

Reviews

RADICAL ORTHODOXY: A NEW THEOLOGY, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999). Pp. xii + 285, £45 hbk; £14.99 pbk.

Radical Orthodoxy, we are told, is 'a new theology'. The term itself has come into common theological parlance only over the last two years or so, and was coined to refer to a new way of doing theology that is generally thought to have been inaugurated by John Milbank's magisterial study, *Theology and Social Theory* (1990). This collection of essays may be regarded as a 'manifesto' for radical orthodoxy and also serves as a pilot volume for a series of the same name. Appropriately, the contributors are, for the most part, 'new' theologians; five of the contributors are (or were at the time of publication) doctoral research students at the University of Cambridge. Even the well established contributors (including the three distinguished editors) are among the youngest of our academic theologians.

The paradox is that this 'new' theology is essentially an 'old' theology, in that we are exhorted to recuperate 'creedal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix' (p. 2). More specifically, this 'old' theology is the 'richer and more coherent Christianity which was gradually lost sight of after the late Middle Ages' (ibid). As such, the gospel preached by this 'new' theology is the gospel of orthodoxy. Lest this be thought of as simply a nostalgic return to the premodern, however, it should be emphasised that this orthodoxy is a *radical* orthodoxy in that it is situated both within and against the concerns of postmodernism. It is situated 'within' postmodernism in its 'rejection of substance in favour of transition' and in its embrace of the differential flux. Far from precluding God, it is claimed that this actually prepares the way for the 'return' of God after the distorting effects of modernity and its conceptions of God as a substance, a thing, or a being, albeit an infinite one. As in previous volumes by these authors, Duns Scotus is the chief villain (although John Montag emphasises the role played by Francisco Suarez in the development of Aquinas' thought into a modern Thomism). It is such distortions that have plagued modern attempts to speak of God, and from which postmodernism offers the possibility of escape. But radical orthodoxy is also 'against' postmodernism, particularly its Nietzschean ontology of violence. For it is claimed that postmodern nihilism imagines the world as a theatre of conflict, within which multiple narratives battle for supremacy. It is argued, however, that this is merely

an exacerbation of modernity, for it is still an instance of the rational mind claiming something about the essence of the world. It is also said that this vision is a particularly unattractive one. It is a story of a dark, violent, meaningless void as opposed to the Christian story of light, harmony, peace and love.

These will be familiar themes to regular readers of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward. The essays in *Radical Orthodoxy* build upon these themes to 'reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework' (p. 1). If this seems an audacious claim, one should not be surprised. For John Milbank in particular is notorious for his penchant for hyperbole, his tendency to make the sweeping statement and the gigantic claim. But how do the contributors go about their task of 'reclaiming the world' for theology? We are told that they visit the sites in which secularism has invested heavily— aesthetics (Frederick Bauerschmidt), politics (William Cavanaugh), sex (Gerard Loughlin), the body (Graham Ward), personhood (Michael Hanby and David Moss), visibility (Phillip Blond), space (Catherine Pickstock)— 'and resituates them from a Christian standpoint; that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist' (p. 1). Their task, therefore, is to read these worldly phenomena in terms of the Word, and their contention is that only in so doing can the finite integrity of these phenomena be preserved. The central theological notion here is that of 'participation', derived from Plato and reworked by Christianity. Radical orthodoxy claims that this is the only configuration that guards against a territory independent of God, and that any such independence must inevitably lead to nihilism. Participation, then, 'refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity' (p. 3). Thus, the individual contributions to *Radical Orthodoxy* may be regarded as particular applications of this general theological configuration.

This is not to suggest, however, that it as an homogeneous effort. On the contrary, if the collection is intended as a 'manifesto' for radical orthodoxy, it has to be said that it is a remarkably heterogeneous one. Indeed, one might well say that there is not one 'radical orthodoxy'; there are several. The divergences of substance and nuance between the various contributors are considerable, and this is a heterogeneity that the unifying introduction tends to conceal. Perhaps one of the most striking and substantial of such divergences is that of the differing attitudes to nihilism. Several of the contributors follow John Milbank in his construction of an absolute opposition between theology and nihilism. He says that 'it is indeed for radical orthodoxy an either/or: philosophy (Western or Eastern) as a purely autonomous discipline, or theology: Herod or the magi, Pilate or the God-man' (p. 32). And the burden of Milbank's essay is to show how philosophy as a purely autonomous discipline must necessarily culminate in nihilism.

