

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 deplores 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

further, often unchallenged, assumption that the gospel and Neoplatonism are irreconcilably opposed has led to the general feeling, especially among many writers on spirituality, that Denys and his numerous progeny were little more than Neoplatonic wolves in the clothing of Christian sheep. Here again there is the assumption of an inner incompatibility between the structures of Christianity and Platonism.

Andrew Louth's treatment of Denys is partly designed to meet objections of this kind in two ways. By far the more important is his attempt to situate the more specifically 'mystical' writings of Denys within a larger framework, above all that provided by the four major surviving writings of Denys, the *Celestial Hierarchy*, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *The Divine Names*, and *The Mystical Theology*. For Louth, as for Paul Rorem, upon whom he to some extent depends, Dionysian theology is in the first place 'liturgical theology' (chapter 2). It is addressed to 'an ecclesiastical and monastic society' (p. 18). If this be borne in mind, so the argument goes, we shall be able to avoid the all too common error of treating Denys as a failed Neoplatonist. In the second place, as Louth shows, even though Denys did appropriate certain Neoplatonist ideas, he modified them in the interests of the Gospel and of Christian tradition. This is particularly and instructively illustrated in chapter 5 (esp. pp 84 and 91), where Louth shows Denys correcting the Proclan treatment of the divine intermediaries in a Christian tradition.

But despite Louth's persuasive treatment the question obstinately remains. It is true that Denys's use of biblical quotations and images is lavish enough and that he remains shy about direct quotation from Hellenistic writers. But in that he is in no sense exceptional. For example the Platonic influence upon St. Augustine and St. Gregory of Nyssa is *not* in any sense to be assessed by sole reference to their explicit quotations from Platonic authors. The question is rather of the structure of their respective systems. Here both Denys and Proclus have much in common; the non-reality of evil, the need for abstraction and the pattern of out going and return, and the non-anthropomorphic conception of God, finally available (*MT* 1) only in ecstasy.

This is a very rich and satisfying book. The canvass is widely drawn and both the Christological discussions of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries are used to illustrate this mysterious writer, as are the poems of Ephraem. To the question as to what made Denys write as he did, whether tradition or personal experience, no answer is forthcoming, nor as to why he diverges in his treatment of Moses from the treatment given by Gregory of Nyssa in the *Life of Moses*, upon which Denys depends. I cannot quite agree that the Dionysian ecstasy of *M. 7. 1* is distinctly different from that offered by Plotinus at *Ennead* 6.9.11.—the first clear usage of the term in a mystical sense (cf. p. 103). Nor again am I convinced by the claim made on p. 92 and in note 20 p. 97 that the understanding of prayer to be found in Denys has its home in Origen and Gregory, at least not in the passages cited as evidence.

For those unfamiliar with later, post New Testament Christian writing, some pages of this book may appear rather overloaded with unfamiliar names and ideas and indeed there is an occasional appearance of breathlessness above all in the chapter devoted to Afterlife (= chapter 7). There are two small errors, Cyril died in 444 not in 446 (p.3) and Pulcheria was the sister not the wife of Theodosius II, (p. 4). The next edition would benefit from an index.

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