

FAITH AND THE MYSTERY OF GOD by M. F. Wiles, London,
SCM, 1982. pp viii + 146 £4.50.

Professor Wiles' book is an attempt to answer those of his critics who have complained that his earlier work was insufficiently 'constructive'. Such an account of his aims tells us a good deal – both about the insensitivity of some reactions to Professor Wiles' invariably thoughtful and searching work and about his own readiness to see theological questioning as in the service of a mature and alert faith. As always, he writes clearly and authoritatively, is patient with views very different from his own, and shows (a little more than usual) something of his own personal feeling about the tasks he is engaged in. This is an attractive book, and much that is said here is indeed 'constructive' and fresh. The second chapter ('The Language of Faith: Creation and Disclosure') is a most interesting and wide-ranging discussion of metaphor in religious language, developing the notion of imaginative precision, with help from Mary Warnock, Paul Ricoeur, Philip Wheelwright and others. It is a welcome relief to find, for once, a treatment of 'poetic truth' and related ideas that does not presuppose imagination to be essentially vague. Chapter 3, on 'Claims of Identity', analyses various examples in Christian discourse of the use of paradox to express truth – in these cases, the paradoxes are ostensible identity-statements (bread and body, Jesus and God). This is a particularly stimulating section, though its integral connection with the argument of the whole work is not entirely clear. There follows a chapter on the role of Jesus as paradigm for a humanity 'justified by faith', a bold conception well worked out, and as parable of 'God's way to the overcoming of evil'. The discussion of the Church makes fruitful use of Vanstone's model in *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*. And in the last chapter, we have an eloquent argument for the primacy of 'spirit' language in speaking of God – something of a recapitulation of Geoffrey Lampe's fine *God as Spirit*.

What emerges is, as Professor Wiles would wish, a serious imaginative, flexible, reasoning style of Christian speech

which has great resource and appeal. As I record my reservations, I am very conscious that it represents a degree of integrity and integration of thought which most theologians (including myself) can only wistfully aspire to. But questions there are, on method, presuppositions and content; let me enumerate some of the more pressing ones.

Professor Nicholas Lash, in reviewing Wiles' earlier *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, commented on the order of proceeding in that work – from God to Christ to Spirit and church – and wondered whether this did not carry with it the risk of a kind of abstractness alien to Wiles' own professed aims. The present book has some of the same features. It could be read as saying that our starting-point is personal belief in God (however much culturally-shaped, some kind of core is recoverable), decisively illuminated by the story of Jesus, expressing itself in an association of believers which is encouraged to act in certain ways. 'The church is part of the gospel', says Professor Wiles (p 76); but if all this means is that 'some form of institutional framework is required for personal flourishing' (p 113), the emphasis still seems to be on the primacy of individual experience of God and personal growth. Clearly this is *not* what Wiles wants to say: he is quite clear that the Church exists in some sense to represent and to realize a new fullness for the whole human world, a communality whose sense of its unity 'is not dependent on hostility to other communities' (p 81). But what is it dependent on? Shared experience, a shared *idea* of God's love? That is obviously not adequate; but if we need to say more than that, we may find ourselves (I suspect) back with the sort of Christological questions Professor Wiles is uneasy with. Because of the order in which he takes his subjects, there is not enough in the account of the role of Jesus to sustain much of an ecclesiology – or much of a theology of the sacraments (hardly mentioned in the chapter on 'Worship and Action').

In other words: if spelling out what is

involved in being in the church leads us to speak of the project of a new humanity, the reconstruction of human possibilities, the overcoming of hostility and discrimination, and so on, do we need something more than parable and paradigm at the roots of its life? If we say that in Jesus is an *image* of such transforming power that its impact is global (or 'final') because it has the potential of re-presenting all human beings to themselves and one another, have we not moved a little beyond Wiles' categories? My own feeling is that without such a move, the Church is almost bound to be seen as instrumental to the nurture of a primarily individual 'sense of God' for which Jesus is an illustration, but not finally constitutive – so that the Church's project will be defined in terms for which the figure or form of Christ is not really determinative (cf. Wiles' remarks on Christian and 'natural' morality, pp 107 ff).

So I am unhappy with the statement on p 89 that 'it is only the church which does not much care whether it is one which is one'. There is a valid and important insight here; but there is also a typical liberal pitfall in the assumption that theory is a luxury. There are circumstances in which the most important thing a church can do is to ask whether it is a church or not. This was Bonhoeffer's challenge to his church, and it is the challenge which some black South African Christians have been putting more and more starkly to their churches – proposing, like Bonhoeffer, the forming of a 'Confessing Church'. There are those who have said that the church should adopt a *status confessionis* over the nuclear issue. This is not melodramatic posturing; it is a recognition that the church is spectacularly capable of betrayal. And in societies like ours, a church such as the one to which Professor Wiles and I both belong is painfully vulnerable to the seductions of theory-less consensus politics, in its internal affairs and its relations with society at large. I cannot imagine that Professor Wiles views such uncritical pragmatism with any favour; but if he does not, he must allow that there is some way of putting and answering the question, 'To what is the church answerable, and why?' He implies as much in many places, but

does not seem to see that this does involve acute *theological* self-criticism on the church's part – caring whether or not it is a church.

