

a text not only for scholars and historians, but for anyone who is concerned with

christian spirituality in theory or in practice.

SIMON TUGWELL O. P.

WHAT IS A GOSPEL? The genre of the canonical Gospels by Charles H. Talbert *SPCK London 1978. Fortress Press 1977 pp 147 paperback £3.50*

This is an important subject but not a good book. The approach is polemical rather than heuristic. Basic issues, like what 'genre' is and how it can be defined, and whether the four canonical gospels are examples of the same genre, receive little attention. Important evidence is ignored. Goulder's midrashic hypothesis is refuted, but otherwise nothing is said about possible connexions with Old Testament writings.

Professor Talbert is concerned to support the thesis that the four Gospels belong to the biographical genre of antiquity i.e. not that they are biographies in the sense that we would use the word today, but that they conform to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography. He divides his study into three main sections: mythic structure, cultic function, and attitude, headings he has borrowed from Bultmann.

In Chapter two he focuses attention on the myth of the Immortals, legendary figures like Hercules, who, because of their beneficence, are rewarded with a share in the world to come. He tells us that 'the average Mediterranean man in the street' would recognise Hellenistic-Jewish Christology and the synoptic Gospels as examples of the myth of the Immortal. There are three obvious weaknesses in the argument. Firstly, most of the Graeco-Roman evidence cited comes from the second or third centuries A.D. Secondly some of the evidence is less than convincing (e.g. that Moses was considered to be an Immortal), and thirdly and most significantly, the structure of the Graeco-Roman biographies is strikingly different from the structures of Hellenistic-Jewish Christology and of the synoptic Gospels. Professor Talbert admits that he has found no parallel in the Graeco-Roman biographies to the idea of pre-existence or to the belief in the Parousia, or to the exclusiveness to the claim to Lordship made for Jesus. In addition, he has not discussed the meaning of 'resurrection'.

In chapter three, he argues that the fourth Gospel shares the structure of a Hellenistic-Jewish redeemer myth, but he fails to provide convincing evidence that such a myth existed. His reference to wisdom personified and to the occasional visits of angelic figures does little to explain the Johannine structure: pre-existence, incarnation, signs and discourses, death and resurrection.

Chapter four is about cultic function. Professor Talbert divides Graeco-Roman biographies with a moral function into five types, of which the second, which is concerned to dispel a false impression of the subject and set a true account in its place as a pattern for the reader to copy, is identified as the type corresponding to that of the four canonical Gospels. However, the Gospels are concerned not only with moral questions but also with metaphysical questions. Very little evidence is cited to connect any of the Graeco-Roman biographies with a cult.

The final chapter discusses attitude or mood. Professor Talbert is correct in questioning whether the eschatological outlook of the canonical Gospels should be called 'world-denying' but he fails to raise the important question: What relevance does the eschatological outlook have in determining the genre? It seems to me to be a central element in the mythic structure and should have been discussed in chapters two and three where it is ignored.

Under this same heading: attitude, Professor Talbert goes on to discuss what he calls the method of 'inclusive reinterpretation' used by the Gospel writers. This describes the way in which each writer drew together older sets of materials, like sayings or miracles, into a coherent whole to present a new and fuller picture. 'Inclusive reinterpretation' is a method used commonly in works of philosophy, history, biography and fiction and it is left unclear how such a general description of method

helps to define the genre.

In general, my criticisms of the book amount to this. Professor Talbert ignores the importance of details. It is true that 'the parts can be understood only through the whole', but it is equally true that 'the whole can be understood only through its parts'. When an interpreter meets details

which are baffling in terms of the expectations of the genre thesis, he should wonder whether he has made a mistake. The main value of the book lies in the references to relevant literature.

MARGARET PAMMENT

THE KINGDOM OF LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE, the Encounter between Orthodoxy and the West, by A. M. Allchin Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1979 pp 214 £3.95

Looking first at the chapter headings the friends of Donald Allchin may be inclined to expect the mixture as before, persuasive but not convincing to anyone not already involved with the Christian East. Chapters are given to Symeon 'the new theologian', to Ann Griffiths and to Grundtvig. Then after four chapters on Anglican tradition we return again to personal studies of F. D. Maurice, Evelyn Underhill and Vladimir Lossky. The new character is Nathan Scott, a priest of the American Episcopal Church 'who has held chairs of theology and of English', important 'particularly perhaps as one who sees the world from inside a black and not a white skin'. He comes in the second chapter, 'The Fall of the "God-thing"', after 'Orthodoxy and the debate about God', as an interpreter of Heidegger, speaking of 'that which is transcendent of every particular being, yet present in every being as the power whereby it is enabled to be'. He is in sympathy with a 'minority tradition in Western religious and philosophical thought', reaching 'from Ruysbroeck through Angelus Silesius to Paul Tillich and from Eckhart and Boehme to Nicolas Berdyaev'. But he does not seem to be aware of affinities between this and the Orthodox East.

In the following chapters persistent attempts are made to persuade readers of the relevance of contemplative experience to theological understanding, and to meet objections made to the mysticism of Ann Griffiths, to the religion of the heart in Grundtvig, to the Platonism of F. D. Maurice, and to the style of Evelyn Underhill. Most of these are objections to taking seriously the development of the Christian religion after the New Testament. They are made to Roman Catholicism as well as to

Eastern Orthodoxy. In so far as Catholics continue to have reserves about the theological influences of spirituality, they are reserved against influences actually exercised at the present day and at all times in Christian history. What kept the Catholic religion credible in England in the eighteenth century were the spiritual writings of John Gother and Richard Challoner. But it may be significant that in this book while Western objections to Eastern Orthodoxy are treated as common to Catholic and Protestant, nothing is said about debate between Catholics, for instance in *Irenikon* and *Istina*, about the interpretation of the Greek Fathers by Lossky and other Orthodox.

This is a theological debate about spiritual experience. No doubt some contributions to it are coloured by scholastic approaches developed while spirituality and theology were kept distinct, but the separation has never been complete. There have always been complaints about the theological influence of the wrong pious books, and good theology in spiritual writings has constantly been commended. This book is a valiant attempt to involve Anglicans in a debate where their contribution is and could be of great use. It will be of use to Catholics as throwing fresh light on the Orthodox contribution to the present discussion of the nature of theology, as well as on what could be gained from F. D. Maurice and David Jenkins, but I do not think that Catholics need to be convinced that spirituality is a matter for theological discussion. Anglicans do, and I hope that this time Donald Allchin may convince them. I fear that the appeal to experience will be written off as not common sense.

GEORGE EVERY