

# Reviews

**JESUS CHRIST LIBERATOR: A CRITICAL CHRISTOLOGY FOR OUR TIME** by Leonardo Boff. *SPCK*, London 1980. pp 322 £5.50 paperback.

**BELIEF IN REDEMPTION: CONCEPTS OF SALVATION FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT TO THE PRESENT TIME** by Dietrich Wiederkehr. *SPCK*, London 1979 pp 109 £2.95 paperback.

**EXPLORATIONS IN THEOLOGY 6** by Don Cupitt. *SCM Press*, London 1979. pp 114 £3.95 paperback.

Many will be understandably dismayed to read that, for example, "with Jesus the evolutionary psycho-social process attained a zenith", and that this is the "fundamental message" that the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke are intended to convey (p 175). But on the whole, despite sporadic flights of such abstract jargon, and notwithstanding his views about the scanty historicity of the infancy narratives (indeed he has a good chapter on them), Leonardo Boff's substantial and important book represents the best in Latin American "liberation theology". Written in Brazil when it was an offence to use the word "liberation" in any of the media, it fully deserves to join the many other recent Catholic Christologies by Duquoc, Kasper, Küng, Mackey, Schillebeeckx and others. More explicitly than any of them, Boff insists that theological work is never neutral and objective but, wittingly or otherwise, only serves the interests of those who have the power in the existing scheme of things unless it takes a clear social stand in favour of the oppressed. And here again the picture that emerges of Jesus as "a person of extraordinary good sense and sound reason" (pp 81 ff), and as "a person of extraordinary creative imagination" (pp 90 ff), for all its painfully liberal-humanist aura, in fact sticks remarkably close to the gospel texts. What is even more important and surprising, however, at any rate for those familiar with recent English Christological debates, is that Boff

has no doubt where "the radicalness of the mystery of Jesus" is to be found: "He is God incarnate, simultaneously God and man" (p 155). Able to cite Scotus on the motive of the Incarnation (Boff is a Franciscan) as well as to quote Wittgenstein (but less appositely), and at home in modern systematic theology as well as in redaction criticism, he isn't shy of devoting a chapter to a positive (and critical) assessment of the Council of Chalcedon – insisting that the Council's intention was not metaphysical but soteriological. If Jesus is not man, then salvation has not been given to us; if Jesus is not God, then salvation has not come through *him* (p 190). But throughout what Boff keeps emphasizing is that salvation is liberation not only from personal "private" sin but also, and primarily, from the sin of society – thus from the effects of injustice and oppression.

In a much shorter book Dietrich Wiederkehr, a Capuchin who lectures at Fribourg, Switzerland, finds traditional Catholic soteriology largely wanting when confronted with the problems of fragmented modern societies. His analysis is inevitably very sketchy, and it is not clear on this account when traditional Catholic soteriology ever was anything else but largely wanting. Ninety pages of text aren't enough to show how the doctrine of redemption should be revised. The main point is that the earthly life of Jesus as a whole (Wiederkehr has the usual Catholic confidence in the power of exegesis to recon-

struct it adequately), and not just the Incarnation or his death, must be regarded as redemptive. Having understood that one can then situate the crucifixion as an integral part of Christ's life and work, so that the cross, far from being the paradigm of patience and toleration of suffering, becomes the abiding sign of the determination of God and of Jesus to free human beings from ancient legal formulae (p 23): "The motive behind his conduct, which jeopardized his continuing survival, was therefore the reason why he risked and ultimately suffered death". Anselm's often dismissed theory of redemption as satisfaction is illuminatingly interpreted as an approach that "presents the relationship between God and man in guilt and reconciliation as one of freedom and obedience" (p 40), which, far from being merely "juridical", makes the saving event far more *personal* than some other theories. Wiederkehr goes as far as to suggest that some

patristic doctrines of redemption (as much writing about the Resurrection, one might add) make the saving event very much akin to a natural, quasi-biological process.

Don Cupitt's collection of papers charts fifteen years of progress from believing in Jesus the Lord, with the traditional concomitants of the Trinity and Incarnation, to his present adherence simply to the picture of Jesus the Jew and his original message. He reprints his exchange of letters on the Resurrection with his Cambridge colleague, Professor C. F. D. Moule. Originally published in the journal *Theology* in 1971, this exchange no doubt constitutes the most permanently valuable section of the book. While less substantial than the earlier Lampe-MacKinnon debate, the Cupitt-Moule exchange holds an important place in the meagre English file of thinking about the Resurrection.

FERGUS KERR O P

**THEOLOGY OF PURGATORY** by Robert Ombres O.P. **THEOLOGY TODAY SERIES**  
No 24 *Clergy Book Service* 1980 pp 92 £1.80.

This is a model essay in Catholic Theology. While fully aware of imperfections in certain presentations of the doctrine of Purgatory, Fr Ombres approaches Catholic tradition with humility. When he examines a 'difficult' aspect of his subject, he does not hastily and censoriously resort to reductionism. He patiently 'asks the Fathers' and listens, with love and fidelity, to the voice of the Church. And his patience and humility are rewarded: in the 'synthetic statement' that constitutes the second part of this book, he gives us a vigorous 'proclamation of belief in the reality of Purgatory'.

The intention of the book is thoroughly Christocentric: 'Purgatory is to be related to the more fundamental and comprehensive doctrine of our participation in the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' (p 13). Purgatory is not a 'second chance' after death, an easy way to Heaven, an evasion of the Gospel's call to conversion. For each one of us the question here and now is inescapable: am I with Christ? Have I decided for Christ? In this light, 'Purgatory is the troubled moment of genesis through death, whereby the soul integrates its decision for God at all levels . . . For each per-

son as a moral agent, responsible for his deeds and in need of complete and thorough appropriation of forgiveness and new life, Purgatory completes his surrender to the Father' (p 24). This emphasis on the appropriation of new life is the hallmark of the doctrine. In Purgatory the Christian who has died in and with Christ makes that death fully his own. There is no second chance, no increase or decrease of merit, but there is a 'maturing', a 'deepening', a 'taking hold' of our decision for Christ. Purgatory is not a furtive backdoor into Heaven but a preparation for it.

Fr Ombres is particularly helpful in his explanation of what, for some, is the most problematic aspect of Purgatory – the notion of the temporal punishment due to sin. Catholic teaching confronts us with the lingering effects of our sinfulness, the deep scars left on the soul by the ravages of concupiscence and the habits of sin. Taking his lead from the new Rite of Penance, Fr Ombres uses the language of 'healing', 'restoration' and 're-ordering', to describe the bitter-sweet working of Purgatory on the soul. 'God has to dismantle the remains of a self-centred identity' (p 81). What we experi-