Reviews.

Christian Justice and Public Policy

by Duncan B Forrester
(Cambridge University Press, 1997; ISBN 0-521-55611-2; 288pp; £14.95)

Between practitioners and academics some mutual disrespect is standard, at least in politics. Professor Duncan Forrester is Director of Edinburgh's Centre for Theology and Public Issues, which for many years has undertaken projects bringing the two together. Much of CTPI's work has concerned on one hand the criminal justice system, and on the other state welfare provision – the social justice system, we might say. That work is the starting point for this book. Forrester has two aims: first to assess whether some of the leading theories of political justice are adequate for practice; and second, to draw attention to resources within the Christian tradition which can help to overcome the inadequacies he does identify.

Very conscious of contemporary fragmentation of moral belief – "nobody knows what justice is", he writes – Forrester considers the work of three theorists of justice, all of whom claim to identify a way through the difficulty. The first is John Rawls, since the 1970s the leading English-speaking liberal political philosopher. Rawls defended a relatively large redistributive role for government, and in more recent work has argued powerfully for an ideal of political debate about justice in which appeal to religious considerations has no place. Forrester's treatment is disappointing: he really only moves around the edges of the edifice of Rawls' theory, this perhaps inevitable in just one chapter. That theory is open to some decisive objections, I believe, but we do not find them here.

In contrast, the following chapters, on Friedrich Hayek and Jurgen Habermas, are full of insight and at points very penetrating. Hayek was the doyen of New Right thinkers, arguing for maximally free markets and, in an insidiously plausible but deceptive way, for the meaninglessness of the concept of "social justice". Drawing on writing by Raymond Plant and an illuminating reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Forrester points to one simple but powerful riposte to Haytek. Injustice can be a sin of omission as well as commission, so there is social injustice if there is human suffering that is open to, and practically would require, remedy by government policy, but which government omits to remedy.

Habermas's work, less well-known in the English speaking world, articulates a "discourse ethics" which imagines an "ideal speech situation" in which communication is truly among equals and wholly free. Only in such a situation can what justice requires be discernible. Forrester's exposition is clear and his critical points telling – notably, the relatively great distance between Habermas's theory and practical policy-making. Yet Forrester points to the familiarity of the vision: "lurking in Habermas's account of the procedures of justice is the hope of reconciled community in which relationships are just and loving".

The reference here is brought out more explicitly in the book's last part, "Theological Fragments". This title reflects Forrester's modest ambition: he is not attempting in this work to present a unified Christian theory of political justice. It conveys also his sense of the difficulty which Christians, as others, currently face in articulating a systematic view. Among fragments we can pick up, he suggests, are insights about how love, mercy and hope are related to justice, and the Christian aspiration that these qualities are embodied in the Church's own life. These are immensely important fragments but, as the image implies, they have to be put together. One finishes the book wanting more. For this we may look elsewhere and forward, I hope, to work attempting such piecing together by Forrester himself.

Nick Townsend

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Science and Theology: A Textbook

by John Polkinghorne
(SPCK, 1998; ISBN 0-281-05176-3; 160pp; £10.99)

Many readers will already know Polkinghorne through his writing and speaking, by which he has so accessibly and plausibly presented a thinking faith in active dialogue with physical science. This latest book "attempts the humble but useful task of surveying the whole intellectual scene". Polkinghorne offers it "as a potential textbook in the rapidly growing area of science and religion studies". He is not concerned here to address the detail of the debate in this area, or indeed the criticisms that have been levelled against his controversial views on divine action, but to set out an articulate summary of the current state of play.

In presenting scientific concepts to a lay audience it can be very difficult to find clear non-mathematical illustrations. The same tired old examples tend to be used again and again, and it is refreshing to find here some new ones. There is an admirably clear treatment of the anthropic coincidences (why is the universe so special?) and a brief but acute reference to the present state of the debate on the origin of life. Occasionally, however, the sharpness of the author's own mind, and the brevity of the book, result in important steps being taken too quickly, as in the throwaway comment that "There is no logical necessity for a block universe to be a deterministic universe." (p 48, repeated on p 90).

