

book should provide an inspiration to Indian Christians, and should help to remind western Christians that we can no longer hide behind the cultural barriers which used to give us our identity. And those who simply like to know what is going on in other parts of the world and church will find this a pleasant and useful addition to their libraries.

Those who missed Bede Griffiths' *Return to the Centre* when it was first published in 1976 will be pleased to find it being reprinted so quickly in paperback. It is a powerful statement of a contemplative view of Christian spirituality and doctrine, indebted to Indian thought and religion, but still firmly Christian. There is a minor irritation which occurs a few times, when the author pretends to be going behind particular religions, like Christianity or Hinduism, to some "eternal religion", which is said to be the source of all of them. This is said to be what "comparative religion" is all about. This is, of course, absurd. Comparative religion is not about distilling and blending essences of religions,

but about *comparing* them in all their complexity. Fr Bede is not doing comparative religion at all; he is doing Christian theology in India, using Indian concepts and practices in just the same way that the church has used the terms provided by Greek philosophy and medieval Aristotelianism. And I think, and hope, that when he tells us that no religion can any longer claim to enshrine in itself by itself the essential "eternal religion", he means no more than what the Vatican Council meant when it reminded us that our catholicity is something we have to retrieve and not presume on, and that this will involve us in various kinds of ecumenism. But apart from this, the book stands up well to re-reading.

Another reprint, which will be warmly welcomed, is Mowbray's re-edition of the 1952 translation of the eastern adaptation of Scupoli, due to Nicodemus and Theophan, with Hodges' very competent and interesting introduction. No alterations have been made for this new edition.

SIMON TUGWELL O.P.

THEOLOGY ON DOVER BEACH by Nicholas Lash *Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979*
pp. xix + 187 £3.95

This collection of essays by Professor Nicholas Lash begins with his inaugural lecture as Norris-Hulse Professor at Cambridge from which it takes its title. The essays that follow are grouped in three sections, concerned respectively with questions of method, comparison with the approaches of some other scholars and the instantiation of his own approach in the treatment of particular theological topics. They reveal a theologian who embodies in a marked degree the two essential prerequisites for a Christian theologian: a deep desire to stand within a continuing tradition of the household of faith and an equally deep sensitivity to the thought-world and the social conditions of the present age. The outcome is a work of theology which is never superficial but often remains elusive. Indeed what else can be expected from one who does "not know whether, and in what circumstances, Christian the-

ology can hope to take positive rather than negative form 'after Auschwitz' " (p. 21)?

I find myself in substantial agreement with very much of what he has to say. And this is surprising because the introduction to the book is directed (as is also one of the essays) to a sustained criticism of my theological writing which, he says, "seems to me admirably to illustrate an approach to problems of Christian theology which neatly contrasts with that which I am recommending" (p. xi n. 1). Where then do the differences between us lie?

Three issues stand out as constituting the marked contrast of approach that Professor Lash sees. First and most frequently he insists on the primacy of practice over theory in the relationship of theology to faith. I by contrast am seen as one who epitomises the false priority of theory over

practice. It is not hard to see why he wants to lay stress on this point; it is not so easy to see just what it involves or whether it is justified in the form that he makes it. He is afraid that the approach he ascribes to me will disenfranchise the non-intellectual believer by only allowing faith to be genuine faith when it is the outcome of carefully weighed evidence (p. 52). He is also afraid that it will lead to social complacency by justifying the world as it is as an expression of God's love (p. 82: the splendid quotation from Newman on p.93 suggests that this is a danger specially endemic to Oxford, but I do not think he regards living in Cambridge to be an automatic safeguard!). There are genuine problems for any Christian theology which wants to avoid fideism (as he explicitly does) and which believes that the present is in some way consistent with and expressive of God's love (as, on the evidence of the final essay, he wishes to do in an unusually strong sense). I do speak of the dependence of theology on religious practice, but am said to do so 'rather reluctantly' (p. xviii). I do not think he is justified in detecting a note of reluctance here, though he would be right to suggest hesitation and uncertainty about the implications of that dependence. And it is interesting to observe that when he himself stresses the primacy of practice, he frequently feels the need to qualify what he has just said by going on to insist that this carries no anti-intellectual implications, that faith is a rational activity (e.g. pp. 15, 57). I do not say he does this reluctantly; I do not think he does for a moment. But I do think that we are both up against the very difficult question of just how the practice and the rigorous theoretical enquiry relate to one another. Again I see no reason to believe that an account of Christian faith as a way of understanding the world as expressive of God's love is incompatible with also seeing it as entitling and enabling us to act. On one occasion at least he seems to me to use this distinction between theory and action as an illegitimate evasion of a proper theoretical question. He objects to being questioned about the implications of his understanding of eternal life for those for whom lack

