

truth, such as that of Christian theology, there could be no understanding and deepening of revelation, no attempt at distinguishing between what is Christian, non-Christian and un-Christian, between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism and their consequences for a Christian life, and so on. Thus the Roman (and indeed the Anglican) Church has done well to make much of truth as propositional and the propositionalisation of doctrine. In a later (rather brief) section, Avis recognises the importance of truth as propositional, but grudgingly and in a way that hardly connects clearly with his earlier discussion on the tacit dimension of knowledge.

Now a propositional understanding of doctrine (and truth) is not necessarily a static understanding. It is here that Avis has been less than fair to the Roman position, in accusing the Church of absolutising its doctrinal formulations. Even a perfunctory reading of the Catholic documents Avis quotes (especially those of Vatican II) will show that the Roman Church recognises that doctrinal understanding should grow and deepen, that there is scope for the continuing interpretation of scripture, for reformulated descriptions—howsoever inadequate these may be—of God's saving action in changing circumstances, and of his revealed yet transcendent nature. After all, the Church numbers among her members some of the greatest experts of the science (and art) of apophatic theology.

Doctrinal formulations change, new propositions supplant the old without necessarily losing the threads of continuity between them. It is unfortunate that Avis' immoderation tends to obscure the valid points he often does make: the Roman Church *has* often been slow to recognise the need to reformulate doctrines, *does* tend to be authoritarian. Certainly these points need making, but in a spirit of conciliation and hope for the future rather than in implacable condemnation. To write as if there has been no significant change of heart (especially after Vatican II) and as if blame and deficiencies lie chiefly on one side is unfair. On other topics too, e.g. authority, theological pluralism, Avis' treatment is less than even-handed.

Finally, it is regretted that Avis nowhere seriously considers the universal, *pastoral* implications of a teaching and interpreting authority in the Church. Most believers, Catholic and otherwise, cannot and should not be theologians. They carry on with the business of living their faith and look to the Church for firm guidance, in these troubled times, on matters of doctrine and morals—nor should theologians, for that matter, shrug off the responsibility of guiding constraints. I daresay that if Avis had dwelt on these considerations his perception of things would have undergone marked change. Perhaps I can conclude with an observation Avis himself makes, ironically in another context, but one to which his own position is subject: 'In negative, condemnatory, dismissive statements ... we are reacting to views that we do not hold ourselves but attribute to others. The possibility of misunderstanding the other person's point of view is undoubtedly a real one' (p. 49).

JULIUS LIPNER

R. S. THOMAS: POET OF THE HIDDEN GOD, by D.Z. Phillips. Macmillan, 1986. Pp. xviii + 186. £25.

The 'logic' and 'clear language' of Paley's *Evidences* and *Natural Theology* gave the young Darwin 'as much delight as did Euclid' and he remembered in his *Autobiography* how he was 'convinced by the long line of argumentation' (Ed. Gavin de Beer, OUP, 1983, p. 32); but since Darwin undermined the doctrine of Man's fall from primal grace with news of our primate past, the role of logic and clear language in defence of faith has been much disputed. The Fall enabled Christianity to account for the evil we inflict, but also for the evils to which we are by nature exposed, in terms of man's freely chosen disobedience. With the Fall's demise, Paley's line of argumentation began to crumble, for now it was God

who had chosen to create a world for men riven with pain and death.

If there is one virtue to be singled out in this book by D.Z. Phillips, it is the reminder that we cannot dodge this problem of evil, that we cannot enunciate with blithe unconcern the doctrine that God redeems us from sin and death, if these two are of his own making. We must find new words with which to talk of such a God. Phillips thinks he has found these words in the poetry of R.S. Thomas, a 'hard-won religious understanding in verse' (p. 132), and offers in evidence copious quotations that trace the poet's development since the Second War. The clear language of explanation has failed: 'the comforting rationalisations philosophers of religion offer in the face of human suffering' prove only their own inadequacy (p. 114). Instead 'we come to God through a *via negativa*, by coming to see that the nature of his will is born not of an external system which gives a point to everything, but of a radical pointlessness in things.... It is not by seeking explicit answers, but by seeing why such answers must be hidden, died to, that the possibility of belief in a God who is present in all things emerges' (p. 82).

