

Reviews

THE THEOLOGY OF GRACE, by Cornelius Ernst OP, *Mercier Press, Cork, 1974.* 96 pp. 75p.

The theological term 'grace' is empty of content for most people today, and for those with a little more religious 'culture', it evokes a world of ridiculous controversies and dubious doctrines that they would rather forget. A few years ago it proved impossible to find anyone who was prepared to talk about grace in a series of religious broadcasts on French radio—I had to accept, and to my great cost, for I was severely criticised for having adopted a position very similar to that which is elaborated by Cornelius Ernst in this wonderfully clear little book. This brings us to another problem: the clergy, or more generally Christians, whose traditional theology has never been put in question, are most profoundly attached to certain theological formulations which are uninteresting or unacceptable to others. For many people this book could be a moment of liberation without trauma. It is, nonetheless, an original work, and in the third chapter Ernst presents his own personal approach, which is very much in harmony with the contemporary philosophical and cultural climate. Above all I was impressed by the great finesse, the sensitivity of his comments and suggestions, so typical of the British intellectual tradition, and in such contrast with the deceptive French clarity or the false German profundity which one encounters so frequently even in writers who express themselves in other languages.

I found the first chapter, devoted to the New Testament and especially to St Paul, most valuable. The author gives a simple exposition of the basic conclusions of modern exegesis, but perhaps the most decisive gain is that he is able to show that Paul had no coherent theology of 'charis'. Grace is an important knot in a whole tissue of relations between various soteriological terms rather than an object of systematic reflection. The variety of usages of the term relate to a primordial meaning, derived from the Old Testament, that of God's benevolence or benefi-

cence, culminating in Christ's loving gift of himself, to which we respond in giving thanks. Certainly, we are truly changed by this saving love, but to describe its utter gratuity and freedom (Rom. 3,24 or 4,4 and 4,16) by the name of grace is not to designate an agent or instrument in the manner of later theology, and to talk about a 'regime' of grace (Rom. 5,1-2) is not to launch into speculation about the 'state of grace' but is rather to evoke a new, collective economy of the religious history of mankind. From within this perspective the other soteriological terms of the New Testament are most fruitfully considered, instead of focusing solely on the term grace.

One can only admire the clarity and, given its brevity, the precision of the historical survey which constitutes the second chapter: the young Augustine, the controversy with Pelagius, the Greek tradition, the Latin tradition after Augustine, and the Reformation. It would be impossible to summarise this chapter without falling into a schematism that would be a caricature. I would prefer to indicate some of the key questions which this chapter raises. It is important to stress, as does Ernst, that in the early works of Augustine the word *gratia* designates, as in the Bible, God's loving gift of himself, his mercy, rather than the effects which he brings about in us. In the same way the passion of Christ is interpreted in terms of revelation: In it Christ shows by his suffering the superiority of the grace of the New Covenant, within the broad perspective of the unity of head and body. His 'caritas' replaces concupiscence: it is a doctrine in which everything is ordered by love. It is no less necessary to point out that even in the anti-pelagian controversies, Augustine wished above all to assert that human freedom by itself is not enough for one to be able to live in grace, but needs itself to be liberated by God's gratuitous choice so that one is able, in turn, to choose God and enter into

a new communion. Since each of us is drawn by his own search for happiness, it is the renewal of the offer of *delectatio* that leads us towards freedom and a new way of life, of knowledge and of love, thus transforming us from within. These are fundamental Augustinian doctrines. But have not the more gloomy aspects and dimensions of Augustine's teaching been underplayed, whether his quite different doctrine of redemption-expiation or of original sin? Has not a veil been drawn over the disastrous consequences that were to result from the dynamic perspective of a dialectic between grace and freedom? Are not a few quotations, without comment, left to suggest to us just how radical is Augustine's judgement on evil (man is not merely incapable of this new freedom—he cannot but sin) and the disastrous individualisation of predestination? Is it really true that St Thomas, in turn, restored the original meaning of grace 'in seeing grace in terms of a divine motion which initiates and sustains' our movement of return to the ultimate source? Did he not rather return to Augustinianism, somewhat clumsily using an ontology of participation? I am more convinced by Ernst's demonstration that St Thomas understood the divine dimension of Christian existence in terms of the whole of human life lived according to the rhythm of grace rather than in terms of speculations on unitive mysticism.

Of course the heart of the book is the personal exploration which constitutes the third chapter. To evaluate it, I must distinguish between the first part, in which the foundations of the new approach are set out and of which I cannot but warmly approve, and the second part, in which, under the general title 'the faces of grace', a number of consequences are developed. With these I am not so happy: I have the impression that the potential fruitfulness of the author's fundamental principle has been left unexploited, that he backpedals a little. Let us try to summarise his approach. The historical changes in the doctrine of grace, which we have remarked upon above, ought to provoke us to reflection: they confront us with the historicity of man who always seeks to understand anew his relationship with God. A theology of grace ought to take into account the experience that man has of his union with God, and unravel its meaning. But how should one go about that task? Can one relate God and man as two

terms separately understood in advance? Since this is impossible for us, ought not the relationship itself to inspire a discourse open to the various experiences and interpretations of God and man? But can one start from a developed christology with all its theoretical presuppositions, themselves liable to change?

