

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Donald G. Dawe & John B. Carman (Ed),*

**Christian Faith in a religiously Plural World,**  
Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978, viii + 195pp., \$ 7.95

The book comprises the papers of a symposium which took place at the Washington & Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, U.S.A., April 22-24, 1976. The symposium consisted of two major papers by two Christian representatives and the responses given to them by participants from other Christian churches and other religious traditions.

The first major paper, by Donald G. Dawe, discusses the critical situation of Christianity today in the face of modern secularism, the competing claims of nationalism and economic imperialism, the critical philosophy that has rendered the intellectual foundations of Christianity almost obsolete, and the scandals created by Christians like the German holocaust and Colonial expansionism. Even the Christian "new" Covenant which replaced the Jewish particularist covenant is still particularistic in a certain way. To face this situation, Christians have to realize that the new covenant is a covenant of the future setting up the Church as a witnessing community that points to the saving work of God throughout all creation. Dawe suggests that the name of Jesus has to be decoded: it is not a magical formula nor a legal code or an ideological program, but rather a pattern of existence by which new being is actualized. Other religions live out this power of new being in accordance with the names by which they encounter and participate in ultimate reality. The finality of Jesus would be merely the unconditioned way in which he points beyond himself so that human beings may find healing in the unconditioned.

The Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim respondents point out the difficulties created by Christians in making their religion intelligible to the rest of the world. The Buddhist Mahind Palihawadana, pointedly asks whether Christianity, which still stands for the economically and socially exploiting groups in Asia and Africa, can really replace its predilection for institutional power with a preference for real spiritual power (p. 40). But the severest criti-

cism of Dawe's dismantling of Christian particularity comes from the Jewish participant, Eugene B. Borowitz, who argues that the universal lordship of God does not in any way imply that He cannot really be connected intimately with particulars. To make Jesus Christ merely a name for any disclosure of new being is to make Him dispensable: Christianity would become just another socio-cultural humanizing faith, and the world would not miss much even if it were to disappear.

The second part of the book is led by John B. Carman's paper on "Religion as a Problem for Christian Theology" in which he summarizes the Protestant and Catholic approaches to the notion and reality of religion, and discusses the present theological situation which ranges between their extreme neglect in protestant theological seminaries and the replacement of Christian theology by the study of religions in colleges and universities. The most significant contribution in this section comes from the Catholic participant, David F.K. Steindl Rast, who states the universality of the religious quest as a quest for meaning, and shows that today the division between religions is no longer vertical or focussed on diverging approaches to the Ultimate, but rather horizontal concerning openness to other men and to the world, creating division within the same religious tradition between inclusive and exclusive attitudes.

In the third part, Wilfred Catwell Smith giving an evaluation of the whole conference, says that to be Christian indicates a process in which one can participate in varying degrees thus emphasizing his oft-expressed opinion that Christianity is not absolutely true, but true only to the extent it is taken off the shelf and actually lived. He also shows that the historical and particular aspects of religious traditions cannot be forgotten. The fourth and last part consists of exploration of ways and means of how to express concretely in the present world in which Christianity is the religion of the dominant culture the absolute lordship of Christ without arrogance, and also how to make the universality of grace and salvation available to all men in all traditions.

The books present an admirable model for a three-day symposium focussing on a few crucial issues without confusing them with a great many disparate papers.

Harold G. Coward,

**Bhartrhari,**

Boston: Twayne Publ., 1976, 150pp.

In the Indian tradition language, logic, psychology, metaphysics and even mystical experience were treated in intimate relationship almost like concentric circles around the conscious self that radiates its inner light through the different layers or sheathes of personality. Harold G. Coward who had a deep interest in "epistemological psychology" and knowledge through language and felt frustrated by the academic alienation between philosophy, psychology and theology in the West, finds in Bhartrhari, the ancient linguistic philosopher-mystic of India a kindred spirit. The book which is study of Bhartrhari's principal work *Vākyapadi-ya* explores the impact of language and meaning in Yoga psychology, aesthetics and religion. But the paradox of Bhartrhari's holistic interest is that it is expressed in Sanskrit, a language removed from the emotional responses of everyday life. His linguistic approach to religion was based on the Vedic view "the whole of speech is Brahman". His own unique contribution to Indian speculation on the word was the *sphota* theory which held that each word or sentence had an immanent revelatory power, which is divine in origin and through it one can attain the realization of the Divine; Brahman is the one object denoted by all words, and the conventional variety of meaning is the result of ignorance superimposed on the unconditioned Absolute.

