

Reviews

THE GENESIS OF DOCTRINE by Allister McGrath, *Blackwell*, Pp. 266.

It is good to come across a book which puts forward such a strong and uncompromising case for the importance of context—theological, cultural and political—when considering not only the emergence and development of Doctrine within Christianity but also its value and current significance. The author treats the whole subject as something organic and vital, which, on his principles, it is essential to examine phenomenologically. This is the great strength of this treatise which has been expanded and further developed from the 1990 Oxford Bampton Lectures. It is not, however, that the author thinks that 'context is all'; in the earlier chapters where he examines a number of theories on the nature of Doctrine he is justifiably harsh on those who would 'explain it all away' and water down its significance in these terms. Later chapters are concerned with the historicity of Doctrine. It is cogently argued that the contingency which this implies is its strength rather than a weakness, but the corollary is, of course, that doctrines in particular can only be understood and evaluated from their historical context. Doctrines are, in other words, not abstract—they would have no life, no validity, amongst us if they were. This leads to what is ultimately a very Catholic conclusion: faith is lived and expressed in a 'Community Tradition'. All this turns upon, without, however, actually depending on, a particular, extremely important, section of Chapter 11: Doctrine as Interpretation of Narrative, together with parts of what immediately follow (pp. 52–81.) Here, however, things do not run so smoothly, because, I think, the author's presuppositions are so strong as uncharacteristically to override both his methodology and what would otherwise seem to be his sense of reality.

He quite straightforwardly takes Scripture as the given from which doctrine is then derived. But for him Scripture is essentially 'narrative', from which 'a framework of conceptualities may be inferred...'. Although 'scripture is not primarily a set of premises, from which deductions may be made' (p. 62) the transition is seen as taking place by way of moving from narrative to metaphysics (sic) in which the doctrine then emerges. 'The recognition that doctrine involves (this sort of) interpretation of narrative, and hence a shift from one literary genre and mode of thinking to another, forewarns us of the potential futility of certain criticisms of doctrine on the grounds of its alleged "Hellenism".' (*ibid.*) McGrath illustrates this using the doctrine of the incarnation which 'is perhaps the classic example of the outcome of a prolonged interaction between narrative and metaphysical modes of discourse...' (*ibid.*) He is thus able to quote Wiles approvingly (Hick, *Myth of God incarnate*, p. 3): 'Incarnation, in its full and proper sense, is not something directly presented in scripture' (p. 61).

I think, however, that the categories of narrative and metaphysics, in opposition to one another, are far too narrow to do justice to what is happening. They are also, used in this way, incompatible with the starting point: Scripture. Treating Scripture as the *given* from which doctrine proceeds, fails to allow for the way in which the beginnings of 'doctrine' affect the emergence and formation of Scripture itself. As a defined formula in 'Hellenistic' metaphysical terms of course the doctrine of the Incarnation is not in Scripture; but what is happening, for example, in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel or the beginning of the first Joannine Epistle? If ever there was a good example of the literary mode shifting within Scripture itself it is to be found throughout the Fourth Gospel—for all the reasons which McGrath himself would seem to imply elsewhere throughout this book. It is, of course, tempting to go back, rather than to the so-called 'narrative', to the kerygma, but surely even here it must be realised that something akin to the idea of doctrine (or at least something which you cannot ignore as unconnected with doctrine) is taking place.

The 'Community Tradition' which McGrath talks about (pp. 188–192) does not simply go back to the *narrative* of Christ's life and ministry, but to Christ himself, those who believed in him and their living context; Scripture and Doctrine emerge within this tradition. If the author were able to accept this, and I suggest it is backed up by his own understanding of 'doctrine' throughout the rest of this book, the real casualty would be seen to be, not this theory (however inadequately developed it actually is in parts,) but his understanding of and/or commitment to the *sola scriptura* principle as 'ultimately an assertion of the primacy of the foundational scriptural narrative over any framework of conceptualities which it may generate.' (p. 64, with a very interesting footnote.) A tough nut to crack, perhaps, but the further consideration of this is where this interesting and stimulating book inevitably leads us.

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THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY by David A. Pailin. *Cambridge University Press*, 1990. Pp. 290. £30.00 Hb.

This is an impressive work both in regard to the degree of scholarship exhibited and intellectual honesty. Pailin leaves no stone unturned and doggedly pursues objections, presenting us with a thorough going, if in parts somewhat tortuous, study. In his own words (p. 198) what the study tries to do 'is to identify and investigate some of the basic problems for theological understanding which arise from the anthropological features that condition it'. This identification and investigation is claimed to have a certain practical result, namely that of showing the implausibility of the view of theology apparently assumed by many of the critics of its recent developments. The academic study has practical teeth in it. How strong the teeth are will have to be assessed by the individual reader in relation to the array of arguments presented in each chapter.

The basic presupposition, illuminated in each of the chapters, is that since theologians are human, theology is conditioned by the nature