

as pretentious and vain, and often incoherent. I should prefer to believe he really is not like this, but the interview will not induce anyone to go and read his beautiful poetry, about which it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that nothing is revealed. So with Geoffrey Hill, whose carefully prepared answers are miniature lectures, absurdly pompous and entirely unhelpful. Tom Gunn's interview commences engagingly, but he succumbs to the obvious temptations, despite his awareness of them, and the spark soon goes out. Douglas Dunn comes across disappointingly compared with Tom Paulin, whose aggressiveness is better controlled and does not get in the way, as Dunn's does. "Does indignation possess you" asks Haffenden, "as much as – or more than – any other emotion?" This elicits the reply: "I don't think it's indignation: it's a combination of affront and also of resignation". Much of the Dunn interview is on this level; most of Paulin's is far above it, though he has an irritating habit of simply stepping round the question, and Haffenden has a rather frustrating time of it, as he does with Craig

Raine. Richard Murphy often fails to see the question, and never seems fully engaged; but then he describes himself as an austere epicurean, and that must lend him a certain uniqueness. He does not bring out the best in Haffenden, whose questions tend to be over-elaborate or just badly worded: the strain tells. Haffenden is not at his best with Muldoon either, but the poet comes across better than Murphy.

There is a moment in the Larkin interview in which the poet modestly eschews greatness: "If I seem good, it's because everyone else is so bad" (p 119). It is perhaps a limitation of this book that it does not sufficiently challenge the arrogance of that assertion. However, it is, ultimately, Haffenden's book, and his intelligence and discernment that make it interesting, sometimes in spite of the poets. They get a bit of doubtful publicity, but the reader of contemporary poetry is given a lesson on what sort of questions he ought to be asking his poets; and perhaps it is those glimpses which are, eventually, of most value.

FRANK McCOMBIE

AN APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY by Bishop Christopher Butler.

Collins 1981 pp 300 £2.95.

This is a straightforward and fairly traditional essay in Christian apologetics. It is clearly written in a personal and readable style. It manages to avoid being technical without becoming superficial. Some repetition might have been avoided without loss of clarity to the argument, but in general the form and balance of the book are well conceived and executed.

It begins with making out the case for acknowledging the reality of God, or as Butler prefers to say in view of the widespread misunderstanding of the word 'God', the Absolute Mystery. The argument is well and, in my judgment, cogently conducted. But I am unhappy about

the *kind* of cogency that is claimed for such a process of reasoning. I do not think it can properly be called 'conclusive' (p 138), nor can I accept that 'philosophy can convey certainty of the reality of the Absolute Mystery which we call God' (p 280). Does such a claim do justice to the continuing struggle of faith in face of the world's evil? The analysis that Butler uses in his discussion of evil – the headmaster who takes the risk that there will be bullying in his school and the oarsman who accepts the discomfort involved in a university boat race (pp 134-5) – may have some analogical value, but there is a measured urbanity about their presentation

which fails to convey the depth of the problem with which he is grappling at this point.

The same sort of duality of response characterised my reaction to the more specifically Christian and historical parts of the discussion also. The general direction of the argument is sound, and important evidence is fairly and helpfully set out. But the conclusions are often more precise than the evidence seems to me to warrant. Thus the case for not finding a critical approach to the Bible any barrier to seeing it as a source of divine truth is well made out. But does it really allow us to go on saying that Scripture is without error, even in the qualified sense of error that concerns only 'the substance of the divinely-willed revelation' (p 90)? The need for a would-be Christian to commit himself to an actual historical group is rightly affirmed. But is it equally clear that 'by divine will the "Church" . . . will always take shape in history as a single "communion of the faithful"' (p 222)? Why should not the sin that mars its intend-

ed holiness not have marred its desired historical unity also? Again, the positive aspects of the institutional life of the Church are rightly insisted on. But is there really ground for claiming that such a Church will include 'authorised teachers of the revealed truth, who can guarantee the truth of their preaching, because this preaching has the authority and the guidance of the divine Spirit' (p 257)?

So the general thrust of the argument of the book is warmly to be welcomed, despite the hesitation I may feel about some of its more specific claims. It is to those who share something of the classical culture and heritage, which mean so much to Bishop Butler, who are most likely to be helped by its particular approach. To say that such are a minority of his contemporaries, is not so much a criticism of the book as a recognition of the continuing need for other books of similar intention but whose primary background lies in some other aspect of our culture.

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