The author explains in detail the arguments in support of the *sphota* theory as well as the serious objections raised against it by logicians like Kumarila Bhatta. But, for Bhartrhari word is not a matter of logic alone, but of metaphysics as well: The nature of the absolute eternal present is word (*sabda*) and consciousness (*caitanya*) inseparably mixed together, self-evident and revealing of all knowledge. Through the limiting function of time *Sabdabraman* without any loss of its inner reality becomes particularised as *sphota* intuited word *vaikhari*, overt speech, *mādhyama*, mental speech, and *pasyanti*, direct experience of *sphota*, as a noumenal whole.

The book examines at great length the intimate relation between Bhartrhari's philosophy and the linguistic-psychological conception of the Yoga system. Similarly the idea of *dhvani* or suggestion developed by Bhartrhari, which is the central concept of Indian

aesthetics is discussed exhaustively. An effort is also made to throw light on the *Vakyapadiya* through a reference to *Vairagya Sataka*, a book on detachment ascribed to the same author.

The significance of Bhartrhari for modern thought is clear from the fact that a number of linguistic and psychological problems discussed by him in antiquity like the philosophy of symbolic forms, the existence of universal grammatical structures in human consciousness, and the assimilation of sensory stimuli to the higher levels of mental structure, are actively being discussed even in our own times by scholars like Ernest Cassirer, Noam Chomsky and Jean Piaget. Harold G. Coward deserves special congratulations for this masterly discussion of such a complex topic especially in an author of antiquity.

J.B.C.

William Bausch,

**Positioning Belief in the Mid-Seventies,**

Indiana: Fides Publishers, Inc., Notre Dame, 1975, 176 pp.

*Positioning* is an attempt to look at Christian theology as a whole, and to try to find out where we stand at this particular moment of time, and why we are there. But I am afraid, from the very tone of the book and from the mood of the times, these very questions lose their basic even before we come out of the wonder and dismay and get ourselves positioned, and, I think, the author is making a provision for this phenomenon too. For such is the pace of change in our world today and this change has its strong influence also in the circle of religion and faith. He is trying to present the very old themes in theology in more relevant terms and in a language that is intelligible to the modern man. And this modern man to whom William Bausch is addressing himself is not the big theologian, but the ordinary adult Christian, the educated Christian parent with school and college-going offsprings, college or high school students, and so on. He has succeeded in making theology intelligible to these groups of people.

Because he has these groups in mind the style of the book is more popular than technical and scholarly. He starts each of the

topics by giving the traditional understanding of the theme, makes a fleeting survey of the current theological discussion on the topic and positions it in the proper perspective.

There are ten chapters centring around eight major theological themes in current theology. The first chapter starts with a survey of unbelief in the world and searches for reasons to account for it. A world which has come of age through the discoveries of science no longer needs an omniscient God. In fact in a scientifically controlled world, God is a luxury and a supernumerary. Along with God, all his lieutenants too became irrelevant. Thus 'for us the sociologist has replaced the patriarch, the surgeon has replaced the witch doctor, the psychologist has replaced the confessor, and the scientist has replaced the priest' (5). But when this unbelief is properly positioned, we come to know that in a fast-changing world religion has failed to change itself and to speak a language that is intelligible. It has failed to notice the writing on the wall. Once these blocks are removed, unbelief is no more a problem.

For proving the existence of God the author starts with the traditional arguments of the prime mover or the principal causality, the psychological argument of man's dissatisfaction with the amenities and pleasures of this world, the moral argument of justice and demand for retribution for the rights denied, and the religious experience man undergoes in certain very precious moments of his life. In spite of all the "Death of God" cry and shouting down of religion, and assertion of the claims of science and secularity, there is enough evidence to prove that 'belief is positioned in the very heart of man and that it is almost impossible to root it out from there.

After long debates on demythologizing theology, today theologians have started saying that those myths, which we wanted to discard long ago, have to be revived, revitalized, reinterpreted, and recast and not removed, because myths and symbols are part and parcel of human existence without which life is meaningless and life cannot go on. Once again man is confronted by the mystery of the cyclic repetition of history and his renewed search for meaning. In other words, faith in the Unknown and belief in the Absolute has become once again a must for the man of our times. God and religion are again becoming fashionable for modern man. Belief for him today consists in a seeking for meaning, a set of symbols to interpret the world with a view to transcendence; thus religion seems to be as much alive as ever: 'What gives the impression

that religion is dying is the break down of the traditional forms of religion... What is required is a credible church preaching a credible God' (32).

