

obsessions. The stories of a Romola, a Dorothea, a Gwendolen, show us that Eliot had no illusions about the *via dolorosa* to be travelled if a human being is to be converted from a life of self to a life for others. She seems to have been aware that because the road is hard, most people do not follow it, hence perhaps her surprising conservatism. For her characters who do take that road, some kind of religious experience seems to be the only explanation. Lacking, however, any conviction of the ontological reality of the divine, religion in Eliot's literature can seem a mere literary prop, a way of justifying the otherwise unexplainable conversions effected in some people's lives. (Without them of course, there would be no *story* in Eliot's novels. ) A prop, so then perhaps a projection in the manner of Feuerbach, except that the reader is warned against 'overemphasizing the influence of Feuerbach. . . on her thinking'. (p. 11)

What seems clear is that Eliot had little or no theology. By definition perhaps, if Hodgson is again correct when he says that religion was for Eliot 'an affective as opposed to a cognitive form of knowing'. (p. 58) What she had rather was her fiction—some of the most powerful in the English language. And it is that which Hodgson takes to be theology, since they are much the same for him: 'theology itself is a kind of fiction, which very much like the work of the novelist, creates imaginative variations on what history offers as real in a quest for the mystery beneath the real.' (p. 29)

The central thesis of this book was originally presented as the Samuel Ferguson Lectures at the University of Manchester in March of this year. Peter C. Hodgson teaches in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University in America. *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot* thus nicely testifies to the ever growing interest in the study of literature and theology on both sides of the Atlantic. It is to be welcomed when a theologian takes an interest in novels; it balances the domination by literary critics and exegetes of so much theological study. One only hopes that more theologians become interested in literature since if Hodgson's 'theology is a kind of fiction' is the only approach, then with this book that domination has become all the more aggravating.

MARK EDNEY OP

**EVIL AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS** by Gordon Graham (New Studies in Christian Ethics Series) *Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xviii + 241, £40.00 hbk, £14.95 pbk.*

Gordon Graham, a moral philosopher who is also a Christian, argues that the humanistic and rationalistic accounts of human behaviour offered by contemporary secular thought are inadequate to its own purposes. It is only by invoking older, theological, conceptions that these deficiencies can be remedied. Specifically he is concerned with the question of evil which is best accounted for in some cases in terms of a spiritual agency intent on seducing human beings into wickedness. Graham describes his work as an amplified version of Kant's 'moral argument' for the existence

of God presented in a different cultural context.

He argues that the consensus in Western societies about most moral issues means we are not in fact living in a pluralist society. The feeling that we are is an inference from the widespread sense that morality is simply a matter of personal opinion. Christian belief is then seen as one ethics among others. Graham suggests we distinguish Christian ethics from Christian moral theology, the first concerned with content and the second with meaning. None of the versions of meta-ethics on offer adequately addresses the question of evil and so fails to address the question of meaning: why should I be moral?

Graham then summarises the history of critical study of the New Testament from Strauss to the present. Ongoing historical study supports the view that the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is itself historically questionable. In particular N. T. Wright's work on Jesus and the victory of God is an historical exploration of the theological which shows that we cannot understand Jesus and his work without reference to the enemies of Israel: evil, death, Satan. For morality Jesus is not so much a teacher of precepts as an agent of cosmic history.

He then turns to specifically moral philosophical questions: the basis of morality and the problem of evil. Familiar issues get an outing: duty versus inclination, egoism versus altruism, and (a contrast that will initially surprise students of Aquinas) morality versus prudence. Kant's quest for a pure morality of duty raises perplexing questions not least the kind of responsibility for the world that human beings may begin to feel themselves to have. The gap between the requirements of morality and human ability to meet them is overcome by 'moral faith', a trust that the conditions that make morality possible actually hold.

Does the existence of evil, though, disprove the existence of God? If it did, moral duty would oblige us, as the remaining moral agents, to destroy the whole thing as soon as possible and so ensure 'the lesser evil'. Even the possibility that there are other moral agencies in the world is enough, Graham argues, to break the logical chain between evil and the non-existence of God. If hopeful moral endeavour continues in the face of great evils this can only be through faith in a providential God. Secular thought refuses to take evil seriously whereas for Christianity history is a cosmic battle between light and darkness with humans free to choose which side they will join.

Chapter Four considers these forces of light and darkness. The therapeutic and other naturalistic diagnoses of wicked human behaviour fail to convince in relation to some examples of great evil: serial killers who are undoubtedly sane, teenagers who become murderers of their school companions. The resort to prayer that follows spontaneously on certain acts of wickedness reveals a true intuition, Graham says, that in some situations we are contending with more than flesh and blood. Humanism cannot explain the evil of evil and humanistic science cannot explain its occurrence. Seduction by evil is a better way of thinking about certain situations, where a person rationally wills an end that is wicked

and devotes his energies towards its achievement.

The modern Western world is unique in finding the idea of a cosmic drama between good and evil difficult to swallow. For Graham this is a measure of its confinement rather than its enlightenment. Inevitably one wonders about the metaphysical status of the seducer and he is reluctant to say too much about this. What is certain, he believes, is that spiritual agency has a real explanatory role that cannot be reduced to human agency while necessarily being described in similar terms. The final chapter revisits the inadequacies of humanism and argues instead for a theology of hope based on the promise of God.

This is a very interesting and stimulating book even if the feeling, at the end, is of having read a series of related essays rather than a single sustained argument. The difficulties faced by humanism in the face of evil are well outlined. At times the tone comes close to that of a British judge, referring to the criminals only by their surnames and declaring them very wicked indeed. This is not to minimise the evil of their actions but to recall a solidarity that all human beings share with them, a propensity to turn away from the truly good, just as we share solidarity in the call of Christ, our hope of glory.

VIVIAN BOLAND OP

**CHANGING CHURCHES: THE LOCAL CHURCH AND THE STRUCTURES OF CHANGE** edited by Michael Warren *Pastoral Press, Portland, Oregon, 2000. Pp. 272, \$12. 95 pbk.*

This collection of essays resulted from a symposium held in New York, on the theme of 'Religious Education: The Local Church as Keybearer of the Possibility of Gospel Practice', with the inevitable variation of quality and value among the contributors. The editor's warning, that his own introductory essay could perhaps be left till last since it may seem to be overly theoretical, should be taken seriously: it is highly technical and excessively jargon-filled as to have left no impression at all on the present, non-specialist, reader, while his shorter prefaces to the following ten essays do them a disservice rather than otherwise.

The essays deal with such topics as the geography and material conditions of local churches; the role and attitude of the laity and the possibilities of raising their consciousness or re-orienting their outlook; the manner and effectiveness of Christian education and formation in local congregations in the context of increasingly secularised contemporary culture, and the benefit of regular attendance, preaching and liturgical practice in relation to moral and ethical values in both private and public life. The setting is essentially North American, despite one Irish contribution, which somewhat limits the relevance of the conclusions drawn and the recommendations offered.

Michael Warren's introductory essay arises out of disillusionment