

Reviews

THE CENTRE OF CHRISTIANITY by John Hick. SCM Press 1977 pp. 228 £1.60

The hand of the Lord was upon John Hick, and he brought him out by the Spirit of the Lord and set him down in the midst of *Christianity at the Centre* (London, 1968); it was full of dry bones. The Lord said 'Can these bones live?' 'Of course they can', Hick replied. So the Lord said 'Prophecy to the bones and say "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."' 'The Gospel ran thus.

There was a man called Jesus. "He was wholly and unambiguously a human being" (p. 17) who 'lived in a closer awareness of God and a more total obedience to God than anyone else' (p. 27). He was metaphorically and honorifically called son of God. "But in the course of time as the Latin theologians got to work, the symbolism hardened into dogma, and the metaphorical son of God became the metaphysical God the Son" (p. 31). But how "the same person can have the full attributes of both God and man has never been explained and seems indeed to be on a par with the statement that a figure drawn on paper has the attributes of both a circle and a square" (ibid). Not to worry, however, this does not mean that "Jesus is not the Lord and Saviour whom we experience him as being" (ibid). And there is always God who is quite intelligible to believe in being "personal and loving, purposive and good ... the infinite Mind" (p. 39) of whom we can say that "from his own point of view he simply and non-temporally is" (p. 37). This is the God whom "we must say" that the men of the Bible "experienced as awesome power confronting them" (p. 43); they had a "vivid compelling sense of the reality and personal presence and activity of God" (p. 44), a position far removed from the dreadful "Thomist conception of faith as believing theological propositions propounded by the Church" which described "the faith, not of the great religious geniuses, but of the simple medieval layman" (p. 44). God is known through "experiencing as", "seeing as" (p. 46); faith is thus "voluntary, optional, uncompelled" (ibid). "Our hum-

an existence itself, considered apart from the interpretative responses of the human mind, remains ambiguous and equally capable of being 'experienced as' in a religious or in a naturalistic manner" (ibid). But "Why should God want to present himself to his human creatures in such an indirect and uncertain way instead of revealing himself in some quite unambiguous fashion that would permit no possible room for doubt as to his reality?" (p. 47) The answer is that we would not then be free and responsible in regard to God. But is it rational to believe in God? It is for you provided that you are like the biblical men who had "the awareness of an unseen personal presence and holy will and purpose which confronted them as truly and undeniably as did their neighbours or the enveloping physical world" (p. 50). Or you might be like Jesus whose "situation was that he could not help believing in God" and who could only have rejected belief in God by "an act of intellectual suicide" (p. 52). And so we have the Church—or do we? "Would it not be more realistic now to make the shift from Christianity at the centre to God at the centre, and to see both our own and the other great world religions as revolving around the same divine reality?" (p. 77) After all, if we are to deal adequately with the problem of evil we must agree that everyone is going to be saved. Augustine and his ilk were particularly dim on this point. They thought that God could not be responsible for evil and that a lot of evil around us springs from human choice. But "man would never in fact choose wrongly unless there was some flaw either in himself or in his environment. The very fact that he fails shows that he was not finitely perfect after all" (p. 84).

There was quite a lot more but by now something intervened. There was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. They started to ask questions. How does Hick know what it is to be wholly and unambiguously a human being? How can the traditional Christian view of Christianity's relation-

ship to other religions be fundamentally changed if it is indeed true that Jesus's view of God was a closer awareness than that of anyone else? Before jumping to the Latin authors, what about the claim that Christ was God as we find it in the Greek fathers and even in the New Testament? Are we so clear about this claim that we can assimilate it in one paragraph to an impossible proposition of geometry? What is the relationship between statements in mathematics and statements in theology? If Jesus is the Lord and saviour whom we experience him as being, what happens if we experience him as being God incarnate? If God simply and non-temporally is, what is it that he is simply and non-temporally? And if God is non-temporal, can he also be personal? Why is an infinite, non-temporal something-which-is-personal any harder to swallow than a person with divine and human natures? Regarding Thomism, did Aquinas have no place for a certain knowledge of God? Did he not also

JESUS THE CHRIST, by Walter Kasper. New York, 1976. pp. 289 £6.95

Four years have gone by since *Jesus der Christus* was published in Germany. This christology, written by the man who (in his own country, at any rate) is perhaps the most widely respected of the younger generation of German Catholic theologians, had plenty of reviews when it first appeared (note, particularly, A. Grillmeier's in *Philosophie und Theologie* 51, 1976, pp. 254ff.). Now it is available in English, the most fitting question to ask first is surely: how useful is this book likely to be to the English-speaking reader?

To say Kasper's book is not an exciting one is not to disparage it. What is most striking is its solidity and compactness. It is the first comprehensive, systematically expounded and nevertheless reliably biblically-based christological treatise to appear in English from the pen of a prominent Roman Catholic theologian. So it should be of value to students as well as of interest to other theologians. Beginning with a prolegomena on the kind of questions being addressed to belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the author gives us admirable, remarkably concise resumes of the challenges to classical christology posed by the inheritors of the Enlightenment

claim that faith is rational? What about that claim? If experiencing is optional, voluntary, uncompelled, how can it be assimilated to the situation of people who could not help believing in God? If the biblical figures were overwhelmed by a sense of God, how is the world equally capable of being experienced in terms of theism or atheism? And if response to God is free, how can we be sure *a priori* that everyone will accept him? Would salvation not then be a matter of coercion? And why could this coercion not have been provided before the wretched problem of evil had a chance to get started? Why does the fact of a man's failure show that he was not perfect before it? Could he not have been perfect *qua* man, and could not this entail his ability to choose wrongly?

The bones stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host. And a voice was heard: 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.'

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Burns & Oates, London, and Paulist Press,

and the onslaughts of the Higher Criticism, and of the ways scripture scholars and theologians have been responding to these challenges. He has, in fact, framed his discussion in terms of the principal debates: the relation of the historical Jesus to the universal Christ; the problems of historical consciousness; the meaning of history.

What is, then, disappointing for the English-speaking reader is Kasper's parochialism. It is true, of course, that a very high percentage of the most important struggles over these great issues have been fought in Germany, in German, but (Thomism apart) Kasper seems—judging from what is in this book—to be very little aware of the non-German literature. His treatment of the scriptural data is good, but his section on the Son of Man (for example) would have been better if he had read G. Vermes. Much more important, although time and again he clearly disassociates himself from idealism, and rejects the idealist christological 'solution', his presuppositions and his ways of conceptualising and putting problems places him firmly in the central-European post-Hegelian tradition (see, for example, pp. 245 f.), and he does not seem to be aware of relev-