To position God, the author elucidates the transition from the static world of Newton with its 'prefabricated planet of fixed rules' (38) into a world of evolving species in which there are moving atoms in everything that seems to be immobile and there are subatomic particles that are 'in a constant flux and in a constant network of relations. From gigantic galaxies to invisible protons and neutrons nothing is still' (37)... 'Ultimate reality is not an objective substracta... it is a huge energy unfolding by virtue of its own evolving dynamic with a history before it and a history to come. It is in process in every part, great and small' (38) He argues forcefully in favour of rewriting or even undoing the Greek philosophy and Thomistic argument of a perfect, changeless and immutable God and to bring down God into our midst and make him move, grow and become just as we are.

The distinction between the Secular and the Sacred is an aberration; Christ did not mean that, the early Church did not practise it, but slowly and gradually it crept into the Church as a consequence of the royal protection of the Church by Emperor Constantine and the consequent expansion of it. This was responsible for the distinction between the Church and the people of God, the former consisting of the priestly class more in the province of the Sacred, and the latter consisting of the laity with greater allegiance to the Secular, and by this process religion is confined to 'a little world of "Sacred" objects and places and persons, and detached from a living faith that is extensive with the world' (48).

Life on earth is a process, the sum total of a relationship, and this is the extension of the life of God, which is again a process of relationship among the Father, Son and the Spirit. This life of relationship is a revelation to us 'not as a privilege but as a challenge' (54), a revelation that God is love and a challenge that our life is to be a relationship of love.

In positioning words, a new look at the language of the Scripture is given. We will be mistaken if we look for merely logical speech or scientific propositions in the Scriptures. On the contrary, the language of the Scripture is to elicit faith in us, to convey certain truths and meanings. We have to read between the lines to understand the symbols and myths. "The gospels appeared in response to the desire to know more about Jesus and even

then they were written not so much as to provide such historical details, as to provide interpretations" (62). To interpret words the author cites as examples the creation story of Genesis, the infancy narratives, the miracle stories, etc., and says that these are in mythical and symbolic language. He says that 'logical truth is only a part of reality. There is room for the irrational, the illogical, the poetical, even the nebulous and the incoherent which test bits of reality that cannot be expressed by precise and correct language'. There is need for taking one's era's language and recasting it for another era (70).

Dogma: The function of the theologian is to reflect on the varied religious experience of the individuals, which is partly human acquisition and partly divine gift, and he has to draw conclusions which are relevant for the community of the times. At the same time he should not attempt to bring in absolute rational proofs for establishing faith which is valid for all times and all peoples. 'Theologians must be wary as they reflect on behalf of the community on the mysteries of faith. They must resist the temptation to declare that they have captured them completely once and for all in concepts, words or formulas (79). And also they are not free from the duty of upholding the dogmas "as the known and confessed truth of the Word of Holy Scripture heard and believed by the Church" (80). It does not mean that dogmas have absolute validity for all times and that they are universally applicable without considering the context and circumstances of their conditioning, 'by the vocabulary, the adversaries, the politics, the thought-patterns, the mindsets of the times in which they were written' (81). Again we have to hold that revelation is still an on-going process and was not completed by the time of the Apostles: but the substratum on which we have to develop is the same. To confine the self-revelation of Jesus to the apostolic times is to deny that Jesus is the Lord of history, even of our own times.

The chapter on positioning Jesus centres around the problem of "Jesus of history and the Christ of faith". We do not have a biographical note on Jesus in the New Testament, but what we have is the faith experience of the unique event of the Resurrection of Jesus as the Lord and not as Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels were written between 65 and 90 A.D., and they relate to events concerning a person who lived three to four decades before that. Therefore when these things were narrated, the life experience of a lived faith has gone into the narrative and has coloured it. They were also the fruit of theologizing by these authors. There-

fore they lack the factual precision of a biographical work. 'The Christ of faith has so overshadowed the Jesus of history that the Gospels remain first and foremost witnesses to the faith of the early Church. Only in a secondary way are they commentaries on the events in the ministry of Jesus' (101). But at the same time the evangelists do not stop at the Christ of faith; they are also trying to ground the Christ of faith in the Jesus of Nazareth.

