

character of his life, death, and resurrection is revelatory because his life generates, breaks open, and extends possible ways of being human just as a poem is revelatory in that 'it manifests an initiative that is not ours in inviting us to a world we did not make' (p. 134). Moreover, to associate with Jesus involves '... a far-reaching reconstruction of one's humanity: a liberation from servile, distorted, destructive patterns in the past, a liberation from anxious dread of God's judgement, a new identity in a community of reciprocal love and complementary service, whose potential horizons are universal' (p. 138). Williams regards Jesus' reconstruction of humanity, liberating people from the dominance of past patterns, as Godlike. He concludes that "God" reveals himself effectively means 'that the meaning of the word "God" establishes itself among us as the loving and nurturing advent of *newness* in human life—grace, forgiveness, empowerment to be the agents of forgiveness and liberation' (p. 145).

Rowan Williams' interpretation of revelation, mentioned with brutal brevity here, is just one of several engaging discourses on Christian theology in this splendidly incisive and thought-provoking book. In the highly pluralized and frequently conflictual world of contemporary theology here is a clear and steady voice.

PHILIP KENNEDY OP

**WITNESS TO HOPE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II** by George Weigel *Harper Collins, New York, 1999. Pp. xiv + 992, £25.00 hbk.*

Among the major achievements that George Weigel attributes to John Paul II are: a radical recasting of the papacy by returning the office to its evangelical roots; a conscientious implementation of Vatican II; a pivotal role in the collapse of communism; a clarification of the moral challenges facing the post-conciliar church; a commitment to ecumenism; a path-breaking dialogue with Judaism; and an unprecedented commitment to inter-religious dialogue. Needless to say the list will raise many eyebrows, but it will look more convincing after a close reading of Weigel's wise attempt to avoid categories of "right" and "left", "conservative" and "progressive", and to tell the story of John Paul's life and work from the inside. Weigel's friendship with the pope himself and his close access to his advisors and collaborators have equipped him well for the task. The result is probably the best biography currently available.

A problem is that these very qualities are apt to provide Weigel's (and John Paul's) critics with the bulk of their ammunition. On occasions they lead to accounts that fail to convince even the most sympathetic of readers. To give but a handful of examples: Weigel tries to make a case for the alleged success of John Paul's 1980 visits to Brazil and Germany; he avoids difficult issues, such as whether the pope was justified to intervene in the internal governance of the Society of Jesus in 1981; he praises the new canonisation process, failing to acknowledge that it has allowed some rather dubious cases (notably the Mexican Juan Diego, for whom there is simply no historical record) to slip through the net.

The book's sheer comprehensiveness is another aspect where a strength can become an easy target for criticism. The need Weigel feels to cover any major event, address or publication leads him into a number of repetitive descriptions and simplifications, summaries and paraphrases of the complex issues in John Paul's thought. Weigel, of course, is quite aware of this limitation. The alternatives would have been either a less comprehensive, more thematically organised book, or a much longer, and therefore almost certainly unpublishable one. Besides the book is of enormous value in other respects. The first part is especially illuminating in its portrayal of Karol Wojtyła's formative years in pre-war Poland, a time when the region was experiencing freedom for the first time in 150 years. How passionately the future pope had come to value freedom could already be discerned in his persistent opposition to Marxism from a Christian humanist perspective. His pastoral care of students at the parish of St Florian in Krakow in the late 1940s was already marked by two central themes in his thought. One is his vision of Europe as inseparable from a Christian culture in which the artificial division into East and West, Greek and Latin, ought to be overcome. The other is his philosophical reevaluation of the Christian concept of the person as self-gift. The two themes are complementary, for Europe cannot recover its cultural and religious unity if it fails to overcome the philosophical dualism at the root of the modern conceptions of the person.

