

# Reviews

**GOD MATTERS** by Herbert McCabe OP, *Geoffrey Chapman*. London. 1987. Pp. 249. £12.50.

This intellectual feast is a collection of some 23 articles and talks written by the author between the years 1972 and 1986. Four are on God, principally philosophical in nature, two on the Incarnation, three on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil in Holy Week, five on the sacraments, principally the Eucharist, two on morals and politics, and seven talks or sermons for various occasions. It is impossible to get bored reading Herbert McCabe. His fresh, lively, insightful, independent, and witty intelligence, deeply rooted in the vision of St. Thomas, sparkle and needle one on almost every page. In his essay on 'Creation', I especially liked his insistence that the essential philosophical question to be asked is that of the radical existence of the world, why it *is* at all rather than not; in the one on 'Evil', his insistence that the most we can do is defend God from any objections arising from the presence of evil in the world, whereas we cannot penetrate the mystery of why God allowed this or that evil. As he puts it, 'It remains, of course, that I have not the faintest idea why God permits moral evil. I know why there is suffering, without it there would be no real animals, but I do not know why there is sin. This is an unfathomable mystery but it is not a contradiction.'

The author frequently tantalizes us with his brevity; he leaves us hanging just where we would like to argue with him, to ask him a further question after a deliberately paradoxical statement, such as, 'It is impossible that God and the universe should add up to make two' (p. 6). St. Thomas has his own, perhaps a little more subtle, way of saying *both* that God is pure being itself and also that He is a 'determinate being, distinct' from every creature. I am also made a bit uneasy by the unqualified way in which the author asserts that God is the cause of all our actions. I would have been happier to hear him say that God is cause, with us, of whatever positive alternative (in a free choice) we decide to pursue, but that the choice itself, at least in its first negative moment of excluding all other alternatives but one, is our responsibility and not God's. His own solution of the problem of moral evil in the next essay depends on this. Just a shadow of the old Dominican-Jesuit controversies over freedom flickers for a moment in a corner of the stage! But there is so much that is insightful and profound that it is hard not to keep applauding most of the time, for example, at the frequent recurrence, at critical points, of one of the central themes of McCabe's thought, drawn from his deep understanding of St. Thomas, namely, the mystery of God, that God's essence in itself is totally hidden from us.

In the essays on the Incarnation, his daring statement that Jesus is a human as well as a divine *person* (everyone admits he has a human as well as divine *nature*), rather than the more theologically traditional way of putting it, that there is no human person in Jesus, only the one divine Person possessing two natures, human and divine, is very challenging, to say the least. It may possibly be understood in an orthodox way, as he tries to show persuasively, but I still think it tends to be misleading unless a little more fully explained, although I must say it certainly makes it easier to talk about the humanity of Jesus with ordinary people.

The three homilies on the Holy Week triduum are wonderfully rich and nourishing, in particular 'Holy Thursday: The Mystery of Unity': '... the mystery of unity, this is what the Eucharist (and hence Holy Thursday) is all about. You could say, of course, that this is what the entire Gospel, the whole of divine revelation, is all about ... the union with God and the unity of mankind are not meant to be two separate things. The ultimate unity of people is only to be found in God, and the real God is only to be found in unity between people' (p. 78).

I must say, though, that I simply cannot follow clearly enough his explanation of Transubstantiation in the Eucharist in terms of language and communication. More unpacking is needed. Nor do I find his all too simplified condemnation of capitalism and advocacy of the class struggle convincing as it stands, though what he says is always worth pondering over. But the seven final talks and sermons I find wholly admirable, especially those on the Immaculate Conception, Obedience, and On Being Dominican. Not only do they stimulate deep reflection in the reader; they also activate the springs of spiritual inspiration — revealing in an unmistakable way the rich synthesis of deeply personal philosophical and theological reflection with living spirituality that is the unique gift of Father Herbert McCabe to our confused world.

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**HOLY WOMEN OF THE SYRIAN ORIENT** introduced and translated by **Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey**. *University of California Press, 1987*. Pp. x + 197. \$28

The area which lies along the Eastern Mediterranean sea and stretches inland into Persia includes places well-known today through the media as rife with violence and unrest. More than a thousand years ago in these parts, Syriac Christians, among the most fervent of the earliest Christian churches, were equally involved in violence, suffering repeatedly at the hands of rival political conquerors. The atmosphere of tension issuing in physical suffering, whether through the imposed pains of torture or the voluntary agonies of asceticism, provide a brilliant colour among the threads that went to make up the cloth of early Christianity.

In this book, the lives of fifteen women, famous in the Orient for their courage and single-minded love of God whether through death or through ascetic practices or both, are translated from Syriac, most of them for the first time. The stories were written down between the fourth and seventh centuries, and circulated most of all in monastic centres, where they were presented as icons of the truth of salvation through the Cross for the rebuke and encouragement of the readers and hearers. The first two stories, 'Maria, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun' and 'Pelagia of Antioch' are well-known in the Greek-speaking world and also in the West, but in their Syriac guise they speak with a new freshness. To the story of Mary is added the 'Lament of Mary', an alphabetic acrostic hymn of great beauty, composed in the fifth or sixth centuries and used sometimes during Lent. In the version of the Pelagia story, many details enhance the atmosphere of the East, with more colour, vigour, movement and emotion than in the more careful theologised Western accounts. Apart from these two ascetic women, the others were all the subject of tortures of the most degrading kind, in which they were steadfast in their faith until death. The details of their sufferings are graphic indeed; but before the reader becomes amazed to the point of disbelief it is as well to remember that the century which far exceeds all others in the extent and savagery of the use of torture is not the fourth but the twentieth. What the accounts of the deaths of Thekla, Anastasia, Febronia and Shirin convey is not the barbarity of their tortures but the steadfastness of their conviction of truth, which no physical discomfort could in any way change. These are texts written to emphasise the power of the Risen Christ over death, not, as with so many modern accounts of similar agonies, to stimulate curiosity about pain.