

# Reviews

**SHADOWS AND THE DARK** by John Cowburn. SCM 1979. pp. viii + 134. £2.95

This book attempts to discuss the problem of evil as it is commonly understood in philosophy of religion text-books: God is good; there are evils in the world brought about by natural processes and human choice; how are the two facts to be reconciled?

Cowburn's conclusion is that evils outside human control are inevitable in an enveloping universe (acknowledgements here to Teilhard de Chardin), and that evils which result from choice are inexplicable. God's omnipotence and providence thus have to be understood so as to deny God's ability to avoid or foresee much that occurs. "When a young person dies or a deformed child is born, and people ask, 'Did God want this to happen?' the best short answer is 'No – he didn't even know it was going to happen'. . . . The dark mystery of moral evil is pure unintelligibility, it does not surpass our minds but is opposed to reason as such, and God understands it even less than we do" (pp. 37, 76). The implication of this thesis is that one should refrain from blaming God and recognize that human beings have a positive role in attempting to cope with evil. "There are two radically different kinds of trouble," says Cowburn; "each has its own explanation or its own way of being inexplicable, each calls for a different emotional response, and to each there corresponds a different remedy – work and, where all else fails, dignified acceptance in the one case, repentance and forgiveness in the other" (p. 116).

"My aim," says Cowburn, "is not to hurt but to heal" (p. viii). One can certainly applaud this evident desire to speak words of comfort. But having said that, I can find little else to offer by way of recommending Cowburn's text. It is intended for "thinking Christians" (p. vii), but, as the above quotations indicate, the concept of God that emerges in it is of

little interest to Christian theology because it seems far removed from what Christians have usually understood by 'God'. It certainly provides no Christian comfort, for it seems to imply that God is just not in control of all that happens in the universe – an idea which simply knocks the bottom out of any confident trust in divine providence. Cowburn's God is, in fact, most easily identified with the peculiar monstrosity believed in by writers like Charles Hartshorne. And, as such, it is open to most of the standard criticisms levelled against Hartshorne.

Another major difficulty with Cowburn's book is a notable lack of argumentative rigour. Where classical views on evil are mentioned (e.g. those of Aquinas), they are inadequately presented and the discussion of them is consequently almost entirely useless. Nor does Cowburn engage at all seriously with the now familiar difficulties facing any prospective theodist. He provides no real analysis of the meaning of predicates applied to God; and he fails to tackle many of the problems raised by the topics of causation, creation and freedom. Most of the time he basically only offers question-begging declarations and sketchy patterns of thinking, which would rightly be howled out of any respectable philosophical meeting. His brief treatment of major and complex issues is, in fact, highly misleading. It gives the mistaken impression that what is at stake in debates about the problem of evil can be treated quickly.

It would be nice to welcome *Shadows and the Dark* as a convincing piece of writing about evil and God. Such a thing is sorely needed. But Cowburn's effort in no way fills the gap. In saying so, of course, my aim is not to hurt, but to heal.

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**THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY** by Gerhard Ebeling, trans. by Duane A. Priebe. Collins, London 1979. pp. 196 £7.95

Ebeling may have written an excellent book on the nature of theology but I

doubt whether many of us will be able to tell from this translation. The text says: