

A SKETCHBOOK OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, by Joseph Blenkinsopp. *Burns & Oates*, London, 1968. 148 pp. 25s.

This is a collection of nineteen essays, mostly very short, that have appeared during the last few years in the *Clergy Review* and other periodicals.

In his *Foreword* Mr Blenkinsopp presents these essays as providing points for discussion, 'some avenues of approach to the creative area of thinking to which the Christian scriptures are an invitation'. They are not a systematic survey of Biblical Theology, but 'as the title suggests, they are offered as thumb-nail sketches'.

So far so good. Mr Blenkinsopp is qualified to write essays of this sort, and entitled to collect them into a book. He has plenty of learning; he is, on the whole, easy to read; and he has the journalist's gift for striking presentation. This is specially marked in the openings of his essays. 'For many Christians there will probably be something rather odd if not amusing about being invited to read the Book of Deuteronomy.' That is the sort of sentence that makes you want to go on. 'The biblical figure of the lamb is a good example of the decay and death of images.' That is a real stimulus to thought: what is the point of these biblical images? And in particular, what is the meaning of this image of the lamb?

Mr Blenkinsopp is almost as good at concluding his essays. Where he lays himself open to criticism is in between.

Often he does not really get down to the problem presented. When I had finished reading 'The Lamb of God' I was no wiser about images than before, and about lambs I was more confused. In this essay, as in most, there were too many ideas. He usually gives us too much, moving jerkily from one thing to another, with a consequent lack of unity; there is too much irrelevant learning, too many sweeping statements. Let 'Deuteronomy' serve as an example. We find that this book has played a major role in deepening our understanding of the Church; that it is important for its influence on the N.T.; its real relevance is that it is a sermon to the laity (*sic!*); then in a monster paragraph we meet covenant renewal, Sinai, Shechem, Luke's description of Pente-

cost, Qumran, and Christian understanding of redemption in its social aspect ('this is one of the basic themes of this book'). This is followed by covenant ceremonies, including a reference to Hittite disparity treaties, the connection of Deuteronomy with Hosea, and much more besides. At the end of it all what is the ordinary reader supposed to understand about Deuteronomy?

On top of all this, the easy and chatty way of writing easily degenerates into sheer scrappiness and carelessness. 'In the context of the Jewish world of that time, Christianity emerged as from the start a lay-movement and Jesus as a layman who was set on by the priesthood and whose execution was on the score of an attack on the Holy in the form of a blasphemy against the temple than which nothing holier could be conceived.'

In fact, the whole book exudes an atmosphere of carelessness. This is increased by a number of misprints, and by the unfortunate start given to the collection by the first essay. This is an abridgement of a good article that appeared in the CBQ in 1944. Reading it now I was surprised at several curious statements, e.g. that the textbook treatment of the Passion and Death of Jesus 'is generally set out in seven theses', and I found the whole exposition lacking in structure and cohesion. On turning to the original article the explanation was obvious; the abridgement has been very badly done.

It is a pity that Mr Blenkinsopp did not take more trouble with the presentation of what he had to say. He has many good ideas, and some valuable insights into the meaning of Scripture and its relationship with our life today. In his *Foreword* he assures us that the essays have provided a useful basis for discussion groups. I hope this may continue to be so, but I would not myself like to see the book used except under the direction of an expert who could remove misunderstandings and clear up the confusions that will be inevitable if the book is left to itself.

BASIL MORISON, O.C.R.

CONCEPT OF TRUTH AND THEOLOGICAL RENEWAL, *Theological Soundings* 1/2, by Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. *Sheed and Ward*, London and Sydney, 1968, 212 pp. 30s.

'We affirm as a guiding principle that the essential content of the Christian faith is the same for all times, places and circumstances; but that in different times, places and circum-

stances the expression, interpretation, and application must grow out of, and meet, the actual situation, making such particular emphases as are called for.' This statement

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came from a theological conference of the National Christian Council of India (*Our Theological Task*, Marcus Ward, C.L.S. for India, 1946, p. 1). It summarizes a Christian consensus which is also the arena for theological conflict. It is this conflict in its Catholic form which provides the context for this volume of Father Schillebeeckx's collected essays.

Some scholastic theologians are still very much on their guard against the argument of Modernism that religious experience is a permanently unchangeable phenomenon but that all conceptual explication of it is radically changeable. Fr Schillebeeckx agrees in rejection of this Modernist approach but presses as a continuing theological issue the question of the relationship between experience and concept. He insists that Aquinas himself recognized that our concepts always remain creaturely and that there must be a non-conceptual though still intellectual dimension to our knowledge of God. This means that we reach out for God but do not grasp him in understanding, though we are aware that he is to be found in the precise direction in which we are reaching. It is this precision of direction which must be emphasized against Modernism. Dogma is a signpost pointing in the right direction for us to achieve a non-conceptual knowledge of God in his transcendence. What is unchangeable in dogma is, as it were, the orientation of the signpost, not the shape or decoration of it. This does not mean that such a distinction between the essential and the inessential was present to the minds of our fathers in the faith; only when new human experience or new positive data explicitly raise questions is it possible to answer them, as, for instance, when we dissociate the Ascension of Christ from Ptolemaic cosmology.