A number of the other essayists, including Catherine Pickstock, Phillip Blond and Conor Cunningham, share with Milbank this sense of

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the dialectical opposition of theology against nihilism. But perhaps this is yet another instance of radical orthodox hyperbole. For in the introduction, it is conceded that theological truth 'may indeed hover close to nihilism, since it, also, refuses a reduction of the indeterminate' (p. 1). This at least suggests that an either/or opposition of theology against nihilism is oversimplistic, even if theological truth is finally distanced from nihilism by its reading of the indeterminate as infinite interpersonal harmonious order rather than impersonal chaos. The essays of Graham Ward, Gerard Loughlin and Laurence Hemming, on the other hand, are marked by a greater reticence in this regard. In particular, a more nuanced theological reading of nihilism is offered by Laurence Hemming in his essay on 'Heidegger and the grounds of redemption'. It is Hemming's contention that nihilism, most particularly in Nietzsche's declaration that 'God is dead', is actually what makes it possible to think about the essence of God at all. The God that is declared dead by nihilism is only the God of metaphysics and not the God of faith. Thus, nihilism is that situation which opens up the possibility of the 'death' of the idolatrous God of metaphysics in favour of the 'return' of the God of faith. In this sense, therefore, nihilism may be regarded as working more *with* theology, rather than merely *against* it. This is just one of several instances which suggest that radical orthodoxy should be considered more as a 'family resemblance' than as a monolithic, homogeneous theology.

But this also raises the question of the extent to which radical orthodoxy (even in its virulently anti-nihilistic guise) is itself indebted to, and indeed made possible by, a certain nihilism. For if, as Hemming argues, nihilism is the overcoming of metaphysics and if, as Gianni Vattimo has elsewhere argued, the accomplishment of nihilism is simultaneously the overcoming of nihilism, then it becomes difficult to conceive of any radical orthodoxy at all without some sort of nihilistic supplement. Again, this is just one instance of a wider phenomenon, namely, the infinite complexity of the interweaving and mutual founding of narratives and so called 'metanarratives'. For although radical orthodoxy proclaims Christianity as metanarrative, one must also take account of the various (meta)narratives by which Christianity is itself supplemented, including not only nihilism, but the (meta)narrative of radical orthodoxy itself. This is because radical orthodoxy tells a story (or stories) that is distinct from, and that cannot be equated with, the Christian story. Furthermore, it is a story that in some sense positions' the Christian story. If this is the case, however, one is led to ask just which narrative can be described as the *metanarrative* here. Indeed, the very concept of a metanarrative seems to become unsettled, as each prospective metanarrative appears to be 'positioned' by yet another. Perhaps the quest for a metanarrative which is itself unfounded, but which founds everything else, is an attempt to go 'too far back'. Such questions require more attention than I can give them here, but they do serve to remind us that the radical orthodox agenda is by no means

unproblematic. And such difficulties will need to be addressed before radical orthodoxy (or at least certain forms of it) can realise its commitment to 'reclaim the world'.

None of which, however, is to detract from the undoubted achievement of these theologians. They have re-drawn the boundaries of the theological landscape in a remarkably short space of time. The uniqueness of radical orthodoxy lies in its efforts to create a space for theology not before or within, but *beyond* the 'death of God'. We have seen that this gives rise to a theological orthodoxy, but one that is *made possible* by a philosophical and theological radicalism that analytic, modern and liberal theologians are bound to contest. So the combats will continue with a renewed vigour. But, of course, there is disagreement here not only in terms of theological content but also in terms of theological method. For unlike their rival combatants, radical orthodox theologians consider criteria of evidence, rationality, plausibility and facts to be, at best, frivolous distractions. Instead, they seek merely to 'persuade' the hearer by telling God's story. Finally, then, their 'new' message echoes a somewhat 'older' one: those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

GAVIN HYMAN

THE WAY OF THE LAMB: THE SPIRIT OF CHILDHOOD AND THE END OF THE AGE by John Saward (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999). Pp. xii +170, £12.95 pbk.

John Saward writes books of a kind no other British theologian does, although his voice carries constant echoes of Hans Urs von Balthasar. What makes him distinctive is the unembarrassed retrieval of certain highly-charged spiritual writers and themes, combined with a firm dogmatic underpinning. This is a doctrinally secure, exuberant Catholicism that proposes to change lives and be counter-cultural.

Saward is a married lay theologian, who has just returned from teaching in the United States and now divides his time between England and Austria. His latest book is on a theme that has long fascinated him—a theology of childhood. He has come to regard the book as a gift to him from his own children. Saward's interest is not only in the possibilities that childhood has for children, but also in how childhood is an essential ingredient in the Christian life of adults and worthy of their respect. The theme becomes counter-cultural in opposing so much violence done to born and unborn children, and in opposing the over-valuing of 'adult faith' or 'Christianity come of age'. The book is not a chronicle of all the main Christian writings or dimensions of the theme of childhood. It reflects on and articulates a constellation of themes present in a particular group who were either contemporaries or born not long after. The book inevitably organises and orders the themes more than the authors did, but it stays close to their words and it is after all an exposition.

To repropose the values of childhood Saward turns chiefly to St