The point of departure for our reflections can only be found in our experience which is at once simple and various, lived beyond the opposition of objective and subjective. It is true that medieval theology, focused on the concept of Being, was not faced with this dichotomy, but Being can no longer provide us with the appropriate referential framework: for us that will be given by the concept of meaning, that is to say 'that praxis, that process and activity, by which the world to which man belongs becomes the world which belongs to man' (p. 68). It is a question, then, of the transformation of a world which is historically prior to man into a world of human communication: evidently, as the author stresses, the perspective is wider than that of personalism. Thus the discovery of the living Jesus Christ corresponds to a new sort of meaning, transforming our human relationships, our understanding of God and man. In brief we can interpret 'grace' as participation by reference to a world of meaning opened up by the experience of Jesus Christ in faith. By 'destiny' is meant the direction which the history of meaning can take for mankind, that which answers the question 'Why?'. Christianity may then be summarised as the affirmation that there is but one answer to this question, contained in the destiny of Jesus Christ, a pre-destination, the accomplishment of the plan of God, and that we are called to share in this predestination through faith, culminating, even in the heart of darkness, in the praise of God rather than in despair. This implies our transformation, that is to say a change in the order of meaning which, once again, is far more than merely subjective: it concerns that which is most *real*. Indeed the *real* is above all 'the genetic moment' in which man is transformed as he transforms his world, the moment of novelty. Thus grace is precisely this transcendent novelty poured into our lives as the gift of Jesus Christ. God's greatness does not, in the first place, lie in his total control of history or the cosmos but it is of the order of an inexhaustible meaning.

I will not attempt a similar summary of the second part of this chapter, which draws out the consequences of this illuminating approach (nature and grace, grace and freedom, grace and sin, grace and the sacraments, grace and the Spirit). I will merely suggest some of the difficulties that I encounter in Ernst's approach. It goes without saying that I agree with most of the views expressed which I do not mention. Of course we must get beyond the idea of the insertion of an extrinsic salvation into a pre-existent natural order. On the other hand, should we be so fearful of reducing the Cross to just one moment among others of the revelation of love, and thus maintain that its essential significance derives from sin (p. 77)? Doubtless the fact of evil, of human misery, would be justification enough for the crucifixion—and neither can I easily see how mankind could have produced a real discontinuity in the divine plan by sin (p. 88) unless one resorts to dreams of an original historical justice. It is most interesting to observe that the relationship between grace and freedom is formulated in terms of the new deeper possibilities of communion offered to the latter. Thus we escape any misleading synergism! It is necessary to maintain at all cost the thomist theory of merit as proportion, as 'the continuity of a human life lived in response to God's predestining purpose' (p. 84)? This doctrine is certainly beautiful, humanist and legitimate in itself—but has not history only too often shown the impossibility of maintaining this view

without falling into self-justification? Would it not be better to entrust oneself entirely to grace, while affirming the historical continuity between the present self and the resurrected self, recreated by the power of the Spirit? And even if one does designate sin as a failure of love, in all its forms and masks, is there not a trace of Augustinianism in the assertion that 'all that is not reborn, recreated, all that is not assumed into the glory of God, is sin' (p. 86)? Finally, it is most interesting to approach the question of sacramental realism, and especially that of the eucharist, from within the perspective of the very real new meaning which is given to the sacramental gestures or elements. But the approach, dear to H. Schillebeeckx, in which every sacrament is conceived of as the assumption of 'nature' into a creative purpose which makes it an action signifying the death and resurrection of Jesus, might suggest that we can speak of the several sacraments as though they were all 'sacraments' in the same sense (pp. 88-90). Can we avoid the fundamental duality of the Christian sacraments, even if other actions may be given this name analogically? In which case, which actions? Ought one to say so hastily that in the eucharist it is not the action (the meal) that is consecrated, but the species? Are the two separable, especially within the perspective of meaning?

Enough! The excessive length of this review shows the interest with which I have read this book by Ernst, and my desire to make it better known.

J. P. JOSSUA OP

CONCERNING RELIGIOUS LIFE, René Voillaume. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975. 145 pp. £1.70.

I disliked this book. It is a collection of talks edited from a tape-recording of a two-week course on Religious Life, given by René Voillaume in 1971 in the desert chapel of Béni-Abbès, to the novices of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld prior to their religious profession.

René Voillaume has attempted to re-establish, simply by repeating, an ideology of Religious Life which many Christians perhaps happily imagine had been mercifully left behind subsequent to Vatican II's document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Some of the book's theology is, to say the least, questionable, its dualisms unacceptable, and its spiritual élitism insufferable.

On page 8 we are reminded of the OT theme of the jealous God who brooks no rival, and then treated to the astonishing observation that 'Jealousy is only possible where there is love between people'. One also wants to observe, of course, that jealousy is *not* possible where there is love between people. On the contrary, it is destructive of love and implies a lack of faith or security. The OT theme of the jealous God who brooks no rival is one thing, but the menace contained in this threatening remark: 'Being loved by God is something very serious: advances like his demand a serious answer', implies a notion of God intent almost on rape, which is degrading. There is,