

the Giver'(p.26) This thesis is given a loose framework by serial consideration of the so-called 'hard sayings' of Jesus, which blatantly contradict any saccharine picture of Sermon-on-the-Mount spirituality or morals, and it certainly compels attention.

The book is in various ways very frustrating. The dense and convoluted style of writing in places makes a complex theme even more difficult to follow. The framework is too loose to provide the rational mind with the sort of ordered progression it craves, and the devastating, illuminating and liberating insights which the author seems to be grasping at are never expressed fully or clearly. One is reminded of the deluding effect of methane over the marshes at night. This is no doubt all of a piece with the theme and intention of the book; the 'answers', if there are any, to the contradictions and paradoxes so brutally expressed by the author, are not to be presented to us on a plate. We must find them for ourselves through our own, painful experience. All that the author has done for us is to turn our familiar Jesus-world upside down, so that we cannot help looking at it from a different angle.

S. M. CECILY BOULDING, OP

A SEPARATE GOD: THE CHRISTIAN ORIGINS OF GNOSTICISM by Simone Pétrement. *Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1991.* Pp. 542. £35.

The strange group of early mystical texts known as gnostic exert a fascination on the restless modern mind. One of the superior Sunday papers published an article suggesting that they express a superior form of Christianity to the one which prevailed. Others have interpreted the movement as a 'new age' or a feminist religion, or even a Heideggerian philosophical system.

The first problem in writing about gnosticism is to decide whom to include. Although Irenaeus applies the term 'gnostic' to Valentinian and other heretical sects, Clement of Alexandria appropriates it as a description of loyal members of the Church who have learnt the secrets of allegorical exegesis. It is only in modern times that historians have given the term a systematic application to a whole range of second and third century sects which sought salvation from an alien material world in esoteric knowledge. However there was no coherent gnostic movement with an organisation or even a sense of identity; it has been suggested that gnosticism was an 'atmosphere' of thought rather than a school.

The title Simone Pétrement has chosen for her study indicates what she regards as the distinguishing feature of the group of writings which are appropriately called gnostic, namely the belief that the creator God, often described by the Platonic title of Demiurge (i.e. craftsman), is distinct from the supreme God and inferior to him. This group includes works which are modifications of mainline Christian or Jewish belief, as well as the pagan Hermetic documents and the Manichean and Mandaean writings.

The second problem concerns the origins of gnosticism: did it first arise in pagan circles (such as Iranian Zoroastrianism), in a pre-Christian Jewish gnosticism (traces of which are alleged to be detectable in the New Testament), or were its roots Christian? The author defends the unfashionable thesis that gnosticism was a perversion of the Pauline and Johannine understandings of Christianity. Mlle Pétremont sees the fundamental idea of gnosticism to be grace: human beings are imprisoned in an alien world, from which they escape to God through the knowledge brought by a Saviour. This view of life, at first compatible with Christian orthodoxy, though already subject to docetic deviations, suffered its decisive gnostic perversion in the second century, when Saturnilus (or Saturninus) reduced the creator of the Old Testament to the rank of an angel, or even seven angels, representing, Pétremont thinks, the seven days of creation in Genesis. The reason for this fatal turn in gnostic thinking was the anti-Jewish sentiment of Saturnilus; Irenaeus attributes to him the belief that Christ came to destroy the God of the Jews (AH 1.24.2). There then developed from these Christian beginnings the 'general Gnosticism' of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Manicheism and Mandeism.

Thus, Pétremont argues, not only is there no evidence that any pre-Christian form of gnosticism existed, but a plausible line of descent can be posited from Christianity to all forms of gnosticism. Moreover, it is not reasonable to propose any other origin: not Jewish, because no Jew would have set so low a value on the God of the Old Testament; not pagan, because only Christian belief in a Saviour and the Holy Spirit can give sense to the gnostic myths. Without Christianity 'nothing remains but a tissue of absurdities' (p.21).

The author presents a powerful case, based on magisterial knowledge of the sources, for a Christian origin of gnosticism. But she does more: for all its extravagant mythology, she makes gnosticism plausible as a faith. For her it is a religion of grace, of 'transcendence pushed to its limit' (p. 25). Gnosticism was a worthy rival of orthodox Christianity.

This is a book that every theological library should purchase and every student of the early Church should study. One can utter no higher praise of Dr Carol Harrison's translation than to say that it almost always reads like an original English work. It is however a pity that the English edition has taken so long to appear. Even when the French original was published in 1984 the bibliography was becoming out of date; almost no book later than 1977 is cited. Fourteen years is a long time in New Testament and gnostic studies.

E.J. YARNOLD S.J.