

Reviews

AFRICAN CATHOLICISM by Adrian Hastings, *SCM Press, London, Trinity Press international, Philadelphia. 191pp. 1989. £.9.50*

This is a collection of 12 talks, articles and essays, mostly written or delivered within the last four years, though some date from as early as 1974. This being so, it would have been more convenient to state the origin of each chapter at the beginning of it, instead of cramming this information into one paragraph of acknowledgments, not very easy to read, at the beginning of the book. While I am on such petty criticisms, Hubert Bucher is not now a bishop in Zimbabwe (p. 153), but bishop of Bethlehem in the Orange Free State of South Africa. In the same chapter on Archbishop Milingo and his work of healing, on p. 141 'Until April 1953' should be 'Until April 1973'. Those are the only material error and misprint I detected; but I found the author's endnotes rather disappointing. They amount to no more than a running bibliography, useful in its way, but not immediately rewarding. Thus in this same chapter he compares Milingo with two other healers, Peter Mulenga and Edmund John. About the first he does tell us a little, as well as giving us the usual bibliographical note. But about Edmund John, apart from whetting our appetites by saying he was an extraordinary Anglican healer in Tanzania, 'not an archbishop by any means, yet the brother of one', he tells us nothing—except in a note that we can read all about him in *African Christianity* by Adrian Hastings, pp. 62–63. There, and in many other places, I would have appreciated a nice, meaty footnote (or endnote), modestly in the style of Edward Gibbon.

The chapters are entirely miscellaneous—apart from all having to do with African Catholicism. One or two recall, very sympathetically, Fr Hastings' experience of the very conservative, very African, very solid Church of Uganda—or rather of Buganda—20 to 30 years ago. We have already noted a chapter on Archbishop Milingo. It is a very judicious assessment of the archbishop's work of healing and exorcism, and of the doctrine or theology that governs it. On several points Hastings disagrees, mildly but firmly, with Aylward Shorter (*Jesus and the Witchdoctor*). In my opinion Hastings has the better of it, his judgments being less conditioned by European cultural assumptions.

Chapter 7, *The Choice of Words for Christian Meanings in Eastern Africa*, I found particularly interesting, dealing as it does with the perennial problems of translation. The author rightly points out that in some respects Bantu languages are better vehicles of Christian concepts than European ones, and he instances the case of sexism in language. It is practically impossible to be sexist in a Bantu language, because they don't have genders, no masculine and feminine pronouns, no trouble over the word 'man'. On this point, however, Prof. Hastings allows himself what strikes me as a peculiarly wrongheaded jab at the bishops of England and Wales for ordering the word 'men' to be dropped from the eucharistic words of institution: '... the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all men'. He thinks he may surmise that 'this novel episcopal

anxiety not to include women among men was fuelled by the need to maintain a certain consistency with Rome's reasons for refusing to ordain women'. And he supports his wild surmise by pointing out that the bishops did not order the wording of the creed 'and was made man' to be altered (or even, he could have added, the words 'who for us men and our salvation').

I really think Fr Hastings needs to sharpen his Ockham's razor here. 1) I'm willing to bet that the bishops of England and Wales were merely following the example of the American bishops, and several other English-speaking hierarchies; 2) the word 'men' in the formula of institution is an English addition, the Latin merely having *omnibus*; so dropping 'men' here is no problem at all. But in the creed, where the Latin has *homines* and *homo*, a substitute word would have to be found for the word: 'human' (as a noun), 'human being', 'person'. Whichever it had been, imagine the fuss such a change would have caused. The motivation of the bishops was surely much simpler, if not more heroic, than that surmised by Fr Hastings.

As regards his discussion of the different words chosen for 'God' in the various languages of the region, I got the impression that both Hastings and most of the translators he was discussing failed to make an absolutely crucial distinction; that is to say, they unquestioningly treat the word 'God' (which is, after all, the same as the word 'god') as a proper name, instead of as a common noun. More than once, in fact, Hastings treats 'God' as purely synonymous and interchangeable with 'Yahweh'. As regards things signified, of course, it is. But as regards the manner of signifying, it most certainly is not.

