

Reviews

THE TURNINGS OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT: ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY by Kenneth Surin. *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989. Pp xv + 316. £35.*

This is a much more difficult book to read than books of theology in English usually are. This is partly due to rigorous professionalism (there are seventy pages of often quite extensive notes at the back), but mostly because the author's interests and enthusiasms extend far beyond conventional theology. The thirteen essays, written between 1975 and 1987, display a fairly radical change of perspective about 1984 but since, for some reason which he does not explain, the author has chosen to present them in the order in which the topics would be treated in the standard theology course (from prolegomena through God and Christology to ecclesiology—*very roughly*) rather than in chronological order of composition, the book becomes even more difficult to follow.

The story of Kenneth Surin's change of perspective goes as follows. Trained as a philosopher in the analytic style he took to what passes, in that tradition, as philosophy of religion. The first essay in the book, for example, is a (nicely constructed) study of the theory of analogy in the work of Thomas Aquinas, referring a lot to such authors as E.L. Mascall, H.P. Owen and J.F. Ross. The last essay in the book, wrestling with Keith Ward's Cadbury Lectures, opens with a salvo of such names as Richard Swinburne and Brian Davies. As a result of studying the work of T.W. Adorno, one of the founders of the so-called Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Surin became convinced that philosophy in the analytic tradition is hopelessly ahistorical and theory-orientated. He now felt the need to situate philosophical reflections in their historical particularity. It became clear that modern discussions of theism, far from being as timeless and neutral as they appeared, were deeply marked by certain seventeenth-century developments. Discovering what he calls 'the Cartesian-Lockean cognitive paradigm' permitted him not only to free himself from the confines of his training but also to mount his vigorous attack on David Brown's recent book *The Divine Trinity* (chapter 2), accusing Brown of 'cognitional positivism'. Surin also realized from his study of Adorno (who is a kind of Marxist) that *all* intellectual work, theology and philosophy included, either addresses or evades *practical* problems in the thinker's historical situation. It is not clear, to me at least, that Surin puts this insight to work, after his change of perspective, any more effectively than he already does, for example, in his remarkable essay on *Sophie's Choice*—the novel, not the film (one of the two essays in the book, incidentally, which first appeared in *New Blackfriars*). As he 'transcended' analytic philosophy of religion, Kenneth Surin turned more and more towards theology in the classical tradition, from Irenaeus to Aquinas: 'a theological speech that was rooted from the very outset in a wide range of faith-bounded activities and forms of life' (page 32). This turn in his work is perhaps just visible in the later essays on Lindbeck (chapter 10), Bonhoeffer and Adorno (chapter 11) and the

disputes between Yale and Chicago theologians in the 'post-liberal' era (chapter 12)—but you certainly have to know what you are looking for! In fact these essays visibly owe far less to Irenaeus and company than they do to Nicholas Lash, Gareth Evans, Sabina Lovibond, Walter Benjamin and above all Frederic Jameson. While certainly 'ecclesiology-minded' (page 202), Surin's theological writing is interwoven by a wide range of literary-critical and socio-political theory. It is appropriate, and surely not surprising, that the founder-editor of the highly successful quarterly *Modern Theology*, now resident in North Carolina, should be writing theology in the same universe of discourse as readers of Adorno (as well as Aquinas), Roland Barthes (as well as Karl Barth), Cornelius Castoriadis (as well as Cornelius Ernst), Julia Kristeva (as well as Donald MacKinnon), Richard Rorty (as well as Karl Rahner), and other such exotic couplings.

An unreviewable book, then. Every other page inspires and requires an essay-length response. It may sound eclectic, modish, inaccessible and even terrifying. But the names are not being capriciously dropped—the extensive footnotes show how solid and illuminating the connections are. This is one of the rare books in which theology shows signs of having joined the modern world.

FERGUS KERR OP

MEDITATING UPON GOD'S WORD: PRELUDE TO PRAYER AND ACTION by Peter Toon. *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London. 1988. Pp. viii + 103. £3.95.

In a brief Introduction, a sketch of traditional Christian meditation, Peter Toon proposes a definition of meditation: 'The mental activity—the mental prayer if you like—of attempting to see ourselves in the light of God's revealed will and truth, as that is recorded in the sacred Scriptures and summed up and contained in the "Word made Flesh", the exalted Lord Jesus Christ' (p. 3). He asserts that if we are to engage in true contemplation of God, 'our souls need to be stimulated, fed and directed by the content and dynamism of God's revelation, written in Scripture' (p. 10). As sentiment, unexceptionable. The pity is: this book conveys little of that 'dynamic'.

The opening chapter seeks to establish the difference between study of and meditation upon the Scriptures. It is claimed that while God does not require all his children to study (in an academic sense) the Bible, he does expect all to meditate upon his revelation. Fair enough. By way of illustration is a study of Psalm 1 followed by a meditation on it. The study tells us that the psalm contrasts righteous and wicked. The righteous is happy now and looks forward to greater happiness in paradise. The consequent meditation is correspondingly bland. The study ought to have shown that the perspective of the psalmist is this-worldly: retribution (theoretically) happens in this life. But, of course, it does not work so in practice. The psalm challenges us to question that theology of retribution and yet to accept the justice of God, enigmatic though it be. A meditation which had respected this real 'dynamic' would be anything but bland.

The rest of Part One (chs 1-4) follows a staidly traditional line, pointing out that meditation on Scripture leads to union with Jesus (as Risen Lord)