

Reviews

CHRIST AND THE MODERN CONSCIENCE, by Jacques Leclercq, translated by Ronald Matthews; Geoffrey Chapman, 30s.

In a recent paper Fr Charles Davis drew attention to the 'danger of irrelevance' which can beset contemporary theology, even at its most illuminating and profound. This danger is a preoccupation with the scholarly elucidation of the true significance of biblical or liturgical concepts which, for all its truth-value, is nevertheless remote from the practical concerns of our society. If we are to avoid the opposite danger of trying to be too *obviously* relevant, by adapting Christianity to fit the contemporary fashion à la Bishop of Woolwich, we must all the same recognise that the relevance of the contemporary biblical and liturgical renewal has yet to be proved to the vast majority of practising Catholics, let alone to others. The most urgent task for those engaged in this work at the intellectual level is to make this renewal available, in its undiluted force, to the moralist and the social commentator. Moral theology, both at the speculative and at the pastoral level, is still a generation behind the biblical and liturgical renewal. It has not yet discovered its Lagrange.

Canon Leclercq's book is one of a number which seem to suggest that the arrival of such a person in the moral field is heralded. But he is not that person himself. His book is a free meditation, rather than a defined thesis, on a number of concepts in the field of comparative morals. Christian ethics is seen in relation to the ethical traditions of China, India, Greece, and Persia, as well as of Judaism: and the similarities, as well as the differences are rightly stressed. The most important distinction made in the book is that between code morality and wisdom morality: and it is a distinction to be found within every important tradition of ethical thought. Code morality is a system of ethics designed for the ordinary run of men, who live a more or less conformist existence in keeping with minimal demands on their moral energy. Hence code morality is concerned with the individual action. Am I allowed to do this? Is it sinful to do that? Must I do this? What are the consequences for me of doing that? In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, code morality is to be found in the ten commandments, and in the casuistical development of them by text-book moral theology and the penny catechism. (So for most Christians code-morality is the only morality they know). Wisdom morality is the ethics of the 'wise man' who is concerned with the total quality of a person's life, its general trends, not with particular actions. It is therefore individualistic and non-conformist. What matters is a person's success or failure to attain, as far as he is constitutionally able, the state of moral perfection which is represented, in all wisdom traditions, by the reduction of the multiplicity of our acts and desires to a condition of unity and simplicity. This unity of the life of wisdom reflects the unity of truth

and goodness in the absolute, whether it is conceived of as personal or not. The ethics of Jesus is a wisdom morality, not a code morality. One of the unique features of Christianity is the way it has tried simultaneously to provide an adequate code-morality for the ordinary man while keeping the reality of the higher wisdom morality before the eyes of its adherents as a continual challenge. But the attempt has never been more than partially successful, and aberrations on both sides have been perpetual sources of trouble.

The author pursues this theme and its ramifications with much learning and a deep understanding of the various traditions, and of modern responses to the problem, principally those of existentialism and its offshoots. The balanced wisdom of the author is, indeed, the predominant impression gained from reading the book, and the simplicity of his style is characteristic. To any reader of conventional moral theology, reading this book must come as a refreshingly cool, peaceful and sane experience.

But the author insists that the wise man is of necessity a rather aloof person, not particularly interested in the bustle of common life: and Canon Leclercq is no exception to this generalisation, at least so far as this book reveals him. It is a remarkable fact that, in a number of spheres of learning, Catholic priests have recently achieved international recognition for their ability to expound non-Christian thought with a cool objectivity which can scarcely be rivalled. Fr Copleston's *History of Philosophy* and Fr Wetter's *Dialectical Materialism* are two examples, and perhaps Canon Leclercq's book is another: but in all these cases the price is too often a lofty detachment which finally emerges as academic. The author of *Christ and the Modern Conscience* seldom says anything precise about any of the crucial moral issues of our time. He can write 'Whether it is a question of diseases, or of mental troubles or of all the various forms of human strife, everything comes from sin' (p. 269) without giving any evidence that he has thought through, and rebutted, the ideas of (say) Lord Russell, or Margaret Knight or Alastair MacIntyre: though we feel that he *could* have done so if he'd wanted to. It is a pity he has not done so, for to English readers at any rate their brands of humanism are the most worrying.

Again, when he is concrete, some of his examples are disturbing. For instance he seems to take it for granted that the main structure of capitalist enterprise is an unchangeable datum for any non-totalitarian society, so that in discussing equality he can write: 'Though slavery may be contrary to the rights of man, because it puts one man at the service of another without taking his own aspirations into account, it is also true that some men have a vocation to be masters and others to be subordinates' and he quotes Henry Ford's autobiography for support: 'it is difficult to find workmen who will agree to shoulder responsibility even if they are offered extra pay'. So the familiar inadequacies have to serve in the end, and they have an uncomfortably Tory ring: 'The relationship of the employer to the workman has no equivalence in material terms to the relationship of the workman with the employer . . . Their duties are different, though the fundamental duty remains the same, that of respecting

the personality of others' (p. 205-6). Surely the whole point of a genuine Christian morality is that it can cut through this kind of undergrowth? If the above is not cliché-thinking, we want some evidence that it is not. But in point of fact there is plenty of evidence to show that it is, as any reader of Brown's Pelican on the *Social Psychology of Industry* can verify for himself.

The really bad gap, however, is that the problem of nuclear war is not discussed. Now the whole context of the debate between (say) Père Regamey and Dr McReavy is the distinction between a wisdom morality and a code morality. (Incidentally Canon Leclercq's book suggests the inadequacy from a Christian angle, of trying to argue against the H-bomb on an exclusively code-morality basis, as I think Miss Anscombe does in *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience*). But while the distinction between these two views of morality is constantly present in every page of the book, the very detachment of the author seems to make it impossible for him to discuss the question of when, in a particular issue such as modern war, the valid claims of code-morality are nevertheless inadequate as a total response to the problem, and have to be superseded (I don't mean blurred) by a recognition that only a full commitment to a wisdom-morality is adequate to this new situation.

BRIAN WICKER

KARL BARTH ON GOD, by Sebastian A. Matczak, Alba House; \$5.75.

KARL BARTH, by Jerome Hamer, O.P.; Sands, 27s. 6d.

One of the most remarkable facts about the theological work of Karl Barth has been the degree of understanding and sympathy which it has received from Roman Catholic theologians: indeed, the authors who have shown most penetrating insight into the concerns of Karl Barth are almost certainly Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri Bouillard, and Hans Küng. Barth appears the first Protestant theologian since the Reformation itself to have excited serious theological debate from among Catholics (strangely enough the understanding of Barth by Protestants has often been less profound—even among those Protestants such as Gogarten and Brunner most closely associated with his name). It may be one of the indirect and not least important results of this massive labours of Karl Barth that to many Protestants unity with Rome is once again a logical possibility, even if a distant possibility. This is not a question of irenism or compromise, since no one has been more careful at every point to distance himself from Catholicism than Barth, but rather that in Barth the problems that are the real problems of Dogmatics become visible once again, and with this the possibility of disagreement with other solutions to those problems. It sometimes becomes doubtful in nineteenth century liberalism whether or not we are still talking about the same matter, God's self-revelation in Christ, which makes Christianity to be what it is; whereas in Barth it is