But the case does not convince. Nowhere does Phillips suggest just how such an understanding might be 'hard-won in verse', what might be the arena in which these battles are fought out. If we do supply criteria, and state with Geoffrey Hill that 'the poet's gift is to make history and politics and religion speak for themselves through the strata of language' (*The New Statesman* Vol. 99 No. 2551, 8 February 1980, p. 214), then we can find instances elsewhere in poetry where battle is joined. Henry Sidgwick criticised Tennyson's *In Memoriam* because 'Faith' is too completely triumphant' and 'must give the last word'; but he failed to attend to the details of rhythm and case:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;

Here in the prologue, the last word lies not with faith, but our lack of proof. Notice the lower cases: 'faith' amid the capitals, 'immortal' where the stress falls not on the prefix but on our mortality. The hesitancy of many commas calls up but cannot give full voice to the assured lyric of Herbert's 'Immortal Love, author of this great frame....' (*The English Poems of George Herbert*, Ed. C.A. Patrides, Everyman, 1974, p. 73). If Tennyson embraces a lonely faith then he does so with the same lack of whole-heartedness that the half-rhymes embrace the stanza. Yet when we return to Phillips and to Thomas, the critic never once mentions rhythm, but talks only of 'religious insights' (p. 108), as if of niggatory concepts embedded in the verse and to be winkled out. But perhaps he has little choice, for Thomas' poetry fails in such battles, falls flat to the ear:

There is an aggression of fact
to be resisted successfully
only in verse, that fights language
with its own tools. Smile, poet,

among the ruins of a vocabulary
you blew your trumpet against. (p. 120).

Wherever the struggle is, it is not to be found in the tones of bland assertion, where verse has no grip either in rhyme or the number of syllables to the line. The continuation across the stanza divide will not bear comparison with Hill's technique in 'Vocations' (from *Tenebrae*, Andre Deutsch, 1978, p. 29), where it expresses refusal to conform to the expected pattern, each stanza, each its own world and centre. Hill can thus pick up, in a poem that shows the Puseyite by his study window, a question from Newman: 'The sun shines, and the rain falls, the garden smiles, as it used to do; and can some one definite, external event have changed the position of this happy scene of which I am the centre?' (*Difficulties of Anglicans*, Lecture IV, Longmans, 1901, p. 123). Technique judges silently

the cool clear language with which the Puseyite would justify himself. Thomas lacks this ability, and Phillips does not recognise its worth.

What, however, of the 'concepts' said to be embedded? Still the case lacks conviction. The author asks 'Why should we expect to base belief in God on knowledge? ... Faith asks us to believe in a hidden God' (p. 115), and in the process questions get confused. The question as to God's existence is thrown together with faith in God's loving nature, a twentieth-century conflation better rejected. For Phillips will seek to assert the primacy of 'dance' over creeds and rationalisation (p. 150), yet it is only when we recognise the existence of a God whose nature is radically unknown will there be the space that Phillips wants in which to dance, rail, or curse. He gives no weight to the evidence for a Creator God that might allow people to trust their 'primitive reactions'. Neither does Phillips acknowledge Christianity's own avowal that what it preaches is to many a 'stumbling-block', and to others 'folly'. He does not discuss just what our reactions might be to that block. Am I to dance round it in pagan ritual? Or embrace it *quia incredibile*? For if it makes a difference, then it seems we have not gone so far from explanation and traditional philosophy of religion as Phillips would have us hold.

In conclusion, there is nothing here that philosophers will not find more fully treated in the author's other writings; there is little that literary critics will find other than exasperating.

RICHARD FINN OP

THE MYSTERIES OF RELIGION by Stephen R.L. Clark, *Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, Pp. x + 277, Hb. £25.00, Pb. £7.95*

This book appears in a new series of 'Philosophical Introductions', whose aim is to introduce beginners to philosophy through philosophising about issues on which the student may already be presumed to have views, though in the case of religion, I fear that the lamentable decline of proper religious education and practice in our schools makes this a somewhat forlorn hope. Professor Clark says that he first doubted that there was a need for an introduction to the philosophy of religion, but quickly persuaded himself that there was room 'for a study which took its start from ordinary experience of religion' rather than the conventional philosophic approach of examining a few 'abstruse' arguments about a being most religious people would not recognise as the object of their devotions. It would not be entirely unfair to say that Clark does not avoid only abstruse arguments in his book. He largely eschews argument altogether, preferring, as he puts it, to map the terrain which religion and religious experience occupies. His view appears to be that there is a genuine area of life and experience to which religion and only religion answers, and he combines this conviction with a strong sense of the limits of rational argument and discourse, and with a largely commendable suspicion of the dogmas of the progressive enlightenment (though some will find his constant sermonising tiresome).

In so far as he deploys an argument at all in favour of religion, it is the familiar *tu quoque* of the religious to the non-religious: that materialism and the pursuit of science stand in need of support and rational justification as much as religion. Even beliefs about existence of bodies and the reliability of our memories cannot be defended except by appeal to consensus, what men would normally say, and so on. Trust in the progress of science assumes a basic rationality in the universe. Without religion and religious piety it is hard to make sense of this assumption or its application in the practice of disinterested inquiry and it is even harder for the non-religious to make sense of the notion that one might be morally bound by obligations not of one's choosing. He also appeals at times to the paradoxes of modern physics as some defence of religious paradox and is attracted to the thought that science itself might be a kind of false religion, with initiations, hierarchies and authorities. If science and common sense require unjustifiable assumptions for their