

Book Reviews

THE CREED: WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE AND WHY IT MATTERS by Luke Timothy Johnson, *Darton Longman and Todd*, London, 2003, Pp. 324, £10.95 pbk.

CATHOLICISM: THE STORY OF CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY by Gerald O'Collins and Mario Farrugia, *Oxford University Press*, Oxford, 2003, Pp. 393, £10.89 pbk.

In 1996 Cardinal Basil Hume asked the then future prime minister Tony Blair, an Anglican, to desist from receiving communion in the Catholic Church. Blair acquiesced but added the parting shot, 'I wonder what Jesus would have made of it'. Blair's question is redolent of the modern Evangelical tag 'What Would Jesus Do?', which as the acronym WWJD is emblazoned on bracelets, stickers, necklaces, billboards and even G-strings. The question presumes an absence of Jesus, and that Christian living is solitary. In contrast, the two books reviewed here are an affirmation of 'What Jesus *Did* Do' – historical Christianity over and against Bible-only literalism. Having waited for ages for a popular work on the subject, two arrive at once, just like London buses.

Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Creed* is an attempt to steer between the Scylla of biblical literalism and the Charybdis of exaggerated 'historical Jesus' research, like the Jesus Seminar. Johnson, a professor of New Testament at Emory University, has written over twenty books, mostly on the Christian scriptures. Johnson's passion for Christianity imbues this book. Its origins are in adult courses he offered at Catholic parishes. Johnson wants to convey to those who memorised it in childhood and 'sleepwalk' (pp. 6, 40) through it now, a fuller import of the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

As important as the bible is for Christians, Christianity is not a religion based on a book. To read the bible, Christians need a map. For Johnson this is the creed. The creed is heavily grounded in scripture, yet serves to interpret it. This is not a circular argument, because both emerge from what Origen calls the 'Rule of Faith', the basis and guide for theology. The creed manifests this 'Rule' by distinguishing what must be believed and what can legitimately be investigated. It embodies a 'core Christianity' any Christian could confess. This is not a weak common denominator, but something vital and invigorating. Christianity, Johnson thinks, would be healthier, have greater integrity, and be far more interesting if it actually believed what the creed says (pp. 297, 323).

The creed is examined phrase by phrase, and sometimes word by word. There is incisive, detailed biblical theology on the central Christian doctrines, and Johnson is especially masterful on Jesus, judgement, eschatology, sanctification and salvation. He uses the scriptures in a synthetic, exegetical manner to explain the creed's tenets. There is also a healthy dose of philosophy, and Johnson upholds the use of reason. His euphonic and witty phraseology glitters on almost every page and avoids technical terms: 'God is revealed in the world first of all not through the "whatness" of things, but through the "isness" of things' (p. 96).

Johnson is conscious throughout of the enemies of creedal Christianity: Fundamentalism and Modernism (p. 308), Millenarians and Anti-millenarians (p. 202), the 'Gospel of Success' and the 'Gospel of Liberation' (p. 171), Gnosticism and liberation theology (p. 258), social fanaticism and social passivity (p. 289). Johnson always steers towards the golden mean between these opposed positions. He argues forcefully that creedal Christians should maintain a 'critical loyalty' to the Church, having painted an undeniable portrait of the Church as *casta meretrix* (St Ambrose's 'chaste whore') – divinely established and yet 'human, all too human!' (p. 255–62).

There are a few weaknesses. Johnson thinks the *Filioque* has scriptural warrant, but dismisses it as 'not needed' (p. 228). Johnson does not tend to engage in speculative theology – except when he disagrees with a traditional belief. Yet when he does speculate, the Scholastics have usually already done a more thorough job. Concerning women priests, Johnson accepts the theoretical possibility that God could have become human as a woman. Aquinas had pre-empted him, and said that any of the Trinity could have become a man or a woman, or all three become incarnate as one human. The Schoolmen's 'fittingness' of Christ's incarnation as a man does not imply that God's theoretical incarnation as a woman is 'unseemly' (p. 83), as Johnson thinks. Johnson implies that Christ's virgin birth denigrates sexual intercourse. Yet many Scholastics would agree with Johnson that Christ could have been conceived sexually. Contrary to Johnson, the creed's implication is not that Christ was conceived through 'human agency' (p. 158) but through human *co-operation*.

Johnson presumes that nothing explicitly scriptural can become normative through doctrinal development. The creed supplants the 'Rule of Faith', and the Church's teaching authority, sacramental system, and Marian dogmas are downplayed. By the end, Johnson elevates the creed so much that it 'leaves the church free to invent itself in a variety of forms consonant with Scripture and the direction of the Holy Spirit' (p. 319), but surely this is putting the cart before the horse. It was an organised Church that formulated the creed in councils. The church 'invents' its creeds and not *vice versa*. Johnson's difficulty here arises in no small way because, in clinging to the creed,

he takes pains to avoid nominating Catholicism as his prime example of creedal christianity.

