

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH by J. G. Davies; *Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 50s.*

This book is one of a series on the history of religion. Even the stony heart of a reviewer must surely bleed for a man who is asked to write a potted history of something so complex as the early Christian Church. Professor Davies is well aware of the complexities, and on the whole he succeeds in resisting the temptation to oversimplify. He fails most often in the area of doctrinal development, where the task is the most difficult. Thus on the matter of the resurrection of the dead, we are told that after the first century 'the Pauline doctrine of transformation was replaced by one of reanimation', and this later doctrine is called materialistic (p. 100f). What a mixture of questions and categories is here compressed! This misleading label of materialism is applied again to eucharistic doctrine: 'there was also a strong materialist theory coming to the fore that regarded the elements as being converted into the body and blood' (p. 206). Augustine, by contrast, is said to maintain that 'the grace or reality (conveyed by the eucharist) is not to be identified with Christ's historical body' (p. 268). So variations of emphasis in doctrine are presented implicitly as mutually exclusive alternatives. But any competent Roman Catholic theologian would strenuously deny that he is obliged to repudiate Augustine's 'figurative' doctrine of the eucharist in favour of Ambrose's 'conversionist', though he is of course committed to the latter by Trent. Ironically enough, the divergent opinions of the Nestorians and the Orthodox, and then of the Orthodox and the Monophysites on the nature(s) of Christ, which caused schisms that have not yet been healed, are eirenicly presented as amounting to little more than variations in emphasis.

On the baptismal controversy between Cyprian of Carthage and Stephen of Rome, there is the very odd statement that 'Stephen of Rome argued that the laying on of hands was the essential element (in the reconciliation of schismatics) and was prepared not to repeat water-baptism' (p. 149), which gives an entirely misleading impression of what the whole controversy was

about. On the Roman primacy also, a Catholic cannot but consider that Professor Davies oversimplifies.

But his most radical mistake is something much deeper than such points of detail. In his preface he says very well that the different facets of the life of the Church 'are aspects of one indivisible entity and could ideally be represented only in musical terms in the form of a fugue, each theme related to the others and inseparable from them'. Thus he recognizes that it is only an art form that could begin to do justice, in the space available, to his subject. But because 'words and not musical notation must be used' he severely eschews all pretence at art in his composition, cuts up his period into five sections, takes six dominant inter-related aspects of Church life, and treats them one by one, section by section, with an introductory section on origins. The result, in musical terms, is like scales and finger exercises; a useful beginner's text-book for students in Church history, but a book of so little artistic value that it can make no appeal to the general reader. Yet surely words are as capable of aesthetic manipulation as musical notes; and surely the only satisfactory way to pot history is to treat it as an art form, and try and convey insights into the past with grace and style. Professor Davies does not bother about style at all.

The notes are not as satisfactory as they might be in a text-book for students. Copious references are certainly given to authorities cited; but the ordinary student will not always find them easy to follow up – perhaps no ordinary student is interested in following up references. Thus on p. 161 we are given an interesting quotation from the founder of Manichaeism himself, telling us about 'my religion, the wisdom that I have revealed'. At least the inquisitive student might like to know where he can read a little more Mani. The note duly informs him that the quotation comes from *Kephalaia* 154. But there the inquisitive student's curiosity must stay. How does he get hold of *Kephalaia* 154? Who has edited it, when if ever was it published? Would it work if he went to

the Bodleian and put in a slip for *Kephalaia* by Mani? We are given no further information. Can it be that he simply copied both quotation and reference from another secondary source?

But I am genuinely grateful to him for making sense to me at last of St Simeon Stylites; what can have given this holy man the weird idea of living on top of a pillar? The answer is simple; it

was to escape the literally distracting attentions of the devout, who kept on tearing off bits of his clothes for relics. So he had his pillar built in order to get out of their reach. You can read all about it in Theodoret, *R.H.* 26. You will find this somewhere (though Professor Davies does not say so) in *P.G.*

*Edmund Hill, O.P.*

THE SOCIAL HOPE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH by Stanley G. Evans. *Hodder and Stroughton, 30s.*

Canon Evans' purpose in this book is to trace the history of Christian social thought and action from the beginnings to the present day. There is an introductory chapter on the social hope of the Old Testament, followed by a discussion of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels; then we pass to early Christianity, the patristic era, and the Middle Ages. Canon Evans' thesis is that during the early and medieval periods the Christian Church maintained its social tradition as an integral part of the Gospel; the Renaissance and the Reformation saw the retreat of this tradition, and the modern age – from Andrewes and Bunyan to the World Council of Churches – its return. He is best on Christian social reformers of the Anglican and Non-conformist Churches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Wesley and Wilberforce, Maurice, Kingsley, Marson and the rest. There is a review of modern Protestant social thinking, a chapter on the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and a discussion of Marxism. The final chapters are entitled 'The social God' and 'The Hope of the Future'.

This is a book written out of enthusiasm. The writer's concern is to preach 'the social God' and a society 'which is like unto him, that is, a society based upon love and justice, in which none is free to exploit his neighbour, in which all shall have full opportunities of self-expression, in which there shall be a large measure of equality. This is, in fact, something of what we mean by the Kingdom of God' (p. 257). The history of Christianity is essentially the history of the ways in which men

have striven to realize this vision. Canon Evans passes breathlessly from the Acts of the Apostles to the Apocalypse, from Abelard to St Francis, from Anabaptists to Chartists, pausing only long enough to bring out his theme. This is history and theology without complexities. Canon Evans' views on almost all subjects are highly personal: Anglican plainsong represents an almost uniquely low level of musical and artistic perception (p. 28); romantic love is a key aspect of the good life according to the Old Testament (p. 30); Jesus' sayings about adultery in the Sermon on the Mount are much more devised to safeguard the position of women in an unequal society than to tell us anything about marriage (p. 48); Newman saw all government as corrupt, saw no hope of changing it and thereby accepted the corruption (p. 148).

Canon Evans manages to admire both Père Hyacinthe in his apostasy and the teaching of Pope John XXIII, whilst the Church of Pius XI was simply 'in the same camp as Mussolini and Hitler and Franco' (p. 224). Similarly, the Church of England, by *conniving* in the resignation of Bishop Reeves of Johannesburg, 'performed almost more than the South African Government itself would have dared to ask' (p. 270).

It is a pity not to be able to like this book, if only because there aren't all that many Christians who want the revolution as keenly as Canon Evans does; but the revolution won't happen out of thinking like this.

*David Eccles, O.P.*