

Editorial

A MAJOR publishing event must be noted in the appearance of *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978. 601pp, £11.80), edited by Hubert Cunliffe-Jones with Benjamin Drewery. It succeeds the monumental earlier work of G. P. Fisher, of 1897. It might well be asked what purpose is served by an attempt to survey the main periods of Christian thought within the covers of a single volume, since there is no shortage of major specialised works on most of the main phases of Christian doctrine. But while specialisation is necessary, equally we need to try to grasp a picture of the story as a whole if we believe that the catholicity of the Christian Church extends through time as well as space. In any case, the limitations on length imposed by a single volume offer some safeguard against unduly prolix treatment of any one section, with obvious benefits to students seeking an introduction to one or all of the periods, and to others looking for some kind of "refresher" course in the subject. What is more, as we shall see, certain important gaps are filled by this work.

Fisher's volume was entirely his own work. Cunliffe-Jones and Drewery, however, have called to their aid a distinguished panel of specialists in the different fields. That in itself is a witness to the immense advances in research into the different periods of Christian doctrine made this century, extending far beyond the ability of even the most encyclopaedic scholar to comprehend alone. It has also, evidently, led to considerable difficulties in producing the volume. Whereas in his Preface Fisher felt obliged to offer some mild apologies for the "unexpected delay" in publication due to pressure of other commitments, Cunliffe-Jones begins his baldly: "This history has been unconscionably long in the making"; and treats us to what must rank as one of the most acidic series of acknowledgements ever to appear in print, on account of the mostly belated submissions of his contributors. Sympathy is no doubt deserved all round. In any event, what has finally emerged is a compendium which will admirably serve the needs of those being introduced to doctrinal history, of church historians wanting theological background to the period they are investigating, and of those among the initiated who nevertheless require an authoritative check and guide in this field.

The large section on the patristic period (G. W. H. Lampe) is a model of balance and lucidity. The middle ages are brought into focus by David Knowles. The Reformation is dealt with, ably as would be expected, by the team of Gordon Rupp, Benjamin Drewery, Basil Hall and T. H. L. Parker. The Council of Trent (Benjamin Drewery), Sixteenth Century Anglican Theology (H. F. Woodhouse), and doctrine in the seventeenth century (R. Buick Knox) each receive a chapter to themselves. The one qualification on the book's value as an introduction concerns the section on the modern period

by J. H. S. Kent, where the argument presupposes that the reader already commands a clear outline of the main figures and movements in theology since the eighteenth century and which, as the Editor points out, will need supplementing from other sources.

Two features deserve special mention. The first is Gordon Rupp's chapter on the history of doctrine from 1350 to the eve of the Reformation. The relationship of the Reformers to their antecedents has been increasingly stressed in recent research and teaching on the Reformation, and students have for long been badly in need of a concise guide in this area. The other feature may well be regarded as the prize jewel in the whole set, and is certainly the most original in value. I refer to Kallistos Ware's sections on Eastern Orthodox theology, in the middle ages, in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, and in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. The riches of eastern theology and spirituality are here made more accessible, a great gain for the increasing number who suspect that, quite apart from the requirement to acquire familiarity with them in an ecumenical age, there is something theologically vital for ourselves to learn here.

Scarcely anyone today would deny that the writing of history takes place from within the particular perspective occupied by the historian, and moreover involves certain presuppositions, conscious or not, as to the overall purposes of the task. Writing history is an interpretative, not a barely descriptive, affair. This applies to the history of Christian doctrine no less than elsewhere. Professor Cunliffe-Jones' introduction to the volume sets out the questions posed by these considerations, and his remarks warrant attention from all serious students of any branch of Church history, doctrinal and otherwise, and, since contemporary theology must involve a dialogue with the past tradition, from those seeking to work out a constructive theology for today. The situation is complicated by the fact that not only is there such a thing as the history of Christian theology, but part of that history is the "history of the history of Christian theology"! That is, in considering the theology of any period of the Church's past, the way in which those theologians viewed the development of theology up to their time, is an integral part of the matter. Cunliffe-Jones offers two comments:

- i. the history of the History of Christian theology needs to be written from some kind of stable perspective, even if that stability is only of a temporary kind. How can it be written from an objective standpoint if the perspective in which we live is constantly changing?
- ii. the writing of such a perspective would be more convincingly undertaken if the question of the legitimacy of the appeal to the Transcendent from within an historical perspective had been settled."

