

MARXISM AND CHRISTIANITY, by Alasdair MacIntyre. *Pelican Books*, London, 1971. 107 pp. 25p.

Despite its title and attractive cover illustration (by Ralph Steadman) this book is very much more focused on Marxism than it is on Christianity and ironically most of the references to Christianity in the original book on which this one is based (published under the title *Marxism: An Interpretation* by the S.C.M. Press) have been deleted in this new version; in truth the titles of the two books should properly be reversed.

Marxism: An Interpretation was rather remarkable when it was first published in 1953 even if it received little publicity at the time. The author was then only twenty-three but it was not so much MacIntyre's youth as the fact that such a book should have been written at all at that date which was surprising. MacIntyre then aspired to be both a Christian and a Marxist and at that time such an aspiration appeared extremely eccentric because Christianity, represented pre-eminently by the Roman Catholic Church, and Marxism, generally considered as incarnated in Stalinist Russia, were looked on as totally irreconcilable. It is necessary to make a positive effort to recall that climate because since the Second Vatican Council we have become accustomed to regular Christian-Marxist dialogues in various parts of the world and in this country the *Slant* group has done much to persuade us that the two doctrines are not only compatible but complementary. Many of MacIntyre's themes and preoccupations were very similar to those taken up by the *Slant* group and it is a pity he was no longer around to participate in their debates.

After publishing his first book MacIntyre became a member of the editorial boards of *Universities and Left Review* and its successor *New Left Review* and subsequently of *International Socialism*; during that time he shed his Christianity although he continued to be pre-occupied with the religion, wrote books and articles about it and joined the controversy sparked off by John Robinson's best-seller *Honest to God*. He drifted out of the International Socialism group some years ago and now professes himself sceptical of both Christianity and Marxism but believes that 'one cannot entirely discard either without discarding truths not otherwise available'.

It is obvious from the way this book has been rewritten that it is to his last love,

Marxism, that the author is still most firmly attached. Christianity now interests MacIntyre mainly as the historical ancestor of Marxism whose development out of the attempts of Hegel and Feuerbach to secularize Christianity he charts very ably. It is Marxism's project that he sees as the only one we possess for re-establishing hope as a social virtue. As a consequence MacIntyre has dropped quotations from the Bible and religious writers at the beginning of chapters while retaining most of the 'secular' quotes; this is no great loss, however, and neither are the rather strident moral judgments on Marxist theory and practice which were part of the original 'Christian' contribution and which have also been excised. But it is a pity that the original opening and concluding chapters have been eliminated in their entirety since, as well as being ahead of their time when they were first written, they continue to express, and attempt to face, some of the principal dilemmas of politically aware Christians.

In the Pelican we have lost the benefit of a valuable discussion on the sacred and the secular, their distinctness yet necessary relationship, without which religion tends to degenerate into empty ritualism and politics into a struggle for power as an end in itself. Also gone is the useful distinction between religion and superstition, the first being a myth which has a foundation in history and points beyond itself towards God, in contrast to the latter which is myth without the control and criticism of reason. It was the confusion of superstition with religion, inherited from the Enlightenment, that misled Marx and his followers in their assessment of religion and its potential for the future. The pre-eminent position accorded to scientific modes of thinking and the dismissal of approaches to interpreting reality based on myth were seen by MacIntyre both as Marxism's great attraction and the main source of its weaknesses.

Do these omissions from the latest book mean that it is not worth bothering with? By no means. The passage of time since 1953 and the revival of Marxist thinking and scholarship has enabled the author to eliminate some of his more naïve mistakes, caused mainly by the confusion of later vulgar Marxist theory and Stalinist communist Party practice, and as a consequence to produce a better introduction

to Marxism. The general reader, Christian or otherwise, who is not very familiar with Marx's ideas, their origins and significance, should find the book worthwhile; there are more comprehensive and perhaps more satisfactory introductions but this one has the merit of cheapness and brevity without becoming superficial or uncritical.

However, the more sophisticated student of Marxism will probably find the exposition both over-familiar and rather irritating since, despite the author's spare style of writing, he can hardly do otherwise in the space of little more than 100 pages than skate over many of the great controversies that have raged amongst Marxists and filled thousands of pages of polemic literature. This fault has been accentuated by MacIntyre's failure to mention that there is any controversial background to many of his statements and perspectives. This reviewer was particularly irritated by his references to the Soviet Union as 'state capitalist' as if this were an accepted fact rather than the particular interpretation of some groups (notably the International Socialists) and his side-kick at Isaac Deutscher, that great Marxist humanist, for 'allowing Marx's notion of revolutionary working-class power to be confused with the administrative manoeuvres of the Soviet bureaucrats' is a gross distortion which reminded me of MacIntyre's vicious attack on Deutscher in the C.I.A.-financed *Encounter* in the early sixties. Even where one agrees with the position that MacIntyre takes on a particular issue one feels his case is made less plausible by his failure to put the difficulties and objections raised against his own conclusions.

A central example. MacIntyre sees an ambiguity in Marx in that in some places he allows for alternative outcomes to historical sequences but in others implies that capitalism must inevitably lead to socialism: science is confused with prophecy and a trend is treated as if it were a law. Engels is given the main

responsibility for this confusion and for rejecting Hegelian modes of thought in favour of scientific metaphysics accompanied by deterministic and mechanistic formulae. Marx, on the other hand, while he was obviously influenced by his principal disciple and collaborator, never rejected Hegel in the same way in his most central development and, most importantly, retained the concept of alienation as evidenced by the *Grundrisse*. This view sharply contradicts the fashionable Althusser, who is not even mentioned, however. Refutation of Althusser's arguments are crucial: if he is right, that there is a sharp break in Marx's thought and that he rejected his earlier humanism, the acceptability of Marx's ideas and in particular the connexions that Christians can make with them must be seriously undermined.

Finally one should remark that MacIntyre is properly scornful of the attempts of some liberal Christians to demythologize Christianity: the 'essential' meaning which is alleged to remain at the completion of these exercises he rightly sees as largely platitudinous, because it is presented as a way of life in accordance with the 'liberal values and illiberal realities of the established order'; this serves to undermine the function of religion which is to promote radical criticism of the secular present. This effect of one sort of 'radical' Christianity has already been exposed by such writers as Brian Wicker fairly thoroughly, but it is good to have their analyses confirmed by such an intelligent man as MacIntyre, who understands Christian perspectives even though he no longer shares Christian beliefs. Moreover, it is heartening that MacIntyre does not believe that liberal platitudes are the necessary outcome of an attempt to realize the human meaning of the Gospel so long as, that is, we worry more about our inheritance from Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas than from Gnosticism.

KEN FLEET

EUCCHARIST AND ESCHATOLOGY, by Geoffrey Wainwright. *Epworth Press*, London, 1971. 237 pp. £5.

A study of the eucharist in an eschatological perspective, supported by a wealth of biblical, patristic and liturgical documentation, leading to clearly formulated ecumenical, liturgical and pastoral recommendations, is undoubtedly to be welcomed. There is, indeed, much in this book for which one is grateful. Nevertheless it

is, in the last resort, profoundly unsatisfactory.

Dr Wainwright describes his 'primary concern' as being 'to show how our understanding of the eucharist may benefit from the rediscovery of eschatology experienced in biblical and systematic theology; secondarily I shall try to indicate how the eucharist may,