

# Reviews

**THE NEW DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY**, edited by Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane, *Gill and Macmillan*, Dublin, 1987, 1112 pages, £50.

Of the 167 contributors to this entirely new theological dictionary twenty-eight have addresses outside North America and most of those are divided between Dublin and Rome. England is represented by Lionel Swain and Denys Turner, Scotland by James P. Mackey, Lesotho by Edmund Hill O.P. There are seventeen Dominican contributors, including Sisters. Of the 167 contributors twenty-one are women, including such well-known names as Monika Hellwig, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Pheme Perkins. Entries were solicited, so we are told, from all over the English-speaking world—'a choice which reflects the increased recognition that theology must be carried out locally'. But the figures just quoted show that the social and cultural situation in which the overwhelming majority of these writers practise their theological skills is essentially North American. This is not to say that more British contributors would necessarily have changed the product greatly. There may not be enough Catholics engaged in theological work in Britain to constitute a community with a distinctive contribution. But that seems unlikely.

There are minor irritations, as might be expected in so large an enterprise. We meet Paschase Radbert on page 347, in what is surely the French form of his name, while Paschasius Radbertus, the standard 'English' form, appears on page 912. St Paul's account of the eucharist, so we hear, 'goes back *at least* to the mid thirties'—my italics: how much further back could it go? More seriously, some entries have a dozen or more lines of bibliography while others have none, on no principle that I could discover. Ombres as well as Le Goff might have been mentioned under 'Purgatory' in a *theological* dictionary. The bibliography under 'Obedience' refers us only to Vatican II and Herbert McCabe. Some at least of the brief unsigned entries, such as 'Quietism', are so unilluminating as to be useless: an ordinary dictionary would be better.

Many of the articles push beyond what most of us still think of as the settled Catholic position. This is not to say that there are signs of that 'liberalism' which is supposed to permeate North American Catholicism. Fred Jelly O.P. on the Virgin Birth insists on the literal meaning of the dogma, quoting a recent pastoral letter by the American Bishops and concluding with Karl Barth, who 'saw in Mary's virginal conception of Christ a testimony to the complete gratuitousness of the Incarnation and so a deepening of the great Christian dogma of grace'. Gerald O'Collins S.J. has an equally traditional article on the Resurrection. It is not by way of diluting but of deepening that there are innovations in this dictionary. The article on infallibility, to take a good example, by John T. Ford, who would surely not object to being called 'conservative', concludes by suggesting that we need to focus much more on infallibility in *believing* as a way of opening up more productive discussion of infallibility in *teaching* (page 520). Once we begin to understand how we cannot be radically deceived when we repent and believe the Gospel we will be in a much better position to reconsider how the preaching of the Gospel might, at least on occasion, be kept free of error. This article connects well with the entry on 'Reception', written by

Thomas P. Rausch S.J., the process through which the whole community incorporates into its life a particular decision, doctrine or practice—something which Catholics have long ignored but which ecumenical discussion with the Orthodox has forced back on our agenda. The difficulty, at least for us in the West, is that, if a doctrine or practice is unpopular, we are tempted immediately to conclude that it is erroneous. Thinking ahead ecumenically, Rausch also asks how one ecclesiastical community (such as the Roman Catholic Church) might recognize a common faith in some other ecclesiastical community from which it had long been separated.

This dictionary is welcome, then, not only for the traditional presentation of central Christian doctrines in a fairly accessible language but also for the many ways in which perspectives are opened up for further reflection, perhaps particularly in areas which are ecumenically problematic. This is certainly the 'aid to preachers and teachers of the faith' which the editors aimed to give to those of us who are 'engaged in secondary and college-level teaching or in ordinary preaching'.

FERGUS KERR OP

**THE OCEAN OF TRUTH** by Brian Hebblethwaite, *Cambridge University Press, 1988.*  
pps. 165. Pb. £7.50.

Continuing the Cambridge obsession with water, Hebblethwaite sets out to drown the ebbing sea of faith in the boundless ocean of truth. It does not take long; the book is remarkably brief and presents a case for objective theism in a beautifully succinct way. Hebblethwaite scores many palpable hits against those who hold that 'modern thought' leads away from objective theism. He argues that the works of Darwin, Marx and Freud, carefully interpreted, may call for some revision but not for any abandonment of the concept of God. He charges Don Cupitt with selecting marginal figures to support his attack on objective theism, and briefly surveys the work of contemporary theologians and philosophers to show how 'critical realism' is in fact a more typical modern view. A spirited and informed attack on Kant is followed by a short but penetrating defence of natural theology—it is refreshing to find arguments for theism that do not simply fall into Kant's pre-arranged grooves. It is beautifully done—though one must lament the brevity which rebuts a large and influential work by J.L Mackie in two pages. Hebblethwaite finds fulfilment beyond death to be a necessary implication of theism, and spells out an attractive vision of the world as an intelligible, beautiful whole crying out for due fulfilment. He ends with a final blast at those who claim to purvey Christian truth without an objective God. It is wonderfully done; but there are peculiarities. He does not hesitate to throw out antique lumber; and this seems to include 'a literal belief in miracles' (13). God reveals himself in 'fallible and developing media', and works mediately through natural processes. Yet Hebblethwaite retains a firm belief in one unique incarnation of God in Jesus, and in the resurrection, 'however we may understand that mysterious event'. But is it not very odd to believe in just one miracle in the whole of history? Or to suppose that a fallible process of revelation could suddenly find one perfect vehicle in Jesus? The account remains precariously balanced between a more robust supernaturalism and a more universalist and naturalistic theism, which might find God working in many ways, perceived by many diverse and fallible theologians. A tension remains at the heart of Hebblethwaite's vision, which must be resolved if metaphysical theology is not to remain all at sea. Let that not detract, however, from the elegance, succinctness and power of the form of Christian theism Brian Hebblethwaite places before us.

KEITH WARD