

GOD, MIRACLE AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND by David E. Jenkins. *S. C. M.* 1987. Pp. 112 + viii. £4.95.

The second part of this book is the text of David Jenkins' Hensley Henson Lectures, while the first consists of three addresses and a sermon. There are two major targets throughout: one is the God whom some people claim to intervene 'as an additional occasional historical cause', the other the notion that tradition makes available absolutely reliable directives for present-day church decision-making.

The concepts of God and of tradition which the Bishop attacks certainly need criticism, and he is at great pains to show that he is not thereby rejecting all possibility of a God who is active in history. But what he calls 'the interactions and transactions' between human persons and God have to be conceived of as occurring in a 'maintained and privileged space which, so to speak, holds apart or allows autonomy to the goings-on of science and history, the personal lives of human beings and the independent existence of God' (p. 68). Again, he writes of 'a mystery of structured space ... which is to be encountered and experienced by persons within the stuff of science and within the events of history.... The mystery and the space is where we who stand in history and matter can stand out and encounter the transcendent mystery of God, God who nonetheless transcends his transcendence so that he can stand in'. (p. 73).

These extracts are quoted because they seem to me the heart of the book. It is unfortunate that, instead of developing these ideas, Jenkins indulges in a great deal of abrasive and repetitive swiping at views he rejects. 'God', he insists, 'is not an arbitrary meddler nor an occasional fixer'. The book is littered with one-liners of this kind, which add nothing to the argument and suggest a compulsion to caricature other opinions. Nor can the Bishop resist wild and unsubstantiated generalisations. 'As many people take up religion to hide from God as to get closer to him'. Perhaps, but how does he know? All history, he claims, is made up, and 'church history is made up more than most'. Why the last phrase?

General Synod debates are described as 'very often taken up by people being sure about things which we cannot be sure about'. Yet in his sermon on Mark 9:14–29 Jenkins simply asserts without argument that this story is about the healing of an epileptic boy, while going on to claim that 'the trouble with moderns is that we keep trying to want to explain things instead of living with the mystery'!

The author also practices a peculiarly Anglican form of self-deprecation which compulsively emphasises the extreme incoherence and muddle he sees as a distinguishing feature of the Church of England. What is infuriating is that this stance is accompanied by a deep complacency: 'We (i.e. Anglicans) rely on God to keep us together and move us forward together', he writes, implying that that other Christians don't and adding: 'We are not papalistic Roman and we are not biblicist Protestant'.

In his zeal against the manipulative God Jenkins is led into another way of eviscerating the mystery. He claims that God is 'no more and no less concerned with the death of the Emperor Theodosius as an event in history than he is with the death of anyone else' (p. 63). Is there then no sense in which God has a special interest in the death of Jesus?

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