

Reviews

THE CHURCH IN THE MIDST OF CREATION by Vincent J. Donovan, *Orbis Books 1989*, Pp. xi + 169. £7.95.

This work makes a further timely and urgent plea for some fundamental changes of attitude in the church. By popularising Karl Rahner's thesis, 'Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II' (*Theological Studies* 40, 1979) the author presents the case that turning the essentially Western European 'Roman Catholic' Church into a world-wide church in fact as well as in name amounts to little less than a re-founding of the church. Three chapters, 'Yesterday's Children', 'The Dying of an Age' and 'The Church : Captive of the Industrial Revolution' depict the static pre-Vatican II church at tiresome length and from a somewhat narrowly American perspective. The remaining seven chapters analyse in rather greater depth the precise ills and their causes as a means of pointing out the needed remedies.

The essential plank of the thesis, derived from Rahner, is that it was only in the twentieth century that the church became *de facto* a worldwide church—a fact dramatically revealed by Vatican II, and that this development was a change quite as momentous as the change involved in the opening up of the earliest Judaeo-Christian church to the Gentile world in the first century. The present author dwells on this point at some length and suggests that the magnitude of that crisis and the struggle and trauma involved, have been partially smoothed out in the scriptural records and certainly entirely forgotten by the contemporary church. He further makes the point that the Judaeo-Christian section of the early church which refused to change or adapt to other cultural demands died off completely. These were not the ones who became responsible for the diffusion of the Gospel, or who brought Christ to the world, because they refused to believe that God's Spirit or his sacred gifts could be poured out on those unclean Gentiles. They believed that the inexhaustible meaning of Christ could be discovered from within the ambit of their own culture which stood in no need of mutual fecundation from other cultures for this purpose.

This leads the author to dwell insistently on the cultural conditioning of all revelation. 'Culture ... is that second artificial layer of reality that is added to the first natural layer and level of human existence. A stream is nature, a canal is culture; a grunt is nature, a word is culture; sex is nature, marriage is culture' (p. 115). Consequently 'the final and fundamental substance of the Christian message, that stripped-down skeletal core of the Gospel, will not remain long. As soon as the dialogue opens it begins to take on the flesh and blood of the culture being evangelised' (p. 127). He claims that St. Paul's achievement in securing the relief of Gentile Christians from the burden of the Jewish law embodied a recognition of this, and that he had in

fact grasped the essential message of Christ more accurately than the Judaeo-Christian group. 'Christ ... set up an ethical faith system based on his own experience and idea of God' (p. 230), a system which had therefore to be earthed in created reality in order to become revelatory for anyone. Such revelation must necessarily be clothed in the cultural dress of each different people to whom it was addressed. 'Christians are not adherents of a doctrine or members of an organisation. They are followers of a person' (p. 48).

This claim is impressively deployed in the author's attack on the Christology evolved by the European church, the 'Mediterranean Christ' who has become a timeless and transcendent absolute rather than a real person to be followed. While there are one or two odd *non-sequiturs* in his thought and some of his remarks about Davidic messiahship would not prove acceptable to doctrinal rigorists, his development of the theme of the 'growth of Christ' through the various cultures—those of Greece, Rome and barbarian Europe—is arresting. His point is that this 'growth' should be allowed to continue in and through all other cultures in which the Gospel is preached. 'The belief in Jesus as the second person of the Blessed Trinity; the belief in the deepest meaning of the incarnation and the divine personality of Christ—these are ideas that could not possibly have come from the Jewish culture or from Jerusalem ... They were beliefs that grew out of the pagan soil of the Roman empire' (p. 50). He admits that all interpretations of Christ may be subjective projections of their own time, but insists that such projections may indeed refer to a real facet of Jesus' life; if this was so in the earlier ages of the Church, why should the process stop?

The author accuses western European culture and the present Church of imprisoning Christ within its own formalised concepts and so preventing such 'growth', and distorting the reality of the Gospel it has tried to preach to other nations and cultures of the Third World. Few will quarrel with his brief references to the stunted and sometimes abortive missionary efforts that have tried to impose European culture along with the Gospel, or the sad remark that, had other methods been used, it is not impossible that China might have been a Christian country today. For the same reasons the Church has shown itself unable to dialogue with the other great world religions; the conviction that it had everything to give and nothing to learn even about Christ, has prevented any real dialogue, and provokes strong words from the present author: 'Christ was not offered in any honest way to them, but was restricted to Europe' (p. 54).

A lengthy and tedious section of the book is devoted to describing and analysing how this situation came about as a prelude to the demand for real change. The further complaint is that although the Second Vatican Council recognised much of a problem and made the right noises about a change of fundamental approach, its directives have not been followed yet in practice. There is strong and seemingly pertinent criticism of the continuing tendency to over-centralisation in the Church, where the perceptions and ecclesiology of Vatican II about the reality of local churches receive only lip-service; and about cosmetic and not fundamental reforms of such matters as sacramental theology. The section on the sacraments, despite some surprising and at times shocking remarks, is probably the strongest and most interesting section of the book: 'we must have the courage to

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continue those (post Vatican II) efforts, not to reform or revitalise the understanding of the sacraments, but to lift that understanding to an entirely new level.' (p. 70)

The nub of the author's case is that western theology is bankrupt and exhausted because it has adopted the early Judaeo-Christian position that all further enlightenment and development must come from within its own ambit, and that the unevangelised world has nothing to teach it. The truth on the contrary is that prophecy always comes from outside the established system, to disturb and even shatter it; that revelation is always clothed in some culture and so all newly evangelised cultures will have something to contribute to the sum of revelation; and that the only locus of revelation is created reality which must be accepted and faced in all its own unmanageable ruggedness if the Church is to remain really in touch with the living Christ. The author's charge is that the Church, which realised and embraced these facts up to about the time of the Council of Trent, has since then turned its back on them in an arrogant assumption of the firm possession not only of all truth but of all possible means and avenues of development and revitalisation. In so doing it has adopted the same fatal path as the earliest Judaeo-Christian section of the Church.

The book is compelling and convincing, for those who still need such convincing, and makes stimulating and easy reading. It is however a lightweight production in terms of scholarship, marred by occasional errors and inaccuracies, somewhat given to sweeping generalisations and tediously repetitious.

CECILY BOULDING OP

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS by Glyn Richards,
Routledge Press, 1989, Pp. xi + 179. £30.00

Cooks tours proliferate in the region of theology of religions. In the last few years guide books have been produced by the dozen, showing us who's who, and where we should look for them on the differently constructed maps of theological classification. The mapping exercises usually have an inbuilt compass, leading the reader to the best vantage point from which to survey and evaluate the scene. A new guide book at £30.00 will have to justify itself. I'm not confident that this one succeeds.

Richards spends some eight chapters mapping out different Christian theological responses to the plurality of the world religions. Any writer carrying out such an exercise, given the enormous amount of mapping already done, should critically interact with previous categorizations, justifying his own and telling us why we need yet another map. Richards fails to do either of these jobs. Furthermore, should a tour guide for 1989 be quoting prices for 1985? One gets this impression when we read Richards' discussion of writers like Stanley Samartha, John Hick, or M.M. Thomas. With the latter, for instance, only his work up to 1975 is outlined, with no mention of important shifts of direction in his recent book, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake* (1987). Although Richards deals with Hick's work up to 1985, he fails to chart an important move away from the original 'Copernican revolution' already present in Hick's work in 1985 and made explicit in his recent Gifford Lectures, *An Interpretation of Religion*. It may be that