

Book Reviews

Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modernity: The Thought of Louis Dupre. edited by Pater J. Casarella and George P. Schnier. Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998. (pb), pp.xii+352, \$28.00 (£18.99)

The book *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modernity* reveals the optimistic hope of Louis Dupre who had taught in the prestigious Yale University and functioned as the president of the American Catholic Philosophical Association. Fourteen of Dupre's friends have contributed to this book what they have learnt from him and with him.

Dealing with the various ingredients of the culture of modernity such as "the turn to the subject, the loss of transcendence, the relativization of truth, the absolutization of human freedom and the secularization of the sacred" (p.261) Louis Dupre has forced his fellow thinkers to pay serious attention to the philosophical and theological import of the spiritual traditions especially the Christian mystical traditions.

In the first part of the book "Prospects" Dupre proposes his project of reuniting what had been separated by modernity, both substantially God, cosmos and self and methodologically the exercises and methods of our spiritual traditions and theories and critiques of our philosophies and theologies.

In the second part "Conversations," the main and bulky part of the book comprising 10 out of its 14 chapters, Dupre's critical and incisive analysis of the thought of the intellectual giants such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, Aquinas, Boethius, Bonaventure, Thierry, Cusans, Spinoza, Newton, Descartes is found in the first chapters. Dealing speculatively with the problem of one and many and discovering certain traits in finite beings that suggest an essential reference to its first cause, Dupre points out how the human mind is directed towards God. Having found God per speculum (i.e. through the mirror) the mind can then enjoy its discovery by realizing that the reference of finite realities to God entails a certain presence of God in these realities. God's infinite being then becomes visible, audible, tangible as displayed in the mirror of finite entities.

Thus Bonaventure's usage of Plotinus' thinking appeals to the Franciscan experience of a world that shows and bespeaks God.

Multiple corporeality is not an obstacle to meeting the One. Nothing in this universe is despicable, though man, affected by greed and arrogance, has to purify his heart to be free from the preference of finite satisfactions over the enjoyment of the *Summum Bonum*, the highest good, God. Thus Christian perspectives have mingled with Greek thinking and have moulded the western culture.

Isaac Newton argued from effect to cause and maintained that only a divine cause could account for the design in the universe, from the solar system to the structure of organic bodies. Yet the resultant insistence on the objective God considered human experience as cognitively irrelevant.

Reacting to this John Locke, Kant and Schleiermacher concentrated on the process of the thinking subject. God is an illation of ethics in Kant, making duty's object, the highest good, seriously possible. God alone makes rational morality possible for human beings and Jesus Christ is the exemplification of this morality. God is a given of the primordial experience of self-consciousness in Schleiermacher.

Gradually human self was so glorified and deified that in the 19th century Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud made the Western world to think of God as the enemy of humanity and paved the way for the atheistic trends of the death of God.

In critical and sympathetic conversation with Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche and other great minds, Dupre has shown how the Western modernity, with all its humanistic, liberal and rational sophistication, has been missing, systematically as well as increasingly, "the other dimension", the mystical and the truly communal...

One may wonder what the writings of the mystics might have to say to modern persons engulfed by indecision and ambiguity. As Thomas Merton states "the temptation to atheism which is confronting many Christians at the present time bears a certain resemblance to the "nights" spoken of by John of the Cross and other apophatic mystics, and therefore how this temptation might ultimately effect a salutary stripping away "of our imperfect images of God" (p. 184). Even the contemporary unbelievers are likely to be drawn to the literature of Christian apophatic mysticism because of the mystics' recognition of the "hidden" (*mystikos*) but real presence of Christ in the scriptures, the sacrament and the world around us, and because of the resultant human behaviour based on both love of God and neighbour. As Merton

writes in *A letter on the Contemplative Life* (as quoted in p. 186), It is the love of my lover, my brother or my child that sees God in me, makes God credible to myself in me, just as it is my love for my lover, my child, my brother that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself."

Dupre's writings cover also the areas of art and architecture. Dupre writes in the very first page of *The Other Dimension* that "modern life has many facets which develop autonomously", including the autonomy of art in the context of the splintering of the modern world, a splintering that means inevitably also the disintegration of individuals. But, emphasizing that religion cannot survive as a particular aspect of life, Dupre links the importance of the sacred to its "unique power of integration" (p. 194). Given the background of the biblical religion shadowed by iconoclasm, Moses smashing the golden calf, marriage of art and Christian faith was an arduous task and yet the invisible God incarnated himself and thus closed the gap between the body and spirit. Christian spirituality is preserved and communicated through sacred art and architecture.