Even within a short book it is good to see plenty of space being given to the all-important issue of the relation of mind to physical matter. In Polkinghorne's important advocacy of the approach of dual-aspect monism he uses two analogies: states of matter and wave-particle duality. But he fails to show why these give rise to a position necessarily different from a cautious panpsychism, in which every system of entities has some sort of mental component, however minimal. After all, every solid has in the right conditions a significant vapour pressure, and every electron can in the right conditions exhibit wave behaviour. And if Polkinghorne's view is to be distanced from panpsychism, how does it differ from a mere assertion of mentality as a property emergent at a certain level of complexity? Perhaps the author's earlier language of a "noetic world" would have helped him here.

I must declare an interest in the question as to whether this is a potential textbook in the field, but I doubt if any text could do the job in 144 pages. And Polkinghorne makes little attempt to point the student to the sources in which the contemporary debate is being conducted (beyond the familiar trio of Barbour, Peacocke, and Polkinghorne himself). Moreover there is scant coverage of the important area of evolutionary biology, and no acknowledgement of the point – so trenchantly made in recent years by Willem Drees – that religion is itself properly the subject of scientific study.

The reader already somewhat familiar with questions in science and religion and wanting to go deeper will long for the footnotes and technical afterwords that Polkinghorne has provided in the past. This book is shorn of these. I found myself comparing it with the collection of essays *Science Meets Faith*, edited by Fraser Watts, and also published by SPCK in the same year (with Polkinghorne himself a contributor). Parts of the Watts book are lucid introductions to areas of the subject; others are much more technical; others are near the cutting edge theologically. *Science and Theology* is much more uniform in approach and tone. It presupposes much less knowledge of the Christian world (indeed it has a major chapter outlining various Christian positions such as the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as one comparing world faiths). Either book could be given to a semi-lapsed searcher, or an enquiring agnostic colleague, or to a puzzled atheist friend. But if the person were in a position to read only one book in the area, this would be the one to give. In

providing it, therefore, Polkinghorne has himself given another significant service to the cause of apologetics and dialogue.

Christopher C B Southgate

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Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy

by Walter Brueggemann (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997; ISBN 0-8006-3087-4; 800pp; £30.00)

The publisher's blurb describes Walter Brueggemann's latest book as "the most comprehensive and important Old Testament theology to arise out of the American scene in this century". Such a claim is hardly surprising, for this major work is the fruit of years of studying and teaching Scripture by one of the foremost biblical theologians of our time.

In a study which regards Jewish and Christian theological interpretations as parallel operations, the author's intention is to examine the claims made by the Old Testament for Yahweh and to relate them to current interpretative processes.

The book opens with a substantial section tracing the history of Old Testament scholarship from the Reformation to the present day. Here the contribution of such establishment figures as Eichrodt, Von Rad, Brevard Childs and James Barr, among others, are noted and explained. But attention is also paid to the non-centrist approach found in the writing of feminist, liberation and black theologians.

The core of the work is divided into five main sections. The first addresses the question: How does ancient Israel speak about God? The answer constitutes the nation's core testimony to Yahweh. This is followed by an account of the countertestimony – those parts of the Old Testament that probe the adequacy and credibility of the testimony by raising crucial questions about the character and actions of God. The third section examines the unsolicited testimony of Yahweh's partners, namely Israel, individual people made "in the image of God", the nations and the creation itself. The penultimate section considers the role of Torah, king, prophet, cult and sage as mediators of Yahweh's presence. The final pages raise pervasive issues of interpretation by considering the relation of Old Testament theology to historical criticism, the problem of justice, the New Testament and the Jewish tradition.

This thorough and far-reaching study by one who commands a wide range of scholarship will be valued by teachers, pastors and students for its theological reflection, its immense erudition and its accessibility. Those familiar with the author's work will find here again an example of his ability to demonstrate the relevance of the ancient texts to the modern Church. This book will prove to be an invaluable source of ideas for sermons and lectures for many years to come.

