

Book Reviews

Worthen, Jeremy F., *The internal foe: Judaism and anti-Judaism in the Shaping of Christian Theology* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2009 £44.00 hb) ISBN (10): 1 4438 0207 7 (13) 978 1 4438 0207 9, pp. xvi, 286

Much Christian writing and preaching implicitly assumes that Christianity has superseded Judaism, and that the Christian Church now, rather than Israel, constitutes the true people of God. The classical Christian framework judged Judaism as failing to understand its own scriptures and disobediently resisting ‘the new thing’ that God had done in Jesus Christ. The relationship between the two faiths has been stained with bloodshed. Both anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, albeit carefully sublimated, continue to flourish as a distorting legacy today.

It is true that more adventurous thinking has sought a rapprochement with Jewish theology, but often at a price; when only a modest Christology can be defended and when orthodoxy and distinctive identity yield to a corrosive relativist pluralism.

Jeremy Worthen forges a way through the thicket of issues associated with this vital contemporary religious and political concern. His title, *The Internal Foe*, derives from the Jewish scholar, Franz Rosenzweig, who wrote during and after World War One. Rosenzweig examined and discarded two other highly influential models for this interfaith relationship. One is Judaism as an ‘exterior other’. Its origins overlap with those of Christianity, but the two religions have become quite separate and independent. This ignores the reality that they have often been close neighbours and cultural adversaries.

The other model is that of ‘estranged sibling’. This argues that the two faiths were conceived in a single womb and that, though there has been a parting of the ways, a repair of the breach is possible. This underestimates the width of the estrangement caused by the radical newness of Christianity.

The insight of Rozenzweig is that, although the enmity between Christianity and Judaism has been bitter, it is the relationship with the latter that has shaped Christian theology and self-understanding. The two faiths encounter one another in an irreducible tension within the same frontier. So Judaism is uniquely positioned to have influence in the Christian imagination and within the Christian community.

Jeremy Worthen painstakingly excavates three layers of Christian history (the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, the early modern period and the first half of the twentieth century) to show how, in experience, continuing Judaism served as ‘a perplexing stranger’ who helped to resolve Christianity’s internal dilemmas and to precipitate uniquely generative shifts of interpretation in Christian theology, law and ethics.

Sometimes the analysis in this book is very dense, and it is far from an easy read. But there are seminal ideas that are certainly worth pursuing. The scholarship is immense and impressive; extensive footnotes are placed at the end of each of the six chapters, and there is a substantial and comprehensive bibliography containing some three hundred items.

Robert E. Dolman, Cambridge Circuit

Boesel, Chris, *Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference: Christian Faith, Imperialistic Discourse and Abraham* (James Clark and Co 2010 £33.00 pb) ISBN 978 0 227 173145 pp. xix, 286

Let me begin with an admission: I am far from sure quite how much I understood of this book. This may say more about the my capacities than about the writing of the author, but it is a needful confession, considering this review. What Boesel offers here is his published PhD, in which he addresses the question of whether the gospel can be good news for all, not bad news for some; in this instance the Christians’ Jewish neighbour. Kierkegaard, Hegel, Said, Barth, Ruether, Lessing, Derrida and Levinas all make appearances during the book, so at the outset there is a realization that this is not going to be a simple read. The question has been stated – how can the gospel not become bad news for the Jewish neighbour: sadly the answer is long and complicated, and in conclusion, provisional.

Boesel regularly attempts to introduce the key themes of his thesis, in each part and chapter of the book as each movement is made in his argument, but while this was probably done to be helpful, at times I was just left simply bewildered. So, let me instead focus on the key sections and where they leave us.

Boesel recognizes that whatever attempt is made there is no escape from some form of imperialism – the decision of the believer/reader is whether this imperialism is that of western discourse, or that of the self-revelation of God in Jesus. He clearly favours the latter, after Barth, but he presents it alongside the option provided by Ruether. In engaging with Ruether he

eventually concludes that her scheme is one that imposes a relativism that emerges from western intellectualist imperialism rather than authentically creating the space for believing communities to be who they truly are. Also the risk he sees, in her approach, is that by reducing the gospel to a sectarian-particular [his words], or what in other discourse would be called an ideology, she has somehow denied the Catholic nature of the Church in its response to the address of God.

