# Reviews



**THE KINGS AND THE COVENANT, by Hamish Swanston. *Burns and Oates*, London, 1968. 207 pp.**

In the note of acknowledgment Fr Swanston refers to this book as an 'account of the Hebrew Monarchy'. It is certainly that. After a brief fifteen-page sketch of Israel before the Kings, he plunges quite deeply into the history of Israel under its kings and the narrative is taken on through the Babylonian captivity to the destruction of Jerusalem.

One gets the feeling that Fr Swanston enjoyed writing this book. He is evidently fascinated by the details of the kings, their courts, their battles and the rest. At times, however, I feel that his fascination runs away with him. Despite bold sub-headings we do tend to get bogged down in a plethora of names of persons and places and a maze of incident. I am not clear whom the author had in mind as likely readers, although in a note at the beginning he says that he has been 'encouraged to think that such a book would not be despised by intelligent members of senior school classes'. That is a rather vague category —how senior? how intelligent?

Certainly I can visualize some intelligent fifth- or sixth-formers delving into the book for information, but I should think that if it formed the staple diet of a year's religious course it might soon become despised.

Although the main body of the book is history with many interesting insights into recent interpretations, there is an attempt to go beyond mere history. That is to say, Fr Swanston looks back from the standpoint of the monarchy to the beliefs that have evolved among God's people. Thus in chapter III, 'The Yahwist of Solomon's Court', we are led to an examination of the accounts of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, the Exodus, the Covenant and then to Creation, Cain and Abel, the Flood story and the Ziggurat.

This is valuable, for it sets these parts of the Bible in their literary context and so enables the reader to understand how they are to be interpreted. It is here that the author makes most obvious what is the relevance of all this ancient Hebrew history to our own situation.

But it is on this point that I find the book most disappointing. Surely the interest of senior students in the Hebrew monarchy and its literary works is rightly primarily concerned with what light all this can shed on our present lives as God's new Covenant People. Only rarely is the connexion made and then we plunge off once more into the battles and the intrigues. The later sections dealing with the prophets naturally have a more obvious relevance.

Given the fact that 'A' level Scripture is at present still heavily biased towards this sheer history and sheer Bible study, this book could be useful for examination students. But one wonders if such an examination and such a book really serve the best interests of religious education.

DEREK LANCE

**PRAYER, by Abhishiktananda. *Indian S.P.C.K.*, revised ed. 1969. 78 pp. 4s.**

**CONVERSATIONS: CHRISTIAN AND BUDDHIST, by Dom Aelred Graham. *Collins*, 1969. 206 pp. 30s.**

Abhishiktananda is actually a French Benedictine (author of *A Benedictine Ashram*), and this little book, written in his hermitage in the Himalayas, is a delightful indication of what can happen if we really allow ourselves to learn from Hindu thought even to the extent of in some way submitting ourselves to their scriptures. It is well worth four shillings, but the supply is rather erratic (through the S.P.C.K. in London).

This is not just another book about the Jesus prayer, although that inevitably comes into it; it is about prayer as a mode of life, not only open to but proper to all Christians. God is not far from us, to be sought by effort and complete separation from everything else. True

to the Eastern tradition, Abhishiktananda ji rather stresses the easiness of prayer (only how hard it is for us complicated Westerners, like the sophisticated Naaman in II Kings 5, to do anything easy!). He rightly complains about the common devotional beginning, 'Let us put ourselves into the presence of God'—as if it were possible to be out of God's presence! One might add the typically Western mistranslation which makes of prayer 'the raising of the heart and mind to God' instead of 'the rising'.

Even more than the excellent content, the book recommends itself by its aura of authentic prayerfulness, all too rare in 'spiritual books' (let me warn you, for example, against a terrible little pamphlet by Dom Peter Flood, called *Prayer and Meditation*, which will put anybody off for years).

The only eccentricity in the book is the suggestion at the end that we should use 'Abba, Father' as the highest Christian mantra, completing the Trinity of mantras (the Jesus Prayer for the Son, and OM for the Holy Spirit being the other two). Whether this will prove its worth or not I would not care to predict.

Dom Aelred Graham's book is, as the title indicates, a series of conversations he had in Japan in 1967, with Buddhists of various sects, and miscellaneous other people, including Gary Snyder, the renowned Beat poet (quaintly described on the dust-jacket as 'founder of the hippie movement'!). In fact this last is the only really interesting conversation in the whole book.

The reason for this is not hard to find. In the other encounters, no real interchange takes place: nothing important is said about Buddhism, or Christianity, or the relationship between them. The only significant thing (not to be under-rated) is that such conversations should have happened at all, though we may recall that, amongst Christians, Rome has given a quite remarkable lead in inter-religious dialogue.

But if anything is to emerge, then a long process of cultural and semantic wooing must go on first, as in the case of Abhishiktananda ji.

In a way, a much more urgent task for us is to learn to speak the language of the multitudes of orientalising Westerners, and this is where Dom Aelred comes in, as indeed he came in some years ago in *Zen Catholicism*. It appears that his present understanding of both Zen and Catholicism is rather less staid than that of six years ago, and he and Gary Snyder exchange notes quite interestingly on hippie spirituality (a phenomenon which has, apparently, been the undoing of the more honest of the American secular theologians—see, for instance, the article by Bloy in *Commonweal* earlier this year); also on LSD and marijuana (Dom Aelred admits to a preference for Martinis).

Even here, however, there is need of a much more profound study. How does one preach the gospel, for instance, to a generation that takes re-incarnation for granted? Certainly not by simply re-asserting what McLuhan calls a Gutenberg-era attitude towards individuality. After all, in a totally different way from that of India, the Bible too suggests that individual identity is not the ultimate truth about ourselves. What about John the Baptist who is Elijah, and 'I live now not I but Christ'? If we fail to develop our theological anthropology in this direction, we will find that we have, unwittingly, sold out to the modern Origenists and gnostics.

It emerges, in fact, that the dialogue between religion has three distinct possibilities: the dialogue between orthodoxies, which needs a deep acclimatization, as manifest in Abhishiktananda; the dialogue with the eclectic hangers-on, not to mention the spiritual tourists (a dialogue in which men like Abhishiktananda can play a crucial role). And finally, and perhaps most interesting though as far as I know least attempted, there will be the attempt to collaborate with the leaders of other religions in trying to cope with the apparent need of the Western world for a living spirituality, a need which the Church has so far signally failed to meet. Dom Aelred's attempts to discuss hippies with Japanese Buddhists are rather discouraging, actually, but my own experience with some *gurus* who have come West has been helpful so far. Perhaps the fact that they have come West is what makes the difference, in which case we have a fourth distinct inter-religious possibility, namely our dialogue with the East-come-West, which will especially concern us in Britain and the U.S.A. (The English Buddhist community, I am told, has been thinking of starting a Buddhist Public School.)

In all this, it is greatly to be hoped that Eastern Christians (and some of them have come West, too) will help to build a bridge. Abhishiktananda's use of Eastern Christian spirituality shows that this is a possibility.

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