

Reviews

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT by Patrick Grant. *Macmillan*, 1989, Pp. 161. £27.50

This book has a two-fold aim: by drawing on recent Biblical scholarship it offers, from the perspective of one trained in English literature, close and lucid readings of the works which comprise the New Testament; by means of such readings it seeks to convince us that our doubts and disbelief in the risen Christ are, in the New Testament, challenged by a knowing portrayal of these very doubts, by the writers' refusal of too simplistic a faith. We come as moderns worrying about the possibility of knowledge, the treacherous ambiguity of signs, lack of reasonable proof beside the presence of innocent suffering, to find that these problems are the very stuff of the Gospels: 'We are persuaded, then, in part to take Jesus' claims seriously because of how imaginatively they are presented, and the New Testament does not oversimplify the perplexities of faith' (8).

Patrick Grant's chapters on the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, Hebrews and Revelation are a pleasure to read, well written. For Mark's Gospel he examines the call for 'a sign from heaven', the cross from which Jesus does not come down as a sign of his power but which remains 'a warning against seeking security from signs' (13–14). He looks in detail at the anointing at Bethany. In Matthew the stress lies with the writer's passion for symmetry and order, 'a concentrated interest in binary structures' (29), challenged by the earth-shattering events of crucifixion and resurrection, events mirrored in the text by 'strategies of upheaval' (31). Journeys are the theme for Luke—Acts and the subversive use of Classical stories of shipwreck and heroic deliverance. Hearing and sight are discussed in John. Each chapter summarizes as it synthesizes the work of many scholars and by virtue of so doing avoids the polemic, the jargon, that quotation in German at least once a paragraph, which bedevil the tomes of most professionals. The latter, increasingly familiar with the workings of narrative, irony and so forth, will find little new here, but might study the clarity with which it is presented. Of particular worth is the chapter on St Paul. It opens with an analysis of T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Journey of the Magi', its concern is with our inability to understand fully many of the events we participate in, an inability due to the constraints of that very participation. 'Like the magus, Paul is caught up by an event—his witnessing the crucified and risen Christ—which he does not fully understand, and his letters record the struggle to clarify his experience' (81).

The weakness of these accounts, however, is that they thin out the New Testament writings in attempting to substantiate, hammer home, the overall thesis. There is a constant referral to an existential 'challenge' (the

word oft repeated) to belief by the individual reader in 'the amazing claim that the chief character in the story is in fact God' (8). It may seem like a claim to us and Patrick Grant assumes that all the authors of these books expected Christ's divinity to be read and heard within their narratives and epistles as such a claim, indeed the central claim. These texts are then artfully designed to put the claim forward in its strongest form. But, with the possible exception of John, this assumption would be questioned in works written precisely for believing communities with varied concerns.

The New Testament writings seek to convey just what faith in Christ is and what it entails. Exhortation to repentance, teaching on riches, consolation in the face of death, the call to act upon belief, the articulation of faith already present in liturgy and community: all these things should not be reduced to or confused with a challenge to believe in the divinity of the crucified Christ. That they have been so reduced can be seen in Patrick Grant's omissions: how can Luke-Acts be described without mention of that work's concern for poverty and debt? How can John's Christology be described without stress upon its sacramentalism? Faith as virtue here swallows whole hope and charity. A second assumption lies behind the first: belief is something that Christians are likely to have come to as readers of the New Testament. Faith is talked of as 'our commitment and assent to the vision which the New Testament documents present to us' (8). Thus 'ways in which we are drawn through the literature towards the extra-literary remain to engage and compel us by means of a powerfully relevant narrative and the explanations of our conditions which it offers' (132). This is not the faith taught by children learning to say the 'Hail Mary' by the bed! Nor that found in the love of a spouse, or the death of a martyr in the arena, the assassinated catechist. Across the pages of this book flits the ghost of Luther reading in lonely anguish his copy of St. Paul.

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YVES CONGAR by Aidan Nichols, OP. *Geoffrey Chapman, 1989.*
Pp. xvii + 207

As any student of theology knows, the Second Vatican Council is unintelligible apart from the pioneering research of Yves Congar. More than thirty years of his theological investigations prepared the ground for the flourishing of much of what the Council had to say on such topics as tradition, church and ecumenism. Aidan Nichols' presentation of Congar's work helps us to understand how.

Consider, for example, the chapter on tradition. Nichols explains how for Congar the transcendent subject of tradition is the Holy Spirit while the immanent subject is the church herself. Although one must seek to discover the tradition through scientific research, ultimately tradition eludes the grasp of the detached observer, for tradition in its most profound sense, is the educative milieu of faith (p. 38). Thus, only the church as such is adequate to understand its faith which is always more than a matter of doctrine, embracing rather the whole of the church's being, including worship, prayer, the moral life, and the holiness of the saints. In Congar's exposition we see a foreshadowing of *Dei Verbum* 8: 'Now what was handed on by the apostles includes everything which contributes to the holiness of life, and to

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