

MERTON'S THEOLOGY OF PRAYER, by John J. Higgins, S.J. *Cistercian Publications*, Massachusetts, 1971, 159 pp. \$5.95.

I don't think I'd go quite so far as to say that this book was written by the devil, but there can surely be few things so disedifying as true things stated in an utterly untrue way. And that, in a nutshell, is all that this book contains (except footnotes).

It is presented, quite unashamedly, as propaganda for Thomas Merton, as being the unique and original guru for our age, and the style, especially of the introduction, is appropriately bombastic and vague. Fr Higgins' purpose is to show how Merton's spiritual doctrine was essentially consistent throughout his life, and how it fits the needs of modern (American) man. In other words, growth and change is denied, a man of prayer is now on sale in neat little capsules to be taken (with water) after meals.

We are led through the teaching on contemplation, asceticism, solitude, self-transcendence, and so on, and many good texts from Merton are quoted (and sometimes one need look no further than the quotations to see just how Higgins is misrepresenting his hero). But the whole thing is reduced to a system which is impeccably sound and impeccably dull. The living voice of the man of prayer, which rings out so exhilaratingly in some of Merton's own writings, is quenched; we are to be fed on husks.

Not content with freezing the fountain of living water, Higgins also detaches Merton from his context in the whole Christian spiritual

tradition. The mind boggles when we read of a kind of prayer which 'Merton calls' prayer of the heart. I dare say there was another kind of prayer which 'Merton called' the Mass (though it isn't mentioned, so far as I can remember—thank God, it is a singularly unmemorable book). Merton immersed himself ever more deeply into the living tradition of the church, and found there life and freedom, and in becoming more traditional, became also free to be far more adventurous—a natural consequence of being genuinely traditional. Higgins rather suggests, with his constant use of words like 'unique' and 'original', that Merton just dropped down from heaven into the lap of the twentieth century. I think it is no accident that the two things one looks for in vain in this book are a sense of the real, and a sense of tradition.

Merton wanted to lead us to God, and in at least some of his writings there is a ring of authenticity which clearly has spoken to our age. Higgins wants only to invite us to contemplate Merton, and, even if his account of his spiritual teaching is right in every detail (and it may be largely accurate), this fundamental betrayal vitiates the whole enterprise.

Don't read the book; look at the picture on the dust cover, which speaks far more eloquently and is far truer to the spirit of Thomas Merton. There is also a large bibliography of writings by and about Merton.

SIMON TUGWELL, O.P.

ORTHODOXY AND HERESY IN EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY, by Walter Bauer. Translated from the second German edition by a team from the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian origins. Edited by Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel. *S.C.M. Press*. £3.75.

From its earliest days the Christian Church was faced with the problem of the false brother in its midst; but the problem of distinguishing an 'orthodoxy'—the teaching of the 'great Church'—from 'heresy'—the doctrines of the sects on the fringes of the 'great Church'—became serious in the course of the second century. It was then that a large number of groups all claimed to be the true representatives of the original teaching handed down from the apostles; often they claimed the support of secret apostolic traditions, sometimes the authority of writings which were becoming extruded from a canon of scripture which was slowly establishing itself in the 'great Church'.

Christian writers in the second and third

centuries generally thought of 'orthodoxy' as the pure doctrine of the Gospel, subsequently corrupted by false teachers. Origen, alone, so far as I know, came near to seeing that disagreement among believers was as old as Christianity itself. The 'classic view', according to which 'orthodoxy' is primary and 'heresy' derivative, has held sway until very recent times. Though challenged occasionally (as by Gottfried Arnold, the German pietist historian at the end of the seventeenth century), the 'classic view' was not seriously called in question until Walter Bauer published his work in 1934. The English translation we are now given is welcome: it makes accessible a seminal work whose importance is far from exhausted.