

THE SECULARIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY by E. L. Mascall. *Darton Longman and Todd, 32s.*

'First we must be prepared to ask with rigorous honesty what is the real cash value of the statements we make and the forms we use . . .' Such are the admirable sentiments of the Bishop of Woolwich in *The Honest to God Debate*. The task he proposes is perhaps more difficult and painful than he always realizes, it is hardly ever a job you can do on your own. What you need is someone else to enquire into the cash value of your statements. In his new book the Professor of Historical Theology in the University of London has set out, amongst other things, to perform this service for the Bishop: he tries to work out the cash value of the statements made in *Honest to God* and the answer comes to rather a small sum.

I must say at the start that I think Professor Mascall under-rates the *importance* of the Bishop's book. He thinks, for example that its importance depends on its accuracy ('he was saying something which, if it was true, was very important', p. x) but this is a mistake. *Honest to God* expressed what a very large number of Christians were incoherently thinking; that it expressed this incoherently too is a secondary matter. The response to the book proved, if we needed any more proof, that there is something terribly wrong with our preaching of Christianity, that the people who go stolidly on in the old way are at least as crazily out of touch with reality as the wildest eccentric. The Bishop saw this and was shocked by it. A state of shock is not the best condition for writing theology, but he was right to be shocked. Dr Mascall, however, is not concerned with importance but with truth. His chapter on Woolwich is aptly titled 'Emotion Recollected In Tranquillity'; now that the shock has

subsided he wants to know about the cash value.

His book is painstaking, highly intelligent and often extremely funny. It is not all about the Bishop of Woolwich, there is also a long essay on van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, two other chapters on the intersection of theology with philosophy and with science (which for the most part repeat what the author has written elsewhere) and finally a long cool and fastidiously puzzled look at the extreme self-assurance of the radical biblical critics.

It was right to treat van Buren first, because he is theologically more serious and more lucid than the Bishop and also because he shows where you get to if you pursue one strand of the Bishop's thinking to its logical conclusion. Van Buren's book is a work of theology; that is to say it is addressed to believers who are trying to understand what they believe. He is not primarily concerned to commend the faith to unbelievers but to make it intellectually coherent. Just as St Thomas Aquinas sought to do this by drawing heavily on the philosophical outlook of Aristotle, so van Buren sees how far he can get with the radical empiricism of our own day. The attempt is, of course, a perfectly legitimate one; van Buren indeed thinks it is an urgent necessity, but this may be because he overestimates the importance of such empiricism in the intellectual climate of today. In any case Dr Mascall shows that the attempt in van Buren's hands is a total failure. The effect is to eliminate the Christian faith altogether.

'What remains of the traditional faith, and this is a deeply moving feature of van Buren's position which sets it in contrast with that of Ogden, is a deep devotion to the figure of Jesus

of Nazareth and a firm conviction of his uniqueness and centrality in human history, even though this goes with the belief that Jesus has not existed for the last nineteen hundred years and that the God to whom he prayed and whose will he believed himself to be obeying has never existed at all' (p. 103).

The chapter is difficult but only in the sense that it requires close attention: the reader, for example, will find himself from page 52 onwards for quite a long time engaged with Dr Mascall's critical comments on what van Buren has to say about Schubert M. Ogden's estimate of Bultmann. He will for the moment be spared McCabe's assessment of all that. The analysis and criticism of van Buren seems to me in general accurate though I cannot accept his every argument. For example, he makes a general criticism of van Buren's programme for 'reinterpreting' the New Testament which seems to me unfounded. Van Buren regards statements which purport to be about God as meaningless, and proposes to replace them with others which have the same practical consequences as the 'God'-statements. Dr Mascall argues (pp. 92–93) that while a *false* statement could be replaced by a true one with the same practical consequences, a *meaningless* statement could not have any practical consequences at all, and hence could not be 'reinterpreted' in this way. But van Buren surely does not wish to say that e.g., 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' is meaningless in the sense that the babblings of delirium are meaningless: he means that, like a battle-cry or a greeting, we cannot ask whether it be true or not. Plenty of linguistic expressions which are neither true nor false – and which an empiricist in his quaint way would call 'meaningless' – have definite practical consequences. Another slight point of difference is that Dr Mascall criticizes van Buren for not regarding the Incarnation as 'an event in the history of the Divine Word' (p. 49). Now van Buren would surely be right about this. In virtue of the Incarnation there are events which are events in the history of the Divine Word, but to speak of the Incarnation itself as such an event would, I think, imply that the Word has a history

*qua* divine, that the Incarnation made a difference to God, and this is impossible.

