

Reviews

TO THE LENGTHS OF GOD. TRUTHS AND THE ECUMENICAL AGE by B. Brinkman SJ, *Sheed and Ward*, London. 1988. Pp. xiii + 334. Price £25.

The title of this book gives very little clue to its content. Even in its fine index truth does not figure, and what is *Truth* on the dust jacket is *Truths* in the subtitle in the book itself. The one outstanding impression left by the volume is that ecumenism is a very complex matter in which relatively little progress has been made to date. Fr. Brinkman aligns himself squarely with critics of the classical approach to theologising, whether it was in the Tridentine documents or later, exempting most notably St. Thomas from these strictures. Personhood was either misunderstood or not understood at all in the classical tradition. In ignorance of the subjective and historical, this same tradition canonised the unchanging and universal. This resulted in a projection of reality untrue to the lived experience of the faith and of the communities bearing witness to it. One should now no longer ask 'what man is' but 'where man is' (p. 279). (The author's indifference to sexist language will not endear him to those who would perceive in it a betrayal of the very principle being defended!). It even involves considering that Trent had precluded Catholics from savouring the total mystery of God, 'but this is unchanging' (p. 266).

The first and last chapters are devoted explicitly to ecumenical discourse. Fr. Brinkman doubts that the way theology is done presently in the western world will be of much help for the future. Catholics and Protestants are working with different anthropologies. While no originality is claimed for this observation, the author urges that its implications be addressed more seriously than heretofore. The behavioural sciences should be drawn on to create a more intelligible picture of contemporary human beings. That would let it be seen how unjustified is the seeming gulf between the symbols of word and sacrament. That way too one would better appreciate suffering as a definer of humanity. The millions sacrificed to ideologies this century should inhibit any further discussion of evil as a 'privation of good'. Suffering is an inexorable factor of historical existence which the Son of God accepted and transformed in a privileged piece of history as significant for all of history. Concreteness was a necessary part of that experience. And concrete existence must be fundamental to theology, and that includes a sexually intelligible account of Jesus to show his 'properly symbolizing function' for all human beings everywhere (p. 109).

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The volume stimulates many questions. In practice, for instance, what can be done to implement a hierarchy of truths when Catholics disagree so much about their content and significance, or do not recognize the same faith professed by each other? Is it enough to expect that creeds and sacraments not too closely defined will provide adequately for unity? Not much is said of praxis. Fr. Brinkman suggests that on certain issues, especially of the moral sort, the magisterium should simply plead ignorance (p. 35). Magisterium is certainly a thorny matter. I recall the thunderous applause which the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches accorded to the Secretary General, Philip Potter, when he declared for the total abolition of 'the heresy of magisterium'. That was at Vancouver in 1983.

Fr. Brinkman recommends that the current slogan 'renewal' be changed to 'progress' or 'advance' to avoid the idea of a return 'to an ideal world which never existed' (p. 273). In fact the Council did not use *renovatio* and its cognates in any way suggestive of that. The word conveyed the idea of reinvigorating the Catholic mind, regenerating the faith of individuals and communities through a change of heart, purification from sin and prejudice, with openness for change while maintaining continuity. This is very biblical. In the concrete the recent questionnaire distributed in the pope's name to facilitate greater participation in the coming Roman diocesan synod should gladden the heart. It makes a real effort to tap religious experience, and to discover the desired 'open-ended anthropology which bears some resemblance to the thinking world of today ... and the demands of the gospel' (p. 274). Modernism or its most recent spectre has not quite chased *aggiornamento* away; perhaps, with Roosevelt, 'all we have to fear is fear itself'!

The seven chapters constituting this volume are often hard reading. They are more like individual pieces around a theme, reminiscent of Rahner, than systematic development. Neologisms abound. The *Sitz-im-Leben* seems to be the lecture room with Fr. Brinkman's students well acquainted with his vocabulary and style, conversant with all the languages he uses so easily for conveying the classical tradition. It is a paradoxical illustration of the difficulty of rediscovering 'the gospel within the shifting forms of the West-West dialogue' (p. 23). But it is clear that without St Augustine there would be an impoverished dialogue. For Fr. Brinkman his influence is mighty yet.

RICHARD J. TAYLOR

THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION 1875—1980 by Alan P.F. Sell,
Croom Helm. 1988. P. 252. £35.

This is an interesting and informative history of the philosophy of religion, mainly in Britain, during the period in which it deals, and will be a useful work of reference for those who do not know the field, but it does not attempt to tackle the difficulties there are in writing history of philosophy, whether it be of the philosophy of religion or of any other part of the subject. For that involves interpretation of a past philosopher's views and interpretations will often differ so that there is no general unanimity as to

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