These views Fr Schillebeeckx holds to be generally accepted throughout the theological world of Western Europe; he supports their attribution to Aquinas in a more technically philosophical appendix. From this interpretative approach to Aquinas he develops in chapter 2 an appreciative but critical study of Max Seckler's 'Instinkt und Glaubenswille nach Thomas von Aquin' (Mainz, 1962). Seckler argues for a normal openness of the human spirit to the Absolute which is not only a powerless need for grace but also a concrete offer of grace, a grace which already prompts man to make an act of faith. Schillebeeckx thinks this goes too far in making concessions to the demand for secularization. What

Aquinas meant is that if God offers grace, this grace is not a 'foreign body' in our life but meaningful to human life. The 'light of faith' introduces a non-conceptual experience into our human existence which is distinct from our mere openness. This is a good example of Fr Schillebeeckx's skill in opening up possibilities of dialogue with Reformed theologians by safeguarding grace from evaporation into nature and faith from confusion with philosophy.

He is well aware also of the restlessness of theological students who find even such a study of Aquinas and his commentators remote from life. Yet while there is 'a rationalizing kind of conceptualism which attempts to enclose the inexpressible in conceptual terms', there is also 'a kind of conceptual thought which leaves the mystery as a mystery and tries somehow to express it precisely as a saving mystery, with the result that these concepts of faith radiate a value for life' (p. 83). Theology is Christological as to its method—it has a basis of salvation history; but theocentric and trinitarian so far as its proper object is concerned—a reflection about the God who addresses us in a plan of salvation. There is moreover a contribution which philosophy has to make whenever we have to do with the intelligibility of reality, even when it is a saving reality. This perception of the unsatisfactory nature of a 'detached' Christology and the need for answers to basic theological and philosophical questions is important for any resolution of the problems inherent in contemporary humanist and existentialist presentations of Jesus. It is therefore disappointing that

the reference on the cover to Rudolf Bultmann is only minimally reflected in the contents.

Fr Schillebeeckx approaches modern thought and non-Roman theology with expectancy and with assurance, believing that, as in the past, dialogue will be an opportunity of grace but that in it the essential content of the Christian faith is to be guarded. He is passionately devoted to the cause of truth in theology, truth which is not relative to pragmatic value, but he is clearly unwilling to say in advance what is incorrigible in Catholic teaching and it is this which exposes him to conservative criticism. On the other hand he is at such pains to stress that theological renewal 'should be seen as a throwing of new light on what was previously latent and unexpressed, but nonetheless implicitly accepted' (p. 127), footnote), that he remains open to the question of Protestants whether Catholic theologians and their Church have not over-extended the range of 'essential content', so that they guard what should be open to change. To be so aware of the importance of balance is to make walking difficult.

In Fr Schillebeeckx's interesting summary of new trends in dogmatic theology (chapter 4) the Protestant may find conservative what to the Catholic is new: Fr Schillebeeckx's understanding of ecumenicity as an integration of the other Christian Churches into the Romana Ecclesia cannot be accepted as adequate by Protestants: but we too (p. 154) 'can only hope that the years after the Vatican Council will honour the authentic gains of the new Catholic theology and give them evangelical expression in the renewal of the outward form of the Church.'

MARTIN H. CRESSEY

**ABSOLUTES IN MORAL THEOLOGY?** Ed. Charles Curran. *Corpus Books*. Washington, 1968. 320 pp. \$6.95.

**CHRISTIAN ETHICS**, by David H. C. Read. *Hodder and Stoughton*, London, 1968. 127 pp. 15s.

**CHRIST AND MORAL THEOLOGY**, by Louis B. Gillon, O.P. *Alba House*, New York, 1967. 144 pp. \$2.95.

Each of these three books has a valuable and helpful contribution to offer to the on-going debate on moral theology. *Christian Ethics*, however, is somewhat different in kind and emphasis to the other two in that it is a general introduction to the whole subject written for the general reader rather than for the specialist. It is an interesting and lucid book, somewhat conservative in tone, but then, as the author points out, 'nothing is duller than the radicalism of the day before yesterday'. It is also a truly theological work. Grace is the 'theological

centre' of the author's exposition; Grace conceived of, not as a sort of celestial syrup measured out to us according to our merits, but as 'Christ meeting us at the point of our greatest need . . . freedom from the burden of sin . . . freedom from the fears that haunt our moral decisions'. David Read is alive to the vastness of the human context, both in its theological and in its social dimensions. He draws from the New Testament the vision of the Christian *koinonia* as a 'more intimate fellowship' within the visible Church (and, I