BOOK REVIEWS

WHY BOTHER WITH THEOLOGY?

ALEX WRIGHT

(London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002)
ISBN: 0-232-52409-2;
139pp.; rrp £9.95

Unsurprisingly, Wright answers his own question with affirmations of theology's worth. His insistence that a redefinition is needed if such positive responses are to remain credible, however, is less predictable. Wright's call – and it is that rather more than a statement of theology's inherent worth – is for relevance. Having worked all his life within theological publishing, Wright is well qualified to comment upon contemporary theology. Against those like Millbank and Hauerwas, who seek to redeem theology through sectarian rejection of worldly influences, Wright sees answers to theology's problems of irrelevance only in a "secular" or "religionless" approach. He asks that we take both the needs and the answers of contemporary society seriously, recognising that people still enjoy spiritual awareness despite their distance from a marginalised Church's traditional language and conceptions of spirituality. This means making theology accessible and pastoral, not alien to the realms within which most people live most of their lives, realms also recognised as part of God's creation.

That Wright is a self-confessed non-churchgoer may colour some assessments of such a call, but his lack of allegiance is not so much justified here as exploited to allow him space to think. Theology's marginalisation is complete and can only be reversed by a culturally appropriate reshaping. Theologians can continue to pontificate from afar or can choose to get involved. Wright affirms only those who grapple with pain, relationships and politics; he sees good theology as offering an alternative view of human experience, though never a reductionist, utopian one. Such theology begins within the experiences of ordinary people and from the cultural tools they use to explore and make sense of their lives. Thus Wright demonstrates what theology might gain through interaction with fiction and film, drawing out themes which provide a stage for theology to encourage a more "reverential approach to life".

Wright by no means offers a comprehensive account; indeed in places his thinking seems as blinkered as the theology he rejects. But there is much here to fire the imagination and to open the eyes. This may not be a definitive or even ground-breaking call for change, but it is one worth grappling with – one which theology can hardly afford to ignore, even if not all of Wright's suggestions or procedures remain unscathed by the struggle.

Adrian Long

A LONG WAY EAST OF EDEN: COULD GOD EXPLAIN THE MESS WE'RE IN?

PETE LOWMAN

(Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002)
ISBN 1-84227-108-3;
400pp.; rrp £14.99

"This is a book for the dissatisfied." Lowman's opening line is immensely appealing for those – including myself – who count themselves among our culture's (and the church's) malcontents. No easy answers and no papering over the cracks, it seems to promise. Here is a book that will, Lowman goes on to claim, explore the interconnectedness of many of our culture's key problems, tying them all back to a common root in the popular notion that God is dead. True to his word, Lowman leads the reader on a thought-provoking journey through several key areas of contemporary life, arguing forcefully along the way that the deteriorating "mess" he depicts flows largely from our society's denial of God's existence, purposes and claims, and of notions of transcendence more generally. Aren't we, he asks, moving inexorably toward the sticky, nihilistic end that the logic of denying God always entailed?

Starting with notions of identity and purpose ("I shop therefore I am" included), Lowman demonstrates with a flair for drawing upon various cultural "texts" that it matters whether God is dead, and his purposes illusory. This, for me, is the best part of the book: provocative, challenging, persuasive. He then moves on to discuss contemporary ethics, notions of truth and what love really means, or ought to. As he does so, however, the picture he paints becomes less convincing. It would be fine as a partial explanation, but there is too much unaccounted for or skirted around for the book to retain the power of its earlier chapters. Can, for example, MacIntyre be described as "masterly" with no mention of the fairly serious critiques of his work? Can contemporary thought be adequately presented without reference to communitarianism or critical realism? (Are they ignored because they might seem to temper Lowman's pessimistic depictions?) Is postmodern thinking quite so devoid of positives as he makes out? And, perhaps most importantly, aren't non-Christians capable of profound love and Christians capable of atrocities?

Lowman's is an ambitious project. That is no bad thing, and perhaps his passionate conviction that "the mess we're in" can be explained largely in terms of the death of God is fundamentally valid. Indeed, much of this book is excellent; it's certainly always engaging. But perhaps his analysis of the "mess" is also too simplistic. The problem with the answers he gives is not that his outlines of the Genesis and Jesus narratives are defective or have unconvincing implications for today drawn from them; anything but. It is that his lop-sided depiction of "the mess" itself may not fit with the world as some of his readers perceive it, making them unsure as to the specific relevance of the answers he offers. And that in itself may mean that they remain dissatisfied.

Adrian Long

PRIESTS IN A PEOPLE'S CHURCH

GEORGE GUIVER (ED.)