These are tall orders, but Cunliffe-Jones dares to hope that "someone, thoroughly equipped," will undertake the work. The second of his two points surely contains the nub of the issue. Given that, on a

thoroughly historical view, all our theological statements (from which credal affirmations cannot be excluded) are historically relative and time-conditioned, in what sense and to what degree can any of them be regarded as legitimate and truthful references to God who is both involved in and yet transcends history? The very fact that there is a *history* of theology means that there is no one, absolute, final theology. In any age, constructive theology requires both continuity with and dissatisfaction with what it has inherited. Professor Cunliffe-Jones, possibly, is asking for just too much in wanting the question of the legitimacy of the appeal to the Transcendent from within an historical perspective to be *settled* as a prerequisite for the framing of an overall perspective on "the history of the history" of theology. Perhaps our modern chronic disturbance by this question has itself to be the perspective with which we view the history of the doctrinal tradition. The perspective will then be one which recognizes that theology, faith seeking understanding, seeks as much coherence as possible at any one time, and equally admits its final brokenness in face of that which always eludes exact comprehension because it is the Transcendent. So often, the history of theology has been written simply as the record of what theologians have said. But it should also heed what theologians in each age have felt unable to say, the necessary points or silence and reserve, the continual tension between systematic formulation and theology's inbuilt inadequacy in face of its subject-matter, all of which is sustainable so long as it holds to a vision of holiness as gracious in its condescension, and so long as it take place in the context of a community which worships no less than it tries to understand and proclaim. These inner dynamics of the theological tradition, as something always cracking, always being rebuilt, need to be brought out into the open if the past is not to be seen as a monolithic body of assured statement, a world apart from today's questions and uncertainties.

What do Baptists make of the idea of the whole Christian tradition? With other offspring of the radical Reformation, we arose in the seventeenth century, justifying ourselves by an appeal to the first century. How do we regard the intervening and subsequent periods? As is well known, early Baptists in England went out of their way to identify with the classic doctrinal statements of Catholic Christianity in the first five centuries, in order to rebut the charge that they were innovatory heretics in doctrine. Scripture remained the supreme authority, but the value of such statements as those of Nicaea and Chalcedon and the Apostles' Creed, as authoritative guides to the exposition of scriptural faith, was recognised. Something like that attitude has continued to the present. Patristics has never ranked very high in importance in Baptist eyes (except perhaps in discussions on baptismal theology and practice). But if the principle of identification with early "Catholic" doctrine as codified in the classic statements is maintained, the *context* in which those statements emerged—so much more of which is now known than in the seventeenth century—cannot be

regarded slightly. Nor, in the light of recent scholarship, can the medieval period be regarded any longer simply as an arid desert age preceding the upsurge of the springs of the Reformation from whence the pure stream of Separatist and Baptist life eventually flowed. Nor can Eastern Orthodoxy, historically remote from the conditions in which our movement arose in the seventeenth century, be treated as merely of exotic interest. A whole view of the Christian tradition—or perhaps one should say the interlocking variety of traditions—is emerging, and it behoves Baptists to become more conscious of it, and relate more positively to it, if indeed they regard themselves as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Church history, Gerhard Ebeling has said, is the history of the exposition of Scripture. Baptists, precisely because of their commitment to Scriptural authority, should be eager to explore the ranges of tradition beyond the relatively narrow tracts with which they have customarily familiarised themselves, in search of those expositions which enable fresh light and truth to be seen breaking from the Word. En route to and from the New Testament, a quick nod at Nicaea and a deferential bow at (some of) the Reformers will no longer suffice. Freedom under the Word of God includes the freedom to be, in Irenaeus' phrase, a "pilgrim with the Word" through the manifold riches of the tradition, exploring, enjoying, sifting, and learning from, the varieties of apprehension of the Word in the course of time and circumstance. The tradition can then itself become a liberating force in our present, a vital factor in opening new horizons, provoking new questions, stirring new visions. As an encouragement towards this goal, a work like *A History of Christian Doctrine* is warmly to be welcomed.

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