The processes of the growth of consciousness about himself in Jesus and the growth of the Jesus of Nazareth into the Lord of the kerygma is developed with two analogies, namely, Mark Twain's "Prince and the Pauper" and Dickens' "Oliver Twist". The Christological controversies are just mentioned and emphasis is given to the humanity of Christ. The Christological titles are analysed and put in proper perspective. The titles we use such as The Lord, Son of God and the Second Person of the most holy Trinity are not the best interpretations of the revelation of Christ; they are descriptive symbols and not objective statements about Jesus. 'Jesus indeed may be all the things implied in the symbols, but not necessarily the symbols themselves'. "The affirmation that Jesus is Christ, that he is Lord, that he is the Holy One and so on, is not of the historical order, but of the eschatological. It is a judgment about the absolute future" (127). 'The reality of God's fantastic loving self-disclosure in Jesus can still be served even if the symbols are rearranged or recast' (130).

The key to the whole mystery of redemption is the story of the grain of wheat, Jn 12,24:25. Jesus' death on the cross 'is his final self-abnegation' (141). This act completed in Jesus the process towards his maturity, a new maturity and a new growth, which led to a self-transcendence and as a culmination of it Jesus is made the Lord. Death to self is that which gives true life and true glory. 'So redemption means that life comes out of death. Jesus saves us precisely because he is the definitive statement of the truth' (142). Jesus achieves redemption as the 'revealer of the on-going, saving love of the father for all men' (144).

In positioning the Church, it has to be taken out of the notion of a cloistered institution with prescribed regulations for membership and the loss of it. It is a community called to the proclamation of witnessing the good news whereby it 'becomes the sacrament of the encounter with Christ, as Christ is called "the sacrament of encounter with God" (Schillebeek). The

Church is an ever-present sign of God's love... Salvation is had outside of the Church, but never apart from it. The Church... is God's concrete, historical manifestation of his design in Christ for all men' (155).

The traditional understanding of sacraments in the Church is that they are channels through which the grace—that is, the accumulated merit of Christ's saving action is flowing to the believer. But a possible error implied in this is that grace is looked upon as an object, a thing and hence the sacraments are also objectified. But in reality grace is an action and it may not be available for storing up for the future use. Likewise, 'Sacraments are the actions of Christ in his Church. Christ is the sacrament of the Father and the Church is the sacrament of Christ. The Church prolongs and extends the incarnation (167) through the sacraments.

Thus, in this book the average student of theology and the ordinary layman baffled by the impact of the revolution in theology have a valuable answer to position themselves. And the "why" of the word "POSITIONING" is given by the author himself in the introduction: "I have used Positioning as a title because the word carries with it the notion of a certain fluidity, a certain holding still of an idea that might, at the very next moment, suddenly shift. Nevertheless there is a momentary lull and the book's modest attempt is to take advantage of it. So, knowing that the last word has yet to be said, that new qualifications must be made before the reader turns the page, nevertheless I want to explore with the reader some of the fascinating and at times setting ideas that constitute the religious culture of our times.'

*George Palamattam*

*J.A.B. Van Buitenen* (trans. & ed.),

**The Mahabharata: 4. The Book of Virata, 5. The Book of the Effort,**

Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978, 572pp., \$ 24.

This is the third volume of Van Buitenen's projected single-handed translation of the epic Mahabharata. With this, more than one third of the great work is complete and the next volume is

promised for 1980, volumes five and six by 1983 and the final seventh volume "within a reasonable time thereafter".

The Book of Virata sets the stage for the central story of the great epic, the decisive war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. This preparation for the eighteen days war is done on two levels, a symbolic one in which the Pandava brothers come out victorious in an initial fight against the Kauravas, and a real stage when all possible efforts to settle the dispute peacefully through diplomatic channels are exhausted and war becomes inevitable. The Book of Virata shows the five brothers and their wife Draupati in the service of the cattle. King Virata in order to fulfil the condition for regaining their kingdom by spending a year incognito. The year is almost over when the brothers are forced by circumstances to lead the battle against the Kauravas, who steal Virata's cows. The book, though a later addition, is important since it brings out the symbolic nature of the Bharata war: The year prescribed for their life in concealment is not mathematically complete before the Pandavas reveal their identity and the ambiguity of time is emphasized by their common teacher Bhishma, who argues that owing to the complexity of time made up by instants, hours, days, fortnights, months, lunar houses, planets seasons and years, the prescribed time may have been either already completed or two more months needed to fulfil the stipulated condition. The affinity of the Kauravas to the forces of evil, personified as Vrtra in the Rgveda, is brought out since they like Vrtra steal the cows. The Pandava brothers have their fixed roles consistent with their characters, Bhima standing for physical strength, Arjuna the warrior personifying Kshatriya valour and leadership, Yudhishtira unswervingly standing for the dictates of Dharma, and Draupati acting out the dynamic feminine role of constantly challenging her husbands to the exercise of their duty and the realization of the cosmic design.

