

Reviews

THE ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL TRADITION: from Plato to Denys,
by Andrew Louth. *Clarendon Press (OUP)*. 1981. pp xvii + 215. £12.50.

The titles of most books have to be taken with a pinch or two of salt; if they include words like "mystical", most readers will not need to be told to increase the dosage. In spite of the title of this book, Andrew Louth shows few signs of wishing to maintain that there is any such thing as "the christian mystical tradition"; and, if there were such a thing, an account of "the origins" of it would patently have to include some reference to things (e.g. the bible) which he makes no pretence of discussing. What we are in fact offered is a gallery of writers, from Plato to Denys, who are both interesting in their own right and pertinent to the case which the author wishes to establish, against Festugière, that patristic mysticism is not sheer Platonism with "nothing original in the edifice". Louth does not claim that the christians all present a homogeneous mystical doctrine, nor does he suppose that there is a single line of development amongst them; his contention is simply that the christians, on the whole, differ from the Platonists in fairly regular ways, and that "by the time of Denys the various mystical traditions which the Patristic period bequeathed to later ages have all emerged". The very modest claim is then put forward that the differences between the patristic writers and St John of the Cross are not as radical or systematic as has sometimes been alleged. A final chapter comments on the social, ecclesial, dimension characteristic of christian mysticism, which sets it apart from the Plotinian flight of the alone to the alone.

The author is at his best in his exposition of individual christian writers and of Philo. He himself asks the reader to treat his extensive quotations as "the most important part of the book", which suggests that he is more concerned to intro-

duce the reader to the Fathers than he is to exploit his witnesses for speculative purposes of his own. There are excellent and sensitive accounts of Philo, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, pseudo-Macarius, Diadochus, Augustine and pseudo-Denys. Louth's original translations of pseudo-Denys are particularly welcome.

It is, not surprisingly, in the more speculative dimension of the book that the reader is likely to feel more dissatisfied. The whole notion of "mysticism" is so unclear that any attempt to chart its contours is bound to be unsatisfactory. Louth sets himself two major themes to explore: (i) the allegation, already mentioned, that christian mysticism is nothing but Platonism; and (ii) the "fundamental co-inherence of mystical and dogmatic theology" in the patristic period, which was, according to Louth, lamentably lost in the West as early as the 12th century.

The difficulty in any exploration of (i) is that "Platonism" is almost as slippery a word as "mysticism", and Louth makes little attempt to clarify exactly what he means by either term. He offers us a chapter each on Plato, Philo and Plotinus, but the chapter on Plato seems to be unduly dependent on Festugière and ignores many of the exegetical and philosophical issues debated in current scholarship. Philo is certainly an important influence on christian theology, but it is far from clear that he can be treated as a typical Middle Platonist. A serious attempt to chart the relationships between Middle Platonism and the Fathers would have to involve a much fuller account of people like Albinus and Numenius. Neo-Platonism too would have to be discussed in much greater detail if any clear and accurate picture is to emerge of the nature and limits of Platonist influence on christian religious

thought. Louth pays hardly any attention to Porphyry and Proclus, although he acknowledges the importance of the former for Augustine and of the latter for pseudo-Denys. But at least some of the allegedly christian features in pseudo-Denys (especially his doctrine of God's love) can be found in Proclus, and I wonder if it was not, paradoxically, due to Proclus that pseudo-Denys, almost alone among the Fathers, allows a real role to the glorified body of Christ in the beatific vision (PG 3:592BC).

A point on which Louth lays great stress (and which straddles (i) and (ii)) is that the Fathers, after Origen, work with a strong doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and that this effects a decisive break with essential features in Platonism (it is alleged to be one of the major factors in the Arian controversy). The "fundamental ontological distinction" is said to shift as a consequence from the Platonist distinction between the material and the spiritual to the christian distinction between created and uncreated. This is certainly a suggestive observation, but I wonder if it can really carry the weight that Louth puts on it. In the patristic texts he himself quotes there seems still to be a considerable emphasis on the distinction between material and immaterial, and in much of Platonism, including at least the later works of Plato himself, the more important distinction is surely that between the One and the multiple, a distinction which is not unlike that between God and creatures. And I wonder if the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is really as different as it is alleged to be from later Platonist doctrines of emanation, especially the doctrine of Proclus. In any case, it needs to be clarified just what is involved in the doctrine of creation; after all, Damascene, Eriugena and Aquinas, to name but three, have widely differing views of the meaning and consequences of belief in *creatio ex nihilo*.

In general, Louth's discussion of the interaction between doctrine and "mysticism" promises more than it achieves. The fascinating suggestion that the Arian controversy was part of a crisis of christian

Platonism which was essentially resolved in the realm of mystical theology is not really developed; and the suggestion that Athanasius' dogmatic speculation led him to an anti-mystical view of monasticism and that this remains a strand in the subsequent history of monasticism is not filled out with any reference to other pertinent sources or with any fuller theoretical discussion.

