

might destroy the Jewish people whom he intended to save.

The PNs in their basic similarity and remarkable diversity, in their narrative and figurative language, in their reference to Roman and Jewish judicial procedures, present some of the most strenuously disputed questions in New Testament scholarship. Here they all are, woven into the Commentaries and Analyses, treated with patient care, each brought to a judicious and usually unemotional conclusion or sometimes to a suspension of judgement. For example: What was the Sanhedrin? Not the body described in the Mishna, nor administering Mishnaic rules. (But Professor Brown seems not to know Martin Goodman *The Ruling Class of Judaea* (1987) which first persuaded me that the Sanhedrin of the PN was a Roman-appointed quango of wealthy priests and laymen.) What were Sadducees and Pharisees, and what part did they play? Could they impose the death penalty, at least in some cases? Is there persuasive evidence of Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus and could it be said that they were not guilty but responsible? The hostility to Jews in the PNs requires six pages of comment (pp. 391–397). The strange roles of Annas and Caiaphas in John. Was Jesus against the Temple? And why was the testimony against him said to be false? What were the meanings of Messiah, and the Son of God, and of Son of Man if it was or was not a Jewish title? There is no real evidence that claiming to be Messiah was blasphemous; perhaps Jesus was condemned for being a false prophet or for arrogantly claiming prerogatives and status properly associated with God. Further, what information is needed about Roman administration, Jewish and Roman trial procedures? And Herod's involvement, the historicity of Jesus Barabbas, the so-called Passover release, and the special features of the trial before Pilate in John? What was the manner of crucifixion and its physiological effects? How to understand the various and non-agreeing words from the cross, and the extraordinary phenomena accompanying the crucifixion?

Scholars will turn to all this with gratitude and sharpened attention. Non-professionals, in my opinion, had better begin by reading an Analysis, then turning back to the preceding Commentary, before re-reading the Analysis. The Analyses are to be found in paragraphs 11, 16, and 24; and at the end of paragraphs 26, 27, 29, 32–36, 39, 41–44, and 46–48.

KENNETH GRAYSTON

**CONFUSIONS IN CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS: PROBLEMS FOR GENEVA AND ROME** by Ronald H. Preston, London, *SCM Press*, 1994. Pp.202. £12.95.

Ronald Preston is the doyen of British Christian social ethicists. Through a series of significant contributions down the years he has defined the subject of 'Ecumenical Social Ethics', and made it his own. His new book usefully describes the major events and documents of Christian social ethics of recent times, both from the Vatican and from the largely Protestant ecumenical movement. Preston then presents on his own behalf, and as a leading spokesman for the group of 'friendly critics' of the World Council of Churches' recent work on social ethics, a disturbing account of the present state of the art in the WCC and (to a lesser extent)

in the Vatican.

Preston assesses the various programmes and encyclicals against a benchmark which appears to be the earlier work of the ecumenical movement, particularly around the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State of 1937. He finds the results disappointing. His judgement should be taken seriously, not least because on his own terms he scores some bull's eyes. But some of his targets are easy. His book could help the WCC in particular to learn from its mistakes. It would be good, for instance, if the WCC were to acknowledge that the Seoul Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation of 1990, which was intended to deliver a covenantal commitment on the part of the world's churches, in the event was a considerable disappointment to almost everyone. Similarly, the repeated utopian ecumenical rhetoric to the effect that 'without justice for all everywhere we cannot have peace for anyone anywhere' brings the WCC's record for serious investigation of the relation of peace and justice into question. And the Programme to Overcome Violence on which the WCC is now embarking is so broad, ill-defined and overambitious, that it is unlikely to achieve much.

But Preston's disenchantment with the present state of ecumenical social ethics goes beyond such instances of sloganizing or utopian simplification. Liberation theology, the Kairos document, Russian Orthodoxy, trinitarian social theology 'eschatological realism', virtue ethics, kingdom theology and others are all paraded and found wanting. The Vatican is commended for taking moral philosophy seriously, but the WCC is accused of a simplistic and misleading use of the Bible. Some of Preston's critique of biblicism is to the point. But he says little about the responsible use of Scripture in Christian social ethics, so that we are left with the impression that the Bible continues to be 'the Pandora's box which opened when the Reformers put the Bible into English and made it available to everyone'(p.128), rather than an essential resource for any ethics that calls itself Christian!

Preston then presents a strong reaffirmation of the 'middle axiom' approach which dominated an earlier stage in ecumenical social ethics. This has English empiricism at its heart and focuses on ethical dilemmas, particularly those facing decisionmakers and the powerful. It involves bringing together 'the facts of the case', determined with the help of a rather positivistically understood social science, and doctrine, biblical insights, and theory or moral philosophy. Out of this interaction there emerge the middle axioms, which are instances of time-bound, situationally limited, general guidelines for policy making and action. There are a variety of reasons why this approach has become unfashionable today. It served better in a more consensual and Christian age, when Britain was run from the senior common rooms of Oxbridge and the Athenaeum, than in our modern secular pluralism. It tends to fall silent in face of radical evil — Auschwitz, or the bombing of Dresden. It takes 'experts' and the powerful seriously, but does not take the measure of their interests and their sin. It gives little place to the poor and the victims and

the people who feel powerless. The place of theology and of Christian and biblical insights in the process sometimes becomes unclear. The force and authority of middle axioms is seldom spelled out. Preston dislikes unambiguous statements of how Christians should behave, and accordingly tones down J.H. Oldham's classic statement of the nature of middle axioms: 'I myself would say that they are not *binding* at any time, and that the words *must* and *required* are too strong' (p.157).

