

# Reviews

**THEOLOGY ON THE WAY TO EMMAUS, by Nicholas Lash. S.C.M. 1986, 240 pp. £10.50.**

This volume of essays, a successor to *Theology on Dover Beach*, contains 13 papers. 9 have previously been published (2 in this journal), and the other 4 are versions of lectures delivered. There is thus a range of differing levels at which the various papers are pitched. But they reveal a consistency of theological stance, with only the minimum of repetition that is inevitable in a collection of this kind. The earlier papers are devoted to questions of method, while the later ones deal with substantive theological issues.

I find myself in fundamental agreement with most of what Professor Lash has to say. That will probably disturb him more than any of the specific criticisms I shall go on to make. For in the Introduction to *Theology on Dover Beach* he set out his own approach to theology by contrasting it very sharply with mine. He will no doubt be able to comfort himself by assuming that I have not fully understood him. And in that he may well be right. But if so, I can cite him as chief witness for the defence. In the excellent opening paper, he adverts to the complaint of the 'ordinary Christian' that the theologian makes things too difficult, and suggests that in practice the theologian is more often guilty of making it too easy to speak of the mystery of God. If making things seem difficult is the criterion of a good theologian, then Lash is to be regarded as a very good theologian indeed. And that is intended in the first instance as a genuine and serious compliment. The difficulties that we encounter in the book arise for the most part from his resolute determination not to succumb to the too easy dualisms of matter and spirit or theory and practice. Time and again he forces us to see the problems of Christian faith in a wider and deeper context to our considerable enrichment. To take one example, the recurring emphasis on the fact that construction and discovery are not mutually exclusive alternative accounts of the nature of theological work is particularly timely.

But the very substantial benefits of his approach are not achieved without some accompanying weaknesses. If one emphasises with Lash the inextricable interweaving of theory and practice, how is one to *talk* theologially without either falling prey to the false idealism of which he so often accuses others or alternatively becoming so oblique as to be obscure. (When on p. 117 he writes: 'In this chapter I have attempted, perhaps too obliquely, to indicate...', this reader found himself nodding in agreement). Lash allows that academic theology has a place, but argues that the theologian needs to be more 'modest' about his or her contribution to the whole scheme of things. There is need for a theological agnosticism, which is a very different thing from religious agnosticism. All that needs saying and is well said—often in pellucid and memorable epigrammatic form. But there is another kind of 'modesty' of the theologian, which one would have liked to see more in evidence. In so difficult an enterprise, even those with whom one disagrees most sharply seldom deserve the scornful dismissal with which they are on occasion treated here.

But more importantly the laudable determination not to oversimplify seems sometimes to degenerate into a wilful refusal to allow straightforward, but nonetheless quite proper, questions. This certainly seems to me to have happened in the interesting paper 'Easter Meaning'. He begins by attacking Harry Williams' account of resurrection as a profoundly unsatisfactory flight from the factual. In evidence he quotes Williams' words (adding his own stress): 'The real and important truth remains *whatever the status as history* of the story in which it is represented'. By contrast he insists that a proper understanding of the

resurrection must be as an 'objective' and 'historical' fact about Jesus, because only so can it be a fact about Jesus at all. And it is about Jesus in the sense that it is an answer to the question: 'how did it go with this man and what is the sense of his ending?'. In another paper he speaks of Easter faith as 'interpreting his death as resurrection' (p. 196). The position he adumbrates here seems to me to be basically right, and one of the many things that make me claim to be in fundamental agreement with him. But in view of his criticism of Harry Williams, it is surely legitimate to ask about the 'status as history' of the resurrection stories themselves. They are not, of course, the whole of the Jesus story, but they are a part of that story as we have it. He himself describes that part of the story as 'an invitation to construe Jesus' history ... as a story the sense of whose ending is given by the incomparable power of God's transforming grace'. He doesn't argue the case for such a treatment of the resurrection stories and dismisses any consideration of their particular status as history as the product of false empiricism. The words 'objective' and 'historical', in which the question might most naturally have been posed, have already been hijacked for another higher purpose, from whose standpoint all particular 'historical' (if I dare use the word) questions may be grandly dismissed as improper. He has an important point to make, but in my view he makes it less effectively than he might have done because he fails to take seriously the possibility that those he disagrees with might also have an important point to make, however unsatisfactory the form in which it is raised. Like the Johannine Christ, who in one sense but only in one sense is the most 'historical' of all, he floats a few feet above the day to day detail of our earthly history and its historical records.

I have concentrated disproportionately on one paper. What I have said about it will almost certainly convince Professor Lash that his guess that I had not properly understood him is right. I hope it will also have convinced potential readers that they will find much in all the papers, whether they find themselves in agreement or disagreement with their substance, that will stimulate them in the direction of constructive theological thinking.

MAURICE WILES

**SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR: ROME, CANTERBURY AND ARCIC** by Hugh Montefiore. *S.C.M. Press, 1986, £5.95 paper.*

When the Bishop of Birmingham last uttered upon ARCIC, in *Theology*, a long standing member of that Commission, Henry Chadwick, remarked that it had been written in 'the excitement of rapidly composed polemic'. Taking that bull by its horns, the author simply says that this too has been rapidly composed 'against the remorseless headwind of an episcopal diary' and that he has found this too exciting, though not polemical. Only prayer and rigorous thinking will move Churches into union. So, is this rigorous or hasty thinking? Is a bishop's between-times thought worth publishing? Should the author not have waited until he had handed over his large diocese on last April Fool's Day, and then gone deeper? He surely will, in other books.

Bishop Montefiore is meanwhile to be taken seriously. Before he became Vicar of Great St Mary's, he was a Fellow and Dean of a Cambridge College and Lecturer in New Testament studies. During 1967–76 he was a member of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine. He has edited or contributed to a number of books and theological journals. His avant-garde interests have included *God, sex and war* (1963), *Remarriage and mixed marriage* (1967), *Doom or deliverance?* (1972), *Yes to women priests* (1978), *The Probability of God* (1985), and writings on nuclear crisis. He has, as now, liked to be up with the debate: does that make him a respected journalist or a religious leader?

A slight chapter, 'The miracle of convergence', opens the argument; in it, 'absolutely null and utterly void' is misquoted, but the case for avoiding precipitate intercommunion while orders are in doubt is well put. The main engagement begins with the chapter on 'The Church and its sources of authority', a right place to begin. The Bishop turns for his