In the introduction the translator-editor discusses the question of the interpolation of the Virata Book in the epic. Some scholars would rather throw out the book as an interpolation cheapening the story of the Bharata war; others argue that the entire Mahabharata as it exists now is simultaneous as both epic and dharmas-*astra*; still others think of the different stories as merely contemporaneous. Van Buitenen's own view is that there is an organic growth in the Mahabharata since the later interpolations like the Virata are not extraneous to the text but "attracted, even at times provoked by an incident in the original." According to him, even the frivolous element introduced by the Virata into the Maha-

bharata "is inspired by the frivolities with which the change from one year to the next is celebrated" and symbolized by the masquerade and the reversal of roles of the Pandavas and Draupati during the period they had to remain "nameless".

The Book of Effort, which takes its name from the first of the eleven minor books that it comprises, is concerned with the preparation for war and is principally the narrative of the negotiations in which the pandavas demand half the kingdom while Duryodhana refuses to yield even a "pinprick of land." It is a valuable document containing a wealth of information regarding diplomacy in ancient India. There are at least four embassies: a Brahmin and then Krishna the noble prince sent from the Pandava side and Sanjaya, a bard and then Uluka, the son of a gambler, from the Kauravas, the status of the messenger being part of the message. There are also examples even of political subversion: Krishna attempts to win Karna to the Pandava side promising him the entire wealth of the world, and even the just Yudhishtira contrives to make Salva an original ally, by deceit won over by Duryodhana, to demoralize Karna while acting as the latter's charioteer.

In the introduction to this book, Van Buitenen presents a detailed discussion about the mythological content of the Mahabharata, much discussed by scholars over the last decades. According to him the holistic interpretations of Dahmann, Holtzmann and others do violence to the text. He challenges Louis Dumont's attempt to interpret the Mahabharata as pure myth with no reference to history based on the minimalist definition of myth as a poem that may at best contain history. But his main arguments are directed against Madeleine Biardeau's position that rejects all historical interpretations and takes the book as a didactic presentation of Dharma in symbols. For Biardeau, symbols have no intrinsic and invariable signification but have meaning only in the ideological structure of the whole. Against these theories that emphasize the higher criticism which looks for the questions and meanings behind the text in opposition to the lower criticism, that tries to establish the text on the basis of the best possible evidence and explain it, Van Buitenen sees a continuity between the two with priority being given to the latter. He sums up the methodological attitude "as a willingness to listen to what the text has to say in so many words before groping for what it is *not* saying in so many words". (p.143) To establish a critical text based on manuscripts dating back to the sixth century is not to deny the value of later additions

but to see clearly what the original content of the book was and what was added on to it later.

The historico-critical study of the text tries also to find out what the author intended in the actual situation going beyond the mythological elaborations put on his text later. Thus Van Buitenen finds "a palace-building Asura more plausible as a human than a demon; a dicing match mandatory to a Vedic ritual more interesting as a narrative device than as a cosmic symbol; the Book of Virata far more fetching as a year-long Holi festival than either as a silly interpolation or as a mine of information in trifunctional characteristics." Taking the different versions of the Parasu Rama-Kartavirya story which Biardeau takes as an example to illustrate her theory, Van Buitenen shows how a single narrative can grow by association in the course of historical development. It is no use arguing that the Mahabharata was in a fluid state in the beginning, and orally transmitted. There is no way of arriving at that fluid state except through the written text which has a life of its own. The text should first be seen in itself and only on that basis other symbolic interpretations adduced.

But we have to remark that just as there is danger of violence to the text in an exclusively symbolic and didactic interpretation of the Mahabharata, equally dangerous is an exclusive historical criticism of the religious text. Religion consists mainly in the interpretation of symbols that represent the ultimate meaning of life. When these symbols are reduced to their everyday meaning, they lose all religious value. To restrict Virata to the symbolization of a long Holi festival definitely trivializes its meaning. Similarly, purely profane events like dicing could be associated with religious ritual only by investing them with a cosmic symbolism. But there is no doubt that such meanings should not be read into a text arbitrarily according to one's fancy but should be based on a clear historical understanding of the text itself.

Van Buitenen's translation maintains the same excellence and clarity as that of the previous volumes. His text makes delightful reading. An exceptional scholar, who has undertaken such an arduous task and carries it out with such dedication, deserves our sincere gratitude.