In the final section of the book comprising three chapters can be seen the significant contribution of Dupre to the philosophy of religion, Christian theology and social ethics. These chapters show how Dupre has delved into the realm of the practical cultivation of the human family life, work place and politics ... and aimed at restoring what is worth saving of the culture of modernity.

In conclusion, we can see in these pages how the versatile thinker Louis Dupre` grasped and evaluated the geniuses of the West who paved the way for the culture of modernity and how in his own unique way he interprets the perennially vibrant Christian spirituality holding aloft its hopeful optimism.

Lest this solid book be reserved to a few sophisticated intellectuals, Greek words and idioms in this book can be rendered into easily understandable English e.g. in p. 43 "But how can it be that the intelligible are both an enfolding *homou en heni panta* and really diverse? No, it must be that the *exlcxs* in question here is a new and different form of unfolding.." Praiseworthy index in the last pages can have differentiated ones for persons and themes found in the book.

A Dictionary of Asian Christianity edited by Scott W. Sunquist. Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. pp.xl+iii + 947. \$75.00 (£52.99)

Christianity in Asia has not only a long and checkered history but also a character that is as complex as this vast and most populous continent. Though Christianity took its origins in Asia, it is today in all the countries here, with a couple of exceptions, the religion of only a minority. Though some Asian countries witnessed the advent of Christianity in their soil in the very first century itself its spread on a wide scale in most countries of the continent is a more recent event closely associated with the colonialist enterprise of the European nations. Having taken root in such an ancient and bafflingly complex continent with its unbelievable variety of peoples, cultures, languages, landscapes, climates etc. Christianity has also developed here strikingly varied forms and traditions.

To capture such a perplexing variety and complexity of Christianity of this continent in one volume is certainly a daunting and almost impossible job. But it is this herculean task that the editor and associate editors have dared to do with the cooperation of many Asian scholars and, I think, they have admirably succeed in their effort. The editors as well as the contributors numbering nearly 500 are well know scholars mostly from the different countries of Asia who have had not only a profound and often lifelong exposure to Christianity in Asia but also have done significant relevant research. This one volume work which despite its modest title 'dictionary' turns out to be, for all practical purposes, a mini encyclopedia in its scope as well as comprehensive coverage. Not only does it present the history of Christianity in each country of Asia, but also includes the biographies of the important church leaders, summary accounts of the major events and movements of the Asian Churches as well as descriptions of the significant developments in theology and Christian arts. The volume has 1260 entries and each of them has a very useful and upto date short bibliography as well as cross-references. It has also 10 pages of black and white maps of the largest countries and the major regions of Asia with the places of ecclesiastical importance clearly indicated.

The uniquely interesting feature of the entries is their focus on Christianity and the cultures of Asia. They describe not only the influence of Christianity on the different cultures with which it contacted but also their impact on Christianity that has given rise to many local churches, sects, movements, associations and theologies and other inculturated forms of Christian thought and action.

An Indian Christian reader would certainly be surprised by the large number of entries on topics related to Christianity in India as well as the depth and comprehensiveness with which they are dealt with. Not only the great missionaries like St. Francis Xavier and Robert de Nobili but also the great Indian Christian leaders of recent times also find entries. Similarly pioneers of Indian Christian theology such as Prahmabandhab Upadhyaya, P. Chenchiah V. Chakkarai and A. J. Appasamy are given adequate treatment. Of the contemporary theologians Stanley Samartha does get an entry.

Apart from the great Christians, the prominent Hindu reformers and reform movements of modern India are also given adequate treatment. This reviewer from Tamilnadu was certainly pleasantly surprised by the excellent short writeup on Periyar (E.V.Ramasamy), the great twentieth century rationalist reformer of south India and his rationalist movement. Of course, this viewer also found it strange that in such a comprehensive work Veeramamunivar (Joseph Constantine Beschi), the Italian Jesuit missionary, who has made enormous contribution to Tamil language and literature, Catholic theologians such as Sebastian Kappen, Soares Prabu, D. S. Amalorpavadoss, and Veilankanni the best known and the most frequented Christian pilgrimage centre of Asia find no mention. Despite such omissions this one volume dictionary on Asian Christianity is an excellent work which is an indispensable reference book to any researcher on Asian Christianity and a must for every library in Asia and elsewhere.

