

**THE IMAGE AND PRACTICE OF HOLINESS** by Margaret R. Miles,  
*SCM*, 1989. Pp. xi + 207. £10.50.

Even readers who do not know her earlier books may here be intrigued to find the Professor of Historical Theology at Harvard—with a suitable protest against the use of the tiresome word 'spirituality'—setting out to explain the images of Christian living cast up by a select number of classical manuals for the devout. The inclusion of the *Enchiridion* of Erasmus among these is a reminder of how a now virtually forgotten book can, in its day, appeal to a range of readers of very different temper. For the *Enchiridion*, after a quiet start among those who could read it in Latin, was widely used by Catholics in Spanish translation while, among Protestants, both Tyndale and Coverdale found it worthwhile to produce English versions of it. Of books currently available in cheap editions or paperback, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which did not appear in Russian until 1884, surely now enjoys a greater vogue translated into English and various European languages than it can ever have known in the original. Of the three undeniable time-beaters, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* must sometimes be known as a literary rather than a spiritual classic. Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* was an instant success, rapidly available in English, and in Italian, Spanish and German in his own lifetime. It retains a very personal appeal which is something unique, but the only one securely to cross most Christian denominational frontiers is the fifteenth-century *Imitation of Christ*.

As Ms. Miles says, 'in order to live a Christian life, one must first imagine such a life, must visualize what it might look like, might feel like.' One needs a metaphor. This is, of course, very true, and the continuing usefulness of a given book is perhaps likely to depend upon its capacity to appeal to something archetypal in its readers. It is unfortunate that the decision to discuss the metaphors of imitation, pilgrimage and ascent and, after that, certain Christian practices in reference to the chosen books—while doubtless an attractive teaching convenience—militates against a subtler consideration of their effect and 'tone' as a whole. Someone must some day bear the brunt of showing why the continued popularity of books like, say, the *Imitation*—impeccable though in many ways it is—is somehow so ambiguous a phenomenon for serious Christian commitment today. But that would be to ask for another book. The introduction to the present one will certainly bear a closer re-reading at the end, for it alludes to most of the dilemmas that such an enterprise involves, especially if one of its aims is a kind of theological neutrality for which student diversities and contemporary pluralism are the excuse. The manuals assumed, we are wisely told, that 'altering habits can change perceptions and ideas; insight is at least as likely to follow change as change is to follow insight.' And one of the author's just preoccupations is the need for change in the habits of professing Christians who live in an 'entertainment culture'—evidently because this is also the only way to achieve *today* that 'interweaving of ideas and activities that has characterised the practice of Christianity in the past.' Yet I noticed the word 'virtue', or some equivalent notion, only once in the whole book, in a quotation from Francisco de Osuna, and there is no discussion of the practice of the virtues appropriate to one's situation at all, though it is implicit in all the books studied, and very

importantly and explicitly in Francis de Sales. No wonder that in her introduction Miles has to admit that 'it is the moment of appropriation that we evade', and add that 'the activity of continuous reappropriation is what it means to participate in tradition'. Exactly. No change, no insight. This lamentable blind spot certainly has a profound effect on her evaluation not only of the books she is studying, but even of her own earlier work.

The little she has to say on asceticism in the present volume would have benefited enormously by her taking seriously and really appropriating Francis de Sales saying boldly near the beginning of the *Introduction*, as he consistently did in almost every one of his perceptive letters, that to take models of Christian living inappropriate to one's case generally turns out, among other things, to be 'ridiculous'. If, as she now thinks (p. 104), the asceticism she quite interestingly studied in her *Fullness of life, historical foundations for a new asceticism* of 1981 'cannot rehabilitate Christianity in the eyes of secular people', she was perhaps aiming at the wrong audience and might have tried a different and more persuasive method with her fellow Christians. The words of Palamas, quoted but unused at the top of p. 147 of the new book, would seem like no bad star to have followed for a creative adventure. When the present reviewer roughly thirty years ago first lectured positively on the Christian concept of the body in a course of ascetic theology there was a small stir. But the larger work is still to be done for many puzzled Christians, partly by historians who do not lose their nerve and, while acknowledging the threat of atomic extinction which haunts this new book, are not less troubled by the awareness that—not far from the classrooms—hundreds of people on the streets of Boston and other great American cities are dying of AIDS and other incurable diseases and would not be impressed by the professor's repeated conviction that misery, disease and death are more remote than they were in medieval times. Someone who is worried about 'the usefulness of prayer for contemporary Christians' might have pondered more deeply the intimate connection between authentic prayer and the development and maintenance of that genuine compassion without which there is not much to be hoped for except the discovery of the secret of how to 'fix' everything.

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**GREEK APOLOGISTS OF THE SECOND CENTURY** by Robert M. Grant. *SCM Press*. 1988. Pp. 254. £10.50.

There is no doubt that a general book on the apologists of the second century is much needed: in fact, it transpires from Grant's bibliography (one of the most valuable features of this book) that there has been no general work on the apologists for many years, and never one in English. It is also very important to treat the apologists in their historical context. The very word 'apologist' with its associations in English of 'apology'—'apologetics' in the sense of softening unpopular aspects of Christian belief to make it more acceptable to modern man—is very misleading when applied to the second-century apologists. The Greek word *apologia* means 'defence', and the apologists' first aim was not to produce a version of Christianity that might appeal to the Greek philosophical mind, but to defend Christians against the threat of persecution that hung over them throughout the