

Reviews

DOES GOD SUFFER? by Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap. T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2000. Pp. x + 310, £16.95 pbk.

Towards the end of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously opined that only a God who suffers can help people in the midst of their own appalling afflictions. Since then, many Christian theologians have joined him in concluding that God is passible. Thomas Weinandy deftly takes them to task in his latest book, *Does God Suffer?* He introduces his text by describing it as 'a scholarly work' (p. x). He is far from exaggerating. In ten chapters he engages a vast array of biblical, patristic, medieval, and contemporary authors so as to discuss their views of divine passibilism and impassibilism. A dense thicket of informed footnotes buttresses the main body of the monograph. In the opening chapter he carefully and fairly explains various arguments averring that God suffers. The second chapter outlines his theological method. The next five chapters explore biblical, philosophical, and patristic understandings of God; the doctrines of the Trinity and creation; and what it means to conclude that God is both impassible and compassionate. The last three chapters deal with the idea of divine Incarnation, New Testament soteriology, and the Christian comprehension of suffering in the light of Jesus' work of redemption. The specific aim of the book is twofold: first, to refute what its author regards as false arguments that God is passible; and second, to articulate positively a Christian understanding of God and God's relationship to humankind.

The driving thesis of *Does God Suffer?* is the denial of a notion of passibility according to which God undergoes or experiences 'inner emotional changes of state' (p. 39). Weinandy not only evinces that God is loving and kind *despite* being impassible, but also that God is compassionate precisely *because* God is impassible. The linchpin of his case is the biblical doctrine of creation. He charges, correctly, that many exponents of divine passibility are panentheists who conclude that God's being includes everything apart from God. Weinandy insists, by contrast, that God and all else exist in distinct, though related, ontological orders. And so he concludes: 'The ontological distinction between Creator and creature is, therefore, the fundamental positive reason why God does not suffer.' (p. 150) Otherwise put, to affirm divine impassibility is simply yet profoundly to underscore that God differs from all that is not divine, and to distinguish God from both pagan gods and a sinful humankind. Strengthening his case, Weinandy elaborates a Trinitarian conception of God. Chiming with Thomas Aquinas he speaks of God as pure act (*actus purus*): there is no potentiality in God that

needs to be fully actualized. Furthermore, he explains that the persons of the Trinity are subsistent relations fully in act. Consequently, to say that the divine persons are immutable and impassible is to assert that they cannot be more passionate than they already are. The point is telling. Those who conclude that God must suffer to assuage the pain of suffering humans, seem to imply that God's loving compassion needs to be augmented in some manner. However, 'Eternally God is immutably and impassibly adapted to every situation and circumstance, not because his love is indifferent and unresponsive, but because his love, with all its facets, is fully in act, and so he is supremely and utterly responsive to every situation and circumstance.' (p. 162) That said, Weinandy injects a subtle dose of humour into his account: 'If God did need, sequentially in a potency/act manner, to adapt and re-adapt and re-adapt himself again to every personal situation in every momentary instance, he would be conceived as an infinite mega-computer (PC, obviously, and user-friendly) continuously and simultaneously processing trillions of conflicting bits of emotional data. He would then be seen to be perpetually entangled in an unending internal emotional whirligig' (p. 163). Bluntly stated, if God is swimming or sinking in the same soup of suffering that we are, then God would be no different from us. *Pace* Bonhoeffer, a suffering God is no help whatsoever to hapless humans.

Does God Suffer? is the work of a seasoned theological master. It is written in a sincere and unfeigned style that is unflecked by malice toward theologians criticized. Its governing argument is pellucid throughout and Weinandy takes great care in each chapter to summarize the various stages of his presentation and to indicate matters that he will proceed to discuss. The text is deferential toward Catholic dogmatic theology and quotes frequently from the writings of Pope John Paul II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994).

Such courteous regard for dogma, however, could well be balanced from two fronts: the findings of modern science; and the results of recent historico-biblical investigations of Jesus' identity and significance. Neither front is encountered eagerly in Weinandy's book. For better or worse, contemporary science enjoys a much greater cultural authority in the West than Christian doctrine. Theologians who wish to speak tellingly of Christianity for a science-enthused public, are well advised to consider those scientific findings that appear to gainsay the world-view of dogma. In other words, dogma does not revel in a storm-free zone, immune from the challenges of new, specifically modern knowledge. *Does God Suffer?* speaks much of evil, sin, and suffering. It concludes that human sin is the cause of all evil and suffering (p. 261). Just what, though, is to be made of Charles Darwin's work, which is not considered in this book? Stamp on any dog's foot and it will yelp wildly with pain. Sentient animals obviously endure pain; and pain is an evil suffered by many animals. After Darwin, the view has come to prominence that animals suffered pain, disease, and death millions of years before

human beings ever evolved. Human sin, then, is not the cause of all evil, pain, and suffering. Could it be the case, therefore, that the great Christian doctrinal drama of salvation, which Weinandy hopes to present accurately, is more mythological than factual? Would that he had countered such a suggestion.

