

**GOD IN OUR HANDS** by Graham Shaw. *S.C.M.* 1987, Pp. 255. £9.95.

This is a hard book both to read and to assess. The first (lengthy) part consists in a detailed discussion of the Psalter that I leave for Old Testament scholars to examine. I am concerned only with the main theological conclusion that emerges, which is this. Following the Old Testament, chiefly the Psalter, Christians have often conceived God as a God of power who secures the temporal privileges of his worshippers and grants them deliverance from various afflictions. In the light of the Cross we must regard this concept of God as erroneous. Jesus died without any hope of vindication. Belief in his resurrection and exaltation must be rejected on the ground that it destroys the significance of Jesus as the true 'man of God'. Thus Shaw says on pp 113—4 that 'while Jews had looked to their God to establish his power in the context of lives terminated by death, Christians proclaimed a God whose power reversed death itself'. Later he writes as follows. 'Religion is safely once again a matter of happy endings. The suffering and death of Jesus become mere incidents which are gloriously reversed. Belief in God is an invitation to believe that we will live happily ever after. The gospel of the cross becomes a fairy tale' (p 122).

Shaw proceeds to propound a yet more radical thesis that is indicated by the book's title. It is not merely a God of power and privilege who does not exist. God himself does not exist outside our imagination. 'God is not an external reality who imposes himself upon me; instead he is the construction of my imagination and his character reflects my choices' (p 181). Shaw then expresses his indebtedness to Feuerbach. The goal of religion is 'the transformation of the self' (p 184). 'In prayer I am not only creating the God who lives in my imagination, I am also recreating myself' (p 201). At the end of his concluding chapter he sums up thus. 'The God who lives in the hearts of those who pray to him, mirrors the self that invokes him. If we have no difficulty in using the word "I", we should have no difficulty in using the word "God"'. Both have their existence in the imagination of the living. Both are imagined constructions which gain their content in the use of language in our imaginative life' (p 241).

This book is salutary in requiring us, first, to consider again the Old Testament's picture of God in the light of the picture given by the New, and, secondly, to purge our religion of any associations with power and prestige that are incompatible with the revelation of God in Christ. The book is salutary too in reminding us that our ideas of God often reflect our own imaginative 'projections' rather than the nature of God himself. However, in saying that God is merely the product of our imagination and does not exist independently, Shaw simply abandons the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition. Whether such a merely imagined God is spiritually helpful and whether it is psychologically possible to pray to him are questions that each person for whom they are relevant must answer for himself. The book raises many further queries of which I shall mention two on the basis of the summary I have given. First, it is a caricature of the New Testament to say that the Resurrection makes Christ's sufferings and death 'mere incidents which are gloriously reversed'. Secondly, Shaw begs a large philosophical question when he denies the existence of an 'I' or unitary self. In any case, there are psychical events that are real, not imaginary.

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**IN THE STILLNESS DANCING: THE JOURNEY OF JOHN MAIN** by Neil McKenty. *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London. 1986, Pp. 205. £4.95.

In this book Neil McKenty presents us with the biography of an extraordinary man who, when staying as a guest, had the disconcerting habit of finding his way into your kitchen before breakfast to bake Irish brown bread and whom Bede Griffiths has called 'the best spiritual guide in the Church today.'

McKenty's telling of the life-story of someone who went from journalism through the army, the law, and the Colonial Service in Malaya to live as a Benedictine monk first in Ealing and then in his own foundation in Montreal is well researched and attractively told. However, it will be of intense interest only to those who have previously encountered Dom John Main and his special method of prayer and who now want to know more about him. Nevertheless McKenty does not fight shy of some of the fundamental questions raised by Dom John and his approach to prayer, and I would like to give these some brief consideration.

Essentially Dom John came to believe that prayer is particularly difficult for modern man because he has become so inured to self-centred introspection that extraordinary steps must be taken if he is to divert his attention away from the ego and refocus it on the divine presence within. Dom John believed that he had been enabled to rediscover the one tool uniquely suited to accomplish this vital conversion—the mantra. By unremitting repetition of the word 'maranatha' (Come, Lord), the Christian is able to escape from the prison constructed by his own thoughts and ideas *about* God into a state of direct awareness of God himself, present in the risen Jesus, who dwells in his heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. Dom John's clear presentation of this extremely simple method of prayer has met with remarkable success. At a time when western Christians, sensing some impoverishment in their own traditions of spirituality, were being drawn to the meditation techniques of non-Christian eastern religions, Dom John offered them a method of prayer which seemed to allow for the best elements of eastern spirituality whilst being at the same time profoundly in accord with the prayer of ancient Christian monasticism as preserved in the writings of John Cassian. Frustrated Christians had been accustomed to hearing in sermons a great deal about the importance and nature of prayer; they found in Dom John—almost alone it may have seemed—someone able and willing to teach them *how* to pray. The large number of Christians who have begun to pray regularly, seriously and more intensely as a result of Dom John's work is evidence of the validity of his insight.

Nevertheless McKenty's book arouses in me a sense of apprehension and uncertainty as well as of admiration. It is not, perhaps, coincidental that Dom John's method has proved most attractive to active lay Christians living in an urban environment: their need for uncomplicated, silent prayer is easily appreciated. His fellow monks seem, by and large, to have eyed Dom John's activities more critically. When prayer is understood as being intrinsically bound up with the liturgy and *lectio divina*, as an activity which flows out of and back into all the other actions of the Christian life, then the insistence that meditative prayer be confined to the repetition of 'maranatha' seems unduly restrictive. It is disconcerting that Dom John was so determined that his followers should never vary their use of the formula 'maranatha'. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, having recommended 'God' and 'sin' as the two most appropriate words for a Christian 'mantra', goes on to say, 'Even though I have recommended these two little words, you need not necessarily make them your own unless grace also inclines you to choose them.'

Perhaps there is something verging on the puritanical about Dom John's approach to prayer. Certainly it is a contrast to the demanding but flexible tradition of medieval English mystical prayer that Dom Augustine Baker (1575–1641) channelled into English Benedictinism and which Abbot Chapman (1865–1933) contemporised with his dictum 'Pray as you can, and don't try to pray as you can't!'

There is little doubt that Dom John's work for prayer will prove to have been a legacy of enduring value, but it needs linking more securely to those broader Catholic traditions of spirituality of whose existence Dom John seems at times to have been curiously unaware. Having made his Irish brown bread before breakfast, Dom John would announce, 'The secret is honey. That is the *only* way.' But there are, of course, many good ways of making bread, just as there are many good approaches to prayer.