Following Barth he accepts that there is an inescapable imperialism when hearing the gospel, but because that imperialism is first and foremost the address of God to the world, in himself in Jesus Christ, then this imperialism is not that of the Church at all. The 'gospel of Jesus Christ is Good News for the world, the Jew first [because Jesus was a Jew], and also for the Greek'. Boesel draws on Derrida and Levinas to offer a postmodern critique as to why such an imperialism may have validity in the context of religious discourse with the neighbour, but ultimately he does not rest on them. Instead it is Barth's central assertions of God's action for the world in Jesus Christ, good news for all and not simply for some, that is the only valid imperialism. The Church only repeats as best it can the truth it thinks it has heard; therefore the Church should never occupy central or prominent ground; should never be imperial in its proclamation, because it is only ever trying to point to God, and away from itself.

In conclusion this book is fraught with complexity, and will have a narrow appeal, but maybe that simple reminder of humility for the Church and priority for the gospel is what needs to be remembered.

Kerry Tankard, Peterborough Circuit

Douglas, Davies, *The Theology of Death* (T and T Clark 2008 £19.99 pb) ISBN 978 0 567 0304 8 pp. 197

Professor Davies' book is a masterpiece of reflection on current theology and thinking relating to death. The book, however, is as much a theology about life as it is death.

In terms of theology one of Davies' underlying theses is that within Church and society there are very different understandings about death. He suggests 'For some death is the end of life, for others it is the gateway to further existence . . . Christians ought to recognize that diversity more clearly and mutually accept it' (p. 168). From this he offers an excellent synopsis of different religious and denominational understandings. He also

reviews different attitudes towards death: for some it holds an abstract fear, often personified in those who feel they will never be good enough and have a fear of hell (using Purcell's term 'spiritual terrorism' as a description of what has produced this); to a review of Tillich's understanding of confidence and courage. There is also a very helpful review of a possible future existence using traditional models, e.g. resurrection, immortality of the soul, and newer understandings, e.g. to live and live again.

Relating to funeral practice Davies offers an excellent reflection of what historically funerals try to achieve as a rite of passage. He sets this in the context of marriage and baptism and how any rite has the function of enabling transfer from one state of existence, or place, to another. In highlighting significant contemporary changes in funeral practice he reflects on how the rite of transference (from this life to the next) has now become a small part of funeral practice and liturgy. Funerals, he argues, now express a modern theology of life, which is often personal, positive and celebratory, which gives the liturgy at least a dual purpose. He also argues that those who lead funerals occupy one of the few available platforms where the meaning of life can be approached in any form of public fashion.

The book also offers solid theological reflections on many issues in relation to death and the disposal of the dead that are all too easily taken for granted, e.g. graves, cremations, burials, prayers of commendation and committal etc. There are also helpful reflections on some new symbols of death and dying, e.g. woodland burial and how this can enhance a traditional image of the tree of life.

Davies' book is an excellent read for all those who have an interest in issues surrounding death. It is not always the easiest of reads (challenging theology rarely is) but the book provides challenge and insight, setting death in the context of 'a blessing when timely, a curse when not'.

Martin Abrams, Southport Circuit and a representative on the Churches' Funerals Group (www.christianfunerals.org)

Greggs, T., *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity*, (OUP 2009 £61.00 hb) ISBN: 978 0 19 956048 6, pp. xviii, 242

I suspect there will be few people who at the sight of such a title will look any further, but to turn away now is to miss what is an excellent and quite incredible gift. What Greggs has set out to do is 'to articulate a form of Christian universalism which is genuinely *Christian* and which does not

exist at the expense of particularity'. What he has achieved at its conclusion is a book which has not only done that, but achieved it within a deeply evangelical theological framework.

Greggs draws on both Barth and Origen, and often weaves between them, laying their theology side by side for consideration, but always in a very readable and well-explained way. As he unpacks their theological perspectives he shows how they create an inclusivist (all are chosen) and particularist (by and in Jesus Christ) theology which takes seriously the work of the second and third persons of the Trinity. He rightly affirms that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ, but following Barth he sees this not as an exclusive claim, which sets the Christian against the non-Christian, but is instead an inclusive and particular claim. If we are created in and through the Word, then we are already in Christ! As Barth then puts it, in Jesus Christ God was electing all humanity for salvation. Greggs rejects the binary notions of Christians going to heaven and non-Christians to hell. Instead, he sees salvation as a gift of God to all but, following Barth and Origen, he then shows how the Holy Spirit then equips the *Christian* in particular to witness to the truth of God's universal love: 'The Spirit's work is not to narrow the salvific work of Christ, but to widen it in spreading its message abroad by giving the community identity as those who witness to the salvation of humanity in Christ.'