With regard to Jesus and his relation to God, Thomas Weinandy believes that the traditional conciliar understanding of the Incarnation is not simply in conformity with the New Testament, but is also intrinsic to its proclamation (p. 174, no. 4). The modern two-hundred-year legacy of Reimarus would question such a view. After his work, it has been more widely recognized than in pre-modern theology that there is not only a difference between Jesus himself and dogmatic portrayals of him, but also between the reality of Jesus and the way the gospels interpret him. The gospels are not unfailingly accurate records of what Jesus actually said and did. Rather, they are theological proclamations based on historical reminiscences. In other terms, they form a stratigraphic account of various interpretations of him that subsequently became the basis of conciliar doctrine. Not even the New Testament conclusively settled the matter of Jesus' relation to God, since it took several centuries of episcopal debate to encode credally the former's relation to the latter. Classical dogma speaks of Jesus as truly God (*Deum vere*) in an ontological sense, and truly a human being (*hominem vere*). However, at no stage whatsoever in the New Testament is Jesus unambiguously identified with a transcendent Godhead. Moreover, among Jesus' own proximate contemporaries the title, 'son of God', did not carry the later ontological connotation that he could be identified with God. While he lived in Palestine, most Jews spoke Aramaic like himself. In Hebrew or Aramaic usage of the time, 'son of God' was employed metaphorically, not literally, to designate a child of God. The title can also specify a human messiah, an angel, a prophet, or a righteous person. Clearly, the gospel handling of 'son of God' is cast in Greek, and is thus a later interpretation of a previous Aramaic linguistic coinage. As such, it conveys quite a different resonance from Jesus' own circle in that it connotes for Greek-speakers that Jesus is closely linked to a Godhead. All of which is to imply that neither conciliar dogma nor New Testament interpretations of Jesus determine who he was or is. Jesus was an historical, contingent human being, not a ghostly divine visitant. His reality determines the nature of dogma, not the other way round.

One further quibble. When outlining the Old Testament's understanding of God, Weinandy designates Yahweh as 'the Wholly Other'. This is unfortunate because such a designation, as Weinandy is fully aware, is alien to Hebrew scripture. He uses it because he could find no better designation for expressing the biblical notion that 'God cannot be numbered among the things created' (p. 46, n. 11). A much better and more biblical expression than 'the Wholly Other' is clearly 'the Creator'. To speak overly of 'the Wholly Other' all too easily obscures

God's immanence and ubiquity.

That stated, Thomas Weinandy's most recent book remains a highly instructive text. Over and against a large body of contemporary thinkers it deploys an impressively bold and independent argument that resonates with much of traditional Christian thought. It reasons in a detailed and painstaking fashion. Finally, its central thesis, that God is impassible yet passionate, is overwhelmingly difficult to resist.

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MYSTERY AND METHOD: THE OTHER IN RAHNER AND LEVINAS by Michael Purcell, *Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 1998*. Pp. xxxiv 394, \$ 40.00 hbk.

A SPIRITUALITY OF EVERYDAY FAITH: A THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE NOTION OF SPIRITUALITY IN KARL RAHNER by Declan Marmion, *Peeters Publishers, Leuven, 1998*. Pp. xhv+372, £ 21.95.

Michael Purcell sets out to bring Karl Rahner and Emmanuel Levinas into conversation, to read them in such a way that they become mutually enlightening. On the face of it this is no easy task. It is not just that Levinas is a Jewish philosopher and Rahner a Roman Catholic theologian, but that at first sight Rahner seems to be getting up to exactly what Levinas is trying to get away from. Levinas wants to overcome ontology, Rahner stands firmly within the ontological tradition. Levinas' concern is with an Other who cannot be incorporated into the Same, into the self, whereas it is precisely self-presence that Rahner offers as the ultimate key to both being and knowing. Purcell argues persuasively, however, that there is room in Rahner's thought for, and the beginnings of a development of, many of Levinas' concerns with the ethical, with alterity and with desire. Moreover, he also argues that the "Being" which Levinas attacks is in fact only one understanding of being, and not one that should be pinned onto Rahner.

The juxtaposition of Rahner and Levinas causes each to be read in a distinctive way. In particular, Purcell argues for a shift in emphasis in reading Rahner, away from taking *Spirit in the World* and *Hearers of the Word* to be methodologically decisive, and towards a greater stress on Rahner's later talk of 'mystery'. This in itself is an important interpretive point, and much else in the book is interesting and insightful. Mystery and method is, however, a complex and difficult book, one which makes heavy demands on its readers. It can perhaps only be recommended to those who already know their way pretty confidently around both Rahner and Levinas. For those suitably equipped, however, and able to muster the high level of concentration demanded, it will provide real rewards.

Declan Marmion's *Spirituality of Everyday Faith* makes an interesting contrast. If the weakness of Purcell's book is that it is so wrapped up in complicated thoughts that it does not quite touch the ground, the weakness of Marmion's is that it never quite manages to get off the ground. It is both a carefully researched, scholarly book—Marmion shows