

**EXPLORING GOD-TALK: USING LANGUAGE IN RELIGION** by Jeff Astley,  
*Darton, Longman & Todd*, London, 2004, pp. 143, £9.95 pbk.

Cicero once wrote, 'Vocabula sunt notae rerum' ('Words are signs of things'). Jeff Astley, in new book, *Exploring God-talk* (EG), introduces his readers to a vastly extended understanding of the possible usages of words, over and apart from being signs of things. EG is a welcome volume. His book is lucid, informative, and richly illustrated by an array of examples, exercises, and illustrations. It is also based on vast erudition and careful reflection on a broad range of personal experiences.

In essence, EG offers a survey of 'the variety of ways in which religious believers both speak to God and about God' (xi). Its intended readership includes two groups: adult Christians who are studying individually or are enrolled in courses; and students who are beginning to study theology or the philosophy of religion in schools, colleges, and universities. The book's sub-title is significant in that it reveals a major aim of the author, namely, to explore the question, 'What use is religious language?'

The first chapter of the book offers an intriguing overview of diverse ways in which language is employed in relation to faith and religion. It is followed by chapters which variously discuss topics such as the nature of religious language and religious experience; the language of prayer and worship; figurative ways of talking about God, with attention to the concepts of metaphor, model, and myth; analogical types of God-talk; logical positivism and religious language; Wittgenstein; speech act theory; and hermeneutics.

The last topic mentioned is very helpfully addressed. Voltaire and David Hume both concluded that human beings remain the same in all places and at all times. If that were the case, it would be an easy matter always and everywhere to be able to communicate with human beings. However, it was the singular achievement of the eighteenth-century Prussian philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder, to demonstrate that there are tremendous differences between peoples from distinct historical epochs and cultures. Moreover, he saw clearly that individuals differ widely from one another within a particular culture and time. If that is the case, then the possibilities for misunderstandings in linguistic communication abound. Hermeneutics in its modern guise is the methodological investigation of the meaning of language, especially as language is codified in texts. As the ninth chapter of EG makes clear, there is no agreement among modern and contemporary philosophers and theologians as to the locus of meaning in texts, religious or otherwise. Schleiermacher insists that meaning rests with authorial intention: a text means what its author determines it means. Others would argue that meaning resides with an objectively given text. Still others would contend that meaning arises in an interplay between a text read and a reader reading. Many postmodernists would conclude that a decisive and clear meaning is always elusive.

A particularly noteworthy feature of this book is Jeff Astley's use of the work of the Dominican theologians Herbert McCabe, Gareth Moore, and Brian Davies, to shed light on various aspects of religious discourse. The book contains an excellent account, using McCabe, of the complex and potentially confusing topic of analogical God-Talk. Any student of the use of religious language would benefit enormously from this chapter, and indeed, from the insightful exposition of Wittgenstein.

Were this book longer, it could fruitfully explore more historical background to modern understandings of the use of language in religion. As it stands, it relies a good deal on writers working in the English-speaking world (for example, Sallie McFague, Don Cupitt, Antony Flew, Basil Mitchell, John Hick). A page of text is given to structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction (terms that are not explained in the book's Glossary), but these immensely complex themes would benefit from a more extensive treatment. It is also important in any book devoted to religious language not to give the impression (and Jeff Astley doesn't) that

language became a focus for philosophical investigation in Anglophone circles during the twentieth century, when it was eighteenth-century Prussian philosophers such as Herder and Johann Georg Hamann, and after them Gottlob Frege, who began to focus philosophical analysis resolutely on language.

That said, anyone bothering to read, study, and discuss Jeff Astley's latest book would be amply rewarded and ably instructed.

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**COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH** edited by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Continuum*, London, 2005, Pp. 448, £12.99 pbk.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* is one of the key legacies of Pope John Paul II. It is now joined by a sister compendium, which is 'designed to stand alongside the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as an authoritative summary of the Church's teaching on what makes for human flourishing.' The compendium has a long way to go before matching the influence and fame of her big sister, but as we all know social doctrine is one of the Church's best kept secrets.

So who can benefit from the compendium and how can it be used to promote Church social teaching? The answer to the first question is potentially every person. The introduction states: 'By means of the present document, the Church intends to offer a contribution of truth to the question of man's place in nature and in human society' (para. 14). This contribution continues the modern papal strategy of addressing Church social doctrine both to the faithful and 'to the brethren of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, to the followers of other religions, as well as to all people of goodwill who are committed to serving the common good' (12). The context for this 'contribution of truth' is evangelisation, and the compendium here quotes *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: 'The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelical mission' (7).

More specifically the compendium is intended for those involved in teaching the Faith, primarily bishops, but with them all those 'responsible for formation will find herein a guide for their teaching and a tool for their pastoral service' (11). It is the lay faithful, however, who in their lives confront temporal realities and therefore the compendium sees its role as offering enlightenment to the laity and assistance to Christian communities as they bring the light of the Gospel to social, political and economic realities.

This leads to the second question: how can the compendium be used to promote the Church's social teaching? The first thing to note is that it acts as a reference guide for modern Church social teaching. For the teacher who wants to find out what the Church teaches on a particular social question it not only condenses modern encyclical and the social documents of Vatican II, but also refers to a vast array of pontifical addresses and documents from various Roman congregations. Secondly, it is not merely an amalgam of Church social doctrine, but attempts to present this teaching in its theological, anthropological and evangelical unity. In order to appreciate this it is necessary to examine the structure of the compendium.

The compendium is presented in three parts, but unlike the sections of the *Catechism* these parts are not given titles. The clue to understanding each section is given in its opening quotation, each draw from *Centesimus Annus*. The first part quotes the encyclical regarding the need for the theological dimension in answering social questions, and the second part begins with a quotation regarding the link between social teaching and evangelisation. The quotation at the start of the third part stresses the need to turn social teaching into practice. The chapter headings in each part fill out these clues, such that the first part is a presentation of the