

DEITY AND DOMINATION: Images of God and the State in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by David Nicholls. *Routledge*, London and New York. 1989. Pp. xiv + 320.

This study of the relationship between European images of God and ideas of the State is a good example of a popular style of contemporary apologetic for Christianity. David Nicholls, whose book is an expanded version of the Hulsean Lectures which he gave in 1985, seeks to show that the Christian images of God which have been fashionable in the West since 1800 have played a major role in determining the dominant theories of the State. He suggests that from the Christian point of view the twentieth century has been dominated by images of God as power (here Karl Barth stands out in the text) and as benevolence (there is a long section on William Temple), and that these ideas can be understood as reinforcing, on the one hand totalitarian governments, and on the other welfare states. In his conclusion, however, this distinction seems to disappear, because not only does he describe the autocratic 'God of the new radical Right' as reinforcing social structures of domination, legitimating the wealth of the successful and leaving the poor to the chance of charity, but he also suggests that the benevolent, welfare-state image of God is used to obscure the reality of political systems which protect the privileges of the better-off and transfer wealth from the poor to the rich.

This conclusion hardly suggests that images of God have a profound effect on political reality, and Dr Nicholls is himself sufficiently alarmed by what he is saying to ask whether we do not need new pictures of God to 'balance' the images of power and benevolence which he has been describing. He appeals to Sally McFague, who he says has developed images of God as mother, lover and friend, and he quotes Brian Wren, one of whose hymns proclaims: 'Self-giving lover, since you dare/To join us in our history/Embracing all our destiny/We'll come and go with praise and care'. I don't myself see the New Right stopped in its tracks by this sort of thing, however piously intended. Self-conscious religious image-making is in danger of becoming a branch of the advertising industry, for which religion is never going to be more than a very special corner of Disneyland, or in English terms, a 'heritage park'. And the deregulation of television offers the distinct possibility of a drastic vulgarisation of visual religious imagery.

Politically and economically, we need to encourage people to examine symbols with great care. There is nothing inherently sacred about religious images once they have become part of 'western culture', that is, incorporated into the narcotic entertainment culture created by late twentieth-century capitalism, which is now about to spread the system to Eastern Europe. Alarmed at the prospect of a relativist chaos of images (and perhaps insufficiently alarmed at the prospect of their debasement), Dr Nicholls tries to find a solution by asserting that christian images are not arbitrary but emerge in the context of a tradition and of a community of discourse. Moreover, 'christians believe that the normative images (of God) are given in divine revelation and that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit in interpreting this revelation and in developing new images for new situations. Although all these images are influenced by the cultural context

in which they emerge, they point to the existence of a transcendent being who is the author of truth'.

This is a sweeping statement to come at the end of a book. It is all very well for Dr Nicholls to claim that 'today, when all disciplines—not least the natural sciences—are in danger of being swamped by an all embracing relativism which threatens to undermine the idea of truth itself, theology by its very definition witnesses to a transcendent reality which alone is able to give substance to the concept of truth'. Dr Nicholls' subject is the relationship between Christianity and politics, and in that field (as he is inevitably aware) the normative images of God which (he says) Christians believe are given in divine revelation have been used to defend every variety of political organization from anarchism to absolute monarchy. There is no question here of being saved from relativism. Theologians have always tried to dominate the political sphere. Why else would they have spent so much time in the past forty years writing for and against varieties of marxism? But the ambiguous history of theology rules out a new Christian intellectual domination of political thinking. An ecclesiastical domination of politics would have to come first, but the 'New Right' is not going to agree to that, and welfare-liberalism does not need an ecclesiastical base. Dr Nicholls has given us an elaborate and well-read account of the religio-political ideas of European Protestantism since 1789, but I think that he underestimates the extent to which the use of Biblical images is influenced by the socio-economic context in which they are perceived.

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THE LOST PROPHET. THE BOOK OF ENOCH AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CHRISTIANITY by Margaret Barker, *SPCK*, London. Pp. xi, 116. £4.95.

The lost prophet is Enoch, the great-grandfather of Noah, who lived only three hundred and sixty five years (the average of earlier and later patriarchs was more than nine hundred, according to Gen. 5). But 'Enoch walked with God; and then was seen no more, because God had taken him away.' Not surprisingly Enoch became a popular figure for Jewish religious fantasy, especially in troubled times when it seemed an advantage to make appeal to a patriarch possessing secret information of heavenly intentions. Writings attributed to Enoch were known in the early Church (he is quoted in Jude 14–15), but no copy of them was available until the end of the eighteenth century when Ethiopic manuscripts were obtained from Abyssinia. Since then, partial texts, quotations, and fragments have been identified in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin (though not for section II, the so-called Parables which sometimes refer to the Son of man).

Margaret Barker tells this fairly well-known story in what, it seems, is a more popular form of her recent book *The Older Testament*. She suggests that the New Testament writers were fully at home in the world of Enoch and so took its thought for granted. Hence they accepted (though scarcely ever mentioned) the belief that the final judgement was a trial of strength before God, between two angel princes and their cohorts, when the wicked would get their deserts and the righteous