

## Book Reviews

### **THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO POLITICAL THEOLOGY** edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, *Blackwell*, Oxford, 2004, Pp. x + 566, £85.00 hbk.

This is one of a series of Blackwell Companions to Religion: the topics of other volumes include Hinduism, Sociology of Religion, Religious Ethics, Christian Ethics, Modern Theology, but not yet Islam. This volume has 35 essays, each of about 12 pages plus bibliography, nearly all by people in academic posts in USA or UK. Most of those who write from (or at least of) a perspective which is marginal to that of 'the West' do so within a Western academic context. This may be a good sign — Western academia may be making room for marginal voices — but I'm not quite convinced.

There are five sections: Part 1 is about 'Traditioned Resources: Scripture, Traditions and Liturgy'. I found the essay on liturgy by Bernd Wannewetsch to be the most provocative and creative of these. Part 2 is a survey of Political Theologies; of these, five are about areas of theological reflection and challenge, such as Eastern Orthodox Thought, Feminist Theologies, Black and Asian Theologies, and ten are about individual — Western — theologians (correction: one's about Gutierrez). All ten are or were white males; Stanley Hauerwas appears twice, once as author of an essay on Bonhoeffer, and once as the subject of an essay. Part 3 is entitled Constructive Political Theology, and the essays here address the political implications of major theological themes like creation, Church and eschatology. While William T. Cavanaugh begins his essay on Church by saying that Christian political theology has strangely neglected the topic of the Church, it struck me that many of the theologians discussed in part 2 were vigorously opposed to any view of Church which accepted the privatisation of the Church in the modern liberal nation state — if there are any of those left. Part 4 is entitled Structures and Movements, and looks at issues of state and civil society (a magisterial essay by Daniel M. Bell, Jr.), democracy, critical theory, postmodernism (Catherine Pickstock at her — how shall I say? — densest) and globalisation. Part 5 has two essays, under the rubric of Perspectives, by an Islamic and a Jewish scholar; their position in the book makes them look like an afterthought, and underlines the question whether even an explicitly Christian political theology can truthfully do its business without reference to other faiths.

At one level the tome is broader in scope than you might expect from companion to political theology: it does not confine itself to liberation, feminist, black or third world theologies. Indeed, it places them in special pigeon-holes as though they are rather marginal, and as though marginality were not the normal place from which to start any theology. Rather, it shows that main-stream Christian theology is inherently political, and for this reason I think it's a pity there was not some kind of discussion of the differences between Rahner and von Balthasar, which have huge political as well as ecclesiological implications.

We could all make our particular criticisms of what was put in and what left out. As a not very technologically competent being I was nonetheless surprised that there was not more reference to the reality of information and other technologies which have so massively changed our political and economic life, sometimes in a very violent direction, but also in the way we understand our world. Neither nuclear weapons nor the world wide web receive a mention. I wonder too whether a 21<sup>st</sup>-century bibliography can really confine itself to books, even if in the process of change it needs to change its name. Others might have other particular gripes.

But I would like rather to question the whole perspective of an undoubtedly expert piece of work. While I was reading this volume, I also read Anne Primavesi's *Gaia's Gift*, which continues her work in *Sacred Gaia* of questioning the homocentric presupposition of our philosophy, our politics and our theology. Reviewers of *Sacred Gaia* were often dismissive of a work which simply did not fit into their paradigms, but the whole point is that the paradigms by which we construct our world view are questionable in the extreme, and proving to be hugely destructive of our world. A politics and a theology which simply ask how human beings should see their relationship to each other, and not to the earth and its atmosphere, are increasingly irrelevant. Unless we take seriously our covenant with the earth and its atmosphere (prescinding for the moment from questions of the wider cosmos), and learn from it a new hermeneutic, a humbler theology, and a wiser politics, then the titanic efforts of the editors and contributors in this meaty tome might seem like a last rearrangement of the epistemological deck-chairs before we all drown.

COLIN CARR OP

**HOLY SCRIPTURE. A DOGMATIC SKETCH** by John Webster, [Current Issues in Theology], Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, Pp. viii + 144, £35.00 hbk.

This book admirably meets the requirements of the series in which it appears, which aims to offer focused studies for upper-undergraduates