

# Reviews

**ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN: Jews, Christians and Liberation Theology** by Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok. *Orbis Books, 1987, viii + 136, £6.50.*

**TOWARDS A JEWISH THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION** by Marc H. Ellis, *Orbis Books, 1987, xii + 147, £7.50.*

The advocates of liberation theology see it not as a form of Christianity, suitable for hot climates and poor people, but as *the* understanding of Christianity, by which all other forms, particularly North Atlantic are to be judged. The movement adopts a prophetic role and makes much use of models from the Hebrew Scriptures, and the question has therefore arisen within the Jewish community whether there could or should be a corresponding liberation theology for Judaism. The project will be undertaken by Jewish theologians, but Christians may observe it with hope and fraternal good wishes. Although these two books appear to be contributing to this movement, it has to be said that Cohn-Sherbok not only fails to do so, but represents part of the problem which Ellis attempts to solve.

Although the phrase 'Judaean-Christian tradition' suggests that these two religions have a good deal in common historically, Christianity emerged as a separate religion by emphasising those things which divide the two. To religious rejection have been added many forms of social, political and economic discrimination. Cohn-Sherbok concludes, 'Nearly two thousand years of being despised and persecuted have left their mark on the Jewish community.' The first chapter therefore reiterates the traditional differences between Judaism and Christianity. In some respects this represents a rather wilful account, for example of the teaching of Jesus, especially as precisely some of the passages cited will towards the end of the book be interpreted in a positive way and accepted.

But if Judaism is alienated from orthodox Christianity, so too is liberation theology. And since the latter revives many themes from prophetic Judaism, the question arises whether liberation theology might provide a basis for more positive relations between Judaism and Christianity.

Liberation theology, as Cohn-Sherbok understands it, pays more attention to the historical Jesus than the church's Christ. Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition, criticising rather than rejecting Judaism, emphasising the demands of love which go beyond narrow legalism, teaching his disciples to both work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God. The conflict between Judaism and Christianity is therefore refocussed on Pauline Christianity, for which liberation theology has apparently little sympathy. There may be an element of wishful thinking in all this. Fierro once described Latin American theology as 'leftist orthodoxy'. In the midst of their prophetic criticism of the Church these theologians are still entirely loyal to the most traditional christological and trinitarian formulae.

One of the constant themes of liberation theology, in all of its forms, is the model of Exodus. God delivers his people from oppression, taking the side of the weak against the powerful. Cohn-Sherbok makes much of this, but adds two elements deliberately absent from liberation theology. First he regards the conquest of Palestine as integral to the Exodus. Not surprisingly liberation theologians do not regard this act of oppression and the religious legitimisation of genocide with which it was accomplished as part of the model of liberation. In this context it is perhaps significant that Cohn-Sherbok spends more time on Camillo Torres than Jon Sobrino. Yet Torres was not a liberation theologian. The second addition to Exodus is the passover. The liberation theologians show no interest in this

Jewish rite. Their sacrament is the universal eucharist of the one who was killed at the passover at the instigation of the Sanhedrin.

It will be clear already that whatever might be said for Cohn-Sherbok's project, it lacks credibility for two reasons. The first is that it is so selective that it misrepresents liberation theology. For example, these theologians continually refer to the power of suffering love. This power comes not from the moral example of the historical Jesus, but from faith in the risen Christ. Cohn-Sherbok is always reductionist in his treatment of their works, seeking to make them less Christian than they are. The second reason why his approach lacks credibility is that it is entirely triumphalist. Liberation theology is completely Christian and radically critical of the whole tradition of western culture, yet it is not allowed to raise any serious critical questions about Judaism and its part in the modern world. The motive behind the book seems to be not that Judaism should be challenged and changed, but that the sharp edge of conflict with Christianity should be blunted. This would seem to be one of those tragic 'marks' left by centuries of being despised and persecuted to which the author alluded at the outset.

There could hardly be a greater contrast between the stance and objectives of Cohn-Sherbok and those of Marc Ellis. Ellis is a young Jewish scholar teaching in the Maryknoll School of Theology. This is one of the main centres for the study of Christian liberation theology, and Ellis is therefore taking up the challenge of formulating a corresponding Jewish liberation theology. Quite rightly his primary concern is with Judaism, not with changes within the churches. But the contrast also reflects the fact that he lives in America, in New York State. Ellis, in an honest and courageous way insists on taking up the issues of the place of Judaism in the modern world, not least its relationship to the state of Israel.

