

**ASCENSION AND ECCLESIA. ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE ASCENSION FOR ECCLESIOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN COSMOLOGY** by Douglas Farrow *T & T Clark*, Edinburgh, 1999. Pp. xii+340, £24.95 hbk.

Farrow's ultimate concerns are (i) theological method and (ii) the relationship between Church and world. He traces a certain approach to (ii) that he finds objectionable back to a certain approach to (i), which he also finds objectionable. To this whole objectionable approach, traced up to contemporary liberal theology, he opposes a more Barthian line. For Farrow it is crucial to employ the correct method, so that the correct relationship between Church and world follows. The methodological key is attention to the concrete, particular Jesus of Nazareth, ascended into heaven and awaited to return just as he was seen to go. What theology makes of the ascension is thus of crucial importance.

Fundamentally objectionable to Farrow is the view that Jesus' 'disappearing act' has freed us 'from traditional theological and cultural restraints for a new openness to the future'. Farrow says such thinking is not limited to a lunatic fringe, but is found among mainstream would-be critics of both conservative and liberal agendas. Not only Thomas Altizer but also Graham Ward sings the 'familiar refrain'. Farrow laments that it is now almost reflex action to turn away from the historical Jesus, making Jesus-history over into the manifestation of a universal principle, where Jesus is the dispensable element. This universalised Christology plays itself out politically and culturally with the Church as nothing more than a 'cosmos of the cosmos', in compromise and not in tension with the world. The Church's history, just like Jesus' history, is merged into that of the world. 'Progressive' Christianity thus moves away from a past Jesus towards the world's future, proffering a false tension between past and future not only in liturgy and morals but also in ecumenism. It is said to be intent on the Church's redundancy, embracing the world's identity in pursuit of a global unity for which Christianity is merely instrumental and where religious significance is invested in the narratives of surrounding societies.

Not to turn away from Jesus yields a different appreciation of the absence of the ascended Jesus, namely Farrow's alternative view, which owes much to Barth and T. F. Torrance. The 'human realism' with which one interprets the ascension and Jesus' final advent becomes the test for the 'human realism' of the historical and risen Jesus. Demythologising the ascension dehumanises Christ and so makes the Gospel irrelevant to humanity, but a non-docetic theology of the incarnation does not allow the glorified humanity of Christ to be swallowed up into a future hope less material than is the particular non-docetic glorified humanity of Christ. Linked to this is the belief that redemption is of the whole person, of which flesh and blood are constituent elements. The ascension of the flesh implies ecclesiolegically that there are two histories: our own, in which Jesus

was crucified, and that of Jesus himself, who has gone to the Father. Acknowledging the absence of Jesus, the Church straddles these two times and accepts the tension between them, affirming both its existence in history and its existence contrary to history. The Church must appropriate these tensions, which themselves can be found where the Church is most truly itself, in the eucharist, where Christ is present in one way and absent in another. Such a Church of witness will be a martyr-Church, without compromise with the world.

The view that Farrow rejects is seen as a dangerous parody of the one he proposes, the ascension of Christ's flesh parodied by a purely spiritual ascension of our minds, and the tension between past and future being nothing but a parody of the Church's eucharistic tension. The ambiguity that properly belongs to the Church is subtly displaced by biblical studies to Christ himself, and the search is on for martyrs among those who die their noble deaths for lesser names than the name of Jesus: one is left with a Church wanting to arrive at Damascus without incident. So the Church is now at the crossroads, Farrow says, and theology is faced with two paths, while the stumbling-block is the humanity of Christ.

On the question of where Jesus is now, Farrow contends that Jesus ascends to the Father's right hand in the sense that the whole of creation is reorganised around him, a reorganisation which, though spatio-temporal, is not worked out within the terms of our own spatio-temporal processes, for ours is the very space and time that requires reorganisation. So on our worldly criteria we are simply unable to say where Jesus is, or we would concede primacy to our own cosmology and world-view, which instead become subject to the doctrine of the ascension, our history to his history. Jesus has confronted us with the fact that our space and time are anomalous.

Much of Farrow's book deals with how the ascension has been fitted into various theological projects. There are many villains, from Gnosticism to Anglicanism. Least satisfactory are some of Farrow's interpretations of pre-modern figures. His treatment of medieval theology is thin, and as for the Fathers, he seems to have followed a tendency of taking perhaps too far the often helpful device of comparing Augustine and Irenaeus. He seems to feel obliged to place Augustine among the villains somehow, with Irenaeus as the hero, though one cannot escape the impression that Irenaeus has been 'improved' on such matters as the unity of history and natural theology. However, Farrow does not substantiate his portrait on the latter points. Though he reveals here a somewhat uneven Barthian-Baianist theology of the natural, Farrow's vision is otherwise not unattractive and his narrative not unpersuasive, but it is not clear that everything fits his story. The chief difficulties besetting his narrative are thus those problems involved in any grand telling of a theological story that only comes truly right again with the author's own contribution.

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