

WOMEN AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY, ARE THE FEMINIST SCHOLARS RIGHT?
by Susanne Heine, trans. John Bowden. *SCM Press*. 1987. vi — 182 pp. £6.95.

How refreshing to find a feminist criticism of feminist theology! Dr. Susanne Heine identifies one of the greatest problems of feminist theology as 'the fact that women form a negative theory out of their hurt and their negative experience and claim universal validity for it' (p.3). Her book is devoted to demonstrating that many current feminist judgements in the area of theology prove untenable because they go against the facts. She opposes what she claims to be a meticulous, scientifically exact quest for objective, historical fact to the sort of 'interest-orientated, subjective approach' which it seems most feminist theologians bring to bear on the source material of scripture and patristics.

In the first two chapters she exemplifies the wrong approach by a survey of what has been written by feminists on the Genesis 3 story of the fall, and on patristic commentaries, especially those of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, on the role of Eve. In chapters 3, 4 and 5 she attempts to present a correct approach to the textual material of the Gospels and the Pauline corpus. It is perhaps inevitable, but still unfortunate, that jargon renders the first two chapters extremely heavy going and at times quite incomprehensible to one who is not very thoroughly versed in the manifold literature on the subject. Sadly this characteristic returns whenever the author turns from textual comment to reflection.

The chapters on the Gospels and on the Pauline corpus are the strongest parts of the book. Serious analysis of the texts provides a fascinating, and for the most part convincing, reconstruction of the actual situation of Jesus' group of itinerant preachers, both male and female. Similarly the earliest Christian communities, Pauline and otherwise, are reconstructed, and in them a free, active and equally responsible role for women and men is persuasively discerned.

Chapters 6 and 7 consider some Gnostic texts and the period of the Pastoral epistles. The latter offers a number of useful insights, but the treatment of the Gnostic texts cannot be considered satisfactory since it betrays the very faults the author herself criticises in others, being far too brief and too selective in the use of the material. Even the more valuable chapters of the book are somewhat undermined by questionable conclusions based on doubtful exegesis of New Testament material. The author is not innocent of the eisegesis she deprecates in others and has a marked tendency to erect hypotheses into supposedly established facts. She is even guilty of one serious (and very common) misreading of the text of Acts chapter 5 (p. 60). However the book concludes with a valuable lesson in articulating the distinction between an ideal—in this case the ideal of equality expressed by Jesus in Mark 10.42, and summed up in Galatians 3.28 as 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female'—and the contingent historical praxis in which it is, imperfectly, realised at any given time. The claim that the ideal makes can become an ideology which does violence to reality, or evades the demands of reality altogether. On the other hand the pressure of reality, of what is possible can not only smother the ideal but even legitimate a serious distortion or denial of it. 'The canon of the New Testament is not just a history of successful praxis; it delineates both the claim and its betrayal equally' (p. 153).

'Again and again it is eros and the social responsibility for children which keep women from the tasks which they have in common with men, as a result of reference to their "natural duties"' (p. 146). The author intends a second volume in which systematic questions will receive critical examination. Will she face up to the very profound question implied by that supposed tension between 'natural duties' and 'tasks in common with men'? Many women who value their femininity quite as deeply would answer that question very differently from the way in which some of the more vocal feminists seem likely to do.