Catholicism is by Gerald O'Collins and Mario Farrugia. Both are Jesuit priests, professors at the Gregorian University (Rome) in systematic theology. This book is on what is distinctively Catholic. Despite possible objections to the title 'Catholicism' *tout court*, the authors want to stress the catholicity of the Church. 'Roman Catholicism' would not have included the Eastern Christians: Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox or Assyrian. To their credit the authors never relent on emphasising this universality of the Church.

They begin with a history of the Church in two chapters, one for each millennium – a tremendous achievement. In a good précis of the rise of early Christianity, they trace a comfortable evolution of 'early Catholicism' from the New Testament, as opposed to a Protestant tendency to see decline herein. Catholicity is seen in space and time. Early Christian martyrs sit alongside more recent ones of Korea and Uganda, including Anglicans (Uganda), Assyrians (under Tamerlane) and Orthodox (under Stalin).

The contributions of Ignatius, Justin, Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian are examined. The embryonic tensions between East and West are noted, including the role of the papacy. Missionary outreach includes Gregory in Armenia, Frumentius in Ethiopia, and Assyrians throughout Asia – including the Christians of St Thomas in Malabar. The major figures in the conversion of Europe are considered – Patrick, Gregory, Augustine, Anskar, Boniface, Willibrord, Cyril and Methodius – then conciliar doctrinal developments, and the growth of monasticism and the mendicants. The faith of the medievals is illustrated in their art and architecture (p. 54). Aquinas is balanced with Dante. Chaucer serves as an introduction to medieval pilgrimage, linked to modern expressions of charity like the St Vincent de Paul Society (p. 66). Then church-state friction, crusades, persecution of Jews, the New World, Protestant and Catholic Reformations, the persecution of witches (except in Spain where the Inquisition rejected it!), the French Revolution, Pius IX, and Vatican II. And this is only the second chapter!

The rest of the book slots comfortably into this historical framework. Their account of revelation, tradition and scripture is a marvellous antidote to a literalist reading of the bible on the one hand, and on the other, to exaggerated ideas of tradition (e.g. the early Church looking pretty much like a Tridentine one). They use their own good and useful terms in explaining revelation: foundational, dependent and eschatological. Another admirable term is 'trinitification' (p. 214) to express the tri-personal reality of deification. The intricacies of Trinitarian and Christological terminology are carefully expounded, without losing sight of their importance.

Each chapter reads like a mini-masterpiece, and the breadth of material covered is truly catholic. On the human condition: MacIntyre,

Westermann, Augustine and opponents, the Reformers, Chesterton, Pius XII. On grace and glory: Pelagius, Palamas, the 'divine energies', Luther, Trent, Le Goff on purgatory, the *apokatastasis*. It is a pity then, that they do not include an excursus on indulgences. But they do not shy away from awkward matters, such as usury, torture and slavery, or contested areas such as contraception and women priests.

The authors' conviction is that Catholicism is catholic – like an enormous loving family, with its problems no doubt, but still a family. Doctrine and morals are all connected, and expressions of faith are found in art, literature, music, architecture. God's covenantal closeness to us is compared to Thompson's *Hound of Heaven* (p. 129). The Church as *casta meretrix* finds illustration in Botticelli (p. 329). Contrast and complementarity are everywhere: Patrick and Brigid, the apostolic Fathers and the Fathers of Vatican II, Scandinavia and Ethiopia. The book's great strength is its frequent turning towards Vatican II and its endorsement of *ressourcement* of the apostolic heritage. This is not the spectre of 'the spirit of Vatican II' which has wreaked so much havoc in the Western churches, but the genuine spirit and words of that great council. The book is meaty and needs slow digestion, but if you have an open and enquiring mind, you will probably come away thinking how marvellous the real Vatican II is, and longing for it to be implemented properly.

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RITUALS AND RITUAL THEORY IN ANCIENT ISRAEL by Ithamar Gruenwald, *E.J. Brill, Leiden, 2003, Pp. xiii + 278, € 89.00.*

Tel Aviv University Professor of Religious Studies, Ithamar Gruenwald, here contributes to the theory of ritual a variety of cases and problems deriving from the data of Judaism, with emphasis on antiquity. He focuses on rituals 'as behavioral expressions of the human mind, regardless of any ideology or pre-existing symbolism . . . rituals in their own performative content'. He sidesteps 'the usual textual, historical, or theological perspective'. He argues that rituals are autonomous expressions of the mind, focusing attention on what is done.

He distinguishes rituals from theology: the rite is in the doing (Chapter One). He proceeds to take up the 'ethos as a way of life' with emphasis on economic systems; what brings economics and religious ethos together is rituals (Chapter Two). He proceeds to address the relevance of myth in understanding ancient Judaic ritual (Chapter Three). The climax of the exposition comes with his 'in quest of new perspectives in religious studies: Halakhah and the study of rituals: what do Halakhic rituals do? Intention and intentionality in