

**ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY AND THE ELUSIVENESS OF DOCTRINE** by Paul Avis.  
*SPCK, London, 1986. 142 + p. £5.95.*

In the Preface the author writes that the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission's (ARCIC's) *Final Report* in 1982 'originally provoked the writing of this book' (p. ix) which expanded in purpose till here 'The ARCIC documents are subjected to analysis as a foil to the developing argument'. 'The result' we are told (*ibid.*) 'is an attempt to specify the theological horizons of an ecumenical theology'. Not surprisingly, if one considers the book's point of departure, the two main sides of this 'ecumenical' divide are the Roman Catholic and the Anglican, but Avis makes it clear from the outset that he is presenting the Anglican case as he sees it, intending a 'critical' and 'constructive' building up of Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue towards—he suggests later—at least the limited goal of intercommunion.

In point of fact, as the argument develops, one cannot escape the impression that the author entertains a deep-seated animus against the Roman Catholic Church as an institution if not as a community of believers and that the ARCIC documents serve as the whipping sticks of Avis' hostility. The book turns out to be a passionate 'Protestant' protest, in the name of Anglicanism, against what are perceived to be the official doctrines and attitudes of the Roman Church, especially as these are embodied in the ARCIC documents. As a result it is difficult to see how Avis intended a constructive ecumenical outcome.

Though there is much exegesis of what ARCIC says, Avis intends his thesis to strike much deeper. His point is that the products of ARCIC are but the tip of the iceberg—underlying them are fundamental issues of theological method, of the nature of knowledge and truth, of authority, revelation, theological consensus and pluralism. This is a good point and well worth making. The issues are discussed in confrontational terms, however, as between the Anglican and Roman stances. The contrasts are invariably made so as to show the Roman position in a poor light. Anglicanism has a 'personal' understanding of truth, Roman Catholicism a 'propositional'; Anglicanism achieves solutions by debate and discussion, Catholicism by dictat; Anglicanism is open, Catholicism closed; Anglicans have a 'dispersed authority', Catholics an inflexible magisterium; Anglicanism is doctrinally 'comprehensive', Romanism is uniformist; the Anglican Church is 'realistic', the Roman Church cultivates an 'ostrich-like air of unreality'. There is no remission—the contrasts are stark, and balance is lost.

Avis does well to dig below the surface of the ARCIC reports, but his spadework lacks true depth. Take for example his criticism of the 'propositional' stance on truth allegedly espoused by the Roman Church. Avis contrasts this with a 'personal' (or 'fiduciary') grasp of truth in which not only does (religious) truth tend to be interiorised, personalised by the (Anglican) believer in faith, but genuine scope exists for the 'tacit' dimension underlying articulated belief (much is made of Polanyi) to generate creatively ever richer and 'truer' insights into that Divine Reality which by nature continues to elude the freezing effect of doctrine and dogma. Put this way, Avis' view fails to do justice not only to the relevant Roman Catholic position itself, but to the relationship which exists between truth as propositional and its underlying, tacit dimension. In fact, it is the glory of human consciousness that its tacit dimension can come to fruition in propositions, in articulated meanings which can be true or false (here Avis would do well to consult G.E. Moore's classic treatment of propositions in ch. 3 of his *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*). It is propositionalisation which makes possible the theological debate and discussion which Avis wants (and in books like his!), the striving to distinguish between religious truth and falsehood, the purifying of belief and the nourishing of faith, and indeed the awareness of how inadequate and yet how promising any doctrinal understanding of the transcendent Godhead may be. Without a developed tradition of propositionalisation as a function of

truth, such as that of Christian theology, there could be no understanding and deepening of revelation, no attempt at distinguishing between what is Christian, non-Christian and un-Christian, between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism and their consequences for a Christian life, and so on. Thus the Roman (and indeed the Anglican) Church has done well to make much of truth as propositional and the propositionalisation of doctrine. In a later (rather brief) section, Avis recognises the importance of truth as propositional, but grudgingly and in a way that hardly connects clearly with his earlier discussion on the tacit dimension of knowledge.

Now a propositional understanding of doctrine (and truth) is not necessarily a static understanding. It is here that Avis has been less than fair to the Roman position, in accusing the Church of absolutising its doctrinal formulations. Even a perfunctory reading of the Catholic documents Avis quotes (especially those of Vatican II) will show that the Roman Church recognises that doctrinal understanding should grow and deepen, that there is scope for the continuing interpretation of scripture, for reformulated descriptions—howsoever inadequate these may be—of God's saving action in changing circumstances, and of his revealed yet transcendent nature. After all, the Church numbers among her members some of the greatest experts of the science (and art) of apophatic theology.

Doctrinal formulations change, new propositions supplant the old without necessarily losing the threads of continuity between them. It is unfortunate that Avis' immoderation tends to obscure the valid points he often does make: the Roman Church *has* often been slow to recognise the need to reformulate doctrines, *does* tend to be authoritarian. Certainly these points need making, but in a spirit of conciliation and hope for the future rather than in implacable condemnation. To write as if there has been no significant change of heart (especially after Vatican II) and as if blame and deficiencies lie chiefly on one side is unfair. On other topics too, e.g. authority, theological pluralism, Avis' treatment is less than even-handed.

Finally, it is regretted that Avis nowhere seriously considers the universal, *pastoral* implications of a teaching and interpreting authority in the Church. Most believers, Catholic and otherwise, cannot and should not be theologians. They carry on with the business of living their faith and look to the Church for firm guidance, in these troubled times, on matters of doctrine and morals—nor should theologians, for that matter, shrug off the responsibility of guiding constraints. I daresay that if Avis had dwelt on these considerations his perception of things would have undergone marked change. Perhaps I can conclude with an observation Avis himself makes, ironically in another context, but one to which his own position is subject: 'In negative, condemnatory, dismissive statements ... we are reacting to views that we do not hold ourselves but attribute to others. The possibility of misunderstanding the other person's point of view is undoubtedly a real one' (p. 49).

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**R. S. THOMAS: POET OF THE HIDDEN GOD, by D.Z. Phillips. Macmillan, 1986. Pp. xviii + 186. £25.**

The 'logic' and 'clear language' of Paley's *Evidences* and *Natural Theology* gave the young Darwin 'as much delight as did Euclid' and he remembered in his *Autobiography* how he was 'convinced by the long line of argumentation' (Ed. Gavin de Beer, OUP, 1983, p. 32); but since Darwin undermined the doctrine of Man's fall from primal grace with news of our primate past, the role of logic and clear language in defence of faith has been much disputed. The Fall enabled Christianity to account for the evil we inflict, but also for the evils to which we are by nature exposed, in terms of man's freely chosen disobedience. With the Fall's demise, Paley's line of argumentation began to crumble, for now it was God