This book offers a superb treatise on the nature of salvation, the identity of the Church, and crucially a witness to God, the subject of all theology. It recognizes that our understanding of salvation must be challenged by its implications on God, who at times is painted in vividly destructive terms by exclusive and violent views of election and rejection.

Greggs, in his conclusion, even recognizes the significance of what he is saying in the multiple contexts of church, world, and religious life. It is pertinent that he sees a link in his discussion of Barth, Origen and Universalism, to fresh expressions of church: if all are saved by virtue of already being in Christ, through creation, what implication does the movement of the Spirit now have on ecclesiology for those who sit at the border of what we have traditionally known as the Church?

I'm left with one sadness: the title and cost of this book will undoubtedly limit its audience, and yet it is a genuinely brilliant offering to the Church, its ministers and its laity. Here is a gospel which is good news for all – but who will speak it for all?

Kerry Tankard, Peterborough Circuit

Hauerwas, Stanley, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (SCM 2010 £19.99 pb) ISBN 978 0 334 04368 3, pp. xii, 288

Anyone who has met Stanley Hauerwas knows that he is a character even though, as he says 'I did not intend to be "Stanley Hauerwas"' (p. ix). Hailed in 2001 by *Time Magazine* as 'the best theologian in America', Hauerwas has produced provocative theological fireworks for the past 40 years. Yet behind the writing and speaking is a deeply moving story showing how character was formed in Hauerwas's life. *Hannah's Child* traces the themes of life and theology which contributed to the formation of his character.

James McClendon once declared that theology is at least biography and *Hannah's Child* underscores this. As we read the story we recognize the theological themes which have made Hauerwas so distinctive, creative and combative. Hauerwas is always an outsider. The miracle child of an artisan couple from Texas, Hauerwas declares himself a blunt-speaking, working-class, conservative Protestant who did his theological education in Ivy League Yale University and who has worked as a radical theologian in Lutheran, Catholic and Methodist establishments. He became a theologian because he couldn't get saved and be a minister in the Revivalist Methodism of his youth. His domestic life both as a child and throughout his first marriage was dysfunctional and so his sustaining adult relationships are with friends, and his compassion is for those suffering disability. He is formed in a world of the skilled crafts at the very time when liberal global economics and technology are marginalising this way of practical wisdom. Indeed there is a sense here of someone not simply defending the practical wisdom of his working-class background but also engaged in a fight with those liberal forces which are destroying this way of life. Theology embodied in ethics represents a conservative strategy radically challenging a compromised liberal Church. Hauerwas's Church, in contrast, embodies the social, practical and truthful wisdom that crafts Christians into disciples just as Hauerwas was apprenticed by his bricklayer father. Theology, like bricklaying, is practical work rather than idealistic. Worship is about disciples as artisans being trained to lay faith bricks well.

Liberation theology challenges the Church to listen to the marginal and oppressed. Hauerwas emerges from such a context with a robust challenge to contemporary Christians. The habits and virtues of artisan formation on the building site and in church enable Hauerwas to inform the character of his discipleship. Here in the rough peaceableness of communal work is

Hauerwas' vision for the Church, a peaceableness witnessed to, and vindicated in, the passion of Christ. Christians would do well to listen carefully to this voice 'from below' as they explore what it means to become Christians and embody Church today.

John B. Thomson, Director of Ministry, Diocese of Sheffield

Spencer, Nick, *Darwin and God* (SPCK 2009 £6.99 pb), ISBN 978 0281060825, pp. 160

This book sets out to reconstruct the development of Darwin's thinking on the subject of God, faith, and theology through his letters and published works, as well as a little speculation.

