

Reviews

ON CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY by Rowan Williams *Blackwell, Oxford, 2000. Pp. xvi + 310, £50.00 hbk, £16.99 pbk.*

Rowan Williams is a masterly theologian and a neatly cohering religious thinker. His skills of analysis and explanation are amply in evidence throughout his latest book, *On Christian Theology*. The book serves the valuable purpose of gathering together between two covers eighteen previously published texts that are introduced by a new prologue. The texts were initially published between 1980 and 1998. Collectively, they are the fruit of Williams' rich and varied experiences during that time. He theologizes now on the commanding basis of having taught theology in each of the world's five continents and in the light of his labours as a parish priest, bishop, and more recently, as the Archbishop of Wales.

The chapters of *On Christian Theology* are divided into five major parts reflecting their author's primary theological interests. Part One is devoted to defining the enterprise of Christian theology. Williams' enthusiasm for the work of Dietrich Ritschl is manifest. The second, entitled 'The Act of God', deals mainly with divine creation, God's incarnation, Christ's finality, and the Holy Spirit. Part Three contains three chapters elaborating Williams' Trinitarian understanding of God. The fourth part is principally concerned with sacraments, while the fifth deals with ethics and contemporary Christian living.

Cumulatively, the chapters present a profoundly erudite and notionally nuanced understanding of Christian theology. Rowan Williams is admirably irenic in his writing. That is, he is able to enter into conversation with a wide range of views other than his own without relying on acrimonious name-calling or intellectual back-stabbing in order to justify his positions. He gently reminds his readers that 'the impatience of some modern Anglo-Saxon theologians with the dogmatic tradition sometimes seems in part an impatience with debate, conflict, ambivalence, polysemy, paradox. And this is at heart an impatience with learning, and with learning about our learning' (p. 132). Consistently, he argues his case calmly, prudently, politely, and insightfully. Throughout the book he exercises a rigorous technique of unravelling and formulating complex questions. He appears as at ease discussing biblical exegesis as he is making judgements on analytical philosophy. The discussion of early Trinitarian thought in chapter eight deploys an expert knowledge of patristics, just as chapter twelve displays a ready familiarity with contemporary Jesus research.

The scope of this book is vast. It involves highly informative discussions of Christian origins, divine revelation, sacred scripture, church history, patristics, biblical studies, Christology, contemporary philosophies, politics, racism, and ethics. However, among these and many other topics four tend to dominate: the nature of Christian theology; God understood as a Trinity;

Jesus Christ; and Christian life today. The text is richly documented with footnotes. Hence, the distracting, though all-too-common, necessity of having to interrupt a flow of reading to find endnotes is thereby avoided.

The prologue to the book is significant since it discusses the work's aim and method. In the prologue Williams announces that the underlying purpose of the book is not to advance a single theological system, but to display various modes of arguing and interpreting. For Williams, theology involves '... forming a reflectively consistent speech for God'(p. xiii). And the meanings of the word 'God' are to be discovered by watching the various activities of a community when it worships, imagines, educates and acts. In the remainder of the book, Williams stresses that a theologian needs to be involved in a worshipping community (see p. 146) because '... if theology is the untangling of the real grammar of religious practice, its subject is, humanly and specifically, people who pray' (p. 13). In the prologue Williams further elaborates his understanding of theology by outlining a typology of theological activity that reflects Friedrich Schleiermacher's threefold distinction between theological styles that are either poetic, rhetorical, or descriptively didactic. Williams speaks of celebratory, communicative, and critical styles. For him, the starting-point of theology is located in the language of hymnody and preaching. Theology becomes communicative when it seeks to commend the conviction of its celebratory style to an uncommitted environment. It becomes critical when it pushes itself to resolve issues of conceptual clarity.

The ninth chapter of this book is an excellent example of a contemporary critical theology. The chapter explores the vexed question of divine revelation. Theological debates over revelation were intense throughout the twentieth century and continue today. Those who conclude that theology is a work of human imaginative conceptual construction are disinclined to appeal to divine revelation. For others, though, it is only possible to speak of God on the basis of revelation because God is not a particular kind of thing that is available for our inspection. Since people cannot locate and inspect God, what God's will and action have shown them stands as the basis of their language about God. According to Williams, the point of speaking of revelation is to underscore that before people speak of God they are addressed or called by God. The initiative, so to speak, lies with God. To elaborate further his understanding of revelation Williams relies on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneusis of the idea of revelation. He concludes that revelation concerns what is *generative* in human experience. Generative experiences are those that disrupt existing ways of living and frames of reference, so as to initiate or generate new possibilities of life (see p. 134).

All of which can be clarified even further with reference to Jesus Christ. The language of revelation is bound up with the Church's memory of Jesus. He is remembered as one who generated new possibilities of living, not simply for one race or social group, but for all human beings. His words and actions are generative or revelatory in that they sharply challenge current exploitative human arrangements and offer new possibilities of living. The

character of his life, death, and resurrection is revelatory because his life generates, breaks open, and extends possible ways of being human just as a poem is revelatory in that 'it manifests an initiative that is not ours in inviting us to a world we did not make' (p. 134). Moreover, to associate with Jesus involves '... a far-reaching reconstruction of one's humanity: a liberation from servile, distorted, destructive patterns in the past, a liberation from anxious dread of God's judgement, a new identity in a community of reciprocal love and complementary service, whose potential horizons are universal' (p. 138). Williams regards Jesus' reconstruction of humanity, liberating people from the dominance of past patterns, as Godlike. He concludes that "God" reveals himself effectively means 'that the meaning of the word "God" establishes itself among us as the loving and nurturing advent of *newness* in human life—grace, forgiveness, empowerment to be the agents of forgiveness and liberation' (p. 145).

Rowan Williams' interpretation of revelation, mentioned with brutal brevity here, is just one of several engaging discourses on Christian theology in this splendidly incisive and thought-provoking book. In the highly pluralized and frequently conflictual world of contemporary theology here is a clear and steady voice.

PHILIP KENNEDY OP

WITNESS TO HOPE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II by George Weigel *Harper Collins, New York, 1999. Pp. xiv + 992, £25.00 hbk.*

Among the major achievements that George Weigel attributes to John Paul II are: a radical recasting of the papacy by returning the office to its evangelical roots; a conscientious implementation of Vatican II; a pivotal role in the collapse of communism; a clarification of the moral challenges facing the post-conciliar church; a commitment to ecumenism; a path-breaking dialogue with Judaism; and an unprecedented commitment to inter-religious dialogue. Needless to say the list will raise many eyebrows, but it will look more convincing after a close reading of Weigel's wise attempt to avoid categories of "right" and "left", "conservative" and "progressive", and to tell the story of John Paul's life and work from the inside. Weigel's friendship with the pope himself and his close access to his advisors and collaborators have equipped him well for the task. The result is probably the best biography currently available.

A problem is that these very qualities are apt to provide Weigel's (and John Paul's) critics with the bulk of their ammunition. On occasions they lead to accounts that fail to convince even the most sympathetic of readers. To give but a handful of examples: Weigel tries to make a case for the alleged success of John Paul's 1980 visits to Brazil and Germany; he avoids difficult issues, such as whether the pope was justified to intervene in the internal governance of the Society of Jesus in 1981; he praises the new canonisation process, failing to acknowledge that it has allowed some rather dubious cases (notably the Mexican Juan Diego, for whom there is simply no historical record) to slip through the net.