

THE ART OF GOD INCARNATE – THEOLOGY and IMAGE in CHRISTIAN TRADITION by Aidan Nicholls, O.P. Darton, Longman & Todd, London. £7.50.

The title of Aidan Nicholls' book will remind some of that intended *tour de force* called "The Myth of God Incarnate", and he himself seems to want to make some concessions to its authors. "I hope to show", he writes, "that the model of the artwork can embrace the positive affirmations of anti-incarnationalists about the full humanity and therefore historical contingency of Jesus and about the many-faceted quality of the Christian picture of him, and yet at the same time suggest an ontological foundation, a rooting in the truth of being, for faith in Jesus Christ as the supreme disclosure of the loving purposes of God in history" (p 3). (What the relation is between full humanity and historical contingency he does not tell us.) He wants to provide us with an 'aesthetic theology', a 'theology of the image', by suggesting that an artwork is a model, and an image a metaphor leading to "a renewed theology on the model of the artwork" (p 105). Exactly what these positive affirmations are he does not make clear.

At least he attempts to take revelation seriously, unlike the authors of the other book; but one sometimes gets the impression that for him art can take the place of myth. He begins with the Bible, then goes on to the Fathers (where he has an interesting and informative account and discussion of iconoclasm). There follows a brief chapter on aesthetics which leads on to the last three chapters dealing with aesthetic theology. An appendix "On Models and Metaphors" is an all too brief attempt to try to show how the language of theology differs from that of religion. One continually has the feeling that these ideas have hardly been worked out in detail and should have been discussed more fully earlier and not relegated to an appendix. As they are now they are unlikely to throw much light on the subject of models and metaphors. Nor does he tell us just how "the explicit use of models in systematic theology derives from the transferral to reflection on God of an approach whose original home lies with the natural sciences" (p 154).

In any case it is not easy to understand how the word 'image' in the Bible is metaphorical. This is nowhere made clear. "God made man in his own image". "Christ is the image of the invisible God". But he wants, it seems, to make a metaphor of it so that he can provide us with theology that looks new, if not original. In doing this he may end up nearer to those 'anti-incarnationalists' than he would really like, for his discussion of historical questions relating to Christ's life raised by the Gospels follows in the academic and scholarly traditions of the last two hundred years or so. For what of "the ontological foundation"? He praises Hans Urs Von Balthasar for "nurturing a theological aesthetics, drawing out of oblivion the theme of glory" (p 117) and quotes F. Van der Meer's comments on the mosaics of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore: "When the early christians contemplated the mosaic they would think of how Abraham 'saw three, yet worshipped one', and they would recognise, in the appearance of the travellers at Mamre, an appearance of God in the Three-in-One. For this reason, the mosaic worker has surrounded the head of the middle one of the three unknown men with a wreath of ethereal fire – a *nubes divina* – a divine cloud" (p 53). Were they three unknown men? And what is the theme of *glory*? And why a *nubes divina*?

There can be no doubt that the Christian religion has inspired some of the finest art and poetry, as have other religions, but can it be so brought into relationship with theology that we can speak of an *aesthetic* theology? The author seems to be more concerned with theology than art, and though the theological interest is too much influenced by the superficial theology of our time, one hopes that, nevertheless, his book will stimulate interest in the rich treasures of religious and other art, unlike that bowdlerized edition of Michael Angelo's "Creation of Man" we find on the cover of the most recent example of that theology, Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God*. It is the theology of those who

reject what they do not and cannot understand.

There is a very fine motto: a verse of a hymn from the very remarkable eighteenth century Welsh hymn writer, Ann Griffiths, who died so young at twenty-nine giving birth to her first child. It begins: 'Gwela' i'n sefyll rhwng y myrtwydd'. (See Zechariah 1: 8-11) A translation into English can hardly bring out the qualities of the original.

There I see among the myrtles  
Someone worthy of my love,  
Tho' in part I seem to know him  
Far by far the world above.  
Hail the morning!  
When I see him as he is.

Rose of Sharon is his namesake,  
Pure and blushing, fair to sing,  
By ten thousand times excelling  
Even the world's most precious thing.  
Friend of sinners,  
He the Master on the sea.

What more is there here for me that  
Earth's base images afford?  
I bear witness there's no company  
To compare with Christ my Lord.  
O! How I long  
For his love throughout my days.

HUGH PRICE

**GRAMSCI AND MARXIST THEORY** edited by Chantal Mouffe. *RKP*. pp 288  
£9.50 and £5.95 p/b.

Antonio Gramsci can seem, in retrospect, the model figure for today's generation of aspiring young marxists: the three major moments of his life combine to suggest an enviably comprehensive portrait of the militant intellectual – his direct contribution as agitator, educator and newspaper editor to the maelstrom of factory occupations in 1920 Turin, his combative role in founding and briefly leading the Communist Party in Italy, his protracted physical martyrdom and probing theoretical inquiries in a Fascist prison ending only with his death at the still-young age of forty-six in 1937. In the last few years three solid volumes of selections from the Prison Notebooks and the political writings of 1910-26 have appeared in English, together with many of the prison letters and a minor spate of biographies, studies and articles. Now Chantal Mouffe has usefully culled seven of the more important contributions from the longer-standing Gramsci debate in Italian and French periodicals and symposia and has intelligently grouped and ordered them (with an introduction and an essay of her own) to give the conscientious reader both a feel for the development of the debate over the last decade and a strong sense of the intertwining preoccupations of Gramsci's

thinking – though it is, with slightly disabling effect, on the thinking of the prison years that the emphasis predominantly falls.

The opening piece by Norberto Bobbio, from 1968, very nearly reduces Gramsci to a social philosopher in the classic Enlightenment tradition; Bobbio's over- neat patterning of the threads of Gramsci's thoughts on 'civil society' and the State leads to an almost purely formal foregrounding of the political role of intellectuals and to a voluntaristic conception of the function of the Party. This elegantly empty exegesis was influential in the late 1960s, despite the immediate and severe corrective administered by Jacques Texier whose article justly but rather inconclusively reinstates economic determination as central to Gramsci's assumptions. Some tersely elliptical but compactly assured comments by Nicola Badaloni contribute obliquely to this exchange by both locating Gramsci's considerations on the respective political strengths of civil society and state power (consensus and coercion) more exactly within the trajectory of Gramsci's own political activities and also situating the theoretical problem within a global conjuncture in which, after 1917, the Russian proletariat's revolution-