Gareth Lloyd Jones

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Faith and Power: Islam and Christianity in Secular Britain

by L Newbigin, L Sanneh and J Taylor (SPCK, 1998; ISBN 0-281-05153-4; 192pp; £12.99)

A book, parts of which have been written by different authors, is bound to suffer from a certain lack of unity. This is certainly true of *Faith and Power.* Each of the three writers has a somewhat different agenda.

Bishop Newbigin is concerned with ways in which a Christian society makes room for dissent and with the place of religious minorities in a society governed by explicitly Christian principles. Professor Sanneh is much more interested in the Muslim critique of western, secular naturalism and the shaky foundations on which it rests. Jenny Taylor writes about the "ghettoisation"of Muslim communities in this country and their failure to relate sufficiently to the majority community. She lays the blame for this on state policy encouraging multiculturalism, on the rise of religious extremism within these communities and on the custom of seeking marriage partners from outside the United Kingdom.

There is a fundamental tension in the book as the authors all desire that Christian faith should influence and inform public policy and practice, but are apprehensive of Islam seeking to do the same! At least Newbigin is aware of this, as in the last part of the book he seeks to develop an apologetic for such a position claiming that it is only the influence of the Christian Gospel on public affairs which makes tolerance of dissent possible. Liberal democracies have survived so far because of the residual influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This may be so, of course, but such a claim has to be set alongside the actual experience of history.

Generally speaking, the categorisation of Islam is too monolithic and even when, as with Taylor, there is an attempt at analysis of the different aspects of Islam, it is not deep and exploratory enough. It fails, therefore, to convince. There is no detailed discussion of Sufism, for example, as an alternative way of understanding and practising Islam.

The value of the book lies in its claim that liberal democratic societies have emerged in the West because of Christian emphasis on the dignity and freedom of the human person and because of the inherently non-coercive nature of the Gospel. This may well be true but two qualifications apply: both of these Gospel values had to be wrested from the guardians of the old "Christendom" and there are many societies in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle-East and Latin America where a Christian role in public affairs has not resulted in the emergence of liberal democracies.

More worrying, however, is Newbigin's claim that democracy can flourish only in societies shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition. If this is so, we must consign the majority of humanity to perpetual oppression – unless they all become Christians! A moment of reflection will show us, however, that democracy, of a sort, does exist in nations like Japan, India and Turkey where Christianity has not had a prominent role in the public life of the nation. Surely, along with the political analyst Samuel Huntington, we ought to be establishing common values of truth, justice and freedom across cultural and political frontiers rather than making such exclusive claims for our own tradition. In the case of the Muslim world, for instance, it is vital that Muslims should discover the roots of tolerance in their own spiritual and legal tradition rather than having these values forced on them.

To sum up, the book raises a number of important issues and is worth reading for that reason. It does not, however, deal with all of them at a depth they deserve and its approach is somewhat fragmented, lacking the unity that a single author might have provided.

Michael Nazir-Ali

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Looking God in the Eye

by Trevor Dennis (SPCK, 1998: ISBN 0-281-05003-1 112pp; £7.99)

The Genesis narratives have been dismissed as pre-scientific guesswork or defended as God's unquestionable truth. However, reappraisal of story as fundamental to human life, to make sense of our world and cope with its challenges, has encouraged a fresh approach to Biblical narrative. Here, in exploring God's encounters with his world in Genesis, Trevor Dennis recognises this power and sophistication of story.

His title *Looking God in the Eye* symbolises the audacity and insight which permeate his revelations. By introducing us to the God of Genesis through his encounters with its fascinating and flawed characters – Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel; Noah; Abraham; Hagar and Ishmael, Jacob; Joseph – Trevor Dennis brings God down to our level so we confront him, as well as ourselves.

