

**WORDS AND THE WORD: LANGUAGE, POETICS, AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**  
by Stephen Prickett. Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. xiii + 305. £27.50.

In 1976 Stephen Prickett produced a book called *Romanticism and Religion*. In it he explored the deeply intertwined relationship between theology and literary criticism in the Victorian period. It is a fine, fascinating work and its significance is demonstrated naturally enough by the further questions it has raised, particularly about the nature of religious language. These are the questions to which in his new book, *Words and 'The Word'*, Prickett has addressed himself.

The more immediate stimulus for his writing, however, has come from the confidence displayed by the translators of the *Good News Bible*, who declared that they were producing a version in language that was 'natural, clear, simple, and ambiguous'. This confidence, Prickett notes, is in sharp contrast to Coleridge's hesitancy one hundred and fifty years previously when he came to read the Bible. Coleridge was sensitive to the problems posed by cultural relativity. The translators imply that these problems have been overcome. But have they? Prickett turns to investigate the account of Elijah on Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19:8–12. This passage runs through the book. It is its leitmotif.

Prickett observes that what the prophet has finally heard can be translated literally from the Hebrew as 'a voice of thin silence'. Bearing in mind that in Elizabethan English 'thin' could be rendered 'small' (thus 'small beer'), the Authorized Version translated the phrase as 'a still small voice'. It is a remarkably accurate translation for it respects the ambiguity and obscurity of the original. Prickett concludes: 'Something very odd had apparently happened to Elijah.' And at once he goes on to notice that the *Good News Bible*, the *New English Bible*, and the *Jerusalem Bible* are united in rejecting this crucial feature. The text has been tamed, for example, to 'the soft whisper of a voice'.

His argument sweeps on throughout this first chapter, drawing attention to a wide range of views on the nature of translation and to past and present approaches to exegesis and hermeneutic, the over-confident and the extreme cultural relativist. What really happened? What are the facts? Can the text tell us? We find ourselves on 'the ideological battleground of modern epistemology'. He himself is championing the view—apparently unknown to the translators of the *Good News Bible*—that 'translation, where there is no effective equivalent, is one of the major sources of change and enrichment in a living language.... It is not equivalencies, but *dissimilarities* that force the modification and change necessary to accommodate new associative patterns of thought' (p. 32). And he then attacks still more vigorously the translators' tacit denial of language's creative function.

After this opening chapter has raised the issue, the reader will be well advised to relax and concentrate. The next three chapters, the bulk of the book, have a broad range, so concentration is required. But relaxation too, for these pages are illustration rather than argument. They form a chapter on the history of language. They probe the complexities of interpretation and argue consistently for patience with ambiguity and obscurity. There is much on poetry and its place in religious language, much on the different ways the poetic has been perceived and used, much on the Romantic tradition, much on the paradoxes of disconfirmation. This is evidently not a summary of the book. To attempt one could only be misleading: these pages are alive with interest.

In the final chapter, 'Metaphor and Reality', certain conclusions are indicated. Let me quote one of them:

It was suggested in the first Chapter that the reason why it was not possible to use unambiguous language in translating the Bible was that the Bible was not about things that were unambiguous. We are now, perhaps, in a position to extend that observation and suggest that such a language of disconfirmation and ambiguity is not merely a concomitant of religious

experience, but is actually characteristic of, and historically central to, man's experience of God. Elijah on Horeb, Moses and the Burning Bush, the Incarnation itself present events so baffling as to imply quite new ways of seeing the world. (p. 224)

The significance of this view can be illustrated easily enough. Earlier this year, H.J. Richards wrote a letter to *The Tablet* on the language of the Mass and concluded: 'Abelard said of the Athanasian Creed: "It only remains orthodox by denying everything it says as fast as it says it." Is it not time we dropped this weird and misleading language? At least for the sake of the children?' (30 May 1987). Mr Richards and all who agree with him, should cry, 'Hang the expense,' and rush out to buy this book immediately. The rest of us should be racing to do so in any case.

RODERICK STRANGE

**SEX AND GOD: SOME VARIETIES OF WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.** ed. Linda Hurcombe. *Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987. no price listed.*

Books composed of contributions by multiple authors have both strengths and weaknesses. At their best they can expose the facets of a subject like a well-cut stone; but too many misplaced attempts can lead to fragmentation. Linda Hurcombe's *Sex and God* is not a flawless gem, but its vigour and variety make it a compelling study of what it is, after all, a difficult topic.

Linda Hurcombe's brief for the book rises out of her statement, 'the personal is sexual is political is spiritual.' The connections made by feminists between these theoretically divided areas of living, particularly as they relate to being a female and a believer in God in a patriarchal culture, are the stuff of the contributions. The book is divided into five sections: Heresies; First person Plural; Body Theology; The Language of Feeling; and Feminist Theology. But the separate pieces are not confined by these categories, loose and equivocal enough in themselves, and flow naturally into and out of each other. This is not to say that the book is particularly homogenous. The central story in each article is generally a personal one, and these are diverse women: some of them are Christian, some are not; they are married and celibate and lesbian and heterosexual and mothers and childless; they are biblical scholars and poets and pragmatists. Depending on one's own experience the essays are shocking, disturbing, painfully familiar or just plain bizarre. The quality is uneven, inevitable in compilations probably—Una Kroll, normally a very challenging writer, has produced an unpleasantly body-obsessed piece, 'A Womb-Centred Life,' and Starhawk's 'The Women Dance Naked in Jail' is simply too short to develop its own theses. Other selections however are superb in style and quality of argument, especially Polly Blue's contributions.

Despite this unevenness and the diversity of views held, a central theme/problem emerges: what Polly Blue calls 'the tiresomeness of being expected to justify oneself,' and how one deals with the consequential self-hatred and marginalization that most women have found interfering with their relationship with God. The essays, like all good spiritual guides, provide clues for getting round such obstructions whether they are created by others or by one's own psychology. Women will be encouraged by these examples of faith in the face of familiar difficulties; men may learn something of the effects of oppression upon faith.

KATE MERTES