

Reviews

HOW THE CHURCHES GOT TO BE THE WAY THEY ARE by Gavin White. *SCM Press*, 1990 Pp viii + 120.

Gavin White, who lectures on Church History at Glasgow University, offers us a spirited review of the fortunes of Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, since about 1700. He concentrates on the Anglo-Saxon world but devotes his concluding chapters of his brisk outline to the Soviet Union, Ecumenism, the Vatican Councils and what he calls the 'Great Decline' of the mainstream Churches since about 1880. His text reflects the greater freedom which has characterised much writing on church history since the 1960s: the Ecumenical Movement (he says) failed, the Vatican Councils settled little, the end of the great decline of western Christianity is not in sight. Nevertheless, he doesn't despair, but quotes Scott Holland who in 1914, when the Anglican Bishop of Zanzibar anxiously asked where the Church stood, replied that it did not stand at all, but 'moves and pushes and slides and staggers and falls and gets up again, and stumbles on and presses forward and falls into the right position after all'. Holland's sentimental Anglicanism was already *vieux jeu* in 1914, but this is the authentic note of the committed church historian for whom the Churches can never finally get to be the way they shouldn't be, or, as Gavin White himself puts it, 'the church ... never quite goes on the rocks'.

Dr White is presumably content with Holland's opinion, for it appears again on the back of the cover as a summary of his approach, and it controls his discussion of the 'great decline', for example, in which he challenges the idea that what has gone wrong has done so inside the church 'and so can be corrected by more faith, more new-fashioned theology, more old-fashioned theology, more good works, or whatever it is that will make the church irresistible to modern people'. The decline (he says) seems to be found throughout the western world and therefore does not depend on the strategy of any particular church. He concludes that 'if a population does not want Christianity, there is nothing the Church can do about it', but that 'if a population does want Christianity the people will join churches and if they do not like them change them from within.' In the recent past, as White sees it, the Churches have suffered greatly from the fashionable nominalism of the post-1960s, but they may now hope to benefit from the equally fashionable foundationalism, not to say 'fundamentalism', of the 1990s. Such social and economic swings may determine the fate of the Church at a particular moment, but they are temporary; they never affect the core of the Church's existence. For the committed church historian (and presumably for White) the final triumph of the Church is guaranteed by supernatural power.

If this is true, it doesn't matter so much how the Churches got to be the way they are: the causes of a century of decline are peripheral

because the sources of recovery are eternal. As for the internal history of the churches, Dr White offers an analysis in terms of an oscillation between a theology which is pessimistic about human nature and concentrates on the atonement, and a rival theology which is optimistic about human nature and regards the incarnation as the critical event in Christian activity. Social and economic circumstances favoured the optimistic, liberal theology for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but as free-market capitalism threatens to destroy the planet the Augustinian tradition is becoming dominant once again.

This is a rather passive view of church history, one which has much truth in it, but also leaves the impression that with the aid of the occasional supernatural push the Church is bound to fall in the right place in the longer run. Himself more influenced by contemporary opinion than perhaps he realises, Dr White takes it for granted that what he has to do is to show that nineteenth-century Christians were somehow innocent, were not doing anything 'wrong', in the sense that Professor E.R. Norman, for example, thinks that they were 'wrong' to dabble in left-of-centre political opinions: instead, Victorian religious leaders were simply being 'Christian' in a social context over which they had little control and which inclined them to share the political judgements of those around them. If the sources of the 'great decline' are beyond Christian control then the Churches are not to be criticised. Such a conclusion is itself open to criticism. 'World Missions', for example, are discussed here chiefly in terms of Africa, not of China, where a passive view of 'Church History' is more difficult to sustain. And when Dr White devotes a chapter to the farcical internal conflicts of 19th-century Wesleyanism he pays too much attention to sociology: the root of the sickness was religious. But the idea of the Church whose errors are always passive, and whose virtues are always active, is one that the church historian will not easily abandon.

JOHN KENT

DYING WE LIVE: A NEW ENQUIRY INTO THE DEATH OF JESUS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT by Kenneth Grayston. *Darton, Longman & Todd*. 1990. Pp. viii + 496. £30.

This is a large book in every way, a text of 369 pages, four appendices, 59 pages of notes, plus the usual indices, though strangely lacking one of modern authors. Grayston introduces himself as neither a preacher nor a systematic theologian 'even if the language I use may sometimes suggest that I hope to be both.' Rather, the substance of the book serves as an exegetical enquiry where readers are invited 'to enter with understanding and imagination, into the thoughts of people whose view of the world was very different from ours.' If preachers and theologians draw out the consequences of Grayston's proposals, 'I think they should find themselves with room to move, liberated from the tight restraints of stock theories (which often now seem implausible or offensive). No