

EXPLORATION INTO GOD, by John A. T. Robinson, *S.C.M. London*, 1967. 158 pp. 7s. 6d.

Very much of this book will certainly be welcomed by every Christian. The author comes clearly through to the reader as a man, sincere and devout, whose aim is to help that large number of people who are puzzled by the Christian doctrine of God, and who wish to find out what can be said in its favour. His understanding of the type of religious thought with which he deals—so prominent at the present day—is obvious. It is also important to notice his emphatic repudiation of accusations that his teaching implies atheism or pantheism. He tells us (p. 23) that his concern in *Honest to God* was to give expression to the conviction of the ultimate reality of the 'Thou' at the heart of all things: 'To say that this was atheistic because it questioned traditional theism's image of a supreme Being was surely absurd. To say that it was propounding an impersonal God because it used the phrase "the ground of being" was hardly less so. . . .'

What, then, is the book about? I should put it in my own words like this. Belief in God is belief in absolute reality, free from all imperfection. Any expression which refers to God as though he were finite is to that extent misleading. Yet we can only express the obscure awareness we have of ultimate reality by reference to finite reality in which God is immanent, and by looking at this finite reality as an imperfect revelation of that which is transcendent. Hence we can express God in very many ways which, though true, are inadequate: one form of expression needs to be balanced by another. Misunderstandings arise if any expression is taken literally, and not as a pointer to what lies beyond. Bishop Robinson recognizes that here we have a very old problem, when he says (p. 55): 'There is a sense in which the new crisis is simply driving theology back to what it has always known and witnessed to, namely, that God is "ineffable", that there is literally nothing that can be said about him without falsification—except the fact that something must be said.' The great merit of

this book is that it sets out to explain the inadequacy of all forms of expression, and to suggest ways in which men may be persuaded that, in spite of this, God has the most real personal meaning for each of them.

Nevertheless the fact must be faced that many Christians will have reservations and hesitations in welcoming this book, even when they appreciate much that it contains. Now why should this be so? Perhaps one reason is that, though Bishop Robinson affirms so definitely his orthodox belief, yet he uses language about the traditional way of expressing theism which suggests a stronger criticism than it actually states. Again he sometimes quotes from unorthodox writings in such a way as to leave the reader confused as to his precise meaning. Would it not be better, instead of referring to traditional expressions as now superseded, to explain that the Christian idea of God has often been misrepresented even by Christians, and that what we now need is to understand properly the old idea? After all, we cannot go beyond the idea of absolute perfection, and that is the old idea. Is it not arguable that many current trends of thought emphasize unduly some aspects under which we can express God, to the neglect of other aspects which are needed for a balanced account, so that it is just as necessary to draw attention to certain unpopular lines of thought as to acknowledge what is sound in the popular lines? Some readers may feel that, while Bishop Robinson is deserving of all praise for his sympathetic understanding of many new insights, he seems to have less understanding of the value of the traditional approach. We read (p. 36): 'The conception of God as a Being, a Person—like ourselves but supremely above and beyond ourselves—will, I believe, come to be seen as a human projection.' But surely it has always been recognized that God is not a Being and we may wonder whether the image of projection does justice to analogical truth. Then again, does not the fact of sin

and judgement point to an important aspect in the Christian view of God, and is this aspect sufficiently allowed for?

It should be added that certain views which seem to be expressed (though it is not quite clear precisely what is meant) would scarcely be acceptable at least to Catholics, who would feel that far more could be said in defence of their position than is shown here and far more against the position proposed. For instance, on page 95 God is apparently said to be in some

way passive to the action of creatures, which would imply that he was subject to change, and on page 109 it is apparently said that creation is in some sense outside the control of God.

These are some thoughts which may occur to one section of the readers of this book, but there can be no doubt that the book will be widely read, and will lead many to deeper reflexion on the meaning of God.

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THE CANON OF THE MASS AND LITURGICAL REFORM, by Cipriano Vagaggini, translated by Peter Coughlan. *Geoffrey Chapman, London. 1967. 200 pp. 30s.*

At long last the Church authorities have given permission for the Canon of the Mass to be in English. This permission marks one more turning point in the history of the liturgy. There have, of course, been many, but one of the most momentous was the alteration by an anonymous Frankish scribe of the eighth century; in accordance with the mystical ideas of his age, he inserted the single word *tacito* into the ancient Roman directive: *Surgit Pontifex et [tacito] intret in canonem*. Since then the idea has been established that the canon of the Mass was not so much a prayer as a holy of holies into which the priest alone could enter. The new ruling gives a hard-won official approval to a very different attitude. We are now encouraged to appreciate this prayer as the blessing and thanksgiving which the celebrant at Mass, like the father of the Jewish family, makes over bread and wine on behalf of all present and with their consent. Once the novelty has worn off, however, and the joy somewhat abated, it will become evident that the ancient Roman canon is not very well suited to this function. It is essentially a prayer of offering. The elements of praise and thanksgiving, which it contains, are submerged under this dominant theme, and what logical development it has is obscured by the intrusion of the commemorations with their long lists of saints. Fr Vagaggini's book, therefore, arrives on the market at a very opportune moment, for it assists the general reader to appreciate the extent of these defects and to consider how they might best be remedied, to form an idea of what the central prayer of the eucharist has traditionally been and to think how this could best be realized in our present situation.

During the early centuries of Christianity the bishop or priest who presided at the celebration was free to formulate the thanksgiving prayer in his own words within the

limits of an accepted pattern. Eventually it became customary in the different Churches to use prayers composed for this purpose by certain famous bishops. Peter Coughlan, who translated the book, has done a great service by including in the English edition the Latin text and translation of many of these prayers, so that the Roman prayer can be seen as one amongst several different types of anaphora. Comparison shows the Roman prayer to be quite exceptional in its form and emphasis. Fr Vagaggini discusses the merits and demerits of these peculiarities and the various attempts that have been recently been made to 'correct' them. Most will agree that while there is nothing to be gained from altering this ancient prayer, the Roman rite would gain from the possibility of using some better constructed prayers as alternatives to it. Two such new forms are proposed by Fr Vagaggini himself but these are disappointing for a number of reasons. They are composed in a very traditional liturgical Latin which is utterly remote from the twentieth century, since we no longer think or speak in the concepts it presupposes. It is especially regrettable that the author tries to write into his prayers a particular theological account of the nature of the sacrifice of the Mass, and insists that prayers for use in the Roman Liturgy must conform to what he rather arbitrarily establishes as the Roman tradition.

In spite of these reserves, however, this book should lead many to a deeper understanding of the issues involved. Clearly we must look forward to a time when Christian communities will be able to exercise greater freedom in the choice and composition of eucharistic prayers which are more suited to their circumstances. Before this can come about, however, there must be a wider appreciation of the traditional form and function of this part of the Mass.

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