The WCC and other ecumenical bodies have in recent times tended to take quite often just the kind of unambiguous stance that Preston dislikes, particularly in relation to apartheid. Perhaps this has to some extent gone to the head, suggesting that in most or many situations there is a relatively direct transition from Christian confessional indicatives to necessary imperatives. The various declarations that support to apartheid was incompatible with confession of the Christian faith and that ecclesial fellowship could not be maintained with those who were at ease with apartheid, backed up by the controversial Programme to Combat Racism, have proved to be a perceptive and prophetic discerning of the signs of the times, which has given the WCC a high standing in many African countries. This stance was modelled on precedents established in the 1930s in relation to Nazism, particularly Karl Barth's resonating 'Nein' to Hitler and all his works, as the new idolatry. Ulrich Duchrow (here spelt 'Duckrow' throughout!) and others have argued that a similar unmasking and denunciation of evil should take place in relation to the world economic system. Preston rejects this as a crude oversimplification of a complex situation. In a sense he is right, and his cautions are well taken. But his careful calculations and confidence that the world economy can be made beneficent by adjustment and reform does not engage fully with the outrage and anger of those who know that international debt kills, and that the world market is strongly biased towards the powerful and the rich.

Preston is surely right in arguing that the WCC no longer has a consistent, carefully thought through and incremental social teaching. It does not compare well at an intellectual level with the official teaching of the RC Church, although that is somewhat compromised by its pretence that at the root it is always the same, that it never makes mistakes, and by 'creeping infallibilism'. Much of the WCC's constituency today rejects the need for such magisterial teaching from on high. And the WCC does have an ability to 'speak for the dumb', to express the anger, outrage and expectation of the victims of oppression and exploitation. It is not at present good at developing a social theology which can articulate critically these cries. But that may come. Meanwhile, it is important to recognize that the Christian church is one of the few institutions which is capable of speaking for the dumb, and has a positive mandate to do so. This voice, even if disjointed, angry and simplistic, must surely be a major ingredient in any serious Christian involvement with social issues today. It would have been good had Preston recognized and welcomed this development more warmly.

Preston and his confrères on the one hand and the WCC on the other need to attend to one another, and learn from one another. But so far we

have a dialogue of the deaf, rather than a meeting of minds or a pooling of resources and of insights. The two sides are more complementary than either appears willing to admit; within the one Body they need one another, if the world church is to respond creatively to the challenges of the age. Meanwhile we are grateful to Ronald Preston for setting out so clearly one side of the debate.

DUNCAN B. FORRESTER

**REPORTED MIRACLES: A CRITIQUE OF HUME, by J. Houston, Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. 264. Hb: £35.**

Houston's carefully matured and judicious book draws its material from historical, theological and philosophical sources, and its potential readership is correspondingly wide. The first five chapters (there are twelve in all) are surveys of major writings on miracles. Chapters 6,7 and 12 are mostly concerned with rebutting theological positions (among others those of MacQuarrie, Barth and Cupitt) which take Hume's scepticism about reported miracles as an established general view; a view moreover that, according to such positions, liberates theology from the embarrassment of defending the real, literal occurrence of miracles, and hence facilitates a radical and possibly fideistic re-think of what religious belief is. But the core of Houston's anti-Humeian argument is in chapters 8 to 11. It is a thought-provoking and well organised case somewhat in the tradition of Swinburne's *The Existence of God*.

As the title indicates, Houston's target is Hume's contention that to a man who proportions his belief to the evidence (Hume's "wise man") a miracle "can never be proved [from historical reports] so as to be the foundation of a system of religion". I and others have argued at some length (and the point seems to have been well taken) that this should be unpacked in the light of the eighteenth century controversy concerning miracles as a coded way of asserting that "the Resurrection cannot be proved in such a way that the wise man must accept it as an established fact which validates the Christian revelation". I mention this unpacking because although Houston quotes Hume's coded version on p.124, it is a real defect in his exposition that the initial chapters are taken up with snapshot accounts of Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, Hume and Bradley/Troeltsch on miracles (much of the material to be little used in the subsequent argument) whereas he makes no mention whatsoever of the highly relevant controversy which took place in England between Locke's writings in the 1690s and Hume's publication in 1748 - a controversy which gave point and significance to Hume's contention about historical evidence. One might almost say - but because of the gap in his historical account Houston does not begin to say - that Hume's "check" is not so much on "all kinds of superstitious delusion" as on all kinds of fundamentalist claims that because the Resurrection is a proved historical event, the rest of the Christian revelation must be believed.

Houston's argument, particularly in chapter 9, is careful and persuasive, and brief comment cannot do justice to it. What one might call