While the author quite enjoys belabouring bishops, as we have seen, the main target for the Hastings ecclesiastical artillery is the Vatican and its current policies—and of course all those, throughout the Church, who support them. The burden of his complaint is that by its policy of stringent central control, exercised, in the appointment of compliant bishops, and in the maintenance of the traditional clerical structure of a celibate ministry dependent upon a traditional seminary education, the Holy See is squeezing the vitality out of the African Catholic Church, as far as such a thing is possible; and of course the existence of the Holy Spirit and the promises of God ensure that the possibility has limits. But here is one eloquent paragraph, in the chapter on *Why the Church in South Africa matters*, which expresses the Hastings case very forcefully:

Is the poor, southern, non-white world also to become anti-Christian because the white, capitalist world is claimed as Christian? Such a scenario is not wholly devoid of plausibility. Let liberation theology be 'excommunicated' in Latin America; let the black millions of central Africa be alienated from the churches by a prolonged white-black conflict centred upon a South Africa firmly backed by the United States and western Europe; let the basic Christian communities of the southern continents be deprived of the eucharist, and starved of life; let a diminished priesthood retreat into the realm of the sacral, reasserting its segregation from the laity, and its concern with more important clerical matters than torture and starvation; let an other-worldly and authoritarian form of Christianity be proclaimed again as the only one fully acceptable to Rome; and we are almost there. It is not impossible (p. 175).

There is a rather strange concluding chapter, about the provenance of which nothing is said. Perhaps it was a sermon to some small group; perhaps, even, it is a sermon which Adrian Hastings likes to imagine himself preaching to a group of curial cardinals. It contains the exhortation, 'Friends, think again'. It is full of pathos, a kind of lament for an African Catholicism that might have been, but that 'fundamentalist ossification' has sapped, or is sapping of vitality. For example, the insistence on wheaten bread for the matter of the eucharist. Here, incidentally, is another place where a 'meaty' endnote would have been welcome; Hastings implies (p. 185) that the sacrament was celebrated for centuries in South India with some other kind of bread, before the Portuguese arrived. One would have loved to learn the precise details.

But the chief instance of fundamentalist ossification which he deplors is the refusal to countenance the ordination to the priesthood of married men. In spite of one rather tactless recollection of an off-the-cuff remark of a nun in Lesotho in 1971, Hastings' main argument in favour of ordaining married men is not any supposed fact that African men are no good at celibacy. In this respect, I don't suppose he thinks they are very different from men, including priests, on other continents. His main concern is with 'the eucharistic famine of the rural church' over most of Africa. He says it is getting worse; that the traditional mode of recruitment of clergy is nowhere near remedying the situation, nor ever will be.

If Adrian Hastings were a Protestant, or even one of the more radical kind of Catholic, he wouldn't be worried about eucharistic famine, as long as the rural church had the word of God. But he is a Catholic, a rather conservative one, and he actually thinks that the sacraments matter. He suspects that in the *real* opinion of the Holy See, evinced by its practice, they don't matter as much as the clerical institution does. He thinks that is a scandal. And so do I.

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DENYS THE AREOPAGITE by Andrew Louth. *Geoffrey Chapman, Outstanding Christian Thinkers series, 1989, x + 134pp. Hb. £14.95, Pb. £5.95.*

The reviewer of another of Andrew Louth's books described him as 'writing like an angel' and the present work is no exception. Yet the elegance of the style is not so alluring as to lull the reader into a false sense of security or into the belief that the subject matter is easy or the treatment of it banal.

Writers who stress the centrality of the Incarnation and the importance of the active service of neighbour as the core of the gospel have always found Denys a challenging and uncomfortable figure. His stress, or as it turns out his apparent stress, on the importance of abstraction and ecstasy on a Neoplatonic model, seem to distance him from the more this-worldly conceptions of his critics. Further than this, together with Origen and Evagrius he is regarded as responsible for grafting the foreign gospel of Plato onto the root of 'true Christianity'. Since the discovery in the fifteenth century that Denys was not the Pauline convert of *Acts* 17.34 and the subsequent proof at the end of the last century that he was deeply influenced by the philosophy of the Athenian Neoplatonist Proclus (413–485), the conviction that he betrayed fundamental gospel insights has found increasing currency. The