

convincing accounts so far of the genuine 'promise' in a theological movement that has at times seemed likely to become a mere fad. By way of clearing the ground he surveys the progress of 'narrative theology' from its beginnings in the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, and shows that 'narrative' and 'story' have sometimes been almost empty counters, standing for nothing in particular or oscillating between a very precise meaning (e.g. particular genres within Scripture or other Christian writing) and a very loose one (as where 'the Christian story' means, in effect 'the Christian world-view'). His own proposal is that language about narrative in theology belongs to the doctrine of *revelation*. The first part of the book shows that there is a crisis in the (Protestant) churches about revelation: a loss of nerve, resulting in either a mere sell-out to secular culture or a nervous retreat to some form of religious obscurantism (e.g. fundamentalism). What is needed is some fresh way of asserting the objective reality of revelation which avoids the many pitfalls into which the doctrine has fallen since the heyday of Neo-orthodoxy. Stroup's proposal is that revelation is an event rather than a body of information, and that it occurs at the point where a person's perception of his own autobiography or story collides with the story in which the Christian community expresses its own corporate identity—a story which includes but is not simply to be identified with the scriptural narrative running from Abraham to the resurrection, and a story, moreover, which is rooted not merely in its own 'meaningfulness' or 'narrativity' but in genuine historical events. As he goes on to show, 'A description of Christian identity as that confessional narrative which emerges from the collision between the *Credo* narratives of the Christian community and an individual's personal identity narrative has important implications for what Christians mean by revelation, faith, confession, and conversion'. (p. 198). This is illustrated with a few sample studies, for example, a narrative account of the doctrine of justification by faith; but there are (tantalising) hints that it could be applied to less obviously congenial doctrines, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. 'The doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian answer to the question, "Who is the person that is identified as 'God' in the church's narrative history?"... The claim that personal identity is always an interpretation of personal history applies to all persons—human beings and the triune God'. (p. 246).

When the potential scope of a model for a complete systematic theology is so far-reaching, a book of a couple of hundred pages is obviously no more than an impressionistic essay, and the author clearly intends his work to be seen in this way. He tries his model out on various classics, such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, with a pleasing blend of adventurousness and tentativeness. Maybe the model is too frail to stand up to more rigorous application. It would be particularly interesting to try to use it within a Catholic framework, with the somewhat different assumptions about the likely locus of revelation that would apply there. The present reviewer is deeply attracted to 'narrative theology' as a *style*, but suspects that the vagueness of the term, despite Stroup's attempt to give it more definition, may turn out to be incorrigible in the end and to preclude its use as the basis of a *system*. Meanwhile few readers will fail to be stimulated by this fresh and attractive essay.

JOHN BARTON

HEALING AS SACRAMENT by Martin Israel. Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1984. Pp. 116. £3.95.

A book of this title, by somebody who is an Anglican priest in charge of a London parish and lecturer in pathology at the Royal College of Surgeons, well known as lecturer, retreat-giver and broadcaster, promises well.

The contents bear out this promise. Beginning with a brief evocation of the chemical, emotional, rational and spiritual dimensions of health, suggestively correlated in terms of the notion of *vis medicatrix naturae*, or 'healing power of nature', he goes on in a series of ten further chapters to reflect on various components and aspects of

healing in the light of relevant passages from the gospels. Thus he deals successively with active faith as an 'openness to the potentiality of life itself'; the act of contrition in respect of unrelieved resentment and unforgiven guilt; the refashioning of the will seen as the emergence from the 'shadows of non-commitment'; the removal of obstructions of an 'ego-conscious vision' so as to make room for communal concern; deliverance from evil in the form either of a personal moral disorder or something that infests society as a whole; the sacraments (especially the eucharist, holy unction and the Church itself); prayer as the 'heart of healing' and God's attitude to healing; the gift of healing, its nature, conditions and its connection with 'authoritative teaching ministry' and with counselling; the problem raised by those 'who apparently fail to be healed' and the place of this apparent failure in the total scheme of the restoration of the cosmos; and finally with the vision of this total scheme in terms of the resurrection not so much of the individual body as of all matter.

The content of the book is thus rich. Yet something is amiss. One looks for the presiding idea of the book. The Prologue opens with the statement that the 'ministry of healing is often disturbingly fragmented due to sectional loyalties'. This suggests that the idea is to draw together the centrifugal tendencies of healing by centring them on God. But this is not what the book is really about. The opening statement therefore comes across as an after-thought and a distraction. The focus is blurred.

Nor is this the only indication of a certain looseness of thought. Thus there are many unexplained logical leaps in the exposition. The binding notion is that of healing but reference is also made to St. Peter's idea of sharing in God's own nature, without bringing the two together. Dr Israel is therefore re-presenting the older idea of *gratia* as *sanans* and as *elevans* but without the organising correlation of, say, St. Thomas Aquinas. The wider use of the term sacrament as 'outward sign and portent of a spiritual reality' (p. 65) and the narrower ritual used are juxtaposed, again without any indication of their mutual connection. The description of the 'sacrament of penance' as a 'most useful healing aid' (p. 24) suggests what is at best a very vapid sense of sacramental efficacy and at worst a disturbingly humanistic one. The play on the theme of light at pp. 49–50, successively presented as penetrating source, medium and object is confusing and suggests confusion. And perhaps most telling of all is the reference to 'a deeper centre of moral decision which is traditionally called the soul' (p. 3, and see, e.g. p. 23). This ignores two important things: not only the tradition of the Aristotelian notion of the psyche or soul as a double *entelechy* or actualisation, not only potentiality but operation, or, the other way round, not only, as we might say nowadays, performance but competence; it also ignores the strenuous contemporary effort to undo the Cartesian notion of the soul so brilliantly reported and represented in a series of articles in this journal by our confrère Fergus Kerr.

At the same time, scattered through this book are several sharp and illuminating insights. For example: 'The cause of a failed healing is often ambivalence in the basic attitude to life: one half of the person wants to move onwards to scale the spiritual heights while the other half prefers the seductive comfort of inertia' (p. 38); 'When the mind is not focussed on a teaching of high spiritual potency, the entire personality begins to vacillate in its purpose' (p. 44); 'Love is not clinically detached, neither is it passionately possessive' (p. 81)

So the impression one gathers is that the book is the product of a man with a darting mind as well as a warm heart who has yielded to pressure—from the publishers perhaps?—to throw the book together before the many good ideas have gelled. This is a pity because, as it stands, it is only a quarter of the book it could have been with greater rigour of thinking and less streaming of consciousness.

MARCUS LEFÉBURE OP