to history' (page 12) such that there could be no such thing as the resurrection of Christ or anything else unique about his case. While the ethics of endorsing what she regards as an irretrievably masculinist religion is a pervading issue throughout, *After Christianity* is first of all a vigorous defence of epistemological considerations that need to be dealt with if traditional theological ideas about faith and reason are to remain tenable.

In *Keeping Hope Alive: Stirrings in Christian Theology* (Gill & Macmillan, 1996, 244 pages, £10.99) Dermot A. Lane seeks to bring eschatology into the centre of theological discussions — 'to show how political praxis presupposes an eschatological vision, to unify perspectives about the present and the future, to reconnect heaven and earth, to link up history and creation, and to re-establish a relationship between the Eucharist and eschatology'. The uniqueness of the crucified and risen Christ remains central, but that does not mean that Lane is blind to developments in philosophical anthropology and cosmology. On the contrary, he argues that feminist arguments for the existence of 'a radically relational, processive and multi-polar self' (page 27) are of decisive importance. He outlines an 'alternative anthropology' which opens up chapters on the 'changing experience of death', prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology in Judaism, the anticipation of the *eschaton* in the paschal mystery, and the eucharist as 'sacrament of the *eschaton*'. Chapter 9 discusses traditional questions in a traditional and open-ended way (judgment, heaven and hell, purgatory). Chapter 10 discusses, very judiciously, the principal 'disputed questions' (the state of the soul between death and the *Parousia*, the possibility of universal salvation, and reincarnation).

Hans Urs von Balthasar's views about universal salvation are perhaps rather more disputable than Lane suggests (page 164): the descent into hell 'expresses Christ's radical solidarity with all who are

separated from God', but surely, for von Balthasar, the traditional picture of Christ, in the 'harrowing of hell', preaching to and liberating the souls of the righteous, is replaced by a conception of the dead Christ sharing the passivity of the dead? Also, is it as clear as Lane says (page 231) that von Balthasar's view is 'echoed' in the *Catechism*? But the purpose of the book is to 'initiate a debate about the ultimate questions of living and dying', and in this it will be of great value to preachers and catechists as well as to theologians, since it is lucidly written and very well documented.

The Beginning and the End of 'Religion' (Cambridge University Press, 1996, 284 pages, £35 hardback, £12.95 paperback) includes the Teape Lectures that Nicholas Lash gave in India in 1994 together with eleven other essays and lectures. The inverted commas signal that the notion of 'religion' as a distinct, self-enclosed area of experience, language, customs, etc., is peculiar to post-Enlightenment Western culture, and coming to an end. As Thomas Aquinas contended, the subject-matter of theology is everything there is, considered in relation to the mystery of God as source of life and destiny of all things (*Summa Theologiae* 1, 1, 7). Religion never has become detached from politics, art, science, law, economics, etc., in non-Western cultures — which may often seem a disaster to Enlightenment eyes but which is indisputably the situation. But now, in the astonishing outburst of grief at Princess Diana's death, it turns out that, in one of the most 'post-Christian' societies in the West, unmistakably 'religious' feelings, aspirations, and practices, remain as potent as ever. It would be impossible to sort out the 'religion' in all this popular mourning from the communications industry, appropriate psychologies of grieving, politics, the economics of cut flowers, etc. For better or worse, as Professor Lash argues, the 'modern' world of educated people in the West has obscured from view possibilities of discovering new forms of ancient wisdom as well as distorting myths.

One of the myths which distorts people's views of the question of God far beyond its narrowly professional context is the Enlightenment proposal to decide what may reasonably be believed about God *before* bringing in the specifically Christian claims about God as Trinity, Christ as both human and divine, etc. Michael Buckley's book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987) argued that modern atheism derives from the efforts of seventeenth-century Catholic theologians to produce Christian apologetics without the revealed and supernatural elements. (The thesis was proposed many years previously by Henri de Lubac, though never worked out with so much documentation.) In an unguarded moment Buckley seemed to trace this desupernaturalized theology to Thomas Aquinas, which allowed Lash, no doubt drawing on years of expounding it at Cambridge, to sketch a wonderfully clear account which, whatever Buckley intended, should put an end to still powerful myths about Aquinas's theology (chapter 7: 'When did the theologians lose interest in theology?'). We are often told that Aquinas's doctrine of God is

'philosophical' and *therefore* not 'theological' — Lash comments: 'not all philosophical investigation is necessarily untheological or irreligious' (page 143). Again, we are often told in standard textbooks by wellknown theologians (no names no pack drill!) that Thomas's division between *de Deo uno* and *de Deo trino* leaves us with a non-Christian God — Lash reminds us that Thomas starts from Exodus 3:14. Of course, for many people today, the question as to whether or not God exists is an empirical question, which needs to be settled before we bring in the more bizarre claims — but here again, Lash contends, there is no need to regard contemplative wonder as standing in sharp contrast to critical reason (page 146). His own writing demonstrates how the two may be combined — would that more theologians were as convincing! And it is not a purely academic matter. On the contrary, in a culture dominated by 'spectatorial empiricism' God is commonly regarded as an object — 'a' being — standing over against us, such that the primary task of the theologian is to construct a conceptual representation of this entity; over against all that, however, Lash insists that the doctrine of God is unceasingly and unendingly a set of 'protocols against idolatry' (pages 88-90).

In many other ways the essays in this book keep coming back to Enlightenment assumptions — not to rubbish them, as so many critics now do, 'all too easily' serving 'reactionary and most irrational purposes' (page 84); but seeking, rather, to retrieve the values that certain Enlightenment priorities tend to occlude. In another beautiful essay (chapter 13: 'Incarnation and determinate freedom'), Lash starts from 'the obsession with freedom' which is 'a defining feature of the modern Western mind' and leads us through to the truth which shall make us free: 'truth enfleshed, enacted, made finite and particular, arrested, tried, crucified' — 'not truth sought elsewhere or somehow found in flight from the circumstances and predicaments and responsibilities and darkness of the world' (page 248).

The Teape Lectures themselves are witty, anecdotal, alluding to an immense range of reading, and often moving. Once again, the pervading theme is critique of the God of modern deism, insisting on the importance, in Christianity as in Indian wisdom, of 'criteria for the purification of desire and for weaning adoration from idolatry' (page 70). The Christian doctrine of God, then, is 'the threefold figure that furnishes the grammar of our education from threefold idolatry — from worship of the dark, from worship of the uttered word and from worship of the living world — into the freedom of confession of God's holy mystery as all things' source, and sense, and harmony; as all things' origin, and healing word, and destined peace; as Father, Son, and Spirit' (page 64). That sounds like Christian theology, reconceived in conversation with an Indian tradition, the fruit of years of critical and contemplative attention to the sources and to the world around — highly recommended!

FERGUS KERR OP