of love or hostile surroundings have inhibited the growth of love in this life, as if such questioning were an alternative to, or diversion from the task of removing such conditions (p. 182). But, leaving on one side the narrowly individualistic conception of hope that his argument presupposes, we may surely retort: why should it be seen as an alternative? The squalor is there and is in God's world. Is it not our duty to try to understand it (provided we recognise the limited degree to which this will be possible) *and* to change it? If it be true that my way of putting things runs the risk of social complacency, of too easily accepting the world as it is (and I accept the warning as salutary), his reversal of that way seems to me to run the risk of religious and ecclesiastical complacency, of too easily accepting the practice of faith in the church as it is. It is certainly not a risk to which Professor Lash himself is likely to succumb. But if theoretical reflection were as radically *secondary* as he makes out, could it in practice fulfil the critical role he assigns to it in a constructive way? Faith and action do not just happen. Critical reflection of a theoretical kind is not a mere epiphenomenon. It can open up new possibilities for faith and practice. Thus while I agree with his insistence on the secondary character of theology, the relation between it and faith is of a more dialectical character than many of his statements seem to allow. I do not believe Professor Lash would disagree with that in practice. Indeed in the course of a discussion of Newman he himself makes the point in just the terms that I have used (p. 95). So while there is a significant difference in emphasis and style between us, I do not think it is as marked on this issue as he makes out. And neither of us gives a wholly satisfactory account of the relation between theory and practice, may that not partly be due to the fact that it is by definition incapable of a purely theoretical statement?

A second major issue, which he describes as 'perhaps the heart of the matter', is his insistence on the radical dependence of Christian faith – and therefore of Christian theology – on particular historical events. And he sees his position on this

issue as true to the 'risk-laden' character of Christian faith emphasised by Newman and in sharp contrast to what he sees as my 'faith without risks' (p. xiii). This sounds impressive but what does it really involve? The 'particular events' concern Jesus, but what exactly are they? He would, he says, cease to be a Christian if he became convinced that Jesus never existed, that the story of 'his life, teaching and death was a fictional construction ungrounded in the facts' (is it significant that the resurrection is not mentioned?) or was 'a radical *mis*interpretation of his character, history and significance' (p. 84). The risk-laden quality of faith sounds a much less serious matter when it is spelt out like that. The likelihood of there being new evidence – or a convincing representation of existing evidence – that would shift the grounds for historical judgment as drastically as that, seems to me remote. The real issue is not that the work of the critical historian leads us to make negative judgments about Jesus and his relation to the stories told about him in the New Testament, but that it leaves the issues shrouded in uncertainty. Professor Lash recognises this and responds to it once again with his concept of a faith that involves risk. Faith is a principle of action and action does not leave time for minute and finished investigations (pp. 50-2); 'The Church has to have the courage to risk doing the truth in love without waiting for the resolution of complex theoretical and hermeneutical problems' (p. 148). Of course there are risks in the fact that faith needs to act and never has certain knowledge of what action is called for in the complexity of its particular historical situation. That risk is implicit in any form of life that is, as it should be, reflective, self-critical and active. It is a characteristic of political life and of personal life generally. I am certainly aware of it as a feature of Christian faith as I understand it. But is it as closely linked to the dependence of Christian faith on particular historical events, as Professor Lash makes out? I doubt if it is. And that doubt is reinforced when I try to test it against an example of Professor Lash's theologizing in the final section of the book. Chapter 9 is entitled

'The Church and Christ's Freedom' and has much to say about the role of 'remembering Jesus' in that context. He can even (most surprisingly) speak of 'the primacy of the theoretical in the concrete remembering of the past' (p. 148). But, perhaps for reasons that that phrase suggests, concrete remembering of the past (whatever exactly that is) does not seem to be at the heart of the matter for him; nor therefore does it seem to be where the real risk of faith lies for him. It lies much more in the theological understanding of the past and in the ambivalent character of the human institutions in the context of which human freedom has to be expressed. And those are risks which are not very closely related to the differences between our approaches to theology. So while there is some difference between us in our attitude to the particular historical events of the Christian past, I am not convinced that it is as closely related to the risk-laden character of a practical faith as Professor Lash claims.