It is good to see the deflation of some of Bonhoeffer's more pretentious rhetoric. 'Honesty demands', said Bonhoeffer, as everyone by now knows, 'that we recognize that we must live in the world as if there were no God . . . God himself drives us to this realization'. Professor Mascall comments very sensibly, 'to believe that there was a God and then to live as if one believed that there was not, whatever else it might be called, could hardly be called honest. And the subsequent assertion that "God himself drives us to this realization" certainly implies belief that there is a God, even though it also implies that God is forcing us to live in accordance with a lie' (p. 42). It certainly seems to be Dr Mascall rather than those who proclaim their devotion to linguistic philosophy who has caught the authentic tone of the late Professor Austin.

The case against the Bishop of Woolwich, according to Dr Mascall is that he is too narrow and provincial in his thinking (p. 35), that he is certainly not radical enough (p. 134) and that he doesn't take secular humanism seriously enough (p. 112). They're undoubtedly fighting words. On the other hand Professor Mascall will not accept Alasdair MacIntyre's view that 'what is striking about Dr Robinson's book is first and foremost that he is an atheist'. He is, says Mascall, 'a skilful practitioner of the art of occupying advanced and indefensible positions and then hastily withdrawing as soon as the counter-attack develops' (p. 22), and 'he is content to immunize his concepts by placing them in inverted commas. There can, in fact, be very few theologians who have made such extensive use of this simple protective device' (p. 175).

I hope these quotations will not give the impression that Professor Mascall merely makes debating points; on the contrary he takes *Honest to God* intensely seriously and several times pauses to defend himself for subjecting a popular work to such careful and rigorous analysis. He argues, surely rightly, that ambiguity is much more dangerous in popular writing than in work intended for the critical eye of experts, and

ambiguity is, he thinks, the major defect of *Honest to God*. He suggests that the Bishop wants to show that all men of good will really believe in Christianity already, and that in order to show this he 'invests all his key-words and concepts with both a Christian and a non-Christian face and, having obtained recognition of the latter he adroitly substitutes the former for it' (p. 162). The suggestion is that the Bishop occupies a world consisting exclusively of professed Christians and western secular humanists who are probably crypto-Christians, and this, says Dr Mascall is just provincialism. It fails to take account, in the first place, of people like Marxists who have a quite definite set of beliefs which contradict some Christian beliefs, but it also ignores several other world religions which are far less 'secularized' than the most traditionalist version of Christianity. To suppose that the non-Christian really accepts Christianity in his heart of hearts is to erect a barrier to dialogue; it prevents us from hearing what he is actually saying. Such is Dr Mascall's thesis, and I must say that at this stage of the game he seems to be ahead on points, though there are one or two places where I would not agree with his interpretation of the Bishop. For example, the Bishop, quoting Norman Pittenger, speaks of God as 'the Reality undergirding and penetrating through the whole derived creation' and Dr Mascall thinks that St Thomas Aquinas would disagree (p. 125). Certainly it is not Aquinas' style but it seems to me susceptible of a perfectly orthodox thomist interpretation. I think the Professor is similarly unfair about the Bishop's use of the phrase 'depth of being' (p. 128) and most unfair

of all in his treatment of the Bishop on *kenosis* (pp. 152–3). On the other hand he gives him, more generously than I would, the benefit of the doubt about freedom and creation. He interprets the Bishop as saying that the difference between the biblical and immanentist world-view is that for the Bible, *God* is free, whereas it still seems to me that what the Bishop actually says is that we are free over against God (pp. 173–4).

Professor Mascall makes out a very good case indeed, and this is a book which absolutely demands a reply from the other side on the same academic level. I do not doubt that a reply can be made; we unquestionably do need a re-statement of what God is all about, and I think it quite likely that the 'new theologians' (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of that variable phrase) have seen further into this than the rest of us. The fact that their first attempts to explain what they are groping for have not been too successful should not deter them. But if they fail to meet the challenge of this book, if they cannot take account of the new situation created by Dr Mascall's criticisms and go on from there, then we shall have, reluctantly to conclude that it was all just a mirage in the dreary desert of conventional Christian theology. Professor Mascall is too modest and too courteous to end his book with the appropriate quotation from St Thomas Aquinas which I give in a slightly expurgated form.

*Si quis autem velit contra haec quae scripsimus aliquid dicere, non loquatur in angulis nec coram pueris qui nesciunt de tam arduis iudicare, sed contra hoc scriptum scribat, si audeat.*

Herbert McCabe, O.P.

THE MORAL TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT by Rudolph Schmackenburg. *Herder Burns and Oates, 50s.*

No doubt many will take up a book bearing a title like this in the hope of finding a contribution to the current debate on the basic presuppositions of Christian ethics and the ethical teaching of Christ in particular. We have been reminded recently that in the ethic of Jesus 'nothing is

prescribed – except love', that his sayings on morality including some that look like commandments are in fact intended only as signposts not tethering posts, that they are only (to use the figure of Emil Brunner) the spokes which point to the centre of the wheel, meaning the one