

PAST EVENT AND PRESENT SALVATION. THE CHRISTIAN IDEA OF ATONEMENT by Paul S. Fiddes. *Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1989. Pp x + 243, £10.95*

The Doctrine of the Atonement has suffered something of an eclipse in recent years, its place tending to be taken by theodicy (Moltmann) and theologies of liberation. Various strategies are available to those who would restore it to centrality. The one chosen here is the attempt to combine its concerns with those of the dominant modes of theologising, rather than to play its themes against them. Thus in the two final chapters, after a treatment of the content of the topic, Dr Fiddes moves to political engagement and human suffering, showing how his treatment relates to those recent concerns.

However, as the title suggests, other motives are at work as well. This is a study intended to explain the doctrine to a wide audience, while seeking a solution to one of its central problems: what has the death of a man on a cross a long time ago to do with life in the modern world? An answer is sought in two main ways, with expositions of the central images in which the doctrine has traditionally been cast, and through the development of a concept of God.

The images of salvation are expounded in chapters which contain much illustration from literature and discussion of the biblical sources. These crucial chapters are marked by two main features: great reserve about the contemporary acceptability of much biblical material and traditional theology, and a stress on the subjective dimensions of the atonement. Thus, in view of the difficulty the modern has with most ancient conceptions of sacrifice, the image is argued to be most readily appropriated in terms of the human response to the new situation created by the death of Jesus. Similarly, justification is construed as God's creating penitence in us as we respond to Jesus' sharing our 'experience of standing under God's verdict upon distorted human life' (p. 91).

It will already be evident that we have here a doctrine of the Atonement that is strongly influenced by Abelard, and that is indeed the case. The past event that is absolutely crucial is the identification of God with us on the cross. That is a revelation and, to use Dr Fiddes' central concept, a focusing of the salvation which is a continuous process rather than some past and not immediately appropriable transaction. What matters chiefly—although not solely—is the effect which this identification has on us, who are called to respond but free to refuse.

In all this it does appear that too much is made to depend on the subjective dimensions of the atonement. But if the reader asks here for more than the subjective preferences of the reviewer, there are two features of which questions should be asked. The first concerns the theory of language with which Dr Fiddes operates. Despite the centrality which is given to the images of atonement, the author is very near to saying that they are a function of our subjective response rather than means by which we express and indwell the reality which they convey: 'we must, of course, (sic) be aware that speaking of sin as a "disease" or "uncleanness" is only an image' (p. 73). But is anything so deeply etched in the human response to reality *only* image? And has the author as a result not understated the continuity

between past and present ways of conceiving this matter?

But the central problem is to be found in the doctrine of God. Repeatedly we are told that atonement is achieved by the pain of God's involvement with his estranged creation. The objectivity of the cross is to be found in the claim that there God 'increases in experience' (p. 110). What is underplayed, almost to vanishing, is the notion of the atonement as the *active* renewal and completion of the creation. The result is that the resurrection is stressed mainly as divine protest against evil, and even creation itself, on what is surely a misreading of Genesis 1, as involving 'God in cost and pain from the very beginning' (p. 22). That is to say, when the suffering of God bears the weight it does here, other things that ought to be said about what is going on here become unsayable.

In parallel with this is the fact that the virtual identification of Father and Son in what happens—and I do not wish to reject the author's wish to maintain an essential unity of act and will between the two—makes it difficult to conceive the centrality of the incarnate Son's representation of us before the Father. Is not the atonement to do both with a unique divine act and with the perfection of the creation in and through the human life of the incarnate? Because that strain is at least muted, it does seem to one reader at least that this book, for all its wide-ranging interest, has not quite escaped from Moltmann's tendency to reduce atonement to theodicy.

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GOD WITHIN: THE MYSTICAL TRADITION OF NORTHERN EUROPE, by Oliver Davies, *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London. 1988. Pp. 224, £7.95.

Oliver Davies has a Doctorate in German from Oxford University and for two years was Lektor at the University of Cologne. *God Within* presents the results of his study of a number of North European mystics from the 14th century. Davies' intention is threefold: to show the extent to which these writers 'form a specific school, to examine the place of that school within the context of the universal inheritance of the Christian church,' and, primarily, to rescue these writers from 'the academic sidelines,' by providing a broader audience for their message.

The burden of Davies' exposition concerns Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruysbroeck (or, as Davies prefers, Ruusbroec), to each of whom he devotes long, detailed chapters which together comprise almost half the text. Tauler also does well with 25 pages. But Suso, the *Theologia Germanica*, and four of the 14th century English mystics are granted from 2 (Rolle) to 15 pages (*the Cloud of Unknowing*). The book concludes with a brief summary and evaluation of *Wesenmystik* 'then and now'.

Davies prefaces his presentation of the North European mystics with a chapter devoted to their medieval background, a generally well-informed and engaging synopsis of the emergence of two major currents of spirituality—*Brautmystik* and *Wesenmystik*, bridal mysticism and 'the mysticism of being.' Since his thesis pivots on the place of Meister Eckhart in 14th century spirituality, it is not surprising that he next devotes 42 pages to the Dominican preacher—the longest treatment given any of his subjects. Overall, Davies' approach to Eckhart is academically accurate, if less than well-balanced: he distances himself doctrinally from Eckhart at several critical points and generally regards the Meister with an air of suspicion absent in the rest of the book.

210