

Reviews

THE LEAP OF REASON by Don Cupitt. *Sheldon Press, London, 1976. 145 pp. £4.50*
PATTERNS OF FAITH: A STUDY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE by J.L. Houlden. *SCM Press, London, 1977. 87 pp. 90p*

WHAT IS THEOLOGY? by Maurice Wiles. *Oxford University Press, 1976. 117 pp. £2.50*

Don Cupitt suggests that belief in God strikes the right balance between the duty to recognise a diversity of socially constructed worlds and the duty to transcend the problem of relativism. Our very ability to see the problem already testifies to the possibility of transcending it. The "leap of reason" by which we do so is exemplified by "creative originality in thought, moral regeneration, religious iconoclasm, and humour" (p. 95). This, for Cupitt, is what marks us out as "spirit". By the leap of reason we attain the standpoint of the "transcendent". We may then understand the transcendent subjectively and end either in Romanticism or in Buddhism, in self-assertion or self-extinction. The alternative is to conceive the transcendent, objectively, which is what theistic religion attempts. It must contain within itself a further stage of transcendence, indeed a principle of self-destruction and iconoclasm: "The true religion is the religion which declares itself untrue, which asserts the relativity of its own symbolism and says that God is infinitely greater than our highest ideas of him" (p. 96). God, as Cupitt says, is not one who just *happens* to be hidden for the time being and might in principle come out of hiding: "he is hiddenness" (p. 101), he is the God who hides himself, *el mistatter* of Isaiah 45:15. But God has been proclaimed by Jesus—in an utterance which, being "mocking, elliptical, enigmatic", simply cannot be reduced to "authoritative propositions". As so often in the history of theology, where the theism is strongly affirmed the Christology tends to fade out. In fact, for Cupitt, Jesus "does not appear as one who *embodies* God, but as one who with the whole of his passionate nature witnesses *to* God" (p. 128). So the "incarnationalist doctrine" that Jesus is an absolute icon of God will not do: "how could men iconize an iconoclast without being aware of the absurd irony of their own mistake?" (p. 131). It would be better to speak of Jesus as Word and Witness rather than as Son and Image (p.

129). "It is, above all, through his ironical spirituality that he has imprinted his own distinctive vision upon mankind, and planted a seed of saving self-doubt in his Church. Christianity must never be allowed to become a mere religion, a positive symbolic system built around the idea of the incarnation. For it is infinitely more than that" (p.130). The cry must already have gone round the clerical sherry party circuit that Don Cupitt is even more dangerous than Maurice Wiles—Nestorianism, Adoptionist Christology, the slots are in the latest pink-cheeked tyro's head, and the jolliest sort of intellectual ostracism will no doubt follow. But it is a good book, dealing with a real theological problem, and far more reverent and traditional than a brief review can show. It has a good deal in common with *Lectures en echo*, the recent theological "diary" published by Jean-Pierre Jossua, the French Dominican who is currently Gifford lecturer in Edinburgh.

Leslie Houlden's book is better still—at least as good as his *Ethics and the New Testament*, which means very good indeed. The subject here is the relationship between Christian doctrine and New Testament studies. Houlden, an Oxford-trained scholar, starts from the observation that "there has been a strange lack of sustained and thoughtful analysis of the relationship which might now be proper between studies of the New Testament and the formulation of Christian belief" (p.4). Far too often New Testament studies remain unwittingly under the spell of the doctrinal and philosophical perspectives of later Christianity, while systematic theologies, such as those of Pannenberg and Moltmann, focus on some theme abstracted from the New Testament—"erected into independent existence and, within a modern context of thought, treated as a base from which to formulate the traditional programme of Christian doctrine" (p.5). Christian doctrine cannot subsist on outdated knowledge of the New Testament, and New Testament scholarship cannot be

divorced from the life of the Church. To bring the two together, and allow them properly to interact, will compel us to evaluate afresh the function and nature of dogmatic statement and doctrinal tradition.

In twenty superbly distilled pages Houlden recalls the diverse, immensely mobile pattern of Christian experience and belief registered in the leading New Testament writers, "subject as they were to no central unifying direction with regard to their conceptual structure, and in most cases unaware, as far as we can see, of responsibility to toe allotted lines" (p.11). This prepares the way for a sampling of the doctrinal work of the New Testament writers. Whether the word "incarnation" is an adequate or even useful term for the diverse ways in which they express their conviction about Jesus may be disputed (p. 55). The word "resurrection" is not the only idiom for conceptualising the vitality of God in relation to mankind (p. 58). It is not only that subsequent doctrinal formulation has inevitably slanted and narrowed various aspects of the New Testament faith but that we have lost the capacity to see them properly. We find it hard to regard stories (as in Luke) as the vehicle of faith (p. 70). More radically still, Houlden suggests that to worry about traditional Christological definitions is to begin too far away from the root of faith. By one route or another we have come to find God, together with his

creation and our relationship to it and to him, most illuminated by lines of thought that stem from Jesus. The Christological question for us must surely be: what account of Jesus enables our theism to receive the shape that the tradition of Jesus gives it (p. 72). And the expression of one's belief must be nourished by many sources—Scripture and liturgy, but also poetry, art, music, and so on. Houlden doubts if, for him, the work of many theologians would be a very nourishing source—apart, as he says, from that of Austin Farrer, to whose memory the book is dedicated. Almost every page demands to be quoted, and the argument as a whole is much too closely knit to be expounded in a review. Beautifully written, this book is a timely example of how to assess Christian doctrine New-Testamentally, or the New Testament doctrinally, and it cannot fail to enlighten many readers.

Maurice Wiles, whose own characteristic concerns are very much akin to those of Houlden's book, provides a clear, simple introduction to theological methodology. Based on lectures which have been given over a number of years to students embarking on the study of Christian theology, his essay contains many observations that the veteran will enjoy as well as much that will instruct the non-professional.

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THE HOMOSEXUAL QUESTION: by Marc Oraison, *Search Press, London 1977*
132 pp. £2.95

THE CHURCH AND THE HOMOSEXUAL by John J. McNeill S.J. *Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1977.* 211 pp. £2.60

If modern psychology has led us a long way towards understanding the proper role of sexuality in marriage, it seems to have produced nothing but contradiction and the most profound disagreement in respect of the assessment of homosexuality. We have all a very long way to go before a sound moral theory can be formulated. Both these recent studies of the question are compassionate and apparently well researched, but their respective versions of the "facts" are very different. For Oraison, the consultant psychoanalyst, armed with many a case history, homosexuality is a defect of development root-

ed in earliest childhood. He offers two Freudian explanations: it is a failure to overcome fear of the sexual difference discovered in early life; and it is a failure of the oedipal mechanism, "we can say schematically that when the mother is not forbidden as an object of possession it is the woman who will be forbidden as the object of desire." In any case, what homosexuality amounts to is a "fear of the other". It is a failure to grow out of a stage of narcissism in which desire is for a double rather than for a different and complementary person. Thus eventually permanent relationships—even homosexual