

THE APOSTLES' CREED, In the Light of Today's Questions. Wolfhart Pannenberg. S.C.M. Press. £1.95.

The series of essays that make up this stimulating book are, in substance, the lectures given by the author of *Jesus, God and Man*, to members of all faculties in the University of Munich. Addressed to a wider public, he presumes his readers are theologically literate and cognisant of the schools and trends of recent theological work. It is a book more likely to be of value to the educated christian who feels his faith undermined by today's questions, than to the enquiring non-christian seeking some introduction to the content of christian belief.

In a splendid chapter on the tenth article—*The Forgiveness of Sins*—we read: 'The immediate occasion of the whole creed finds its expression here'. The central aim of the coming of Christ was to liberate us from the internal seeds of death; and it is turning to God that is liberating, not perseverance in moral rectitude. Today, the author reminds us, 'its hardly evident any more that sin, and the forgiveness of sin, are a matter of death and life'. In thus returning to the message of the epistle to Romans Pannenberg questions our whole approach to baptism and forgiveness in reference to breach of law. Forgiveness is a message for life, not a judgment about morality.

After analysing the nature of belief, as trust in, or reliance on a thing, or person, rather than as an intellectual assent to a truth, we are recalled to the need for credentials, and of the essentially historical nature of judeo-christian religion. The creed proclaims the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ in unequivocal historical terms, and the chapter on the Resurrection is a notable piece of firm judgment for the historicity of the New Testament.

Born of the Virgin Mary is an article that gives the author much more trouble, and one feels that not only is the traditional orthodox and catholic faith, and the gospel itself, in question here, but Mary's virginity is almost eagerly rejected with a curious plea (also to be found in *Jesus, God and Man*) that Luke (1.35) found Mary's virginity a necessity to prove Christ's divine sonship. Pannenberg also finds John and Paul (Gal. 4.4) 'expressing themselves more or less clearly (sic) in the opposite direction'. We have become used to protestant scholarship rightly indignant at the worst of catholic marian excesses, but it is disturbing to find it apparently so innocent of the best of catholic mariology.

In regard to *God the Father, Creator of Heaven and Earth*, we are shown clearly why belief in Jesus without belief in God simply

won't do, as a basis for faith. 'The idea of forgiving love is not self-supporting', he reminds us, and without reference to God it is just an extravagant demand; at best no more than was advocated by a Socrates or a Confucius. But while the uniqueness of the Father's creative role is developed at length, his nature as Father is treated only slightly, and in consequence the centrality of the Trinity for any understanding of the Faith is not brought out. In fact the treatment of the Holy Spirit is very derective indeed, and He appears somewhat as an unexplained third, an expression of God's activity in the world. The treatment of *the Holy Catholic Church* is thus impoverished also, although his clear awareness that unity is of the being of the Church and not just of her well-being leads him to highlight the scandal of our present divisions.

In treating of Jesus, Pannenberg sees his eschatological expectation as so central to his thought that Jesus was incapable of any political theory; for him there was no 'polis', for the end was upon the world, hence his refusal of the title of Messiah. At this point the author slips from using a conjectured premise to taking it as established fact from which to draw his conclusions. Of Jesus' suffering and death he is perhaps unduly agnostic about the accounts of the trial and passion, but would not stand beside Professor Brandon, and concludes that Christ's death and resurrection established for ever the truth that political rule has no absolute binding force.

The Communion of Saints, Resurrection of the Body, and Life Everlasting are explored with fresh understanding and problems about disembodied souls, and disintegrated bodies are bypassed by suggesting that reality is not horizontal in terms of duration, but is a vertical dimension with God, who is timeless. Only by such thinking can we get away from talk of an 'after life', and rebut the secular charge of preaching pie in the sky to the wretched of the earth. No, eternal life, as Jesus says in John's gospel, is now, and the kingdom is already in being. The christian has the political as well as the personal and individual task of practising and preaching that good news to our present world.

Well translated, the book suffers in places from involved syntax, and one very long passage at an important point of the argument on p. 36 has no verb at all.

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