

Reviews

BETWEEN CHAOS AND NEW CREATION by Enda McDonagh. *Gill and Macmillan.* 1986. pp 195. £7.95.

This book is a collection of thirteen fairly short pieces, all of which have appeared in print before (four of them in *The Furrow*). They are divided into two roughly equal halves, the first half being of a more general character while the second have more specific reference to the Irish situation.

The general picture that emerges is a welcome and attractive one. Professor McDonagh emerges as a theologian well rooted in tradition, but open and sensitive to the world which he seeks to address. He writes in a positive and optimistic vein, but is not blind to contemporary tragedy or to the dangers of triumphalism. He is concerned to stress the option for the poor, ecumenism and narrative theology, but not in a way which makes him impervious to other more traditional concerns.

But the make-up of the book is such that this does remain a 'general' picture. The articles (having been written in the first instance to appear separately) tend to make the same general points in much the same general kind of way. I am not convinced that all of them (appropriate though they may be in their original context) called for reproduction in book form.

The subtitle of the book is 'Doing theology at the fringe', and so holds out the hope that it will throw light on how theology may influence and be influenced by its particular, troubled Irish setting. That an ecumenical approach is called for seems obvious to an outsider, but its advocacy remains expressed in very general terms with little analysis of its particular possibilities or difficulties. Narrative theology is commended for the way it can illuminate the particularity of a situation, such as that in which Ireland finds itself today. But more might have been looked for about how that illumination is to be constructive rather than destructive in its effects. The use of violence is criticised, but the reader is left not altogether certain just how absolutely the rejection of violence and killing is intended.

The sense of not being taken quite far enough on the issues that the book raises is partly a result of the way the book is built up from occasional pieces. But it is also in part a reflection of a wider problem. If theology is to be localised so that 'particularity not universality becomes primary' (p. 136), how far can the theologian write such theology in book form for general consumption? May not the call for particularity be a call to speak in a particular situation in a manner which cannot be effectively transcribed in that form?

So I ended reading the book with a sense of slight disappointment that 'doing theology on the fringe' had not come across to me with the distinctiveness and forcefulness for which I had hoped—but also with a sense of gratitude that a theologian of Professor McDonagh's sensitivity and commitment is doing theology in so demanding a context.

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