Ellis deserves to be called a prophetic writer, since when he criticises his people he does so out of loyalty to the best traditions of Judaism. He is conscious of the ambiguities of the present position. There is the Holocaust, and the obligation to keep faith with six million men, women and children who were killed for no other reason than that they were Jews. And there is the state of Israel, the political empowerment of a people who have not been able hitherto to guarantee their own security. But in the fidelity there is the danger of betrayal. It gives Ellis no pleasure to point to the exile forced upon the Palestinians and the attempted genocide by the Israelis on the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Israel, which depends for its existence on the support of the Jewish lobby in the United States, has maintained good relations with South Africa and has constantly acted as an agent in American foreign policy, including giving military assistance to 'the murderous governments of El Salvador and Guatemala.' In other words has the way in which Jews today have sought to keep faith with the past led them to betray their own traditions? They have taken over the role of oppressors within living memory of being the oppressed. But 'to speak publicly on issues of the Holocaust and Israel in a critical manner is to court suspicion and raise the spectre of treason.' What hope is there for Judaism if the prophetic voices are silenced? This is what Ellis regards as the real betrayal. Is there another understanding of Judaism yet to emerge, which can be challenged by the themes of liberation theology, which identifies with the poor and oppressed instead of increasing poverty and oppression in the third world? Towards the end of the book Ellis discusses specific writers and movements, some of them within Israel, contributing to a new understanding of Judaism. He ends with an outline of how this might proceed.

Perhaps it is inevitable that in order to protect himself Ellis repeats some of the constant themes of contemporary Jewish writing. One in particular which I find objectionable is the claim that the Holocaust is an indictment of modernity and Christianity. (See pp. 20, 25 *passim*). National Socialism as an ideology specifically rejected both modern western culture and Christianity. And although we hear again and again about 'survivors' no mention is ever made of how they came to survive, nor any word of

gratitude. The answer is that they were rescued by two modern Christian nations, Britain and America, neither of which was directly threatened by Germany and its persecution of the Jews when they chose to oppose fascism. One of the themes from liberation theology which Ellis has yet to take on board is that one must eschew the 'elephant and the Polish question' syndrome, exalting one's own experience into a criterion for the whole of mankind.

Notwithstanding this, Ellis's book is a creative work of real theological significance, prophetic and courageous. It will also be clear why Cohn-Sherbok's work represents part of the problem which Ellis struggles to resolve.

ALISTAIR KEE

**THE WAY OF PARADOX: SPIRITUAL LIFE AS TAUGHT BY MEISTER ECKHART,** by Cyprian Smith, O.S.B. *Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1987. 131 pages. £3.95.*

Popularization largely functions as a term of contempt in the academic circles whose excrescences require it. On a deeper level, popularizers make remote and difficult areas of thought and achievement accessible to those who are the ultimate and intended beneficiaries—the people. Socrates, the Buddha, and Jesus were popularizers in this sense. So was Meister Eckhart, one of the leading theologians of the fourteenth century and its greatest preacher. So also is Cyprian Smith, who has undertaken to render 'a clear and balanced account' of Eckhart's spiritual teaching. This is not an easy task, if a worthy one, considering the distance between Eckhart's century and our own, and also the inherent problems of trying to cope with a philosopher, theologian, and above all, a preacher of uncommon depth, brilliance, and creativity, much of whose doctrine survives only in outline form or as fragmentary notes preserved by his hearers.

A monk of Ampleforth Abbey where he teaches, Smith modestly disclaims in the end that his 'exposition of Eckhart's teaching is neither exhaustive nor particularly deep' (p. 131). His book nevertheless provides a solid, readable, informative, and surprisingly comprehensive account of the Meister's spiritual doctrine. Smith does not attempt to translate into ordinary language Eckhart's more obscure and convoluted philosophical and theological speculations. Thus, his sources are almost exclusively the German sermons and treatises, for which he wisely relies for the most part on Maurice Walshe's superb three-volume translation from Element Books (1987).

Two introductory chapters summarize Eckhart's life in the context of the turbulent fourteenth century and the place of his 'way' to God in the context of our own times. The section on the ways of knowing in chapter two is particularly interesting, especially in light of a later discussion on the similarities and differences between Eckhart's doctrine and that of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Eckhart was an intellectualist. His way looked ahead to final vision—but in this life, the knowing is an unknowing, the vision of God a dark one.

Chapters three through six present an overview of themes central or significant in the Meister's spirituality—God paradoxically transcendent and immanent, internal and external, image and emptiness; the dynamic 'boiling' and 'melting' of God; the origin of the Word by divine speech and birth; and the birth of the Word in history and human hearts. Most of Eckhart's major themes are presented in capsule form—the spark or ground of the soul; *abgeschiedenheit*; God as Godhead; living 'without why'; the soul's identity with the Son. For those unfamiliar with the focal point of Eckhart's spirituality, the birth of the Word in the soul, Smith's discussion will help immeasurably, especially with regard to the achievement of emotional equilibrium, which follows as its emblem.

In the final three chapters, Smith applies the main principles of Eckhart's teaching to the situation of contemporary Christians attempting to develop a solid but practical spirituality. His discussion of mysticism begins from a modern and, as he notes, erroneous