With a twinkle in his eye, Dennis unleashes the spirit of these stories. He whips up excitement and triggers reflection about familiar tales which have perhaps lost their sparkle and power to us. Sparse Hebrew writing allows space for his discoveries of drama, mystery, contradictions, ambiguities and challenges. Intriguing background material and the richness of his inspired translations from the Hebrew, enhance this energetic presentation of scholarship.

The author recognises the need and the right to struggle with Scripture. With the increasing fundamentalist approach, Trevor Dennis' conclusion that, "These remain magnificent, though flawed stories" is a welcome antidote. He has the courage to face up to tough questions about the nature of God. For example he judges that "just six chapters after Creation, the Creator deliberately dismantles his creation". In relation to Jacob he asks "What kind of a God is this who rewards deceit?" Abraham is presented as telling God how to be God! It is suggested that whereas God could absorb Abraham's teaching, the narrator or compiler of Genesis could not. Hagar, a foreign slave woman dares to give God a name and God leaves her presence with a new identity. He is changed by this encounter.

Modern metaphors relate concepts to our experience. For example, a

concrete bunker substitutes the ark and God "pressed the button" rather than unleashing the rains! The versatile, poetic use of language encapsulates the occasion. For instance, Hagar returns, after encountering God, "with heaven shining in her eyes" and the God of Genesis 2 is "dressed in overalls" and "getting his hands dirty"! The symbolic names "Pride-and-joy" and "Nobody" aptly describe Cain and Abel. New perspectives abound as with "Jacob's ladder" becoming "God's stairway" and provocative thoughts intrigue; like God at play when he wrestles with Jacob!

This delightful book is written for all who struggle to understand more about God and themselves. It is suited to personal and group study or meditation and could well inspire sermons!

Trevor Dennis invites us to enter the story, look God in the eye while seeing ourselves in reflection, and "strike sparks" from each another in order to "set the world ablaze".

Heather Savini

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Reel Issues: Engaging Film and Faith

By Ian Maher
(Bible Society, 1998; ISBN 0-564-04126-2; 32pp; £4.50)

This resource points to film and video as both expressions and shapers of culture, that engage the intellect, the emotions and the subconscious, asking common human questions, like "Who am I?"

It offers statistics highlighting the importance of film within the UK, then goes on to give guidelines on the use of films for theological exploration, pastoral care and evangelism. Maher views films as neither sacred nor secular, regarding divisions of this nature as confining God to specifically religious activity.

There are guidelines and general questions for group leaders. Ten examples of films, with reflections, are somewhat contrived to correspond to themes of Bible Society's Open Book project. Each example gives a summary of the film's story; key issues from the film; suggested clips with questions for group discussion; questions to encourage people to share experiences of related issues; and a final section providing biblical interpretation to be offered by the group leader, with questions for the group.Overall, I believe this book will be useful for those for whom it is intended: Maher specifies those in church leadership, and those who teach 6th form. I can imagine a wider group than this finding useable material within it.

The guidelines provide clear direction on preparation regarding the use of the film. In my opinion, they fall down in the lack of emphasis on choosing a film based on things that are important in the lives of the group members for whom it is intended. A further question, not addressed by Maher, is whether the group or group leader should choose the film. A strong emphasis on analysis of issues before talking about personal matters appears to contradict a view of the use of the film as engaging with emotion, possibly reflecting expectations about the culture of users of the material. I suspect that middle class groups may prefer the intellectual exercise before disclosure of more personal information; on housing estates, I would want to go immediately to explore their own stories, with raw emotion, brought to the surface by the film, and perhaps later consider the issues raised. I found the section "God's story" to be prescriptive about theology. My preference would be to offer Bible stories, allowing the group members to make their own connections with experiences – or even to encourage them to identify for themselves the stories that connect. This book makes a useful and different addition for those who face people asking "Have you any ideas of things I could do with my house group?" It's a welcome change to begin with film instead of text, and to find something that deliberately engages the emotion as well as the intellect.

In the hands of a skilled group leader, who knows the group's culture and the issues facing them, it could be a useful tool towards encouraging powerful and deep exploration and connection between real issues and the Bible.

Jenny Richardson

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