

tion', which is intermingled with a question about 'tradition' and 'orthodoxy', and which seems relevant to any consideration of 'belief' and 'assent'.

- 1 I take it that Newman's orthodoxy is assured if not by the hint of *Hebrews* 10:1, then at least by Aquinas' conviction *in statu autem praesentis vitae, non possumus divinam veritatem in seipsa intueri*, and his suggestion *imago pertineat ad novam legem, umbra vero ad veterem*, (1a 2ae, 101, 2 art.) I recall that Stephen Dessain was most pleased when I pointed this passage out to him.

## John Coulson: Religion and Imagination

### Anthony Cockshut

It is a delicate and difficult matter for me, a professional student of literature, and an amateur of theology, to review a book by a professional theologian and an amateur of literature. *Odium academicum* is usually a much greater danger than the more-publicized variety, *theologicum*. But at least I have the advantage of having already acquired a deep respect for Dr Coulson's work, and of having learnt a lot from him about Newman in reading his earlier volume.

The main thesis of this book is clearly stated as follows:

The argument of this book is that the real assent we make to the primary forms of religious faith (expressed in metaphor, symbol, and story) is of the same kind as the imaginative assent we make to the primary forms of literature.

At first sight this claim is so improbable, and indeed extraordinary, that we feel it cannot mean what it appears to say. If we can appreciate Homer and Dante and Henry James because they all make a powerful appeal to the imagination, it would seem that by analogy we can simultaneously assent to Greek paganism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Imaginatively, if our knowledge is sufficient, and our sympathies are wide enough, no doubt we can enter into all these and more. Those of us who had a classical education can remember (very likely with pleasure and gratitude) entering into the religious ideas contained in the *Oresteia*. But we did not for a moment think of believing them to be true. There are other statements, both religious and secular which we believe to be true, without being able or perhaps wishing to enter into them imaginatively. All this must be quite as obvious to

Dr Coulson as it is to us. And he must see, too, that many attitudes entailed by religious belief, such as duty, responsibility and repentance are absent in literary appreciation. What then is the real point that Dr Coulson is getting at?

I think he has been much impressed by the fact that the best literary critics are usually dissatisfied with modern literature, language and culture, and point us back to the great names of the past. Nobody says that Yeats is as great as Shakespeare; if theologians (or some of them) write as if everything written more than twenty years ago is silly, literary critics never do. Even trendy literary critics, who invent new disciplines, still wish to use them on the old material. This is comforting. Matthew Arnold is a strong presence throughout the book, and Coulson is surprisingly ready to pardon his intellectual muddles, because he dresses secular concerns in traditional language. But does Coulson ever ask himself *how* Arnold survives as a classic writer, albeit a minor one? Arnold wrote several books propounding a new religion. Has anyone ever heard of anyone who adheres to this religion? Has it ever given the slightest religious aliment to anyone? Is it not completely dead, while Arnold's poetry, his social criticism, and even some of his literary criticism is alive? And why is this? Surely because Arnold by-passed the question of truth and tried to make religion morally useful, aesthetically satisfying, civilized and dignified. The utter failure of the attempt not only to convince but even to influence anyone at all must surely be significant. And Dr Coulson can hardly need to be reminded of the reason because it is supplied by an author whom he knows very intimately. Religion as a mere sentiment is a dream and a mockery.

I am inclined to think, though, that the more important and valuable part of the book is not to be found here but in the analysis of the religious content of literary texts. He asks: Does religious explicitness weaken poetry? And he recalls the objection made by that devout Christian Dr Johnson to devotional poetry. He does not quite agree with Johnson, but he appears to think he has a good case if the subject matter of religious poetry is taken as already defined theologically. At this point, I expected a full discussion of the case of Keble, who answered Johnson at the level of theory and of Hopkins who may be said to have proved him wrong poetically. But these names are only mentioned in passing. Hopkins's poetry, the most theologically explicit of the nineteenth century, is also the richest imaginatively. Surely, if Dr Coulson does not agree with this, it would have been good tactics for him to tell us why he doesn't. Because every reader with even a cursory acquaintance with Victorian literature will be wondering. A lawyer who simply fails to mention the strongest point in his opponent's

argument is usually ill-advised.

In part, perhaps, Hopkins was crowded out of his mind by T S Eliot, to whom he pays an eloquent and welcome tribute. And I fully agree with his general judgment of Eliot's status as a great religious poet. But he strikes me as much more theologically explicit than Coulson appears to suppose. The 'wounded surgeon' passage in *East Coker* was rejected by the late Dr Leavis precisely on the ground of its theological explicitness. Eliot, I imagine, would have said: 'So much the worse for Leavis', and so would I. What would Dr Coulson say, I wonder? I think he rather misses the point of the Krishna passage in *The Dry Salvages* by assimilating it to the very different use of Buddhism in *The Waste Land*. Krishna is quoted as Plato might be quoted, because he has a wise and relevant thing to say. He is certainly not in the slightest degree a rival to Christ in the poem's terms; while in *The Waste Land* there really is a syncretistic tendency. And this is not surprising, since Eliot was not a Christian when he wrote it.

Much of this, I am afraid, may sound peevish. But I can at any rate close with a heart-felt tribute. Dr Coulson never fails to interest and stimulate. Everything he writes is freshly his own, even when he is expounding the thought of others. The process of disagreeing with him is enlarging and salutary.

## John Coulson replies:\*

I am indeed grateful to Dr Cockshut and Professor Swanston for so thorough an examination of my book. How does one give a coherent reply to so many diverse issues? Perhaps the best way is to try to remove two mis-apprehensions. I should not like Dr Cockshut to suppose that I hold that there is no more to religion than imagination; but I would wish to affirm my contention that a religious claim which fails to become credible to imagination may fail to establish itself, or, if it does, it is almost certain to perish in the sands of rationalism. Conversely, it is equally possible to undervalue the force of our imaginative response to Homer or Dante. It should certainly lead us to distinguish real from notional assent.

The other mis-apprehension arises from Professor Swanston's query why I did not confine myself to a more exhaustive exposition of Newman on Imagination, especially because his position appears to be ambiguous. At one moment Newman speaks of mere

\* The page references in brackets are to the text of *Religion and Imagination*.