

Reviews

SHADOWS AND THE DARK by John Cowburn. SCM 1979. pp. viii + 134. £2.95

This book attempts to discuss the problem of evil as it is commonly understood in philosophy of religion text-books: God is good; there are evils in the world brought about by natural processes and human choice; how are the two facts to be reconciled?

Cowburn's conclusion is that evils outside human control are inevitable in an enveloping universe (acknowledgements here to Teilhard de Chardin), and that evils which result from choice are inexplicable. God's omnipotence and providence thus have to be understood so as to deny God's ability to avoid or foresee much that occurs. "When a young person dies or a deformed child is born, and people ask, 'Did God want this to happen?' the best short answer is 'No – he didn't even know it was going to happen'. . . . The dark mystery of moral evil is pure unintelligibility, it does not surpass our minds but is opposed to reason as such, and God understands it even less than we do" (pp. 37, 76). The implication of this thesis is that one should refrain from blaming God and recognize that human beings have a positive role in attempting to cope with evil. "There are two radically different kinds of trouble," says Cowburn; "each has its own explanation or its own way of being inexplicable, each calls for a different emotional response, and to each there corresponds a different remedy – work and, where all else fails, dignified acceptance in the one case, repentance and forgiveness in the other" (p. 116).

"My aim," says Cowburn, "is not to hurt but to heal" (p. viii). One can certainly applaud this evident desire to speak words of comfort. But having said that, I can find little else to offer by way of recommending Cowburn's text. It is intended for "thinking Christians" (p. vii), but, as the above quotations indicate, the concept of God that emerges in it is of

little interest to Christian theology because it seems far removed from what Christians have usually understood by 'God'. It certainly provides no Christian comfort, for it seems to imply that God is just not in control of all that happens in the universe – an idea which simply knocks the bottom out of any confident trust in divine providence. Cowburn's God is, in fact, most easily identified with the peculiar monstrosity believed in by writers like Charles Hartshorne. And, as such, it is open to most of the standard criticisms levelled against Hartshorne.

Another major difficulty with Cowburn's book is a notable lack of argumentative rigour. Where classical views on evil are mentioned (e.g. those of Aquinas), they are inadequately presented and the discussion of them is consequently almost entirely useless. Nor does Cowburn engage at all seriously with the now familiar difficulties facing any prospective theodist. He provides no real analysis of the meaning of predicates applied to God; and he fails to tackle many of the problems raised by the topics of causation, creation and freedom. Most of the time he basically only offers question-begging declarations and sketchy patterns of thinking, which would rightly be howled out of any respectable philosophical meeting. His brief treatment of major and complex issues is, in fact, highly misleading. It gives the mistaken impression that what is at stake in debates about the problem of evil can be treated quickly.

It would be nice to welcome *Shadows and the Dark* as a convincing piece of writing about evil and God. Such a thing is sorely needed. But Cowburn's effort in no way fills the gap. In saying so, of course, my aim is not to hurt, but to heal.

BRIAN DAVIES O. P.

THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY by Gerhard Ebeling, trans. by Duane A. Priebe. Collins, London 1979. pp. 196 £7.95

Ebeling may have written an excellent book on the nature of theology but I

doubt whether many of us will be able to tell from this translation. The text says:

"In general the presentation lives from the courage for what is fragmentary". (p. 11) But I often found it simply incoherent. I gave up after three chapters. Here is a sentence introducing a new section of a chapter: "The publication dates of theology immediately produce a relationship of tension, in addition to the problems characterised by the catchwords 'ecclesiastical character' and 'scholarly character'." (p. 5) What could that possibly mean?

Sometimes the translation is merely quaint, for example: "Nevertheless, for the theologian complicating conditions are added that generate nervousness about the churchly practice that awaits" (p. 2), or this terrible image of an intellectual Hoover: "The suction towards what is endless,

which belongs to the strength of scholarly methods, and the mass of scholarly over-production, which can never be worked through, should never hinder a person from turning to limited tasks and concentrating on particular things with inner peace and good conscience" (p. 5) One might be forgiven for wondering whether this translation was not an elaborate practical joke. The translator's name, after all, is an anagram of 'i.e. u are bad pen'.

One must conclude that it is sad that many people may spend so much money for such a bad translation of what might actually be an important book. As the text says: "If one includes this fact, then a discomforting impression arises" (p. 8).

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE O. P.

LONGFORD, A BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT by Mary Craig. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1978. pp. 220 £5.95.

"The nursery-maids at North Aston, local girls of sixteen or so, were supposed to keep the children in order, but in reality were more like older sisters to them all. One in particular, Winnie, was a great favourite of Frank's. When his first daughter came to be born, he wanted to call her Winnie but, as his wife demurred, they called her Antonia instead and bestowed the name Winnie on a new bitch puppy." This tasteless anecdote is typical of the concatenation of trivial rubbish that makes up Mrs Craig's dreadful book. The mind boggles under the weight of it all. Was Winnie the girl or Antonia the bitch? What does it matter? Not really very much except that an untalented and unscrupulous publicity hunter could, by the mere fact of being born into an aristocratic family, play a senior role in the nearest thing to a democratic socialist government that has existed anywhere. He was a 'brilliant' don at Christ Church in spite of a tendency to fall asleep whilst students read their essays to him. In 1939 he joined the Territorial Army in a blaze of publicity, having himself photographed in the *Oxford Mail* offering a fellow private a light. "The fact that he neither smoked nor possessed a lighter was of no consequence." Not at any rate to Mrs Craig. But soon after there was a real war and the territorial private became a second lieutenant in the real army. However he found

the lack of privacy intolerable and training gave him gastric flu', so a friendly medical board invalidated him out and released him for antics with the Home Guard. It does not seem to occur to Mrs Craig, or perhaps Lord Longford, that many men found themselves misfits in the army and put up with it— as did Evelyn Waugh—some even got shot, but only the well-connected got out quite so easily. According to Mrs Craig he expiated his wartime failure by becoming First Lord of the Admiralty in the Attlee government. But publicity rather than politics was his real aim and his growing concern with prison reform—that is securing the premature release of notorious prisoners— was paralleled by his ludicrous antics in his anti-porn campaign. The latter is given much the most space in this biography. He has now given up socialism apparently and devotes his time to forgiving Myra Hindley and whitewashing Richard Nixon. The best comment on his career comes from Richard Ingrams: "His political achievements are minimal, his writings are piffle and his pronouncements on matters of religion and pornography are entirely worthless." There is a book to be written about the deadly snobbery of the English left and its appalling consequences. In that book the careers of Lord Longford, along with those of Richard Crossman, Patrick Gordon-Walker and Bertrand Russell, would serve very well as case-histories.

ERIC JOHN