

GOD IN OUR HANDS by Graham Shaw. *S.C.M.* 1987, Pp. 255. £9.95.

This is a hard book both to read and to assess. The first (lengthy) part consists in a detailed discussion of the Psalter that I leave for Old Testament scholars to examine. I am concerned only with the main theological conclusion that emerges, which is this. Following the Old Testament, chiefly the Psalter, Christians have often conceived God as a God of power who secures the temporal privileges of his worshippers and grants them deliverance from various afflictions. In the light of the Cross we must regard this concept of God as erroneous. Jesus died without any hope of vindication. Belief in his resurrection and exaltation must be rejected on the ground that it destroys the significance of Jesus as the true 'man of God'. Thus Shaw says on pp 113–4 that 'while Jews had looked to their God to establish his power in the context of lives terminated by death, Christians proclaimed a God whose power reversed death itself'. Later he writes as follows. 'Religion is safely once again a matter of happy endings. The suffering and death of Jesus become mere incidents which are gloriously reversed. Belief in God is an invitation to believe that we will live happily ever after. The gospel of the cross becomes a fairy tale' (p 122).

Shaw proceeds to propound a yet more radical thesis that is indicated by the book's title. It is not merely a God of power and privilege who does not exist. God himself does not exist outside our imagination. 'God is not an external reality who imposes himself upon me; instead he is the construction of my imagination and his character reflects my choices' (p 181). Shaw then expresses his indebtedness to Feuerbach. The goal of religion is 'the transformation of the self' (p 184). 'In prayer I am not only creating the God who lives in my imagination, I am also recreating myself' (p 201). At the end of his concluding chapter he sums up thus. 'The God who lives in the hearts of those who pray to him, mirrors the self that invokes him. If we have no difficulty in using the word "I", we should have no difficulty in using the word "God"'. Both have their existence in the imagination of the living. Both are imagined constructions which gain their content in the use of language in our imaginative life' (p 241).

This book is salutary in requiring us, first, to consider again the Old Testament's picture of God in the light of the picture given by the New, and, secondly, to purge our religion of any associations with power and prestige that are incompatible with the revelation of God in Christ. The book is salutary too in reminding us that our ideas of God often reflect our own imaginative 'projections' rather than the nature of God himself. However, in saying that God is merely the product of our imagination and does not exist independently, Shaw simply abandons the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition. Whether such a merely imagined God is spiritually helpful and whether it is psychologically possible to pray to him are questions that each person for whom they are relevant must answer for himself. The book raises many further queries of which I shall mention two on the basis of the summary I have given. First, it is a caricature of the New Testament to say that the Resurrection makes Christ's sufferings and death 'mere incidents which are gloriously reversed'. Secondly, Shaw begs a large philosophical question when he denies the existence of an 'I' or unitary self. In any case, there are psychical events that are real, not imaginary.

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IN THE STILLNESS DANCING: THE JOURNEY OF JOHN MAIN by Neil McKenty. *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London. 1986, Pp. 205. £4.95.

In this book Neil McKenty presents us with the biography of an extraordinary man who, when staying as a guest, had the disconcerting habit of finding his way into your kitchen before breakfast to bake Irish brown bread and whom Bede Griffiths has called 'the best spiritual guide in the Church today.'