Professor Wiles' discussion of the 'creative' and 'disclosive' aspects of theological metaphor is admirable; but the trouble is that the 'creative' side seems to be seen rather too much as free (and dispensable) construction. This is apparent in the treatment in the final chapter of trinitarian language. Wiles argues that the symbol of God as trinity is a construction, whose claims to disclosive force must now be suspect (why *precisely* he does not say very fully in this context). He admits that 'It represents a pattern into which my own critical reflections continually fall' (p 126) but denies that it gives any purchase on God's 'nature'. We need a word to express God's personal character, as self-presence and self-communication, and this is the great usefulness of the term 'spirit'.

Several questions and comments occur. For one thing, it might be said that classical trinitarian language (in the hands of Augustine and Thomas, for instance) attempts to say rather more concretely what 'spirit' language says abstractly. What is God's self-presence like? More like a relationship of human intimacy than a 'pure' individual self-reflexiveness. More importantly, I feel that Wiles has here put asunder what he so suggestively joined together in Chapter 2. Why do we now have to say that some symbols are exclusively creative *rather than* disclosive (if this is what is being said)? There is a certain lack of consideration of what might have *constrained* Christians to reflect on God in this way and to regard it as normative. As I understand it, a fundamental aspect of classical trinitarian language was and is its 'grammatical' character. For the Christian, to speak of God is to speak of Father, Son and Spirit: this is how 'God' appears in specifically Christian speech. It is a crystallizing of just those features of our talking and thinking which Wiles obviously shares in his own 'critical reflection'. Is it a claim to knowledge of God's 'nature'? In one sense, yes: we are not licensed (as participants in Christian language) to abstract to a speculative deity unrelated to the 'God'

who is present in our speech. There is no such 'object' to be known. It would be like trying to escape from language itself into the fantasy of absolute knowledge. In another sense, no: the doctrine of the trinity (as the Cappadocians and Augustine alike insist) does not give us theoretical or conceptual information on what it is to be God. 'God' is simply whatever it is we encounter in the mutually-related, mutually-definitory creative and recreative agencies we name 'Father', 'Son' or 'Word' and 'Spirit'.

Is this so very alien to what Professor Wiles wants? I think (especially in the light of some of the remarks on p 127 about the separation of trinitarian doctrine from

considerations about God's relation to the world) that the trinitarianism he rejects is a remarkably attenuated version. I hope one day he may have more to say about this. As in so much of his writing, he prompts the desire for the conversation to continue. This book itself testifies to his own exemplary willingness to listen and to respond in the conversation of theology; and I hope it is no derogation from this book's worthwhileness to say that it is more of an invitation and a goad to draw us on than any kind of systematic resolution of our shared difficulties.

ROWAN WILLIAMS

**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST JOHN, VOL III, by Rudolf Schnackenburg,
translated by David Smith and G. A. Kon.**

**Herder's Theological Commentary on the New Testament.
Burns & Oates, London, 1982. pp x + 510. £28.00.**

This third volume completes Schnackenburg's great commentary on the Fourth Gospel. The three volumes together total 1722 pages, beating Raymond Brown (1374), and a long way ahead of Bultmann. It must certainly be reckoned the most detailed and the most up-to-date commentary on the gospel. It also has the advantage of dealing more fully with the Greek text than Brown's very good book. With the space at his disposal Schnackenburg has been able to mention at every point practically every exegetical possibility and consider the merits of each. That one may from time to time disagree with his assessment derogates in no way from the value of his work. Readers will turn to such a book for full information and will not be disappointed; they will find also a wise and fair-minded guide, and a sober judge.

The present volume deals with Chapters 13-21. The verse-by-verse commentary can be reviewed only in the general terms I have already used. No serious theological library can afford, even in the present economic circumstances, to be without it. The volume also contains four Excursus (Nos. 15-18 of the whole) and a section headed "Outlook: On the Significance of John's Gospel Today". It will be more

profitable to look briefly at these than to pick out the notes on a few verses.

Excursus 15 is on "The Johannine Last Supper and its Problems". John (Schnackenburg thinks) is not giving a theologically motivated variation on the synoptic but following a different tradition. His interest is theological rather than historical, and concentrates upon the person of Jesus as he goes to his death in perfect love for his own. This may possibly account for the absence from John's narrative of the "institution of the eucharist", for the washing of the disciples' feet adequately portrays John's theme.

Excursus 16 deals with "the Paraclete and the Sayings about the Paraclete". John took over the name from tradition, where it may have originated in the synoptic material touching the aid given to disciples when on trial, but he then elaborated its meaning, which must be read out of the sayings themselves. These show us a community guided and instructed by the Spirit, but receiving this teaching through qualified leaders – standing therefore within the mainstream of primitive Christianity.

Schnackenburg returns to this theme in Excursus 17, discussing the concept of dis-