

**INTERPRETING JESUS** by **Gerald O'Collins** *Geoffrey Chapman*  
London, 1983 pp.214

Two years ago Dr O'Collins published his *Fundamental Theology*, which I reviewed in this journal for July/August 1981. In this book he has gone on to 'provide a textbook in Christology for a wide range of English-speaking students' (p.ix). The style and general approach of the two books are remarkably similar. Those who welcomed the earlier book as a lively expression of a traditional catholic faith, showing awareness of the problems caused by the contemporary world, will find similar help in this new book. Those who felt that the earlier book did not really come to terms at a deep enough level with the critical challenge of those contemporary problems are not likely to have that feeling expunged by this later work.

Dr O'Collins sees the work of theology as explicating a faith already known to be true. The role of philosophy within Christology is not therefore to prove the 'truths about Christ's resurrection, saving function and divinity. Rather philosophical reason plays its part in clarifying the meaning and presuppositions of such truths' (p.29). That is a reasonable approach to the work of theology. But can one distinguish as clearly as that formulation of it suggests between the content and the meaning of the truths of Christian faith? By accepting as fully as he does the framework of truths laid down in catholic tradition, the philosophical and historical reflections which he conducts fairly and judiciously seem to me to be worked out in an un-

satisfactorily restrictive setting. Thus I find it questionable whether, within a Christology that is fully attentive to the challenges of contemporary understanding, issues such as the scope of Jesus' knowledge or the nature of his faith either merit or are amenable to the kind of argumentation that he accords to them.

A further role that he ascribes to philosophy is that of organising Christology into a coherent whole. His own Christology he says, 'will be structured around Graf Durckheim's insight into human existence as a radical quest for and experience of life, meaning and love' (p.30). Strangely Durckheim is not mentioned again, and Dr O'Collins pedagogic concern to deal with a large range of historical and interpretative questions does not allow him much scope to present his own position at all fully. But in so far as it does come through, it is one whose positive and constructive character should prove pastorally helpful for many people— as many of his shorter, more popular writings have already demonstrated. But the 'wide range of English-speaking students' to whom this book is particularly directed, should not accept too quickly the coming together of traditional and contemporary insights offered here, without first looking more deeply into the intellectual and conceptual problems that face us as Christians to-day.

MAURICE WILES

**MUHAMMAD** by **Michael Cook**. *O.U.P.* 1983 £1.95.

There are obvious tensions in the study of any religion or great religious figure between their portrayal in seemingly straightforward historical terms and an appreciation of their meaning for believers of a particular tradition. Many people who buy this book will be interested not only in a man who, like other figures in the O.U.P. 'Past Masters' series, has greatly influenced world history, but also in Islam.

The author remarks in the Preface that from an Islamic perspective 'the term

'master' is properly applicable only to God', and that the 'insinuation of intellectual originality' is not appropriate to Muhammad since, 'as a messenger of God the task was to deliver a message, not to pursue his own fancies'. This is encouraging sensitivity from Cook, who in 1977 was joint author of a book called 'Hagarism, the making of the Islamic World', a book which was deeply offensive to most Muslims. The Introduction to 'Muhammad' continues by emphasising the extent

of Islam's presence and importance in the world today and after setting the geographical scene with two maps chapter one focuses on what Cook takes as his central theme for understanding Muhammad-monotheism, its universe, history, law and politics.

'Muhammad was a monotheist prophet. Monotheism is the belief that there is one God, and only one. It is a simple idea: and like many simple ideas, it is not entirely obvious.' p.5.

Cook then sets Arabia against the wider background of religious history seen in terms of the many movements from polytheism to monotheism. Since Islam itself recognises those who worship the one God before and after the establishment of Islam, and sees the heart of Muhammad's message as 'There is no God but God' this presents no problems. The second chapter gives the framework of Muhammad's life with the aim, 'simply to present the traditional accounts in outline—not, at this point, to interpret it or assess its reliability'. (p.12.) It is chapter three, which Cook calls The Monotheist Universe, that the tone which is perhaps hinted at in the quotation from page five above becomes clear. It is a tone which trivialises its subject matter. Cook writes: 'There are two components of Muhammad's universe: God and the world. Of these God is the more remarkable'. p.25. Later (page.29) Cook talks of the basic conception of Muhammad's universe deriving from the first chapter of Genesis and of Biblical material 'altered, added to or lost in the Koran'. In contrasting Muhammad to Jesus (p.58.) he says:

'If Christians want to be political activists, they cannot in good faith take their values from the life of their founder. Muhammad has a great deal more in common with Moses, an altogether less dovish Biblical figure.'

In the chapter on origins Cook says: (p.77.)

#### PLEASE NOTE

in Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok's article in last month's number, *Judaism and the Universe of Faiths*, on page 31, two lines above the diagram of Judaism's traditional understanding of its relation to other faiths, the text says other belief systems intersect with Judaism only at those points "where there is no common ground". It should read "where there is common ground".

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'To understand what Muhammad was doing in creating a new religion, it would be necessary to know what religious resources were available to him and in what form...For the most part, we are reduced to the crude procedure of comparing Islam with the mainstream traditions of Judaism and Christianity, and trying to determine which elements came from which'.

One wonders at the point of such reductionism if the historical critical methods on which so much depends are so acknowledgedly crude and if the results are so counter-productive to the serious task of understanding the place and importance of Muhammad in Islam, and through that of understanding Islam itself. At a time when Muslims are emphasising that the word Islam means 'peace', putting ones own will in peace and harmony with the will of God, Cook uses the older translation, submission. (p.19.) When he discusses the Koran, he gives little indication of its beauty and inspiration for Muslims. Jihad for him, is not struggle with evil, the greater part of which takes place within man, but war.

I found this book very sterile. Its lack of evocation of the socio-political background can be supplemented by the interested reader from M. Robinson, Muhammad. Its lack of insight into Islam from M. Lings' Muhammad or F. Schuon, Understanding Islam. Michael Cook seems to have found the subject bleak too. His final words are:

'I shall therefore seek only to identify that quality of Islam which has most worked on me in the writing of this book...The bleakness which we saw in its conception of the relationship between God and man is the authentic, unadulterated bleakness of the universe itself'. (p.88-89).

PEGGY MORGAN