

THE KNIFE EDGE OF EXPERIENCE, by Rosemary Haughton. *Darton, Longman & Todd*, London, 1972. 168 pp. £2.25.

One of the difficulties inherent in the idea of experience is that it never comes pure, but is already layered with interpretation. This is not to say that some experiences do not burst through their customary interpretations and demand new ones. One can see such a process at work among the poets who went to war in 1914-18, for instance, as one could have done among the disciples after Pentecost. The question is, in what spirit does one reinterpret? The answer to this will be influenced by the kind of experience that one is looking for. And what one is looking for ought to depend on some fundamental faith rather than on convention or some unrecognized need. This is the way the Hebrew prophets made their reinterpretations and hence made new experiences possible. This is the way poetry should come to be written. Thus faith would seem to be prior to experience since it may be used in generating it. But there is a difficulty to be faced very frequently in the use of religious language. The risen Christ, for instance; does one believe in him or does one experience him? Perhaps this is a false dilemma, but vagueness about this invites merely the impatience of the unbeliever as well as the bewilderment of the less imaginative Christian. Where belief and experience pass into one another is one of the unacknowledged difficulties of this book (page 154 for example), as it is perhaps of religion itself.

Epistemological difficulties aside, it must be agreed that all genuine theology arises from the experience of individuals. Even the dogmas of the faith are what certain Christians found they *had* to say in the language of their day in order to do justice to their experience of liberation in Christ. It is this traditional occupation that is the business of this book. To begin with we are offered two different types of reaction to experience: the 'prophetic' and the 'reflective'. We must have both if justice is to be done, in the most exact sense of that phrase. The 'knife edge' of the title is the narrow course that must be walked between the *merely* prophetic and the *merely* reflective if the fundamental values of Christianity are to be kept. Thus the prophet without reflection would bring down the good with the evil and many a valuable life would be wrecked in the fall of imperfect social structures. And the purely reflective man would do nothing at all rather than destroy

the good which he sees everywhere enmeshed in them. The Christian cannot afford to be purely one or the other if the work of Christ is to be done. This means apparently that all situations must be recognized as being in some way theological, just as they are all political. Everything we do—we are told—expresses a theological position of some kind, whether we wish it or not. From the theologians' standpoint this must be true, but here we seem to have gone rather a long way from experience. It is perhaps a little too reminiscent of the assertions made by some Christians that there are no real atheists. Is it not possible to believe those who say they have no religious experience whatsoever?

The knife-edge is traced through three large areas of experience—those of community, ministry and family. All these chapters are really about the Church, the Christian presence in the world, and how, for its effectiveness, the balance must be preserved. On community, Mrs Haughton says: 'My thesis is that the Christian assembly not only has the task of judgment laid upon it, but that it is this act of judging which constitutes it as a community' and that this means the Christian community itself is under judgment since it is inescapably a wordly affair. Yes, we have to be careful about assuming the role of judging community. There have been plenty of Christian communities set up for judgment which have been shown by history to have been mere 'sect' rather than 'church'. The Montanists, the Donatists, the millenarian groupings of one kind or another down to our own day, all of them for the purpose of making the outsider who refuses to be converted feel as if he is unspiritual and already judged. This should be avoidable however if the group in question forms itself not for the purpose of judgment but for the purpose of some specific job of liberation or care. We are given good examples in the book to illustrate this. The judging is a by-product and the resentment of society will not have to be deliberately provoked, nor will the Christian assembly have to defend itself with myths of moral infallibility in order to stay alive. The Church cannot afford to be either a mere judging sect or the official cult of a society (what begins as one often ends as the other, in any case). Does this mean—but the question is not asked—that any given

Christian assembly must accept dissolution when its first inspiration has run dry instead of switching to the secondary goal of self-preservation like any worldly society? This is a question many religious orders ought to ask themselves.

In the problems surrounding the ministry, the alternatives show themselves in another way. Should the priest try to be a priest first or a man first? Is the 'parental role' of the clergy a hindrance or an essential help to the work of the Christian community? We are reminded that both traditional sacramental theology and modern psychology tell us that there is a duality of 'thing' and 'sign' in any human transaction. We must be prepared to give and receive both. But we cannot expect people to identify with our preconceptions of their role. It is well worth being reminded here that many of the most valuable and loving members of the church will always need the 'parental' support of the priest. (One might add that many priests will always need this also.) If many of the clergy are still guilty of keeping their people in a state of helpless childhood so far as Christian things are concerned, allowing money as their only contribution to the upbuilding of the Church, it is, on the other hand, illusory to expect that the entire body of the faithful is going to 'come of age' just because we feel they ought. We need the apostolic tact of Paul. 'All things to all men' must include father, brother, priest and man, even 'conservative' and 'progressive' in one and the same person, all for the care of the individual. There are many other good things said in this chapter and in the chapter on the family. Those who are familiar with Mrs Haughton's writings know how good she is at applying the insights of St Paul to the modern situation of the Church. She does this successfully throughout the present book.

There is a rather different chapter on the 'intuitive experience of sexuality'. The great confusion in the mind of Christians about sex is due, we are told, to the constant failure of the Churches to bring it within the realm of the New Testament—the redemptive power of Christ's resurrection. The best they could do was to treat it in an Old Testament way—salvation by procreation—thus ignoring the more 'pagan' insights of unity and transcendence of self through sexual experience. In other words, it remains merely generative and fails to become regenerative as all Christian experience should be. It has been left to alien

myths and philosophies to express this neglected aspect. Consequently it is to them that Christians tend to go when they wish to make sense of it. Unnecessarily, says Mrs Haughton, since this is to behave as if Christ has not risen. In fact that passion and resurrection of Christ is all we need to provide the 'myth-framework' by which the experience of sexuality can be interpreted, since it brings together the themes of love, death, procreation and regeneration of which that experience also speaks. In so far as any sexual experience is free from mere conformity to a 'cosmic pattern' and deliberately chosen in hope, then it is a paschal experience, whether the people are Christian or not. This is now possible because Christians like everyone else can be free from the tyranny of unwanted procreation in order to choose it as an integrated part of the liberating process of sexuality. The philosophical arguments brought in to the birth-control debate by Catholics on either side are 'meaningless', when we have the interpretive framework of the resurrection already at hand. Apart from the inherent difficulty about belief and experience which I mentioned above, it must be said that this is a much better argument than those put forward a few years ago by such as the unsuccessful majority of the Pope's commission on birth control with its Old Testament arguments about man 'subduing' nature. The question is, how many Catholics would be at all impressed by appeal to the resurrection as an explanation of anything? The truth has to be faced that this very centre of our faith has not been taught as such, or even believed in by many, for centuries. At present one gets the impression that it is the possession of a handful of Bible-reading middle-class Catholics. Death, judgment, heaven and hell still seem to be the 'myth-framework' of most, as one can find out by questioning the children in a Catholic primary school.

Whereas many a modern book of theology would hardly be worthwhile reviewing several months after its appearance, this is certainly not the case with this one and the negligence of the reviewer has to be exposed. One can only plead that several readings are necessary with gaps for meditation before the depth of thought in this book can be appreciated. It is well worth reading several times over by anyone who is at all interested in the Church and its future, even if the future we would like is a long, long way off.

ROGER RUSTON, O.P.