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The Incarnation of God, By Hans Küng (book review)

Peter Gavin Ferriby, Sacred Heart University
Joseph’s adolescent fears and successes will remind the reader of his or her own: making friends, cutting class and racing back to school, taking a first smoke. We get a portrait of a very loving family and church which nurtured a unique young man so as to enable him to overcome an incredible hardship, day by day. In some ways the book is like the sickness-of-the-month television movies we are offered so often. But this story has many heroes, not just one. And it has no miraculous healing, except perhaps for the reader.

Peter T. Nash

The Incarnation of God.
By Hans Küng. Crossroad, 660 pp., $34.50.

Hans Küng, the ever-controversial Catholic ecumenist, is best known for his pithy, thorough writing aimed at educated Christians in such books as On Being Christian and Does God Exist? Küng’s study of Barth is well known among scholars, but his massive study of Hegel—originally the dissertation for Küng’s second doctorate—is only now appearing in English. Fifteen years in the making, this book was hardly dashed off and is scarcely a quick read.

Küng’s aim is twofold: to explore the position of Christ in Hegel’s thought and to glean from it criteria for Christology. Hence the ponderous subtitle: An Introduction to Hegel’s Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology. The book relates the external events of Hegel’s life to his philosophical system. At times Küng’s two-track inquiry threatens to split the seven exhaustively documented chapters. Ranging widely through the Hegelian corpus, Küng pulls together a variety of sources—though often he buries his illuminating ideas in a truly Teutonic style.

Ultimately the reader will finish this lengthy tome impressed by Küng’s noble failure to engage Hegel. He repeatedly cites New Testament witnesses of faith over against Hegel. What exactly this witness proves remains unclear. Küng, like Hegel, wants to mediate divine immutability and scriptural truth but finds the classical criteria for mediation, such as the church councils and Aquinas, inadequate because of what he calls “the historicity of existence in which God has become involved.” But the criteria for determining historicity are exactly what is at issue. Küng, with Hegel, would like to be both scripturally adequate and philosophically coherent. Whether this is possible remains an open question, and accounts for much of the uncanny power Hegel’s ghost holds over virtually every modern and postmodern theology.

Undoubtedly this book does not represent Küng’s present thinking, although he avows that it is consistent with the basic

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intentions of his published works. In retrospect The Incarnation of God tells us as much about Küng’s open-ended and meaty theologizing as it does about Hegel or Christology.

Gavin Ferraby

RECENT ARRIVALS

The Health and Wealth Gospel. By Bruce Barron. InterVarsity, 204 pp., $6.95 paperback.

Time was when conservative Protestantism was dismissed for “pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by solace”; adherents were to live for deferred benefits in heaven. Their religion was to minister to them in their want and need. No more. Bruce Barron here exposes a substantial number of Protestant leaders—Kenneth Hagin, Jr., Charles Capps and Kenneth Copeland for starters—who promote and all but promise material rewards to those who follow their prescriptions or join their movements. He ends with some moderating “let’s be fair” words, but we get the message: it’s hard to preach a theology of the cross in this get-rich, be-healthy context.


O’Brien knows, and says, that nationalism is or can be a modern religion, or rival of religions. The concept of “chosenness” is particularly dangerous, so Muslims, Jews and Christians are especially vulnerable, as are nationalists anywhere, anytime, but especially now. Roger Williams first talked about “God Land,” and from Williams O’Brien takes up the theme and a sense of urgency about it. The author finds plenty of vulnerable subjects, but seems to enjoy being most unsparring with the United States.


The writing is on the wall, or in the last paragraph of this book: the central reality of the contemporary Catholic Church in the U.S.A. is that “it is mainly in and through the local congregation, the parish, that the church lives on, because that is where the people are.” It’s the same with Protestants and others, as well. Yet Americans tell polltakers that they believe in Jesus but not “the organized church,” and they dabble at the edges of things Christian in the name of a pure non-parochial kingdom. The Lilly Endowment helped Notre Dame and a cast of scores reach samples of the millions who make up parishes, or their edges. They asked most of the right questions and got rather consistent answers. Catholic and Protestant leadership should pay attention to the findings.


This giant book has become a paperback bargain. While it had its detractors when the hardbound appeared in 1986, most of the valid criticisms concerned unavoidable decisions an author must make about proportions, evidence and direction in such a controversial field. Fox did more than anyone else to bring together most of what has been said meaningfully about pagans and Christians interacted. Though some aspects of this topic remain unknown, more is available than scholars and other readers had thought. Almost everything here shatters old stereotypes, though Fox is not in the business for iconoclastic reasons. He has a fateful story to unfold, and obviously relishes the task he has undertaken. This book will live for many years.


Contrary to much contemporary usage, the Old Testament still makes up much more than half of the Christian canon. Aware of this discrepancy, Birch wants to lead churches and laypeople toward a better understanding of the relevant social-justice themes that permeate the stories of ancient Israel. After two or three of Birch’s themes (creation, exodus, covenant, kingship, exile and restoration), the exegesis and application become somewhat predictable. But Birch’s radical evangelical perspective should activate lively discussion by study groups.


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