D. Alphonse

Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics. Edited by Steven Bouma - Prediger & Peter Bakken. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. (pb), pp.xiii+242, \$20.00(£ 12.99)

"Evocations of Grace" is a collection of nine articles of Joseph Sittler, an American Lutheran theologian. Following the traditions of Paul, Augustine and Martin Luther, "the masters of grace-talk and experience", Sittler takes up the theme of grace and tries to relate it with nature so as to evolve a theology of the earth.

As one reads the articles of Sittler, written between the 1950s to the 1970s, one cannot but appreciate him for his concern for the earth and his environmental consciousness. The reader will certainly be touched and inspired by his venture already in the early 50s to reflect on the environmental problems within the traditional framework of

the dialectic of nature and grace. Looking at the environmental problems from the perspective of nature and grace makes Sittler certainly a significant theologian of our times, "a pioneering theologian of nature". And precisely for the said reason the reader will also agree with Peter W. Bakken, who rightly observes in his introductory article that Sittler is one among the handful of theologians in the 40s and 50s to argue that environmental degradation is profoundly a spiritual matter.

The author by placing the ecological issue right within the framework of nature and grace leads the reader gradually to the conviction that environmental degradation is in fact a spiritual matter and not simply an economical and moral issue. He does it by basing himself on the conviction that the fusion of nature and grace has taken place through the event of incarnation. Nature and grace, or to use the traditional terms nature and supernatural, cannot and should not be understood as two self-enclosed spheres of reality without having any link between them. The mystery of incarnation calls into question this understanding. And so Sittler affirms that the incarnate Word is in himself the unity and harmony not only of human beings but also of the entire material universe (p.63). Since the fusion of nature and grace has taken place in Jesus Christ, Sittler underscores the need and urgency of a "Cosmic Christology". In Jesus Christ and through the event of incarnation the Earth has become the locus where God's glory became flesh and dwelt among us.

Forgetting the relation between nature and grace would inevitably result in reductionism, that is, the earth will be looked at simply as a resource for human needs. And this would amount to divest the mother earth of her life. This is what we see and experience in today's world. Things that are to be enjoyed are used and those things that are to be used are enjoyed (p.76). This attitude, according to Sittler, is indicative of the wrong and irresponsible relationship between human beings and nature. It is also an obvious proof of the fact that human beings are no longer related to nature in the way intended by God. The absence of the right and responsible relationship (a relationship which recognises the presence of grace in all creatures) between human beings and nature is the reason for the desecration of the earth and the consequent ecological problems and crisis. Hence, Sittler calls abuse (of the earth) as use without grace (p.57).

In this connection the author also draws the reader's attention to the failure of Christian theology. Christian theology has not paid

sufficient attention to the earth and he calls this as "calculated disengagement". This calculated disengagement of Christian theology from the earth and ecological issues has excluded nature and the earth from the scope of theology. The result is that traditional Christian theology has not produced an earth-affirming or eco-centred theology. It has failed to affirm the meaningfulness and purpose in all creatures. Because, the fusion of nature and grace affirms that not only human beings but also the non-human world of nature has significance, meaning and purpose. Hence the abuse of the earth and the consequent ecological crisis should become the constitutive dimension of our theologising. This theology will not be a theology for the earth, but a theology of the earth (p.76) and will aim at restoring the right relationship between human beings and nature by expanding the circumference of redemption to embrace the whole of creation.

Moved by the conviction that among all other Christian doctrines the doctrine on grace is the one which is capable of articulating the theological relationship between theology and ecology, Sittler has approached grace from a different perspective and has underlined the need to relate it with the earth. The theology of grace of Sittler certainly leads one to the realisation that it cannot but be earth-affirming and earth-caring.

As one reads through the articles, one wonders at the domination of the rhetoric in a theological treatise. However, it does in no way take away the credit of being a serious and systematic enquiry into the relationship between nature and grace. Though the work cannot be said to have exhaustively dealt with the theology of nature, it certainly has pointed out the trajectory of such a theology. This collection of articles from Eerdmans, though intended to introduce the thought of Joseph Sittler to the readers, would provide all with a new perspective that would enable them to look at the earth through the eye of grace.

Fr. M. Paul