The third issue is the question of divine action. It is, he affirms, an essential condition of non-illusory faith – and therefore of theology – that God should be accessible by his own action (pp. 16-17). I agree. If God had not made a world in which we could have some knowledge of him, make some response to him, faith and theology would be either impossible or sheer error. But the traditional doctrine of Providence (the theme of chapter 10 entitled with words of a poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins 'These things were here and but the beholder is wanting') speaks not only of the universal conditions of existence as due to God's action but also ascribes particular events to the action of God. This also Professor Lash sees as necessary if we are to avoid 'a cold and irreligious agnosticism' (p. 153). Here too, as Professor Lash recognises, I agree at least in the limited sense that in some events, such as the Cross, God's eternal nature and purpose are most clearly to be discerned. Professor Lash argues, very reasonably, that in that case we may need to go on and speak of the Cross as 'a special, historically particular act of God' (p. 117). In the primary language of faith that

is the sort of thing we do say. My concern is to try to clarify our understanding of such a statement. That is a process of which Professor Lash does not, I think, disapprove. In a sense it is what he is up to in his chapter on Divine Providence. Certainly he rules out, as firmly as I would, some unsatisfactorily credulous or superstitious accounts of what it might mean. But when it comes to saying anything positive, he is at his most elusive. In the end we are encouraged to say simply 'these things were here . . . but the beholder is wanting' (p. 163). In effect he falls back on the language of poetry, a language akin to that of religious faith rather than of theological reflection. The difference between us on this issue seems to be that I have attempted to give a theoretical account of what faith language about particular acts of God might imply. I am far from satisfied with the account, but it was the best that I could do. He is even more dissatisfied, but offers no alternative. At this point, he is saying in effect, we must be content to let the language of faith stand unexplained; none of the reflective

accounts being offered do justice to what faith intuitively. I accept that as a reasonable response provided the struggle to understand is not to be proscribed. I am relieved to observe that it is only seeking "*prematurely* to 'behold' " (p. 163: my italics) that is condemned. To fall into that error, if that is what I have done, is part of the risk of theology – for like faith it too has its risks.

In short, I find in this book much that is sensitive, much that is pertinent to the contemporary task of theology. But it is not always easy to see just what its positive affirmations amount to. The subject matter of theology calls for a measure of elusiveness in the prosecution of the theological task. But elusiveness can be overdone and give rise to a 'theology without risks'. I hope that in the larger theological works to which we look forward from the Norris-Hulse chair the shape of his own theological proposals will become clearer as he pursues not only the risk-laden venture of faith but the risk-laden venture of theology also.

MAURICE WILES

THE NATURE OF MAN by Don Cupitt *Sheldon Press, 1979 £1.95*

This kind of romp through a vast subject is something on which reviewers are liable to be hard, forgetting how useful such a thing can be, when approached in the right frame of mind. Dr Cupitt has just the sort of genial brashness and omnivorous curiosity to carry the thing off. I found this book at once more thought-provoking, and much less wrong-headed, than its author's attempts at constructive theology.

After a peep into anthropology, there comes a sketch of the doctrines of man in the great religions. Dr Cupitt's view of early Christianity is prejudiced, but he disarms criticism by admitting as much; and certainly such a book as this is no place for protracted scholarly reservations and qualifications. Next there is an account of the atheist conception of man, and of how in modern times the religious conviction of human bondage has been twisted into the view that religion is itself a principal

cause of that bondage. I thought the distinction between seven types of atheism particularly useful. It was amusing to find a thumbnail sketch of the thought of Aquinas here. Dr Cupitt affects surprise at the manner in which that philosopher 'cheerfully distinguishes between the way things really are (*per se*) and the way they seem to us (*quoad nos*)' p. 50; but I can hardly believe that Dr Cupitt himself makes no such distinction, which the very existence of science might be said to presuppose. In fact he implies as much at the end of the book, when he very pertinently suggests that the self-transcendence implicit in man's capacity to know may provide a basis for a positive assessment of religion. There follows a look at contemporary accounts of human origins, man's similarities with and differences from other animals, and reactions of religious bodies to these. The author's irrepressible chirpiness was severely tested in his survey of the