

CHURCH BUILDING by Joseph Rykwert. Faith and Fact Books : 120. *Burns & Oates*, London 1966.
 HOUSES OF GOD by Jeannette Mirsky, *Constable*, London 1966.

An understanding of the way in which liturgical activity is related to the physical space in which it takes place is vital if existing and new churches are to make concrete the thinking of the Constitution on the Liturgy and, more than that, to be sufficiently open-ended and flexible for further developments and experiments not to be frustrated.

Joseph Rykwert has set out to produce for the layman (lay *vis a vis* theology, church history and architecture) a guide to the way in which the interaction between the physical space and liturgical activity has taken place from the beginning of christian history. Within the brief space allowed by the size of volumes in this series he has done this with great skill taking us on a rapid review of the political and historical network within which christian communities in both east and west grew. About half of the book is devoted to developments in the eastern church and comparison between these and parallel developments in the west.

Wearing scholarship easily Mr Rykwert takes us through Byzantium, Asia Minor, Egypt, the Serbian and Russian church and the Coptic liturgy and succeeds in showing to what extent the social and political forces of time and place shaped the physical setting of the liturgy. The second half of the book is devoted to specifically western developments with, of course, a good deal of space allowed to an analysis of Gothic and Renaissance churches. A few pages before the end we reach the 19th century and then finally, two or three 20th century architects. It is just at this point that one feels one has got some grasp of the historical background and is in a position to discuss its significance for decision making today.

Yet, at this very point the discussion ceases and Mr Rykwert leaves us doubting whether he himself has any clear notion as to the strands in the tradition which can, or should, continue, and upon which we can build. In other words, the book is essentially a history book and, whilst it fills a real need it is sad that the opportunity is missed to develop these ideas in a fruitful way. Nevertheless, the historical summary is so lively and complete that it makes an essential introduction for any christian concerned with understanding his architectural roots. Even so, however, there are some gaps; for instance a discussion of how the liturgy actually worked in the very different church types; as an example,

the many different arrangements for baptistries must have answered the liturgical requirement of baptism to a greater or lesser degree, but no evaluation of this is made.

Discussion of elements of the church plan – for instance the altar or the baptistry – would have led naturally to consideration of the alternatives available today and the various solutions which both liturgists and architects have put forward. Moreover, it might also have led to consideration of the problem of today – that is the housing of a small community from a handful to perhaps a couple of hundred people. The whole history of the parish church is dealt with in a few paragraphs since, rightly, there is far less to say about it in the historical context than about developments of the basilica, memorial churches and cathedrals. Nevertheless, it is the parish church which is the only relevant problem today and insofar as the priest stands in the same relationship to his community as the bishop to his, we can learn something from cathedrals and basilicas; since, however, in most vital aspects the practical relationship is quite different we need a whole new set of values which are precisely different from those accepted in the typical western parish churches of the Middle Ages and later, which were considered as miniature cathedrals.

Another agonising problem confronts the church builder of today: how is the site and fabric of his building to be integrated into the complex city pattern? This problem faced the basilica and cathedral builders too and there is a limited discussion of the various historical solutions. The relationship of the Christian community to the political and social one and the degree to which this relationship determines where Christian buildings are built and how they are related to the rest of the city is, however, not discussed and, as a result, the void for today's problems is not filled. The whole question of a special building for liturgical activity; the question of its location with regard to housing and work places; the question of its architectural integration with other building masses; its social integration with other community buildings; its relationship to buildings of other religious communities, whether Christian or not – none of this is even touched upon and yet these are the pressing problems.

Of course, the answer to all this may be that this is intended to be a history book and nothing

more, and that the development of the historical ideas to our needs is to be left to someone else, perhaps in another volume. If this is so, the title should suggest the purpose more clearly and we must press for the sequence.

Finally, a few important details. In a book about an essentially structural and visual question it is surprising to find so few illustrations and those entirely limited to plans. Illustrations generally increase costs; but I cannot believe that simple pen and ink drawings printed in the body of the text in the same way as the plans are would have substantially done so and they might even have reduced the length of the text. As a typical example for instance, at the end of Chapter One there is a description of the development of the pendentive dome. Even to the architectural student the idea of the pendentive is difficult to explain at first, with every possible visual aid in the form of diagrams, sections, perspectives, solid models and wire frames, as anyone who has tried to do this will know. How much more difficult to a layman and how contorted the language becomes. It is rather reminiscent of one of those school essays in which, as an exercise, one was asked to describe verbally to a visitor from another planet a common object such as a lawn mower! Many of the important points Mr Rykwert makes about dome shapes, buttresses, pinnacles and vaulting for instance, would have been much more concretely and tellingly made by means of a few simple sections or three-dimensional diagrams.

In the discussion of the dome in eastern churches and its symbolic significance much more, I think, should have been made of the strong existing pagan tradition in which the dome in both tombs and temples was explicitly expressive of cosmic ideas and cosmogony; Earl Baldwin Smith's study of the dome and Hans Pieter L'orange's study of the relationship of the

dome to sunworship have thrown much light on this field. Into this discussion would have to be fitted the symbolic use of apertures in pre-Christian buildings of all kinds (e.g. the Pantheon) and the degree to which this was taken over by Christian architects and painters as, for instance, in some of the memorial churches at the Holy Places in Palestine and in such paintings as Crivelli's Annunciation where the Holy Spirit descends on the Madonna from the sky through a carefully sculptured and moulded hole in the arabesque frieze of the building containing her.

Lastly, the brief section devoted to 20th century thinking and work is marred by the misspelling of one of the few buildings discussed – Ronchamp – and one of the few writers discussed – Rudolph Schwarz.

Jeannette Mirsky's book is a chatty, pictorial survey accompanied by brief introductory notes and captions of all the religions of the world starting with cave paintings and finishing with Ronchamp in which the religious structures of each community are illustrated with magnificent photographs. The style is easy if rather romantic. The interpretation of interactions between religious developments and social ones are, on the whole, over-simplified and this is particularly evident in the large final section on Christianity. In comparison with Mr Rykwert's book it really fails to put across the east/west relationship and the complex strands of tradition which were woven into the early Christian basilicas and churches. For instance, the very simple assertion is made that the basilican plan was a direct descendant of the Roman basilica with the bishop taking the place of the judge. However, there are some refreshingly new illustrations, although the well-known examples are included too, and altogether, as a book for browsing in, it is very pleasant.

THOMAS A. MARKUS

MAN'S NATURE AND HIS COMMUNITIES, by Reinhold Niebuhr; *Geoffrey Bles*; 12s. 6d.

The first few pages of this book promise much: Niebuhr is commonly acknowledged to be the finest English-speaking post-liberal theologian, of whom Emil Brunner has written: '(Niebuhr) has made out of the dialectical theology something quite new; something genuinely American'. At the very beginning of the book the author says: 'This volume of essays on various aspects of man's individual and social existence is intended to serve two purposes: namely, to summarise, and to revise previously held opinions' (p. 9). Niebuhr has retained his reputation to a large extent because he has

always been prepared to rethink and modify his earlier opinions and, now in retirement at the age of 75, he has attempted what may be his final revision. One approaches the book with a sense of occasion; yet in the end the book is a disappointment. The book is not bad, but it rarely advances beyond the ordinary; it could well have been written by a man of considerably less talent.

Of the merits of the book, Niebuhr's great gift seems to be that of common sense (not, in fact, a common gift) especially in his analysis of the intricate relationship between idealism and