John Paul's philosophical achievement in this field has been grossly underrated. It is emphatically not the reaction of a conservative ill at ease with modernity, but the deeply committed work of an able philosopher passionately engaged with the modern world. The centre of the person, he argues, is neither to be found in the psyche (Kant) nor in the body (empiricism), but in moral action. It is here that the essential unity of mind, body and spirit attains its true and fullest character, especially when expressed in the gift of self. Nor is this a product of the ivory tower. At every stage Wojtyła's writings were discussed, tested, and criticised by a large group of friends of both sexes, the majority lay, many married, who made up his *Srodowisko*, a term loosely translated as 'environment' or 'milieu' and perceptively referred to by Weigel as 'the empirical tether for [Wojtyła's] philosophical reflections'. Something which emerges from the history of *Srodowisko* is Wojtyła's openness to others and his firm commitment to the freedom of the person and the inviolability of the individual conscience. Never a dogmatist or an authoritarian, he always proposed without seeking to impose. It is surprising that this aspect should have been so largely misinterpreted. The irony is that, by focusing on morals, and specifically sexual morals, the bulk of his critics show themselves to be much closer to the dualistic Manichaeism that they claim to attack, than to John Paul's incomparably more comprehensive, integrated, and decidedly more forward-looking defence of the person.

Weigel also trumps those who insist that John Paul has somehow betrayed Vatican II. It is well-known — though by no means widely acknowledged — that Wojtyła was a central figure of the Council. He was

among the first to respond to John XXIII's 1959 letter to bishops. His suggestions for the agenda found their way into many of the Council's conclusions. Some were already foreshadowed in initiatives that Wojtyla had taken at St Florian where he had encouraged liturgical innovation and the need for a pastorally and evangelically engaged laity. Aspects of his personalist philosophy are echoed in the Council's emphasis on God's self-revelation in both Scripture and tradition and, especially, in the various sections dealing with religious freedom and the role of the Church in the modern world, which were largely drafted by Wojtyla himself. Throughout the Council's sessions Wojtyla emphasised the need to recover a true humanism capable of engaging in a genuine dialogue with modernity and with the world religions.

Not so well-known is that one of the reasons that might have facilitated his election was the meticulous care with which he implemented the Council's decrees in the archdiocese of Krakow in a sincere spirit of collegiality and pluralism. It is true that Wojtyla's record as pope is not so happy in this respect, and Weigel's rather dubious silence over many of the more controversial episcopal appointments will no doubt receive harsh treatment. The book nonetheless makes it amply clear that the image of John Paul as a conservative reactionary bent on undoing much of Vatican II is not merely exaggerated but radically mistaken; and perhaps Weigel's most notable contribution is his skillful portrait of John Paul's extraordinary human qualities and profound spirituality. The fact that most, if not all, of his decisions have been made in the context of a deep life of prayer, totally oblivious to career or personal advancement, should alone make this excellent study of one of the greatest figures of the age a worthwhile read.

FERNANDO CERVANTES

**CATHOLICS IN ENGLAND 1950-2000: Historical and Sociological Perspectives** edited by Michael P. Hornsby-Smith *Continuum International* London and New York 1999. Pp. 352, £45.00 hbk, £18.99 pbk.

In 1950 the centenary of the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy of England and Wales after the post-Reformation penal times was celebrated with some pomp and a fair amount of historical and journalistic reflection. There was much to celebrate: the vast network of parishes and schools, the flourishing convents and monasteries, the literary and intellectual figures (G.K. Chesterton, Martin D'Arcy, Christopher Dawson and many others); as well as the wave of mostly French Catholic theology, in translation, that showed how what looked very much an isolated subculture ('ghetto' Catholicism as it was often called) was also the bridge to the non-Protestant European Christianity which was in any case becoming more present in the United Kingdom through the 'Common Market' (as it was then). It looked, indeed, as if things could only get better for the English Catholic community.

Once people got over the initial shock of the Council (1962-65), an event not anticipated by anyone but for which Catholics in Britain were