

Teaching theology not only in Rome at the Gregorian University and St Anselm's but also at his own monastery of La Pierre-qui-vire must keep Dom Ghislain Lafont very busy, but there is no sign of haste in his work. I find his criticisms of present philosophical and theological fashions most effective and his presentation of Christian theism most impressive even though I cannot go all the way with his metaphysics.

In the first chapter of this book André Leroi-Gourhan's *Le Geste et La Parole* is subjected to a close examination. According to that writer, 'evolution seems not to have managed to go further than producing man on his two legs; moved by the primary forces of seduction and aggressiveness proper to his fundamental animality, man constructs a world from which, progressively and unwittingly, he alienates himself ... is the final upshot of the world a non-world or a beyond of the world reserved for a few who know how to die?' (31). In the next chapter Jean Baudrillard's *Le Système des Objets* is discussed: the life of the consumer society is considered in that book to be 'a phenomenon as abstract, as complex, as codified as production is in the Marxist analysis'; it is bound up with 'a dehumanising (one might say 'inhuman') system of signs and codes ... which allows it to function apart from any human need or value in the thing itself' (different sorts of furniture, for instance, are meaningless except when considered as opposing one another, 47). 'The authentic social form' is defined as that of 'symbolic exchange' (46), a perfect reciprocity which, Lafont points out, is hardly to be found except in the Christian Trinity (59). In chapter 3 a penetrating account of Heidegger's eventual position leads to the following question: 'if (according to him) our technical epoch is not to have an *afterwards*, has the *gift* of time and being, for which (he says) we wait, a *before* or must we consider salvation a *pure origin* without connection of any kind with what preceded it?' (73). Then Jacques Derrida, the most influential, seemingly, of the deconstructionists, is shown, at tiresome but, in the circumstances, necessary length, as faced by the familiar absurdity that there is nothing to be said positively at all. The first part of Lafont's book ends with a chapter which considers attempts to make the drama or the novel compensate for the intellectual bankruptcy so far described. They lead only to a revival of gnosticism.

The second part of the book, then, brings us back to reality, to *being*. There needs to be a *narrative* which explains man to himself, and that means that the all-important thing is *listening* to it. Someone on another level must first speak to us; that means that we must take up with the notion of *analogy*. But there must be 'a disposition to listen to witnesses' who vouch for the fact of this intervention and 'a desire for reconciliation with one's own body and the world, an acceptance, however feeble, of the need to reopen a history with other men'. Lafont speaks of this attitude as one 'which we can call *faith*' (133). What has produced this 'faith'? It is a pity, I think, that so basic a question was not touched on, however briefly, at this point. Instead we are brought quickly to the narrative of the Resurrection; its unique character, its possession of all that a 'fundamental' narrative requires, is powerfully put before us. We discover 'the economy of time, which is that of a progressive approach to the reciprocal perfection of the relationship between God and man' (180). Jesus has been brought by his testing to show the full meaning of his relationship with his Father. Here is the '*time of Jesus*, placed in the middle of times' (183). The theme of a necessary testing is pursued in a chapter about Adam in Eden and Job in the land of Hus, and in a further chapter in regard to the Redemption. All this is admirable; my only regret is that the problem of evil is treated in an exclusively biblical perspective, without reference to recent work in the philosophy of religion. An epilogue to this second part emphasises that the rescue of time from meaninglessness must be seen as bound up with the *truth of being* (265).

So, in the third and last part, Lafont returns to Heidegger, for whom 'the theology of

creation is bound up necessarily with the forgetting of being'. It is pointed out that his eventual position of waiting for a 'giving' of being and time to one another, despite his neglecting the need for a 'giver', has a certain kinship with paschal theology—also that an agnostic sort of apophaticism is to be found in the neo-Platonist tradition, even among Christians: what is needed would seem to be 'a proper adjustment of concept and representation, on the one hand, and of a sense of being and mystery on the other', thus avoiding both the ontotheology of 'a God *causa sui*' and the postulation of a wholly unknown power (279). Lafont goes on (page 280 n.) to propose 'a God who is both beyond the world and yet capable of being recovered (*rejoint*), even by the intelligence, in that intermediary perspective which could be called "metaphysical"'. This does suggest a God who is just Top Being, despite disclaimers. To insist on 'being' as having a special and vital metaphysical import can be to invite the reply that the word is a convenient label for all objects known to us, with the implication that there is nothing *intrinsically* common to them. I suggest that the word can be considered profitably as a 'pointer' to what things do prove to have in common, a relationship to an Originator who is 'beyond being'. When Lafont writes of 'the pure actuality of being (*l'être*) by which the being (*l'étant*) truly is' and of 'this stupefying reality which springs up at the heart of everything ... and arouses amazement at the fact that *it is there*' (312, his italics), he might seem to be implying what I have just suggested. But the general context (the acknowledgements to Gilson, for instance) tells against it.

Such differences of view do not affect the main argument of the book (much of it inevitably left unmentioned); it deserves, I think, translation into English. The perfectly fair and profoundly searching discussion of Henri le Saux's position, for instance (pp. 295–307), seems to me of the greatest importance for the dialogue between Christians and Hindus.

ILLTYD TRETHOWAN

**THE PARABLES OF JESUS** by H. Hendrickx. *Harper & Row/Chapman/Cassell*. 1986. p/b. £7.95. pp. 291.

A great many studies of the parables of Jesus have appeared in the last twenty years. The merit of Hendrickx' book is that it presents many of the insights of form, redaction, existentialist and structuralist analyses while abandoning not only the technical jargon but also the narrowness of each. For example the myopic individualism of existentialist treatments and the questionable limitation of meaning to deep structure in structuralist expositions are rightly eschewed. A chapter is devoted to each of the major parables of the Synoptic Gospels (according to Matthew, Mark and Luke) in its various forms, with a view to recovering Jesus' original version and its significance in his ministry, its reinterpretation by the early church, and its meaning within the literary context of each of the Gospels. A final section headed 'Reflection' considers what the parable has to say to people today. Preachers, in particular, will find the book a valuable resource.

It has to be admitted, however, that assumptions are made which are neither clearly spelled out nor justified. Hypotheses appear in the guise of facts. Mark is reckoned the earliest Gospel and a source of both Matthew and Luke, while Luke and Matthew are thought to share another source, since lost. Distinctions between tradition and redaction, even in the case of Markan parables, or of Lucan parables which find no parallels in the other Gospels, seem to be discerned too confidently, considering the amount of scholarly disagreement. Then, the redactional emphases of each of the Gospel versions is directly related to situations in the churches without any sense of the needs of the literary composition. Most important, it is axiomatic for the study that these parables were at some time spoken by Jesus and not invented by the early church or by the Evangelists. Even