Then there are doctrinal issues which Louth barely even adverts to, though they arise in connexion with topics he does discuss. One example is the Messalian controversy over the effects of baptism. Louth declares bluntly that Macarius is a Messalian (though he admits that some scholars would not agree), and that the Messalians deny all value to baptism. But in fact the larger collection of Macarian homilies (which Louth does not seem to have used, though he notes its existence) explicitly rejects the view that baptism is ineffective (B 43), though it is true that Macarius' position is closer to that of the Messalians than to that, say, of Mark the Monk. Since this controversy, directly or indirectly, had a profound effect on "mystical theology", it is a pity that Louth does not go into it. The theology of Mark the Monk, who is known to have been an important source for Symeon and for the Byzantine hesychasts, was in part shaped by his dispute with the Messalians on baptism. And the fact that Gregory of Nyssa actually borrowed one of Macarius' works and adapted it gives us an unusually well-documented instance of spiritual doctrine developing under pressure from dogmatic considerations, but Louth makes no use of it.

Apart from specific points like these, the whole discussion is inevitably haunted by the problem of what "mysticism" is anyway. Louth very prudently tried to evade this question, but his evasion has some queer results. In his account of Philo, for instance, he seems to imply that mysticism really means what the great Carmelite doctors wrote about, so that a linguistic similarity between St Teresa's description of "infused contemplation" and Philo's

description of meditating on scripture is taken to signify that "we *must* see in Philo's pondering on Scripture something that passes beyond discursive meditation to contemplation" (italics mine). Surely a dangerous argument!

These criticisms, though I have dwelt on them at some length, should not be overemphasised. "Mystical theology" is such a hopeless mess that any proposal to sort it out is bound to be unsatisfactory and will almost inevitably operate with over-simplified dichotomies and inadequately clarified terms. The most useful contribution that anyone can make is probably to shed light on particular areas, for example by suggesting ways of reading particular authors (and this is admirably done in this book) and then, moving into more speculative issues, to provoke a quarrel. And a great many more quarrels

will be needed before we can hope to get any great consensus even as to what the quarrel is all about. Louth effectively rebuts the, surely rather absurd, belief that patristic mysticism is nothing but Platonism, and he usefully indicates various items on the agenda for scholarly debate, and makes a few moves to provoke such debate. I hope that weightier bulls than I will respond to his red rag. But what makes the book valuable to the general reader and to the student is the unassuming and competent way in which the author introduces his patristic friends to us. Because of this, it is a book of considerable charm, and is a useful addition to the equipment of those who wish to engage in "asking the Fathers".

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SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN – THE DISCOURSES, translated by C. J. de Catanzaro. (*The Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK.*) pp xvii + 396. £8.50.

After finding it necessary to blow somewhat on the volume in this series containing translations from the writings of St Bonaventure, I thought that I could rely on being able to write a favourable review of the present one. And indeed there can be no question of its being unwelcome: for the first time a work of Symeon's has appeared in an English translation published in America and in England, and this is a notable event. But it must be confessed that the Discourses are of uneven interest. If the volume had contained a selection of Symeon's writings, omitting a good many of the Discourses and including instead, among other things, a good many of the Hymns, it would have had a greater appeal for the public. Presumably this would not have suited the publishers because a translation of the Hymns by George A. Maloney, S.J., appeared in America a few years ago. That admirable, prolific, but sometimes hasty writer on mysticism, whose *The Mystic of Fire and Love* (Dimension Books, Denver, New Jersey) is at the moment the only book devoted to Symeon in English, has written a substantial introduction to the Discourses which

adds enormously to the value of the book under review; it is a sort of summary of his own splendid but occasionally careless book (from which he repeats a *gaffe* especially strange in a Greek-speaker: 'for Symeon, this phrase, to do the the commandments of Jesus Christ, is almost a hendiadys for fulfilling the teachings of the holy Fathers'). 'Grace', he here writes, 'or the indwelling of the Trinity, for Symeon, was meant, in the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament, to be directly and immediately experienced by all Christians'. Symeon was abbot at the monastery of St Mamas in Constantinople from 980 to 998; the Discourses were addressed to his monks. Maloney's general description of them cannot be bettered. He detects 'two main characteristics': 'The first is the accent on the same traditional themes that the hesychastic Fathers or the mystical theologians of the Christian East wrote about . . . the other main characteristic . . . is the new and insistent accent on the operations of the Holy Spirit, who effects the end of the spiritual life and all Christian asceticism and contemplation, namely greater mystical