

THE UNEXPECTED WAY: ON CONVERTING FROM BUDDHISM TO CATHOLICISM by Paul Williams, *Continuum*, London, 2002 Pp.xx + 240 £12.99 pbk.

When news of Paul Williams's decision to convert to Catholicism began to spread around Bristol university, reactions mostly tried to hide the feelings of disapproval behind a veil of surprise and scepticism. A well-known Buddhist, Williams was head of department of theology and religious studies and professor of Indian and Tibetan philosophy. A comment made by a professor in the arts' faculty stuck vividly in my mind: 'You would understand it the other way around!'

This opinion seemed admirably to encapsulate most of the other comments made at the time. It made it clear that Buddhism is exciting and fashionable to the degree that Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, is not. One of the reasons for this is that Buddhism seems more in harmony with the modern temper because it places primacy on individual experience. As Charles Taylor has repeatedly observed, a striking feature of the Western march to secularity is that it has always been interwoven with a drive towards personal religion. The stress on inwardness and serious commitment gives strength to the view that a religion whose tenets are difficult to believe is not worth believing. Buddhism can present itself to Westerners in a fairly undemanding way, while Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, seems to many to be tied irrevocably to a worldview that succumbed to the judgment of history and empirical science centuries ago.

Williams is as passionate as he is rational and pondered in his demolition of this persistent misunderstanding. *The Unexpected Way* is an apologia, but one that is adamant that Catholicism makes sense *rationally*. This assertion follows three basic steps. The first step deals with Williams's gradual return to faith in God after many years of difficulty with the problem of theodicy. Once such difficulty was overcome, mostly through philosophical reasoning and the help of the writings of Herbert McCabe OP and Denys Turner, among others, Williams could no longer remain a well-meaning Buddhist, for Buddhists do not believe in God.

The second step deals with an obvious objection to the first step: theism is fine, but why Christianity? Here Williams's answer may surprise; it has nothing to do with morality or philosophy or tradition. It is because of the resurrection that Christianity became the only rational choice for him. There is no hint of wishful thinking or nostalgia for a long-lost faith in this assertion. Williams genuinely thinks that, three days after his death, Jesus was raised from the dead, literally, bodily, raised from the dead. This belief is not held by him because the Church says so, or because it is comforting or reassuring to believe it, but because the factual, empirical evidence that we possess is overwhelmingly in favour of such a belief. And so, Williams asserts after a masterly chapter on the subject, it is more reasonable to believe in the resurrection of Jesus than to doubt it.

The final step deals with a further predictable objection. If we grant that Christianity is reasonably reasonable, surely something other than Catholicism, with its obsessions with authority and dogma, would be a more rational choice? Against this, Williams argues that Catholicism has what the Buddhists call 'the lineage', and that it speaks with genuine authority. Therefore, he continues, he would need a very argument *not* to be a Catholic. He looked but he did not find one.

In this final step, Williams's sharp analytical acumen wanes somewhat. There is an overwhelming sense that he has made up his mind that Catholicism is true and many of his arguments will appear somewhat rash. This is not to say that Williams avoids difficult issues or is happy with easy options. Virtually all the difficulties in Catholicism are addressed, and the intellectual honesty of his search for a faith has a wonderfully authentic ring. But many of his remarks on other denominations, especially Anglicanism, will fail to carry conviction outside Catholic circles, and he might even come to regret them in time. Yet, paradoxically, it is in this section that the book's most valuable intuitions are found. Williams is an able philosopher, and his arguments have a painstaking rigour worthy of the best Thomist scholarship. As a good Thomist, however, Williams is also deeply Augustinian, always aware that faith is a gift, and that in the concordance between nature and grace, reason and faith, the initiative always comes from God. In this context, his honest referral to the Church in matters of faith, morality and revelation carries genuine conviction.

The book has an unusually long epigraph. It is the memorable passage where Helena, in Evelyn Waugh's historical novel of the same name, kneels in front of the crib to pray on the feast of the Epiphany. After calling the Magi her 'special patrons', she prays for 'all late-comers...all who have a tedious journey to make to the truth,...the learned, the oblique, the delicate', asking that they may not be 'quite forgotten at the Throne of God when the simple come into their kingdom'. It is one of the high points of 20th-century English prose. Those unfortunate readers who have not managed to shed a tear while reading it may still have a chance to do so after reading this book.

FERNANDO CERVANTES

THE ONTOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTITUTION OF CHRIST by Bernard Lonergan. Translated by Michael G. Shields. *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 7. Toronto University Press, Toronto, 2002. Pp. xvii + 295.

This volume contains the shortest of three theological treatises that Lonergan wrote during his years as professor of dogmatics at the Gregorian University in Rome. The original Latin text and its translation are conveniently arranged on facing pages. Lonergan's lapidary style and the highly technical character of his argument called for a close translation, and Michael Shields has provided an excellent one. The only