

Reviews

IMAGES OF BELIEF IN LITERATURE. Edited by David Jasper. *Macmillan*. 1984.

This collection is almost uniformly readable and instructive. In his introduction, F.W. Dillistone justly complains that, while the relations between philosophy and religion have been well explored, those between religion and literature, which one might have supposed were at least as worthy of investigation, have been comparatively neglected. John Coulson describes a three-year university syllabus which studies English literature from the point of view of the relationship between religion and imagination. Up to about the end of the eighteenth century, imaginative forms and religious beliefs on the whole re-inforced one another; but after that time, there began a dissociation of culture from religion. In some writers, culture seems so violently disrupted that imagination is impaired; in yet others, imagination is engaged in a society constitutionally committed to a strict secularity, and yet remains the victim of a certain nostalgia. D.Z. Phillips analyses Flannery O'Connor's attempts to make human encounters with God understandable and credible in face of the contemporary 'vapourisation of religion' which she associates with the Manichean heresy; he finds the pervasive dissolution of religion which she sees as the inevitable consequence well exemplified in the writings of Joan Didion.

Ulrich Simon attends to the difficult problem of how one should classify the Book of Job, which is so curiously isolated within the Old Testament canon; in comparing it with Sophocles, he raises in a fresh and intriguing way the question of how far it is to be regarded as a tragedy. Interesting as I found Peter Walker's account of the Christian piety expressed in some of W.H. Auden's poetry, I was rather put off by his very mannered style. Auden's own misgivings about much explicitly 'religious' poetry, including some of Donne and Hopkins, were well worth quoting:—'Is there not something a little odd, to say the least, about making an admirable public object of one's feelings of guilt and penitence before God?' Paul Crowther once remarked that art had to do with two things, release dragons and tame them; and Fr. Martin Jarrett-Kerr (it is pleasant to have such a pretext for complimenting a friend) in effect brings out the application of this maxim to poetry with splendid wit and erudition. At one extreme there is the frigid formalism of the mere verbal craftsman, at the other the 'disshvelled stanzas' of the 'committed'; how to fulfil both requirements is a perennial problem for the poet. I personally react to life, acts and writings of Simone Weil with a unique compound of admiration and horror; Ann Loades brings out very well the special challenge which she constitutes for contemporary Christians, and has provoked the reviewer into a re-reading of Sylvia Plath.

Stephen Prickett writes about the eighteenth-century bishop Robert Lowth, to whom 'we owe the rediscovery of the Bible as a work of literature within the context of ancient Hebrew life', as opposed to merely a tissue of 'allegorical and typological meanings'. I had previously thought of Lowth as a fairly interesting historical figure about whom I knew very little, and had no idea either of his intrinsic importance, or of the depth and extent of his influence. T.R. Wright discusses the role of religion, or rather the lack of it, in *Middlemarch*. 'How George Eliot lost her belief in God and lived unhappily ever after is a well-worn tale but one which never ceases to comfort the faithful'. For all that, this writer suggests that the bravery and clarity of *Middlemarch*, which in contrast with the compromises evident in George Eliot's life and her other writings, make it almost unbearable reading for persons of a religious temperament. (There seems to be a misprint of a number on page 150.) George Herbert

is one of my favourite poets and devotional writers; but I had no idea that my opinion was so widely shared in the seventeenth century as is shown by Helen Wilcox. I trust that Matthew Henry's use of Herbert's *Temple* in 'Friendly Advice to Drunkards and Tipplers' was effective. Dominic Baker-Smith makes illuminating comparisons between theologians and literary exegetes; as he shows, an important aspect of the revolt against Scholasticism in the sixteenth century was a recognition of the principle that biblical texts should not be 'treated as a store of isolated *dicta* suitable to syllogistic elaboration but as a personal encounter which unfolds naturally as prayer and what can best be called imaginative participation'. On the newer view, with the aid of Scripture 'the imagination performs, in effect, a moral alchemy'. Michael Edwards suggests what a Christian theory of narrative might be. That at all times and in all place human beings have told one another stories is an odd fact, as he says and not at all to be taken for granted. Ingeniously, he selects Boccaccio's *Decameron* as a parable about the nature of story-telling in general; as Boccaccio's young women and men fled from the Florence of the Black Death to tell one another stories, so in general do human beings tell stories to distance themselves from a world plagued by the Fall. There would be no point in story-telling in Eden. The thesis is pursued through Chaucer, Malory and Shakespeare.

All in all, this collection is highly to be commended, and would make a good textbook for university courses in this subject.

HUGO MEYNELL

THE PROBABILITY OF GOD. By Hugh Montefiore. *SCM Press. Pp. 195. £6.95.*

The Bishop of Birmingham has always been fascinated by the latest scientific developments and eventually he took sabbatical leave to study them in more detail. This book is the result, and it summarises his thinking about the probability of God, 'with special reference to the so-called argument from design as it looks in the light of the contemporary scientific scene'.

He begins by stressing the primary importance of the question of the existence of God remarking that without the prior conviction that there is a God there is no reason that a secular society should be interested in Jesus as the Son of God. This conviction can come in many ways, and he is concerned with the intellectual grounds of this belief, and in particular how these have been affected by developing scientific knowledge.

After a short introductory chapter on the possibility of natural theology the main body of the book is devoted to a series of chapters on current scientific knowledge, from the initial big bang, through the development of the cosmos, the earth as a finely balanced organism, the emergence of life, the evolution of species and finally the evolution of man. To assemble this information he has indeed read widely, and the story is told with clarity and with praiseworthy accuracy, as far as I can judge from the sections on physics.

When this is complete, he stands back and surveys the whole process and asks how it all bears on the existence of God. He is willing to admit that the possibility that there is no God remains open, but asks how probable this is. His balanced judgement is that this is 'exceedingly improbable'. This provides the necessary basis for the leap of faith into personal commitment and trust in God.

This final transition from intellectual acceptance of a high probability to the certainty of faith is of such importance that it deserved more attention. If a scientist were similarly informed that his belief that he is investigating an objectively-existing external world is 'exceedingly probable' he might be somewhat dissatisfied. He would be unable to construct a logically compelling proof of the world's existence, and yet he is so impressed by the way everything fits together in a most detailed and precise way (what Newman called the unity of indirect reference) that he can make the final leap from 'exceedingly probable' to 'certain' without difficulty. Once this is done, he sees the world in a new way, and uses his knowledge to forge tools for further successful