

Reviews

CHRISTIAN THEISM: A study of its Basic Principles, by Huw Parri Owen. T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1994. pp. vi + 151. £8.95.

Professor Owen's aim in this book is to offer a concise statement of basic Christian beliefs about God and His relation to the world. He denies that it is possible to offer a rational demonstration of God's existence, but thinks that the cosmological, teleological and moral arguments for theism have a hypothetical validity in so far as they show that if the data stated in the premises are to be ultimately intelligible we must postulate the existence of God the Creator. He thinks that belief in God the Creator also rests on a feeling of absolute dependence: but little is said about the nature of this feeling beyond a few lines of quotation and paraphrase of Otto. Little is said, too, about how and to what extent we may experience God's nature, although Owen states that belief in God's attributes is derived from a tradition that theists find confirmed in varying degrees by their own experience.

There follow chapters on the Incarnation, the Trinity, providence and prayer, evil, Christ the Saviour, grace and freewill, and the soul and immortality; and a brief appendix criticizing John Hick's views on Christianity and other religions. On the whole, Owen takes up conservative positions: he takes issue with some recent critics of the doctrine of the Incarnation, and defends belief in the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, miracles, the *filioque* clause and disembodied survival. He rejects, however, the views that Christ's death propitiated God's anger, gave satisfaction or was a substitutionary sacrifice, and sees it as a revelation of God's love and a perfect example of obedience, and thereby a means to the conquest of evil within us.

The title of the book is a misnomer, since it is really more of a brief exposition and defence of fundamental Christian doctrines. There is only one chapter dealing with belief in God, and the discussion within it of the divine attributes is all too brief. The book's merit consists in the way in which Owen skilfully and cogently marshals a great variety of arguments in a brief compass to defend his positions. The chapters on the Incarnation and the Trinity are particularly masterly.

The book's faults stem from its brevity and compression. Sometimes Owen offers us lists of summarized arguments instead of a connected discussion. This makes for indigestible reading. More seriously, there are some omissions, unjustified assumptions and faulty arguments. A few examples must suffice. His treatment of providence suffers from a failure to consider the idea that God's purposes may be worked out through secondary causes: Owen assumes that the only ways in which God could produce variations within natural sequences would be by performing miracles or by working within the human soul and thereby inspiring actions (pp. 74, 80). But this is to limit the possible efficacy of petitionary prayer. Similarly, he assumes without argument that free actions are inherently unpredictable, and thereby limits God's omniscience (p. 69). His brief rejection of Physicalism and Behaviourism skates over a lot of recent philosophy of mind when he seeks to locate the differences between intelligent and non-intelligent behaviour in a 'mental act' like intention, and claims that a truly charitable act gets its moral quality from a charitable disposition that is other than the act (pp. 125–6). In the same context, he claims that because brain-processes are all of the same 'stuff', they cannot account for the qualitative differences between various mental acts and dispositions; but here a Physicalist would argue that the differences are produced by the great variety of combinations and processes within the brain. Similarly, Owen's brief dismissal of the view that the doctrine of the Incarnation

involves a contradiction may well fail to convince his opponents. He claims that deity and humanity are 'open' concepts, which have not been shown to be incompatible with each other. But critics like Hick are troubled by the thought that if Jesus Christ was both God and man, he must have been both omniscient and limited in his knowledge—which *is* a contradiction. One obvious way of trying to evade this difficulty is by appealing to the idea of *kenosis*. Owen, however, specifically rules out this solution (p. 41) and insists that Christ's divine attributes were not changed, suppressed or abandoned; but in a footnote he allows that "The Incarnation was an act of divine self-limitation in the sense that God restricted the effects of his divine attributes on his human nature so that the finite integrity of the latter might be preserved" (p. 50). In the absence of further explanation, this remark simply slithers over the problem. Despite these inadequacies, I found Owen's book an impressive one on the whole. It is a brief and intelligent defence of main-line Christian belief and, as such, it will be useful to many categories of people.

PATRICK SHERRY

ETERNAL LIFE? by Hans Küng. Translated by Edward Quinn. *Collins*, London, 1984. Pp. 327. £9.95.

The earlier instalments of his trilogy, *On Being a Christian* and *Does God Exist?*, often limped; Küng's *Eternal Life* jogs along at a fair pace. No doubt the audience deserves some credit there, for these are lectures addressed to students in general studies at Tübingen in 1981. So the interest is correspondingly broad and the oral style favours neat summaries to mark the progress of the argument.

Question marks readily attach themselves to Küng's titles. Here questions proliferate; many are provocatively posed and might serve as useful discussion starters for adult inquirers. All the same, English readers may sometimes find references to German literature heavy and unfamiliar—the author comes from Switzerland, that land of clinics, and teaches in Germany, a country where philosophers have taken death as seriously as the poets—but much survives the journey across the cultural divide, felicitously conveyed by the translator: What relevance to belief in eternal life have the experiences of those who have been resuscitated after clinical death? Is consciousness and knowledge of God any more than self-consciousness or self-knowledge? Is not the humanist's denial as suspect of being a projection as the believer's affirmation of eternal life? Can the apparently conflicting beliefs of Buddhist and Christian be reconciled through the *via negativa*? Will reincarnation do justice to the relation of creature to Creator? The range is great, but from this initial questioning on death as the horizon of life the alternatives that emerge are clear: dissolution or eternal life, a cycle of repetition or finality achieved, if not by rebirth, through an irrevocable option.

The argument turns to the substance of the Christian hope. One may not be able to refute someone who says: "Death is the end of everything. I die like all the animals, and nothing comes after" (p. 102). But the counter-affirmation is equally possible and irrefutable: there is a well-founded, not provable, belief that transcends the horizon of our ambiguous experience, an option for God as end and ground, 'a reasonable trust'. In the New Testament that option is focussed upon the person of Jesus risen from the dead, not on a resurrection event, though that event, if outside history, is real enough for Küng. And if he regards the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb and the Easter appearances as secondary, still he takes to be primary the witness there to Jesus alive and not, as he is careful to say, just to the vitality of the mission. Christian hope is presented, then, as a radicalizing of belief in God in the face of the final test of death, a confirmation of belief in Christ's way through death and a daily struggle to take the side of life over against death. While diabolic evil is imprinted on the German memory as a fact of twentieth-century history, the eternity of Hell, even as a condition made by the refusal of love, has lost its credibility for many Germans—83% of Protestants, 59% of