

# Reviews

**RECONCILING** by John Coventry SJ. *SCM Press*. 136P. £4.95.

John Coventry was born seventy years ago last 21st January. Educated at Stonyhurst, he entered the Society of Jesus in 1932 straight from school. Before he was forty-five he was ensconced as Provincial of the English Province of his Society, having already been Rector of Beaumont. When after the Council and because of it the Ecumenical Commission of England and Wales was founded, he was a founder member, and indeed its Secretary during 1967–70. He had been also for nine years ‘consultant observer’ for the British Council of Churches. In his last years, after lecturing in theology at Heythrop College (London University), he has been Master of St. Edmund’s House, Cambridge. This book is his swansong from there this summer, his *Schwanengesang*.

He writes disarmingly at the outset, ‘Things come together when you look back on seventy years of growing with the delighted realisation that you can keep learning how to live, how to enjoy the gift of life up to any age’. Things simplify, and the symbol of that is his one-word title, which collects up six of his essays *nova et vetera* under the title, ‘Reconciling man with God’—with, at the end, his ‘chapter that makes sense of all the rest and knits them together’, viz *Praying*.

Of the eleven pieces, the last three are short and periodless; and others seem to have been written earlier but revised to bring them into the 1980s. ‘Eucharistic belief’ was written as a review-response to *Sharing Communion: an appeal to the Churches* (Collins 1983). Three seem to require special comment, two being the longest and—paradoxically—one the shortest: perhaps there is a lesson there, that when we do know well, we want to say much or little. The first, on ‘Anglican Orders’ (reprinted from *The Tablet*, 1 January 1983), deals with what Fr Coventry has long treated, problems concerned with the concept of judging ‘validity’ from within and from without. He notices here that in 1982 the SCDF demanded that the papal office should be considered constitutive of the Church’s nature—and thus the Orthodox are unchurched! He raised the question of succession in Dr Mascall’s phrase, ‘an episcopal relay race’, and noted that if valid episcopal consecration alone secures apostolic succession then both Orthodox and heretical eastern Churches enjoy it. He stresses that a Church may declare a sacrament to be valid, but should not attempt to declare and guarantee other sacramental action as ineffective. What seems most fitting from New Testament precedent should not drive one to assert that no other way remains possible. What was prudential in the light of the theology of one period is not bound despite the insights of a later theology. Caveat: minimal, not maximal, requirements are necessary for validity, and a tutorist/probablist policy is not always the best, otherwise the Church tends to replace Christ, and God’s gifts.

In his article, ‘Ecumenism in England since the Council’ (*The Month*, March 1975), Fr Coventry wrote: ‘The considerable developments that have taken place in the mixed marriage situation should, I think, primarily be understood in terms of this personal discovery of the other’s Christianity—*footnote*: For a fairly full treatment, may I refer to my two articles in *The Way* for April and July, 1974’. I take it that this is the source of the longest piece (p. 54–80) entitled ‘Interchurch Marriage’. It remains a very important ecumenical matter: Archbishop Ramsey felt most strongly about it when he went to visit Paul VI in March 1966, and it became a major issue in the work of the

ARCIC Preparatory Commission, indeed so much so that a separate sub-commission took it off ARCIC's shoulders. The latest FOAG Paper GS 661, responding to Lima/BEM and the ARCIC *Final Report*, concludes: 'Further, we should like to see encouragement given to ... the alleviating of difficulties caused by mixed marriages' (p. 106). For the Anglicans, this subject became a token of ecumenical trust; but Rome could not see it that way, regarding it as a problem low in the hierarchy of moral truths. Fr Coventry gives it a high valuation: he deals with permission to marry, the promise about the children, the marriage ceremony, joint pastoral care, joint prayer, baptism, communion. He asks that 'merely mixed' marriages should be encouraged to become true interChurch marriages.

The best I can do as to the provenance of the last of the three selected chapters is to say that on 20 April 1983 Fr Coventry was guest speaker at the AGM of the Movement for the Ordination of Married Men (MOMM), on 'The theological implications of married clergy'; and that days later my diary states (to a blank memory): 'To + BCB, John Cov's "Theology of Ministry" paper'. It was printed thereabouts in *The Sower*. Twenty-one pages long, it begins: 'The theology of Christian ministry is essentially very simple; it can be set down in comparatively few words. But then mountains of words are needed to clear the ground and to allow it to operate freely'. He offers three statements central to the theology of the ministry. 1. 'All ministries in the Church serve and mediate the continuing ministry of Christ the Lord'. 2. 'Christ gives gifts of his Spirit to all in his body (and indeed outside it)'. 3. 'At any point in history there is only one "theological absolute" about patterns of ministry, only one categorical imperative: the Church must so structure its ministries as best to fulfil the mission given it by Christ in the circumstances of here and of today'. Pages 22–29 are given to Today's Questions—celibacy and marriage, priesthood in *aeternum* and laicisation, women priests and deacons, authority and service, conserving and innovating. It is all properly for Christ 'the Lord, encountered in and mediated by the ministers of his body the Church'.

In the ARCIC Canterbury Statement on Ministry and Ordination, two key words have been steadily stressed, community/fellowship/*koinonia* and reconciliation (which appears in 7 of the 17 sections): section 4 describes the church as 'a community of reconciliation'. Fr Coventry has done well to write on such a subject.

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**BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS: THE UNITY OF GENESIS, 1–11. Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn. *Abingdon Press (Nashville, Tenn.), 1984. 144p.***

Theories which are well entrenched and elaborately articulated have the habit of being suddenly upended and replaced by quite different hypotheses. This has happened often enough in the physical sciences (witness the sudden demise of Newtonian physics at the beginning of this century) and there is no reason to suppose that it should not happen in other fields as well. At least this is the view of Kikawada, Lecturer in Near Eastern Studies, and Quinn, Professor of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. In the field of biblical scholarship perhaps no theory is as well established as Wellhausen's multiple document theory. This well-known hypothesis holds that the text of Genesis (and the other books of the Pentateuch) is a compilation of several separate documents, or traditions put together by an editor, or better a group of editors over a long period of time. Contemporary Scripture scholars, like Gerhard van Rad and Martin Noth, state quite simply that there is no fundamental dispute that Genesis is to be assigned to three documents, known as J, E, and P. There may be some disagreements about which verses are to be assigned to which document, or about the existence of additional documents, but the theory itself is basically accepted. Kikawada and Quinn pay a great deal of tribute in their book to the scholarly work done in the past century since Wellhausen wrote, and they take great pains to point out that no