

Reviews

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRIUNE GOD by John J O'Donnell. *Sheed and Ward, London, 1988. Pp. vii + 184. P/b £8.50.*

Writing as one who 'thinks and prays within the Roman Catholic tradition,' John O'Donnell SJ intends his book as a synthesis which will prove neither too elementary for scholars nor too advanced for the average educated reader. His aim is to overcome that dichotomy between theology and life which so often plagues discussions of the Trinity.

O'Donnell begins by pointing out certain dilemmas in contemporary theological thought and considering possible solutions to them. A basic dilemma apparently arises from the fact that 'classical theism' (e.g. St Thomas Aquinas) conceived God as the 'perfect being' who could have no 'real relation' to the world. To the contemporary mind such a being seems 'aloof from history', 'remote, indifferent to all that happens, unable ... to receive us into his life,' and thus inadequate as an object for Christian worship. (p. 7, 16) O'Donnell does not raise the question of whether this dilemma may have its real source in certain misunderstandings on the part of the 'contemporary mind' with respect to the classical position. Rather, he assumes that the dilemma is inherent in the classical position itself.

Process theology seeks to answer the dilemma by conceiving God as 'essentially (i.e., of his very nature) referred to the world.' This answer, O'Donnell rightly points out, makes God 'a piece of the world' and so reduces God 'to the level of finitude.' (p. 7, 168) Atheism pretends to answer the dilemma, either in the interest of preserving human freedom or as a protest against the situation of human suffering, by simply denying the existence of the God of theism. But atheism, O'Donnell observes, tends not towards freedom, but only towards greater depersonalization, slavery, and hopelessness.

O'Donnell believes that the dilemma is best solved by moving away from the notion of God as presented in classical theism, and thinking about God in the trinitarian context of God's identification of himself with human history, finitude, and suffering in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Using K. Barth, P. Knauer, and K. Rahner, O'Donnell shows schematically how the God who reveals himself to us in Christ can be said to have a real relation to this world and to be intimately involved with his creatures through grace. (Chapter 2) Turning more directly to Scripture, O'Donnell clearly presents the trinitarian implications of Jesus' awareness of himself as Son of God and as bearer of the Spirit. (Chapter 3)

It is surprising, however, that O'Donnell, who criticizes the theistic notion of God as failing to 'correspond to the biblical vision of God' (p. 168), follows Moltmann in positing a suffering of the Father in the death of the Son (p. 63, 64) even though such suffering is nowhere found in Scripture. Even more surprising is O'Donnell's contention that 'from eternity the Father

... has risked his being on the Son.' (p. 65, 66, 160) What it could mean for the Author of Being to 'risk his being' is nowhere explained, but it does seem to involve the sort of finitizing of God which O'Donnell earlier criticized. (p. 5, 7, 26)

Throughout the work, O'Donnell skillfully employs a broad range of contemporary scholarship, and his presentation is informed by an attempt to be both systematic and pastoral. Thus he includes a treatment of such speculative issues as Heribert Mühlen's theology of the Holy Spirit (Chapter 5), the problem of the term 'person' in trinitarian discussions (Chapter 6), and the nature of analogous language about God (Chapter 7), but he also addresses such pastoral concerns as the application of trinitarian theology to the practice of justice (Chapter 8) and prayer (Chapter 9).

In his final chapter, O'Donnell returns to the basic dilemma that he raised at the beginning of his book. He uses E. Jüngel to show that the trinitarian God can be truly involved in our history, and Hans Urs von Balthasar to show how our history and freedom make a difference to God. As the Father can let himself be gifted by the 'ever greater fruitfulness of the Spirit', so God can 'let himself be gifted in the economy of salvation.' (p. 172) O'Donnell explains that God is gifted or 'enriched' by the world through God's letting himself be participated in by the world. In classical theism, of course, this would be the explanation of how the world is enriched by God, and O'Donnell offers the reader little more than his own personal assurance that it is God rather than the world that is enriched by this participation. In general, it can be said that O'Donnell succeeds in presenting a concise synthesis of contemporary theological issues regarding the Trinity, but fails to establish his own position in a convincing fashion.

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FAITH AS A THEME IN MARK'S NARRATIVE (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 64) by Christopher D. Marshall. Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. xii + 262. £27.50.

Dr Marshall's London thesis written under the guidance of Prof. G.N. Stanton starts from the scarcely acknowledged importance of the concept of faith in Mark's Gospel and makes use of the current development of so-called narrative criticism to get round the problems caused by trying to apply redaction criticism to Mark. He is concerned to look at faith in its setting in individual pericopes and in the narrative as a whole and to show how light is shed on the usage by considering the author's narrative techniques—his use of repetition, framing verses, irony, rhetorical questions, and so on. When the Gospel is examined from this point of view, with attention being paid to its final shape, it is remarkable how coherent a picture emerges, and the clumsiness which some commentators have detected is seen to have been greatly exaggerated. Dr Marshall calls attention to the importance of the placing of Mark 1:14f. as providing the context for understanding the following narrative and establishing the character of faith in relation to the message of the kingdom and to repentance. An insightful treatment of the miracles show how they function like the parables in relation to faith—their positive value is grasped only when they are understood in the context of the message about God's redemptive activity. Various incidents