

A VISION TO PURSUE. BEYOND THE CRISIS IN CHRISTIANITY by
Keith Ward, *SCM Press*, 1991- Ppxi + 226. £9.95

In this work, the new Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford sets out his manifesto for the future of Christian belief. In his "Vision", Keith Ward anticipates a time when the following claims would amount to an accurate report of the state of Christian belief.

Christians have surrendered the idea of the Incarnation, as classically understood, and consider Jesus as no more than an inspired man. They recognise moreover that this doctrine was pernicious, having promoted not only dissension but persecution (and this not merely because of human aberration but on account of the doctrine's intrinsic character). Indeed, Christians have distanced themselves from the practice of earlier theology to the extent of allowing that the fall of Byzantium may have been the work of providence, intended to substitute for the excesses of Byzantine speculation the pure monotheism of Islam. (This last idea is introduced just incidentally, but it is striking.)

All of these considerations constitute one movement of the Vision. This movement involves also a denial of the entitlement of Christians to speak of God infallibly or even with special authority. It is motivated largely by the thought that Jesus himself was mistaken (for instance in his expectation of the imminent end of the age). From this Keith Ward infers first that Jesus cannot be divine, and second that we must forsake any notion that he may have vouchsafed to his followers a privileged conception of the nature and purposes of God.

This first movement of the Vision relates to its second. If Jesus is not God, and if Christians have proven to be mistaken on such central questions as this, then we should think of the Christian insight into God as mediated like any other. From this it follows that the future of Christianity lies not only in a reappraisal of its past, but also in a reappraisal of the value of other religious traditions. Here Ward's suggestion is that a Christianity which has been shorn of its traditional exclusivism will be better able to participate along with the other religions in a process of mutually educative dialogue. As an illustration of what might be achieved in these terms, he offers, in his final chapter, a sketch of a "Christian Vedanta".

Keith Ward speaks movingly of how many in the modern West have been dispossessed of their religious heritage, and his book is intended to address their predicament. Some will see in his approach an attempt to free the Church from an attitude towards its own past and towards others which is primarily defensive: instead of supposing that religious insight is fixed irrevocably in the past, we are invited to think of a progression in all of the great spiritual traditions as they encounter the reality of God in the present. Christians reading this book will want to ask questions about both of its movements: are these criticisms (whether they be biblical, moral or of some further kind) sufficient to overturn the doctrine of the Incarnation? And is a Christian commitment which is oriented towards the future really dependent upon the abandonment of this doctrine? Certainly these questions are worth raising, and Keith Ward's book is a serious attempt to engage with them in a way which should prove generally accessible.

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