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The Work of Christ

Robert Letham

Leicester: IVP, 1993, 284 pp., £12.95, paperback, ISBN 0 85110 891 7

RÉSUMÉ

Letham organise son étude autour des trois offices christiques de prophète, prêtre et roi. Dans la première partie de l'ouvrage, il considère l'oeuvre de Christ comme le point culminant de l'histoire d'Israël et de l'histoire du monde. Dans les trois sections suivantes, il traite respectivement de l'aspect prophétique, de l'aspect sacerdotal et de l'aspect royal de l'oeuvre de Christ. Il rend compte de l'aspect sacerdotal de façon particulièrement satisfaisante.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Letham baut seine Arbeit auf dem Triplex Munus von Christus als Prophet, Priester und König auf. Im ersten Teil wird das Werk Christi als Vollendung der Geschichte Israels und der Welt betrachtet. Die Teile II, III und IV behandeln jeweils die prophetischen, priesterlichen und königlichen Aspekte des Werkes Christi. Die Schilderung des Priesteramtes Christi ist besonders beeindruckend.

The scope of a book such as this is potentially vast, designed as it is to say something of value about 'all that Christ did when he came to this earth "for us and for our salvation", all that he continues to do now that he is risen from the dead and at God's right hand, and all that he will do when he returns in glory at the end of the age' (18–19). With such a remit questions of selection of focus and of structure inevitably arise, and even when these have been tackled, as Letham admits, a book of readable length can still only expect to skate over the surface.

The approach which Letham himself takes is to marshal his material around the familiar *triplex munus* of Christ as prophet, priest and king. This decision reflects both his own tacit commitment to the Reformed tradition in theology and equally the predominantly biblical focus of his study. The task of Christian theology may be put crudely into two categories: first, the interpretation of the received tradition, biblical and ecclesial, and second the attempt to relate this tradition to the

questions and problems of contemporary understanding and life. While, however, the series of which this book is a part is avowedly concerned to accord top priority to contemporary issues (9) it must be admitted that the strength of this book is in the acquittal of the former of the two tasks. It does, it is true, afford some brief consideration to the use of biblical motifs by liberation theology, but the vast majority of its pages are taken up with biblical exposition and discussion of the tradition of atonement theology over the centuries.

Part One of the book sets the work of Christ firmly in the interpretive context provided by the history of Israel, finding in him, as do the apostolic writers themselves, the climactic point in this history, and the central point of human history as a whole. One possible criticism is that it does not do enough to reckon and to dialogue with other approaches which are pursued in Christian theology. It sometimes gives the (doubtless false) impression of a happy unawareness of any other way of seeing things.

Parts Two, Three and Four respectively address the prophetic, priestly and royal aspects of Christ's work. For myself I found the treatment of Christ's priesthood the most satisfying of these, especially the writer's willingness to stray from some traditional evangelical accounts, and to accord due recognition to the biblical emphasis upon the essential humanness of Christ's vicarious existence, obedience, victory, suffering, death and resurrection 'for our sake'. All too often a crypto-docetism or subtle Apollinarianism has held sway here, but Letham's account is well informed by an admirable familiarity with the patristic discussion of the anhypostasia and enhypostasia.

On the other hand I'm afraid I found the treatment of the doctrine of penal substitution rather disappointing; far too concerned to make the right noises, somewhat insensitive to the point of some of the criticisms levelled at it, and apparently unwilling to differentiate between the biblical linking of Jesus' death with the divine judgment or curse on human sin and certain seventeenth century theorizing concerning the same. A good dose of P. T. Forsyth's writing on the atonement might help to clarify the issues.

Overall this is not a piece of creative theologizing. It is, however, a helpful and accessible restatement of a certain sort of evangelical orthodoxy, and provides a perspective on the biblical context for and interpretation of the work

of Christ which many will find informative and stimulating. There can be little doubt of the need for more serious theological writing at this level, and both the series (Contours of Christian Theology) and this volume in particular are to be welcomed for that reason.

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Atonement and Incarnation: an Essay in Universalism and Particularity

Vernon White

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RÉSUMÉ

White souligne le caractère universel de l'oeuvre salvatrice de Christ. L'expérience que Dieu lui-même fait de la souffrance et de la mort lui donne l'autorité pour remporter la victoire sur elles en faveur de l'humanité. L'auteur considère la différence entre la fonction rétributive et la fonction re-créatrice du châtiement, et il montre comment les deux sont impliquées ensemble dans l'expiation. L'auteur de la recension met en question la manière dont l'auteur défend sa position doctrinale au moyen d'argument philosophiques, de même que sa façon d'assimiler la doctrine de l'expiation à des prétendues intuitions morales naturelles.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

White betont die Universalität des rettenden Handelns Christi. Gottes eigene Erfahrungen von Leid und Tod begründen seine Autorität, sie stellvertretend für die Menschheit zu überwinden. Der Unterschied zwischen den vergeltenden und wiederherstellenden Funktionen der Strafe wird behandelt. Beide Aspekte werden im Sühnetod Christi vereint. Der Rezensent hinterfragt sowohl die Verteidigung der Lehrmeinung durch philosophische Argumente als auch die Assimilation der Lehre von der Sühne mit angeblich natürlichen moralischen Intuitionen.

In this work, the author defends the claim that what Jesus Christ accomplished in particular space and time has universal effect. The strategy is simple and the presentation succinct. After sketching out the relevant traditional claims, White indicates why such belief has come under pressure. The dimensions of our world in time

and space make traditional christological and soteriological belief implausible for many. While White sympathizes with those who react in this way to the restrictions on saving *knowledge*, he wants to emphasize instead the universal dimension of saving *action*. Having surveyed thinkers on the different sides of the debate, White sets out his own proposals in three central chapters (5–7). These expound the claim announced thus on page 39:

The heart of the model to be proposed rests on what might be called the criterion of moral authenticity, and goes something like this: *unless and until God himself has experienced suffering, death and the temptation to sin, and overcome them, as a human individual, he has no moral authority to overcome them in and with the rest of humanity.*

White makes much of the moral dimension. On the basis of our 'natural moral intuitions' he expounds the difference between retributive and recreative functions in punishment. In personal relations, only action with recreative intent is unimpeachably moral. But although this is directed against traditional notions of penal substitution, White wants to incorporate the biblical elements of that doctrine (the reality of divine wrath and justice) into his own claims. Hence in the end: 'Moral intuition here meets theological claim, and sends it on its way rejoicing' (p. 106). This elaborates the argument for the way what God has done in Christ is constitutive of salvation.

A particular act could constitute universal redeeming possibilities because it equips the agent with certain qualities or experiences which 'qualify' him to relate more effectively to the objects of his action (p. 53).

The conceptual requirements for this set of convictions can be fulfilled. The doctrine of incarnation is conceptually coherent and here the author avails himself of work on the brain and the person to buttress coherence. Particular attention is given to the question of divine eternity. Here White believes that an account of God's relation to time can embrace both divine transcendence of temporal sequence and temporality within divine experience. The book ends with a postscript defending the author against the charge of anthropocentric (rather than cosmocentric) theology and warning against imperialistic evangelism.

This is a brief and economically-written account which covers a great deal of ground. It is a good, succinct, introduction to the *status quaestionis* in British theology. His proposal has much to commend it, maintaining, as it does, incarnation and reconciliation in history on an intentionally biblical foundation. But two aspects of his work call