(London: SPCK, 2001)
ISBN 0-281-05405-3;
158pp., rrp £10.99

A group of people associat with the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield, had produced an earlier book entitled *The Fire and the Clay*. The work of that group was a response to a particular situation (the possible closure of the College) and when that exercise was completed the

members of the group felt there were still things they wished to say. This collection of essays is the result. There has been in recent years a recovery of the New Testament note that ministry belongs to the whole Church and is not confined to a caste within the Church. These writers would agree with that, but would also note that this is partly responsible for much of the confusion over an understanding of priesthood. This is particularly true if we define a priest in terms of what functions he/she performs for there are many of a priest's duties that can be undertaken by laypeople, which, in Thomas Merton's words, require no special priesthood other than our baptismal participation in the priesthood of Christ. If this new situation is due to a strong theology of baptism, then it poses the question as to whether the diminution of the priest's role is due to a lack of an adequate theology of priesthood.

One might have expected a presentation of a traditional Catholic model of priesthood would follow, and the rest of the space would be filled with an examination of such a model in relation to the many problems facing us today. On the contrary, such a way forward is rejected and no such model is offered, and indeed it could not be offered. Nevertheless, there are shared convictions about priesthood, and a belief that there are definite things to be said which would bring some clarity to our present confusion. It is the conviction that "priesthood cannot be understood, nor even sensibly discussed, except in terms of the relationship between priests, people and God", which provides the clue to an otherwise heterogeneous collection of essays.

The first part of the book is entitled "Perceptions" and is launched by a stimulating essay, which seeks to identify the priest in the light of a new appreciation of "mystery", the mystery of God's transcendence in the Sacrament, in Scripture, in Liturgy and in life. The perception of the priest portrayed on the screen is followed by a wider look at the media in general, and the section ends with a lay contribution in a people's Church. The second part in entitled, "The Priest in Relationship", and deals with the priest in a praying community, the priest in modem society, especially in today's culture of blame, and the Priest in human relationships, especially in marriage and sexual relations. The need for detachment as well as getting alongside people is emphasised and what can be learned from religious communities. There is a final essay on the priest as the focus of the many intertwining threads of life.

It is not in the duties of the priest that we best understand the nature of priesthood, but in what the priest is, and because the Eucharist is at the very centre of the life of the Church, it is as President of the Eucharist that the nature of ministry is most clearly seen.

This is a very welcome contribution to the general debate on priesthood today.

Rt Revd John Gibbs

VISUAL FAITH: ART, THEOLOGY AND WORSHIP IN DIALOGUE

WILLIAM A. DYRNESS

(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001)
ISBN 0-8010-2297-5;
188pp. (4 colour plates; 25 b/w plates); rrp £14.00

Dyrness' book deals with the Church's relationship to the visual arts and looks at pre-reformation history and the use of the image, moving on through the modern period and concluding with the possibilities and challenges open to Christian artists for the future.

Premises, premises, premises! The premise is the thing, if that is wrong then no amount of energy will turn it around. Theologically, the author's affiliations seem to belong to the age before the Reformation, when theologians governed the production of art. The Reformation therefore appears as a nasty accident in the Church's art and sculpture archive. Space does not allow for me to outline the main problems of his approach, partly stemming from a theologian's view of art history and partly from not coming to terms with the development through time of Calvin's theological finesse, nor of Rome's historical involvement in the synthesis of Christian and pagan thought.

The liturgical, sacramental image was no longer needed by Reformers, not because of the rise of the individual over the spiritual community, but because the distant God of the extended presence, brought nigh through icons deemed the locus of the holy, was replaced by an imminent God, who was present in the believer through the Holy Spirit! Which do you prefer?

Wrong premises abound: Christian art = Church art, it has to have clear Christian content, Christian art = good theology (see Introduction). Calvin Seerveld wrote that there are two fallacies about what makes art Christian; if a Christian creates it and if it has Christian subject matter. But are all Christian businessmen christianly in their businesses and are the crucifixes you see on sale at some religious sites, only created by Christians?

The historical inaccuracy that Reformed believers gave up on the visual arts, turning instead to music and literature, is an unbelievable scholarly faux pas (pp.12–13). You only need to walk through northern wing of the National Gallery in London, to see reformational art at first hand. This was art of the human scale – which is still a way forward for Christian contemporary artists.

The author tells us of a revival in Christian art, but what is really apparent is a crisis in evangelical spirituality, which has not aided the believer to see their place in the world and how to fulfil their calling. This doesn't need the anachronistic reintroduction of icons, but the development of a thoroughgoing worldview, so deplete in contemporary Evangelicalism.

Buy the book, if only to sharpen your arguments for why art is aesthetically and not theologically qualified, needing to be sovereign of its own sphere and not suffer from the tyranny of the theologian! Artist, pick up your palette and walk.

Geoff Hall

THE REVIEWERS

Adrian Long
Adrian Long is a PhD student at the University of Gloucestershire.

Rt Revd John Gibbs
Rt Revd John Gibbs is a former Bishop of Coventry.

Geoff Halls
Geoff Halls has a degree in Arts History and an M.Phil in Art Curriculum Design. He is the Arts Editor for *The Big Picture*, www.thebigpicture.homestead.com