

**ASCENT TO LOVE: THE SPIRITUAL TEACHING OF ST JOHN OF THE CROSS** by Ruth Burrows. *Darton, Longman & Todd*. London, 1987. £3.50. Paperback.

This brief introduction to St John of the Cross (117 pp.) aims at taking the fearsomeness out of his stark approach to prayer by showing that his teaching is Scriptural, orthodox and practical. In this, despite occasional generalisation, Sr. Ruth succeeds. She highlights his Christ-centredness in Ch. 9 on Mystical Knowledge, to my mind, the best part of the book, emphasising the need for the study of the Scriptures and reception of the Sacraments: 'Jesus is the definitive revelation of God; God has nothing more to reveal' (p. 97). Self-denial, so often taken as the substance of John's message, is shown as only a means to this end of Christ-knowledge and Christ-love; and its essence as the acceptance of God's will in the darkness of faith. 'Annihilation' is no more than the canalising of our emotions into the stream of the Divine Will.

Sr. Ruth quotes from one of her sisters: '... By contemplation (of a picture) I mean living with a picture over a long period' (p. 103), leaving us to infer that by contemplation of God John means living with God, through Scripture, Sacraments and the clearing away of unlawful bric-à-brac. She ends with a telling quotation from a letter of his to a penitent: The service of God consists 'Simply in abstaining from evil, keeping God's commandments and doing his work as well as we can ... (The soul) has nothing to do but to walk in the beaten path of the law of God and of the Church, living solely by faith ... hope and ... charity....'

Sr. Ruth succeeds, I think, in extricating the essential simplicity of John's teaching from the formidable language in which he presents it, and in showing that it is no different from the message of the Gospels and of Paul: 'If anyone wants to preserve his life he will lose it, but the one who loses it will save it' (Luke, 17. 33); 'Hope that is seen is not hope' (Rom. 8.24). Clearly, John, gives us the teaching of the Church, encapsulated in the old 'penny' catechism: '... I must worship God by faith, hope and charity and religion ...' It is only to be expected, surely, that simplicity should mark the contemplation of a God who is essentially simple.

Although this book is a little marred by looseness in punctuation and occasional lapses of grammar, the printing is clear, the cover attractive and the cost well within reason. It should be useful in urging people to give John a trial. He is, after all, Doctor, poet and saint, and on each level repays the effort to understand him.

JUSTIN LANE OP

**QUESTIONING BACK** by Joseph O'Leary. *Geoffrey Chapman (for Winston Seabury)*. 1985. Pp.225. £16.50.

This book, which calls for a revision of the theological task in the light of the work of Heidegger and Derrida, comes with high praise on the jacket from among others Harvey Cox, Paul van Buren and Fergus Kerr.

As an account of the two philosophers it is excellent. Particularly encouraging is the way in which he takes to task the current predilection in the United States for interpreting Derrida as denying the possibility of objective reference and viewing the written text as a complete closure of language in on itself. Thus Mark Taylor in *Erring* or the various contributors to *Deconstruction and Theology* assume that at most theology can celebrate the multiple interactions and allusions of the biblical text; there is no access beyond to God himself. O'Leary rightly observes that this was not Derrida's point. To put it in my own terminology rather than O'Leary's, the essential thing to note about Derrida is that he is an anti-foundationalist. So for example, in his discussions of J.L. Austin and his former tutor, Emmanuel Levinas, he argues that their analyses fail because what is alleged to be basic can in fact be found to have been covertly assumed all the time among the allegedly more foundational beliefs. So what is being asserted is not the impossibility of referring to

anything in the external world but rather our inability ever to give a complete reduction of any of our concepts. For there remains the problem of mutual presupposition. This is part of what he means by *différance*, the infinite deferral of completed meaning, but it is also something which he sees as caused by the richness and open-ended character of our concepts.

However, the bulk of what O'Leary has to say is a very different matter. He seems to think that this philosophy compels Christianity to become anti-metaphysical, an approach which he believes would in any case chime well with the attitude of the times. Instead we must get back to a biblical faith which is also a phenomenological one. In the manner of Heidegger on being, we are to experience the divine and find poetic language like the Bible's the only language adequate to encapsulate it. Barth is seen as having got nearer this insight than Rahner, though the theologian who is given most praise for being anti-metaphysical is in fact Martin Luther.

There are two things wrong with this argument. First, despite what Derrida seems to imply to the contrary, it does not follow from anti-foundationalism that metaphysics is impossible. All that follows is the need for greater caution in noting interrelations and interactions between our concepts. After all, even if all explanation is in the last analysis circular, it need not be viciously circular without any corresponding increase in understanding.

Secondly, it is a mistake to think that one can get beyond metaphysics into the pure world of phenomenality. Once or twice (e.g. p. 79) O'Leary parodies the failure of the metaphysical expressions of the Christian to be put into prayer. He seems to think that this shows something significant, but all it surely demonstrates is the power of tradition in prayer. For, though highly metaphysical prayers are uncommon in Christianity, they are not unknown, particularly in writings influenced by Neo-Platonism. But, just as metaphysics can become the language of prayer, so also it is a mistake to suppose that poetry contains no metaphysics. O'Leary prefers to speak of Peter's confession as 'an event of recognition and trustful commitment' and tells us that the *homoousion* 'has nothing to add' to the confession of Thomas (pp. 138 & 156). But all our language contains explicitly or implicitly complex ontological implications and these Gospel statements are surely no exception. Of course the rules of imagery allow for the use of conflicting and even formally incompatible metaphors in a way which is inconceivable in metaphysics. But that does not mean that these metaphors do not sustain an intellectual framework which we are entitled to assess either in its own terms in the rules of imagery or more prosaically, after translation, in the laws of logic and metaphysics. Of course, something will be lost in translation but from that nothing follows about all being lost, and indeed much may be gained in intellectual comprehension, which can then be fed back into the language of phenomenality and prayer.

DAVID BROWN

**COMFORTABLE COMPASSION: POVERTY, POWER AND THE CHURCH**, by Charles Elliott. *Paulist Press*. 1987, pp. 194. \$7.95.

Elliott begins with a long critical account of the ways in which the developed countries of the rich northern hemisphere, and the churches with their roots here, have responded to the needs of Third World countries. Much of this has been said before: the ways in which people seem to respond more readily to emergencies and disasters than to the more long-term and apparently less 'soluble' problems of 800 million people living in absolute poverty; the ways in which aid organisations, wittingly or unwittingly, have colluded with imperialism and colonialism to the detriment of those whom they had hoped to help; the myth of 'modernisation' or 'developmentalism' which sees the problems as 'out there', and proposes to help the poor by foisting on them, with no consideration for their own wishes,