

ment it is because of this powerful current running through it that the work deserves to be taken as seriously as it asks, and that

it will undoubtedly endure”.

FERGUS KERR O.P.

BEYOND DEATH'S DOOR by Maurice Rawlings. *Sheldon Press* 1979 pp. xiv + 172 £1.95

TO DIE IS GAIN by Johann Christoph Hampe. *Darton, Longman & Todd* 1979. pp. xiv + 145 £3.25

These books form part of the current wave of interest in the experiences of those who die and live to tell the tale. Not a few people, apparently, though they seem to be dead, later regain consciousness and recount strange experiences which, it seems reasonable to believe, they had during the time they were thought to be dead. It is held that such experiences are theologically interesting as giving evidence of the existence and nature of life after death. From the accounts given by Rawlings and Hampe, these experiences are, to those who have them, of profound significance, often changing the course of their lives and convincing them of life beyond the grave and of the truth of the religion of their childhood.

But to be convinced is not to be right, and it needs a great deal of investigation, empirical, conceptual and theological, to determine whether these experiences do in fact show what it is claimed they do. Dr Rawlings does not, it seems share this view. He is a doctor of medicine who spends much of his time resuscitating people whose hearts have stopped, and immediately asking them what they saw when they were dead. This he began to do after one patient, on reviving, cried in terror that he was in hell. After this 'I went home, dusted off the Bible and started reading it. I had to find out exactly what hell was supposed to be like . . . I was convinced there was something about this life after death business after all. . . . I was discovering that the Bible was not merely a history book. Every word was turning out to be true' (p.20). The doctor is easily convinced. I wish he had extended his sceptical attitude towards historians to the accounts he subsequently collected from many of his patients. He accepts enthusiastically and uncritically the most disparate accounts that

accord with his own version of Christianity (those that do not are, he suggests, probably the result of satanic deception). Doubters may at last rest assured, on the basis of the eyewitness testimonies here contained, that angels really do have wings (white ones) p. 97, and that hell really does contain a lake of fire and brimstone p. 107.

Hampe, a German Lutheran minister, has produced a much more serious book. He recognises some of the reasons why these reports of people 'back from the dead' must be treated with caution, and he does make an attempt at examining what they say critically, and from a theological standpoint. On the whole, though, he agrees that these experiences do indeed provide us with evidence of life after death. His book has its merits, including some interesting comments on contemporary attitudes to death. But it has serious weaknesses too. Hampe relies heavily on the experiences of those who believing themselves about to die, the 'my life passed before me in a flash' kind of experience associated with drowning or falling. Yet he fails to make clear how these can have any bearing at all on the question of life after death. Neither does he attempt to deal with what is the most obvious objection to the whole drift of what he and Rawlings have to say: the fact that the people of whom they write regained consciousness suggests that despite appearances they were not after all dead. It may be an interesting medical fact that people can remain alive for a time when their heart or even their brain has stopped working (though in many of the cases cited it is difficult to see how this latter could be established), but it is surely in this direction, if anywhere, that the evidence of these experiences points. Neither can we be impressed by the content of the experi-

ences, or by their alleged similarity. It may be that many other people have similar dreams or hallucinations in quite ordinary circumstances. The psychological condition and history and the religious background of the patients are also clearly rel-

evant here. To none of these considerations does Hampe allow anything like due weight, and as a result his argument is quite vitiated.

GARETH MOORE O. P.

A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE edited by Hubert Cunliffe-Jones with Benjamin Drewery T. and T. Clark Ltd 1978 pp. x + 601 £11.80

There is something faintly ludicrous in trying to write a book on the history of Christian doctrine. As if Christians ever formed a homogeneous body with a single mind. There are the Creeds of course, but Christians have disagreed about their meaning. And there is also a problem of ignorance: even prospective ordinands have to learn what was going on at Chalcedon. Not that Christians do not agree; and not that their statements always clearly reveal a real conflict of understanding. Perhaps, after all, the mystery in Christianity is the thing that pulls its supporters together in spite of themselves. But to talk of 'Christian doctrine' can still be deceptive. It suggests a peace that may be only linguistic.

Yet it is still useful to have a report of what Christians have said, and herein lies the value of the present volume. Its origins go back a long way, in fact to G. P. Fisher's *History of Christian Doctrine* published in 1896. But it is very different from Fisher's book. For one thing it covers ground ignored by Fisher, the history of Orthodox theology for example. It also contains contributions by several scholars and thereby reflects the impact of growing specialization. Altogether, in fact, the editor has brought together ten authors many of whom are acknowledged authorities in the areas allotted to them. The line up is as follows: G. W. H. Lampe (on patristics), Kallistos Ware (on the Orthodox), David Knowles (on the Middle Ages), E. Gordon Rupp (on Wyclif to Erasmus and on Melancthon and Bucer), Benjamin Drewery (on Martin Luther and Trent), Basil Hall (on Zwingli), T. H. L. Parker (on Calvin), H. F. Woodhouse (on sixteenth-century Anglican theology), R. Buick Knox (on the history of doctrine in the seventeenth-century) and John Kent (on Christian theology in the eighteenth to the twentieth-centuries).

By any standard that is an impressive collection of writers and one must be grateful to have them together in print if not in churchmanship. Inevitably, however, the resulting text has its drawbacks. One is a certain sort of learned superficiality: too many names, too many précis of people's work, too many vague and indigestible bits of information. (Is it, for example, really worth simply being told that "Pietism deeply influenced Johannes Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) whose biblical studies bore fruit in his *Gnomon* (1742) which was a rich mine of information on the text and interpretation of the New Testament" [p. 433]?) Another is an over-concentration on key and/or notorious literary individuals (the makers of theology?) and a corresponding tendency to disregard popular religion (the theology of makers?), political and social influences on ecclesial developments, and the teaching and impact of writers who might be relegated to the area of 'spirituality'. Thus, the text of Aquinas, Luther and Calvin gets fair coverage, but one does not find much about medieval piety and society, sixteenth century nationalism, the fabric of Geneva in 1536, *The Cloud of Unknowing* or Ignatius Loyola. Perhaps such topics do not become the pages of a book on the history of Christian doctrine, but that is debatable. At any rate, if we get a paragraph on John Hick (pp. 589-90) we are surely entitled to one on Walter Hilton or the Rule of Saint Benedict. (One would also welcome a chapter or two on the New Testament.)

But for the price asked one has here a valuable collection for which undergraduate and similar students of theology can be grateful. The only serious competitor covering similar ground is the Pelican History of the Church which works out cheaper and offers more bibliographical material. On the whole it also shows more interest