

in Christianity as something that lives in a world where ideas get forged by events as

well as *vice versa*.

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CONSIDER YOUR CALL, A THEOLOGY OF MONASTIC LIFE TODAY by Daniel Rees and others. SPCK 1978. pp xx + 447. £10.00

In 1969 the English Benedictines set up a theological commission to study the theological basis of their particular way of life, and this book is the result of their labours, generously made available to a wider public than just English Benedictines, in the belief that the fundamental concerns of monks are christian concerns, not peculiarly monastic, so that all christians can be expected to recognise matters of general interest in this exercise of monastic soul-searching.

In so far as this is a statement of Benedictinism for Benedictines, it would be impertinent for an outsider to offer any comment on it; suffice it to say that I should be very surprised indeed if it does not prove to be a very valuable aid to monastic renewal and – perhaps just as importantly – to monastic continuity.

But in so far as their statement has also been offered to the rest of us, certain observations would seem to be in order. And the first must be that the very lucid and sensible discussion of a whole range of topics cannot but be of value to christians of all walks of life, and particularly to non-Benedictine religious. The authors' comments on poverty, for instance, seem to me to be admirable, avoiding both the temptation of exaggerated spiritualizing and that of an uncritical assumption that the most important element in monastic poverty is its social or political effectiveness. The reflections on celibacy are also excellent, and also the discussion of the relationship between priesthood and monasticism. There are splendid (or, as the printer prefers it, spendid) chapters on personal prayer, *lectio divina*, the divine office and obedience. Sensible things are said about shared prayer, though in my opinion it is rather disingenuous to omit any sustained discussion of the problems it can cause and, seemingly, has caused in some religious communities.

From the point of view of a non-Benedictine reader, the weakest point in the book concerns the question of the relation-

ship between Benedictinism and other modes of christian life. The authors on the one hand seem to take it for granted that Benedictinism represents some kind of norm of monasticism, which all other forms of religious life adapt in various ways, and on the other hand they are anxious not to make exaggerated claims for Benedictinism, which they present as only one vocation among others. But there are problems on both counts. It is historically a very dubious contention that "all types of Christian religious life in the West are in some way developments from the monastic ideal" if by "monastic" is meant "Benedictine". The Dominicans, for instance, though they obviously make use of Benedictine and even more, Cistercian models, far more essentially derive from a very different kind of monastic past, rooted ultimately in the wandering preaching monks associated with Syrian monasticism. Similarly the Franciscans are not really intelligible as an adaptation of Benedictinism. Nor are the Jesuits. If by "monastic" we understand the whole spectrum of ascetic movements in the history of the church (Wanderprediger, Stylites, Antony-type hermits, and so on) then it seems necessary to say that Benedictinism is only one species within the genus 'religious life'. Maybe for Benedictines it is self-evident that a return to the sources means essentially a return to the Rule of St Benedict; but if Benedictinism is taken to be more essentially monastic than Benedictine, then the possibility of monasticism without a Rule has to be faced. It would have been interesting and helpful if the authors of this book had done more to specify positively the advantages of having a Rule, and to relate the resulting spirituality to other possibilities. It is at least conceivable that part of the monastic renewal going on now derives more from pre-Benedictine sources than from Benedictine, and it would be helpful to see how the Benedictines would relate to it. In so far as their tradition is in real continuity with

pre-Benedictine monasticism – which it would seem to be, and the authors of this book would seem to accept that, judging from the frequency of their references to Cassian – they will surely have a lot to contribute to a more diffuse, less institutional, rediscovery of monasticism.

With regard to lay life, I do not think that the authors of this book take enough notice of the polemical edge to the *ecclesiola* concept which they use. The myth linking monastic communities with the primitive Jerusalem community (which our authors acknowledge to be a myth) involves inescapably a criticism of those who are not monks, and this is quite patent in several passages in Cassian – non-monastic christians, for instance, are presented as living still under the Law, with only monks moving out into the rule of grace.

Similarly with celibacy: it is not enough just to dismiss encratism with a pious rebuff. It is seemingly an historical fact that a major element in the development of christian asceticism was a feeling that marriage was somehow no longer appropriate after the coming of the Messiah. This is originally nothing to do with dualistic disapproval of the flesh, and the phobia of Manichaeism characteristic of much modern thought is not a helpful tool for those concerned with the understanding of christian celibacy. Obviously it is wrong to regard marriage as incompatible with being a christian; but is it so obviously wrong to see celibacy as an essential aspect of a whole vision of what it means to be christian? But if it is only from outside that it appears to be only one possible way of being a christian. It is not *felt* to be only an option, and this is something that has to be taken into account in any theology of celibacy.

The problem becomes most explicit in connexion with the idea of vocation. As our authors lament, there has been hardly any theological study of vocation, and so it is not a matter for surprise or for superciliousness if they themselves have not made much progress on it. However it must be suggested that it is not at all clear that the scriptural texts alleged in their discussion are really relevant to the point

at issue, since they are all most naturally interpreted with reference to mission, rather than vocation; it is not, on the face of it, correct, to interpret them as referring primarily to a state of being, with doing only incidental and secondary. They are a matter of particular people being given particular jobs, and the consequences for their own personal being are subsequent and derivative. If we are to reject, as our authors do (and surely they are right in this), the view that being a monk is primarily a job, a function, then it is not at all clear what content there is in the idea of a vocation to monasticism. It seems difficult to avoid reducing it simply to the vocation to be a christian. But then at once it becomes polemical, a view of what it means to be a christian which competes with other views. In some ways it is like the problem of other religions: there can be no neutral position from which to evaluate, say, the relative claims of Christianity and Buddhism, because such a neutral position would automatically falsify both of them. One clearly has to recognise the legitimacy of not being a monk; but it is not clear how monastic theology can do this without betraying itself. (It is, incidentally, worth remarking that this book does not follow in practice the narrow usage of the phrase 'monastic theology' indicated in the Introduction: a genuine monastic theology cannot help but be vastly more than a theology of monasticism; it must, eventually, be a monastic theology of God and redemption).

These are real and difficult problems; but, in all fairness, it must be said that they are not necessarily on the agenda for a monastic commission of a particular congregation reflecting on that congregation, and on the whole they do not seriously upset the usefulness of the discussion. This is a book which should contribute greatly to the church's continual quest for her own multiple meaning and vitality, and we are indebted to the English Benedictines for sharing with us the fruit of their labours.

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