

wonder about God and his work, but with this there comes usually the uneasy feeling that God will blame them for responding to the encounter in this way. Such attitudes are so riddled with ambiguity that one can hardly

THE FABER BOOK OF RELIGIOUS VERSE, edited by Helen Gardner. *Faber and Faber*, 1972. 377 pp. £3.75.

At about a penny a page, this book is extraordinarily good value. It does everything that an anthology should do: it contains enough of everybody's favourites to give the reader a satisfying feeling of being at home in a more or less common culture—for instance, there is a sprinkling of well-known hymns like 'When I survey the wondrous cross'; 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' and 'Little Gidding' are printed in full, and the editor's own translation of 'The Dream of the Rood'. But enough of the editor's personal preference also shows through, giving us the chance to extend our horizons by entering into *her* enjoyment of certain writers and poems. For instance, never before have I got so much delight from reading George Herbert, whom I have always enjoyed (the selection is very original and helpful); or, funnily enough, from Isaac Watts. On the other hand, there is enough missed out to give each reader the chance to indulge in delightful indignation that—whatever it may be—has been omitted, and so to rediscover afresh his own preferences. For myself, I would gladly have traded in all the Romantic contributions for, perhaps, 'The Dream of Gerontius' (neither Newman nor Faber features at all), and perhaps one or two of Clive Sansom's delightful Festival of Britain pieces.

The poems are presented in strictly chronological order, and we are invited by the editor to notice how the poems of different periods show the different religious moods and attitudes of those periods; the whole arrangement clearly reflects Dr Gardner's interest in the general relationship between religion and poetry. To some extent the limitations of a Book of Verse thwart this particular concern. Some major literary monuments do not really lend themselves to excerpting for anthologies. Dr Gardner makes no attempt to include anything from 'Paradise Lost', and personally I don't find her abridged Passus 18 of *Piers Plowman* all that successful—as with most poems of heroic bulk, it is precisely the bulk that contributes much of the effect. Further, in the Middle Ages, on the whole, verse was rather a 'hack' medium for religious writers, their more serious and exalted reflections being reserved for prose.

Evil is really a logical problem only for those who have stopped believing in God anyway.

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All the same, a great deal does come through, and I think this anthology gives us a good feel of the varying religious inspiration of different periods of our history (except the modern, which is seriously, though perhaps inevitably, under-represented).

Naturally most of the poems are Christian; but not all: the early nineteenth-century poems given here are religious in a typically indeterminate kind of way. Is it just a prejudice on my part, or is it the case that clear religious beliefs make for much better poetry? The Romantic verse given here strikes me as unbearably fluffy and turgid—in an attempt to be non-dogmatically mystical, it succeeds only in being obscure and vague. Hopkins, by contrast, rediscovering both the old faith and the old rhythms, makes a far more definite impact, without in any way either eliminating the mystical sense of nature sought after by the Romantics, or reducing everything to intellectualist order.

One apparent eccentricity in this anthology is the inclusion of a few satirical poems about false religion, and also poems expressing religious doubt, rather than faith. I don't quite see that these really fit in, if we start, as Dr Gardner says she does, with religion defined in terms of commitment. I would have thought that satirical and doubting poems would be more poems about religion, than religious poems. But, after all, even an anthology of religious verse does not set out, strictly, to be a religious book; the editor's concern is, rightly, with the literature and not with the religion, and satire and doubts are certainly part of the literary picture. This is only a very minor complaint; and so is my occasional feeling that the notes (usually very helpful) could have given us sometimes a little more information about the poets' own religious and denominational commitment (after all, at the time of the Reformation and again in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, denominational allegiance was often a major element in religious sensibility). On the whole, this is a thoroughly enjoyable book; and parts of it are—an added bonus—quite spiritually uplifting as well.

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