The author makes a plausible case for the following trajectory:

- Chapter 1 (1809–36) The Christianity of Darwin's youth and Cambridge years was of an early-nineteenth-century, Paley-inspired rationalist variety.
- Chapter 2 (1836–51) Returning from his voyage on the *Beagle*, Darwin's subsequent scientific reflection led him to question the 'certainties' of Paley's method, while remaining convinced that the truth he was uncovering could nevertheless be held alongside a rational belief in God (Theism).
- Chapter 3 (1851–82) Further intellectual doubts and conversations (not least with Christian thinkers), along with personal experience of the problem of suffering, led Darwin to question the goodness of God and the ability of human brains to comprehend anything about God. These doubts left Darwin feeling 'muddled', and this is the best way to understand his mature agnosticism.

None of this is particularly surprising and, if anything, it is told with rather too much repetition. However, Spencer has clearly done his homework, and he seems to give a good account of Darwin's extensive correspondence.

The lessons drawn in the book's fourth chapter are fascinating. First, that science is no enemy to theology. Many of its discoveries even seem congenial to Christian faith (such as the 'anthropic principle' and so-called 'deep structure' of evolution, on which Spencer speculates for several pages), though it would be a mistake to base one's faith on them as Paley did, thus 'inviting collapse when the next scientific revolution comes' (p.

117). Secondly, that Christianity without the cross has no resources for dealing with suffering (p. 119). Thirdly, that reason alone is not capable of discovering truth about God. As Darwin's wife Emma noted, 'the habit in scientific pursuits of believing nothing till it is proved' left him open to the risk of missing 'other things which cannot be proved in the same way' (p. 121). Darwin experienced wonder and the 'sublime', but did not know how to integrate them into his scientific worldview. He ended up doubting the human mind, and (some of its) instincts for truth. Nevertheless, he remained open to speculation and instinct in some arenas (p. 123), though not in faith.

Finally, Darwin models a courtesy and grace that are lacking from contemporary debates about evolution and religious belief. He lived generously, and took an interest in all kinds of intellectual pursuit – including theology – always with an interest in free enquiry and lively, respectful discussion.

Joel Love, Birmingham

Ogden, John, *Believing the Creed: a metaphorical approach* (Epworth 2009 £19.99 pb) ISBN 978 0716206576, pp. xviii, 202

Is the Creed, 'a piece of discarded machinery that we pass by quite frequently'? John Ogden offers this comment not as a question but as a personal confession at the outset. He begins in a place of admission that the Creed, in this instance the Apostles' Creed, is at risk of becoming moribund for the Church and the world, and yet he wants to offer it back to both as a rich resource for believing and understanding.

As will be obvious in the title, he wants to offer it as a tapestry of metaphor, as poetry, which creates the space for Christian believing because it refuses to be definitive, despite the attempts of some to make it so.

He explores the various confessional statements of the Apostles' Creed in an accessible and open way, offering his own perspectives as a space for people to consider the affirmations anew. The style is light, friendly and at times a little too self-deprecating, as he seeks to provide a text that will serve lay and ordained, believer and doubter.

He first sets language in context, exploring how language serves us in different situations and how it may have quite varied purposes. He then goes on to engage with the content of that language in respect of the confessions of the Apostles' Creed, and how we might receive it today. Having

looked at the content of the Creed, and after offering a broad response to it, he proceeds to ask the questions that the Apostles' Creed chooses not to address directly: questions of grace, suffering, evil, the Bible and prayer, before finally offering the reader access to a wide array of affirmations of faith from a breadth of Church traditions.

We are given a book that seeks less to make definitive conclusions, than to open up the space for believing; that seeks to encourage those who have faith or are exploring, that believing is open to the playfulness of God.

Kerry Tankard, Peterborough Circuit

LaCocque, André, *Onslaught Against Innocence: Cain, Abel and the Yahwist* (James Clarke & Co 2010 £18.00 pb) ISBN 978 0227173190, pp. x, 177

