

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO GOD? FEMINISM AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF.** William Oddie. *SPCK* 1984. £4.50.

From the dedication to the emotive polemic of the concluding sentence this book is a heart felt plea to halt "the intruding new". In this case "the intruding new" is Christian Feminism, which Dr. Oddie regards as, "an assault on what (have) always been regarded as fundamental Christian truths". During the course of the book the author paints an unattractive picture of the Christian Feminist Movement. Apparently, the movement uses anger as, "a means of perception", indulges in hypocritical double-dealing, is obsessive and paranoid, is characterised both by a refusal to accept divine inspiration of Scripture and by an exaltation of the primacy of personal autonomy as opposed to the discipline of the community, it reconstructs reality and answers religious questions with secular answers. In short, "... all its theological principles are ... constructed by human hands, and its social and ethical analysis is indistinguishable from that of the prevailing progressive rationalist orthodoxy of those who ... have been struggling to destroy the moral influence of the Church, in the face of all the results in human misery and the collapse in family life that their undoubted success has brought".

The logic of such a picture and the assumptions on which such logic rests are invariably highly questionable. Although Dr. Oddie recognises that there are "no neutral observers" he nonetheless fails to apply this recognition to his own observations. Thus, for example, he is able to accuse others of "reconstructing" reality without ever reflecting critically upon his own view of reality. Another flaw is that deductions and generalisations are made by using one feminist's work (or even case history) as representative of key themes within the movement, or, alternatively, by blurring various forms of feminism (and not merely Christian feminism) in order to convince the reader of the movement's conscious double-dealing. A further technique is to associate Christian Feminism with other "threats", sometimes via the choice of a metaphor or example, sometimes by spelling out a supposed link. Thus, at one point, feminism is said to arise out of Marxism, and it is therefore feared that it will sweep away individualism; whilst, at another point, feminism is linked with a stress on personal autonomy and the 'dangerous concept' of human self realisation and so made to look suspiciously like the Nazi 'German National Church'. It seems that, whatever one's political leanings, associations can be found to enable the reader to fear Christian Feminism.

The overall tone of the book is dogmatic and defensive and the text is further marred by Dr. Oddie's attempt to cover too many major theological themes in an often highly unsystematic way (despite the sub-headings within each section). It is difficult, therefore, to summarise the positive points which the author wishes to make or to see this work as "a piece of constructive theology". However, salient points do arise.

Dr. Oddie repeatedly returns to one theme, i.e. "that biological differences correspond to clear differences of spiritual identity". In support of this theme he claims that God's self-revelation is through masculine imagery, that Jewish patriarchal culture was God's chosen culture, that New Testament prohibitions concerning women have the direct authority of Christ, that women tend to integrate aspects of their personalities, have more concern for the care of immediate personal needs and exhibit greater verbal skills (thus suiting them to childcare and the domestic sphere, as opposed to men who tend to compartmentalise aspects of their personalities, are more goal-orientated and have visual-spatial superiority). Dr. Oddie does not look at non-masculine imagery for God, either Biblical or traditional. He does not take time to consider the consequences of going beyond the concept of the Jews as God's chosen people to the different notion of the whole of Jewish culture being divinely chosen. He does not consider whether the stated differences between the sexes (which are often only marginal tendencies) are culturally conditioned rather than inherent and indeed never provides a definition of "natural". Furthermore, Dr. Oddie ignores evidence of

women's contributions and capabilities outside the "domestic sphere" and of men's contributions and capabilities within that sphere across different times and cultures.

Closely allied to this recurring theme is Dr. Oddie's praise of complementarity and equality through difference. He supposes that the only alternative to his extreme complementarity is a species of androgyny, modelled in the language of science fantasy and projected onto all Christian Feminism using the technique of generalising from wider feminism. In turn innate differences and complementarity are linked with Dr. Oddie's concept of authority. He considers that any quest for freedom from hierarchy cannot be seen as a "significant" part of Biblical tradition. It seems that Dr. Oddie has not been able to escape the existence of such a tradition and so it is simply dismissed as being insignificant. Redemption, on this view, has no bearing on structures of subordination, rather it enables subordination to co-exist with "radical equality" (an interpretation which enables Dr. Oddie to justify slavery and to make a distinction between the Christian family/community and the Christian dispensation, leaving the reader with the impression that Christianity is a somewhat impotent religion.) Subordination is distinguished from degradation by the cases of Christ, who is subordinate to the Father, and of men (i.e. males), who are subordinate to Christ. Dr. Oddie does not question whether the internal relationships of the Trinity are an obvious model for male-female relationships and neither does he consider the inappropriateness of moving from distinct ontological types when using Christ-male subordination to justify male-female subordination (leaving aside the question of whether the reader in fact assents to the doctrinal assumptions with which Dr. Oddie operates.)

In the latter part of the book the author makes a specific attack on Christian Feminist Liturgical revision. (I use the word attack consciously since Dr. Oddie writes this section in the language of a military campaign.) His argument revolves around the assumption that religious language operates on a symbolic depth beyond the scope of conceptual clarity. Whilst this may not be without truth Dr. Oddie's brief and inevitably over-simplified treatment of this area of theology does not enable him to establish either the extent of this truth or the validity of the way in which the author applies his assumption. The result is that clarity is precisely what is missing from this passage.

The final section is, sadly, little less than a tirade in which Christian Feminist literature is compared to the manipulative ideology of oppressive governments and in which perjorative adjectives are liberally strewn. It is this section, above all others, which leads one to conclude that Christian Feminists and their sympathisers will not be short of reasoned replies to this book, but countering the emotions exemplified in this polemic may prove altogether more challenging.

JANET WOOD

**BUTLER'S LIVES OF THE SAINTS, concise edition edited by Michael Walsh.**  
*Burns and Oates; 1985. Pp. 466. £10.95 and £5.95.*

Three Dictionaries of Saints are currently available in English; is there room for a different book of saints for devotional and historical purposes, arranged according to their feast days? This reviewer believes that there is need for such a book, but that this volume does not satisfy it. A prime requirement would be that all the saints chosen by the Church for the universal calendar should be included, as well as those who are specially relevant to the history of the Church in this country. But here are incomprehensibly omitted important New Testament saints like John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, Andrew and Mary Magdalen, while Mary is represented only by the article on the Assumption and Paul by less than a page on his conversion. And why ever in a work for Great Britain were Alban, Columba of Iona, Paulinus of York, Theodore of Canterbury, Bede the Venerable, Ethelwold of Winchester, Oswald of Worcester, Osmund of Salisbury, Hugh of Lincoln, Edmund Rich and even Thomas More all omitted? The limitation to one saint a day has in fact caused quite

457