

Reviews

DICKENS AND RELIGION, by Dennis Walder, London, *George Allen & Unwin*, 1981 pp xv + 232 £12.50.

'All my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit; all my good people are humble, charitable, faithful and forgiving'. So wrote Charles Dickens to the clergyman, David Macrae. To Dostoevsky, Dickens was 'a great Christian writer'. Yet Dr Walder's book is the first full scale treatment of the place of religion in the work of Charles Dickens. Why is this so? The most obvious answer was that until quite recently the novels were dismissed as mere entertainments, and Dickens's reputation as a serious novelist was higher in Russia than in his own country. Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were greatly influenced, especially by *David Copperfield*. Dickens taught them how to see the modern city with its teeming life and suffering poor. The recurring theme of children in their innocence being made to suffer beyond their capacities to endure is common to Dickens and Dostoevsky. They also share a common form. Characters erupt in their novels which are like great sacks into which all manner of things are swept. But, unlike the Russians, Dickens is not concerned with the stuff of theology: he does not wrestle with the existence of God, or challenge the Christian religion in the character of the Grand Inquisitor.

Dr Walder's argument is not over-pitched. It is that 'if Dickens is not primarily a religious novelist, he none the less evidently expresses religious beliefs in what he writes'. The important critical question is, of course, how he does so, and whether he does so convincingly. His early beliefs were almost naively optimistic. They enshrine a species of Dingley Dell Christianity and are focussed in Mr Pickwick (much ad-

mired by Dostoevsky, but with reservations). With the development of religious polemic and disputes about doctrine occasioned by the Evangelicals as well as by the Oxford Movement, a climax is reached in the 1850s which had its effect on Dickens's own attitude. This is the period of his great religious hypocrites Chadband, Mrs Pardiggle, Mrs Jellyby and the Murdstones – but it is also a period in which he espouses a social gospel very much akin to that preached by F D Maurice and the Christian Socialists. As Dr Walder justly remarks, such a conception expressing as it did 'our collective responsibility for the poor and dispossessed was potent long before it became respectable in orthodox religious circles'.

Dickens had a perfect ear for the cliché on the negative side of religion, but his sense of pitch is not so certain on the positive side. Is the death of the crossing sweeper, Jo, in *Bleak House*, at all convincing? – the references to the Lord's prayer seem disembodied, whereas the use of biblical language to sharpen up the portrait of the solicitor Mr Vholes, who is 'making hay of the grass which is flesh for his three daughters', is worthy of Bunyan.

The charge that Dickens's religion degenerates into benevolence may be applicable to the earlier novels, but the later ones show an increasing sense of the pervasive power of evil. But do they go deep enough, and is this where the comparison with the Russians comes to an end? Dr Walder quotes Acton to this effect, but misses out Acton's conclusion: 'He loves his neighbour for his neighbour's sake, and knows nothing of sin, when it is not crime'. Acton's criticism is that Dickens 'saw no divine part of Christianity, but divinified human-

ity, or humanized religion, and taught that man was perfectible, but childhood perfect'. I don't see why Dr Walder calls this 'a cynical tribute' especially when he admits that the problem Dickens fails to solve is, in the words of Graham Greene, that 'Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there. Human nature is not black and white but black and grey'.

Greene's remark exemplified the need

to distinguish between the religious imagination of a Dostoevsky and religious 'illustration' – but Dickens claims no more than that. Even so, Joe Gargery, in *Great Expectations*, is as a portrait of 'a gentle Christian man' more convincing because more highly developed than Mr Pickwick.

Dr Walder has produced a useful work of reference, especially for the teacher. It is thoroughly prepared and has an excellent bibliography.

JOHN COULSON

THE CHARISMATIC LEADER AND HIS FOLLOWERS by Martin Hengel, trans. by James Greig, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1981, pp xiv + 111 £7.95

This short book is a translation of a volume published in Germany in 1968. It is also one of the first volumes to appear in a new series of 'Studies of the New Testament and Its World', edited by John Riches. It augurs well for the series as a whole.

The book is an investigation of Jesus' call of men to discipleship, based on a detailed examination of one pericope (Matt. 8:21 = Luke 9:59f). The saying of Jesus which this passage contains 'runs counter to law, piety and custom' (p 14), and demonstrates the unconditional character of following Jesus. His unique authority, seen in his call to men to follow him, is inextricably linked with the urgency of his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Although Jesus was a teacher he was not a rabbi, and the manner of his teaching was different from that of the rabbis. It is hardly surprising if there is no parallel to his call of men to follow him in the rabbinic traditions, since the relationship between Jesus and his disciples is quite different from that between rabbis and their pupils. His disciples were not called to imitate his everyday behaviour, not to memorize his teaching, but to share his concern for the dawning Kingdom of God. Jesus himself, instead of conversing with scholars, taught the crowds in the open air. Nevertheless, his call to discipleship was made to select individuals, not to the crowds (as with messianic leaders such as Judas the Galilean or Theudas); although

the offer of the Kingdom was open to all, Jesus did not call everyone to follow him. He is therefore to be distinguished from the apocalyptic enthusiasts, as well as from the rabbis. Only later were 'following after' Jesus and faith identified, so that accepting the message of Jesus became equated with deciding for Jesus himself.

The teaching of Jesus was characterized by authority, and was a call to decision. As such it differed from that of both the rabbis and the teachers of wisdom of an earlier period. Professor Hengel stresses this authority, and quotes several times the well-known words of E Fuchs, who described Jesus as one 'who dares to act in God's stead'. Jesus called his disciples to share his mission and authority, in offering salvation and in proclaiming judgment. So we find that the call of Jesus to men to follow him is linked with the theme of mission (as in Mark 1:17 and 3:13f). Unlike the disciples of rabbis, who are entrusted with carrying on a tradition, these men are called to prepare the nation for the coming Kingdom of God.

The importance of this study, in Professor Hengel's own view, is that it is concerned with questions about Jesus himself, and not with questions about the evangelists or the early Christian communities. In a vigorous protest against those who brush aside questions about 'the historical Jesus', he maintains that 'the central feature of Synoptic research must continue to be the attempt to get back to Jesus himself' (p