This short monograph is a companion volume to Professor LaCocque's *The Trial Of Innocence: Adam, Eve and the Yahwist* (2006). However, it stands on its own as a reading of Genesis 4, seen as a discrete literary unit deliberately crafted by the so-called 'Yahwist', conceived as a 'gifted minstrel' (p. 12) with a 'demythologising' (p. 101) agenda. LaCocque ranges widely among the commentators, Jewish and Christian; he brings the theoretical resources of psychoanalysis, anthropology, literary criticism and philosophy to bear on this primal text. His engagement is primarily with the moderns, with Freud, Girard, Bakhtin and Levinas, but his conclusion is, perhaps surprisingly, in accordance with that ancient exegesis which saw *hubris* as underlying the sins of our first parents. His aim is theodicy; against those modern critics who see the God of Genesis 4 as capricious and, indeed, ultimately responsible for the violence inflicted on the innocent, he urges us to pay attention to the Cain within. LaCocque's profound erudition serves wholly admirable purposes; he seeks to shine light on our darkness, on our participation in murder, or collusion with the murderers, and to urge us to turn to the light and choose communion with the victims.

However, the book offers the reader many challenges. Some sentences resist all attempts at comprehension. For instance, in the course of richly suggestive discussion of the binding of Isaac, we read, 'Along the trajectory of this same paradigm, God the hand sacrificing Abel conceivably could have been voluntarily deviated (like Abraham's)' (p. 72). Footnotes sometimes contain important comments that merit a place in the

main argument – for example, the reference to Gore’s “kenotic” theory (p. 75, n. 20). Moreover, in terms of what Robert Alter has called the “heresy of explanation”, LaCocque may be regarded as an heresiarch. He is profoundly aware of the intentional reticence of the biblical text; its creation of “gaps” through which readers are prodded to explore the deep mystery of human personality and agency. However, into these gaps he pours explanations in abundance. Sometimes, these are suggestive and illuminating; at other times, they are unconvincing, particularly to those sceptical of Freudian “analysis”. Perhaps Eve’s silence when Abel is born — which certainly does contrast with her exultation over Cain, (Genesis 4.1–2) — might indicate a lack of regard for her second born (p. 79). However, to claim that Cain’s ‘societal ineptitude is not without relationship to a castrating mother’ (p. 109), surely goes beyond anything the text says, or doesn’t say.

Nevertheless, readers who do persevere will be richly rewarded. The book’s strongest point is its deep engagement with the Hebrew text. Imaginative close readings repeatedly illuminate both Genesis 4 and other canonical passages. LaCocque’s generosity and wisdom, and his insights into the possibilities of both evil and innocence, are profound and transcend the occasional obscurities of his style.

Peter Hatton, Wesley College, Bristol

Wood, Charles M., *Love That Rejoices In The Truth, Theological Explorations* (Wipf & Stock Publishers 2009 £19.50 pb) ISBN 9781556359538, pp. 156

Charles Wood presents a collection of essays that endeavours to explore how Wesleyan doctrine can be practically applied in current contexts, particularly theological education. He suggests that critical reflection that seeks God’s truth for each new generation is essential in contemporary Christianity and rejects an unquestioning acceptance of inherited doctrines, theology and models for teaching.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in developing a model for theological reflection, Wood draws on the Wesleyan quadrilateral and matches Scripture, reason and experience to different aspects of theological endeavour: historical, philosophical and practical theology. He then suggests that tradition (or witness, as he suggests as a modern equivalent) needs to be tested against the other three.

Wood writes from a United Methodist American perspective which informs his application of the theory to a context which differs from the UK one. Many of the points he makes with regard to the contrasts between the nature of theological education within universities and the denominational theological colleges still resonate within a UK setting. However, for most who have experienced theological education through any of the Methodist supported institutions in the UK, his methodology will seem far from radical. A strong proponent of ensuring that theological reflection underpins all aspects of theological education, Wood suggests that the ultimate aim of theological education is ‘the fostering of an aptitude for theological reflection’ whilst he places additional emphasis on the importance of teaching discernment.

More challenging is his brief exploration of Christian disbelief and its importance within the theological academy: ‘Not everything that is likely to go by the name of theological education really is theological education.’ He acknowledges the secular influences that inform theological education, and also the growing needs of students who lack basic religious formation, and who present with a wide range of psychological problems that need to be worked through during their time in college. Though not denying the importance of allowing the space for these to occur, he returns to the importance of maintaining the centrality of seeking to understand God in all that is done.

As a collection of essays, *Love that Rejoices in The Truth* presents an interesting, if conservative, approach to Methodist theology and theological education.

Karen Jobson, University of Portsmouth

