

THE POINT OF IT ALL — ESSAYS ON JESUS CHRIST by J.C. O'Neill,
(Theological Seminar, 1) *Deo Publishing, Leiderdorp, Netherlands,*
2000. viii + 163 pages, £22.95 hbk.

A rough typology of contemporary theological writing might perhaps begin as follows: German theologians try to be as scholarly as possible, French theologians try to be as spiritual as possible, Italian theologians try to be as pastoral as possible ... while British and Scandinavian theologians try to be as readable as possible. The typology may be rough, but I cannot think of a contemporary German theologian who could have written a book like *The Point of it All*. Not only is it elegant; the argument is impelled forwards by a youthful vigour which makes one forget that the author turned 70 in December 2000.

There is a deeper reason why no continental author would have written this book: John O'Neill, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Edinburgh University, takes measured aim here at a whole number of assumptions which go unchallenged among many theologians. He begins by unpicking common arguments against the existence of God, and goes on to examine the scholarly consensus about the historical Jesus. He concludes with two chapters examining the atonement: what does the death of Jesus actually bring about?

O'Neill's fundamental criticism is that too many exegetes have forgotten how religions actually work. This means that they ask the wrong questions of the Jewish and Christian documents – and those who ask the wrong questions get the wrong answers.

It is often asserted that few Jews at the time of Jesus were awaiting the coming of the Messiah; that such a Messiah was not expected to suffer or die; and that Jesus himself did not believe he was the Messiah. O'Neill assembles evidence to challenge all these affirmations. He also maintains that the virginal birth of Jesus and the empty tomb provide by far the best explanations of the historical data to which the New Testament gives us access.

His most striking piece of revisionism may be a sentence on p. 76: "I would conclude that no whole sayings of Jesus are inauthentic ...!"

Those who have heard him preach will not be surprised by the brilliance and penetration of his concise commentaries on the parables of Jesus in ch. 5. It is also pleasant to note a faint Australian twang on p. 110: "Someone delivered from a great evil obsession is like a haunted house that is rid of a demon, who will easily return with more mates if nothing is put in his place."

John O'Neill is a revisionist, not a fundamentalist. This difference is important, when one recalls the rapacious delight with which conservative Christians twenty-five years ago – including even serious theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose Egeria (alias Adrienne von Speyr) saw through Pius XII, but who succumbed after her death to the meretricious charms of John Paul II – seized on Bishop John Robinson's proposals for redating the New Testament

documents, as an excuse to reject all biblical criticism. There is nothing in this book to comfort those who are afraid to think. On the contrary: it is an encouragement to grapple anew with the Jesus of the Gospels, who refuses to be held fast in any consensus, but always "goes ahead" and summons us to follow him. *The Point of it All* deserves a wide readership.

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PAUL AND POLITICS: EKKLESIA, ISRAEL, IMPERIUM, INTERPRETATION edited by Richard A. Horsley, *Trinity Press International*, Harrisburg PA, 2000. Pp 248, £19.95 pbk.

The Swedish biblical scholar Krister Stendahl is less well known than he deserves to be in the English-speaking world despite his years teaching at Harvard. It is not possible to be sure whether this is a contributory cause or a symptom of the fact that much Pauline scholarship, especially in this country, continues to focus on Paul's language about justification by faith, even though this represents only a very small part of his theological vision. For many in the academy, and even more so among the well-read non-experts in the Protestant traditions, Paul is at the heart of the New Testament, Romans at the heart of the Pauline corpus, and the doctrine of justification by faith at the heart of Romans. If we owe it to E.P. Sanders that this part of Pauline theology is no longer typically read outside the context of first century Judaism, we can credit Stendahl with the attempt to ensure that it is no longer read outside the context of Paul's much broader portrait of the impact of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Especially, as this collection of essays celebrates, he brought to our attention the impact faith in Christ necessarily had and still has upon our approach to the political world.

One of the most important aspects of Stendahl's programme is the constant emphasis on the particularity of each of Paul's letters; it is true that this can sometimes fall into the trap of using the letters purely to reconstruct the history of Pauline Christian communities, rather than allowing history to help us read the biblical texts as Scripture, but when exercised with caution this focus on historical particularity allows us to rescue Paul from a narrowly individualistic reading. Richard Horsley, the editor of this collection, provides in his contribution a fine example of this approach. Writing on 'Rhetoric and Empire' in 1 Corinthians, he makes careful use of our increasing understanding of the rhetoric of political discourse in the first century to show how Paul presented to the Greek Christians of the Roman Empire a powerfully political gospel. He is to be especially congratulated for taking proper account of two often-overlooked factors: first, that Paul's message, though profoundly social and political in implication, cannot be reduced to these aspects, and so it is impossible to force his letters into the strait-jacket of the forms of deliberative rhetoric. Thus 'we should attend less to the formal types of rhetoric than to the rhetorical situation.' Secondly, Horsley rightly places Paul's rhetorical presentation of a spiritually-transcendent