

**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