BIBLE AND BELIEF by J.L. Houlden, , (*SPCK,* London,1991) pp. 174. £10.99.

This is a collection of twelve essays (most previously published) which explore the contribution of New Testament studies to a wider religious context. Houlden writes as a professional New Testament scholar who is concerned not only to preserve the freedom and integrity of the critic but also to understand the contribution that his scholarship makes to the life of the church. The collection forms a coherent whole as it ranges over such topics as intellectual honesty, theological freedom, the possibility of a New Testament theology, and the impact of historical criticism upon liturgy and Christian doctrine.

Houlden admits that New Testament scholarship is becoming increasingly detached from the life of the church. This is a problem which has to be tackled without compromising the integrity and intellectual standards of historical scholarship. The theme to which he returns again and again is that the books of the New Testament and the subsequent episodes in Christian doctrine must be seen in terms of the particular historical circumstances to which each belongs. The historian has blown the whistle on attempts to discern a unitary theology in the New Testament and a subsequent progress towards orthodox formulations which remain immobile and universally valid for succeeding ages. In a fascinating essay on the liturgy he suggests that ancient but theologically suspect formulations (e.g. Christ will come again) should be dispensed with, that the piecemeal use of Scripture in church services is generally unhelpful, and that sermons which attempt historically valid exegesis are 'hopelessly insufficient' and 'distract us from the Godward direction of liturgy'. (p. 120)

Houlden's criticisms are penetrating and challenging, and his numerous illustrations from the history of early Christianity are always illuminating. On two related points, however, his discussion raises questions and possible difficulties. First, there is an epistemological issue which is largely unexplored. There is no information today, he tells us, on matters relating to faith which is not wholly accessible to undergraduates in their degree courses. (p.44) But does he include here the knowledge of God and of our salvation in Christ? Are these accessible to the methods of historical criticism? Or may not the preacher and the congregation untutored in New Testament studies know something of the meaning of what Mark and Paul wrote which may entirely elude the diligent student? Secondly, while insisting upon the historical relativity of the New Testament and later Christian theology, Houlden claims that the Christian faith always converges upon 'a mode of responding to God by way of the phenomenon of Jesus as his agent for human well-being.' (p.80) Yet if the Christian faith embodies this essence can one see all formulations of the faith as subject to revision and displacement when the plausibility structures of a culture shift? Or might there be attempts to think theologically of Jesus in ways that must remain valid if that

significance is to remain undiluted? Houlden's suspicion that the 'poetic' language of the prologue to the Fourth Gospel was misinterpreted by later theologians reflects an apparent conviction that metaphysical discourse is wholly inappropriate when it comes to describing a historical episode. Yet it is arguable that the centrality of Jesus demands the very use of such discourse, and that without it the central conviction of the Christian faith cannot be articulated. In this respect, the juxtaposition of different modes of discourse is a vital feature of Christian confession, rather than the anomaly that Houlden suggests. (p. 117)

These queries, however, should not be allowed to conceal the quality of the essays nor the many probing questions that Houlden raises. He is a scholar who stands on the inside of the Christian faith but who insists that uncomfortable questions must be faced. In this respect, his work has a certain prophetic quality. These essays will stimulate and enrich the thinking of all those who believe in the theological necessity and relevance of New Testament studies but who are concerned by the increasing detachment of professional biblical criticism from mainstream Christianity .

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THE IDEA OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY: A CRITIQUE OF SOME CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTIONS by Gordon Graham, The *University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame,* **IN and London, 1990. Pp xiv + 190.**

In this book, Gordon Graham uses the tools of analytic philosophy to unpack a conceptually adequate account of the Christian virtue of charity. Graham's intention is that his arguments will '. . . put an end to a lot of well-intentioned but woolly-minded talk. . .' on these important issues. (113)

The structure of Graham's well-articulated yet sometimes difficult to follow argument goes something like this:

a. A Christian ethic cannot be constructed independently of the theological concerns of the New Testament. (Chapter 1)

b. 'a' entails an analysis of charity as a necessary Christian virtue.

c. Two contemporary accounts elucidating what counts for charity are inadequate conceptually and in direct opposition to the tenets of Christian theology:

1. The attempt to identify the exercise of charity, especially through pastoral counselling, with 'psychological healing.' (Chapter II)

2. The reduction of charity into the seeking of political and social justice, especially as spelled out in contemporary liberation theology. (Chapter III)