

Reviews

WORKING LIKE THE REST OF US by Richard Syms. *SCM*. 1979. pp. 96 £1.10

There can hardly be a priest around who does not feel thwarted by the ecclesiastical trap. This is often enough accompanied by the thought that before he was ordained he used to be a better christian. If he has previously worked at an ordinary job, all this is compounded by his knowledge that people out there in the real world are often more effectively interdependent than many church communities. It is these sorts of reflection that led Richard Syms to give up his job as an Anglican parish priest to work as an actor.

He starts this account of his decision with the events that crystallised his dissatisfaction with the Church of England. He wrote an article doubting the wisdom of turning the Queen's Jubilee into a christian festival, and learnt that a clergyman is expected to be a right wing conservative. When he suggested that there might be a better object for raising £3000 than the church organ, he found that the primary concern of the church was the maintenance of its own plant. When he wanted to adapt the harvest festival for a town and have it in the community centre, he discovered the congregation did not want to move outwards in this fashion.

His conclusion was, first, that the church had gone in for constructing a special inward-looking community, separated from (and evidently not as sensitive as) the local and other communities in which people actually lived. Secondly, the exchange of his own identity for that of "the vicar", with the respect and authority implied by that status, prevented any honest relationship. As is the way in these matters his worth was identified with his position. Though as a matter of fact this is becoming an increasingly ambiguous experience for the clergy. For background, he adduces the church's hypocrisy: the refusal to upset the status quo, to ordain women, recognise divorce or homosexuality, and so on. For theology - there are some quite long sermon-like passages - he argues that the incarnation has in practice

been rejected; the church refuses to believe that the Word entered the real, messy world.

All this is familiar enough. So is the identification of the root of the problem in the church's very existence as an institution: "Organised religion is the antithesis of the faith of Jesus". Indeed for Catholics, who were being battered by this view in the 1960s, it has a slightly dated flavour, though it is interesting to read how the Anglican bureaucracy can treat its clergy and membership as badly as does its Catholic equivalent. It is a peculiarly modern argument, a characteristic it shares with the quest for a real authentic self outside all structured roles. It may well be the case that Jesus should be regarded, as Syms regards him, as an early anarchist (if one forgets it was a 19th century movement) for he was opposed to one man ruling another. But anarchism in its usual and influential form has been syndicalist, i.e. precisely organised. It is difficult to see how any movement could be otherwise and, to follow Syms, it would be necessary to regard christianity (and apparently understands anarchism to be) is total individualism.

Once the institution has been dismissed, the choice before any clergyman becomes straightforward. Either he must stay as "one of them, representing a dying and corrupt establishment", or he must leave and "become one of us, working with us" and so on. The poor old "trendy vicar", trapped in the special caste created for his kind, ought to realise that any attempt to reform the church from the inside is doomed to failure.

So the solution is to get a job. "Working like the rest of us" (a perceptive quote from the butcher), Mr Syms can nevertheless be called upon by his fellow actors to exercise his ministry. He has become a worker who happens to be ordained, something suggested by Illich and others as a way of breaking the power of the church bureaucracy if not of destroying the church.

Many of Syms' arguments are clearly right, especially his attack on the current cult of special church communities. It is easy to sympathise with his decision. But it is surely false to suppose that, for the sake of his integrity, the real person can and somehow must be wholly separated from the role that others give him: or to

assume that the manifest unlikelihood of church reform from within requires withdrawal from the church; or to dismiss organised religion as such. For most people being in the real, messy world demands a more subtle analysis and a more ambivalent resolution.

TONY ARCHER O. P.

TEXT AND INTERPRETATION: STUDIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT PRESENTED TO MATTHEW BLACK edited by E. Best and R. McL. Wilson, *Cambridge University Press, London 1979. pp. xv + 268 £15.00.*

All who have studied theology or rather Divinity – at St Andrews University will be glad that this *festschrift* has been presented to Matthew Black to honour his seventieth birthday. For more than twenty years until his recent retirement he was Principal of St Mary's College in St Andrews as well as editor of *New Testament Studies*. I found him most helpful in his capacity as T. W. Manson's literary executor. His chief contribution to New Testament scholarship has, of course, been in intertestamental studies and on the semitic influence on the New Testament. It is appropriate, then, that many of the contributions to this collection should be on textual criticism and philology, these include papers by Kurt Aland, C. K. Barrett, Ernest Best, F. I. Bruce, Nils Dahl, Joseph Fitzmeyer, Bruce Metzger, Harald Riesenfeld and R. McL. Wilson. Most of these papers are on detailed technical matters which will restrict the readership, and coupled with the price is likely

to prevent the book being a best-seller. The most interesting papers tend to be those on broader theological themes: an extension of the Son of Man discussion by Morna Hooker, a brief investigation of the presuppositions involved in research into the use of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament by Max Wilcox, the relationship between Jesus and "the messianic prophets" of Josephus by David Hill, and the relationship of I John and the opponents of that author to the Fourth Gospel by Raymond Brown. Not then a major contribution to New Testament scholarship but a collection of some interesting papers and a notable tribute to Matthew Black's invaluable work in a long career. I should add that there is also a bibliography of Professor Black's writings from 1968 to 1977 which supplements the list in *Neotestamentica et Semitica*, edited by E. F. Ellis and M. Wilcox, Edinburgh 1969.

GEOFFREY TURNER

RICH CHRISTIANS IN AN AGE OF HUNGER by Ronald J. Sider. *Hodder paperback. (copyright 1977 by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of USA) £1.00.*

It is paradoxical that while many individual evangelicals have shown great practical concern for the removal of social abuses, evangelicalism has not found it easy to develop a rationale for 'Christian' action in the 'secular' sphere. Evangelical social reformers may have *felt* a congruence between their faith and their social programmes: they have hardly theologised about that congruence; nor have they, for all their attacks on particular abuses, developed a theological position from which one could make an overall criticism of the sort of society which tolerates slavery,

child labour etc.

In recent decades, however, several evangelicals have been becoming dissatisfied with an understanding of the gospel which fails to see an intrinsic connection between good news and just society. It seems that Ronald J. Sider is one of these.

There are three parts to his book: an analysis, with easily-presented statistical tables, of the economic imbalance between richer and poorer countries (and between the richer and poorer sections of many countries). Particularly startling are the figures on development