REVIEW ARTICLE


Calum Gilmour

The questions that are in the minds of Christians and which they debate in the present day are not so very different from those that were in the forefront of debate in the 2nd century, and the answers given then are still valid. The modern Church can learn a great deal from the writers of the early centuries, and they can save us from error, for old mistakes tend to recur in new dress.

Professor Eric Osborn makes these things clear in The Beginning of Christian Philosophy. The book is substantial and important, and rewarding of the effort required of the reader.

Professor Osborn opens his discussion with some comments about the similarities between the 2nd century and the 20th century; writers of both these periods faced the problems raised by Christianity in a pluralistic world. The treatment does not claim to be exhaustive, but five themes are chosen which were discussed in the 2nd century and which find parallels in the present century. The five themes are: the God above; man and his freedom; the world and its Maker; history and continuity; the Word made flesh. Each of these themes is explored in the writings of Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement, and in relation to the questions that were being asked about each theme. The structure of the book as a whole is extremely logical, and the investigation of each theme also follows a set pattern. First the problems are delineated, and then each question raised is investigated in the four authors, always in the order in which they are given above. This discussion is then followed by a section on problems and parallels in which the themes are welded to modern theological/philosophical questions.

Before embarking on the main part of his work, Professor Osborn shows how each of his themes is foreshadowed in Paul's sermon at Athens (Acts 17.16-34). There is a useful discussion of the centrality of this passage to the whole of Acts, and we are shown quite clearly how each of the themes is there in the sermon; the exegesis relies principally on that in Haenchen's commentary on Acts.

This is followed by a section on method, and as the book progresses we hear much more on this. Professor Osborn suggests that in the main five different approaches to method are taken: polemical, cultural, doxographical, retrospective and problematical; i.e. we may ask of any statement: Does it make sense, is it true? How does it reflect the culture in which
it emerged? What was said and what were other writers saying? Where does it stand in the development of ideas to point X? What problems does it attempt to solve and what methods does it use to solve them? Professor Osborn comments: ‘The best historians make use of them all; but with the first four methods there is a tendency to absolutise one and to neglect the others. When this happens, distortion is inevitable, for each of these four methods has serious limitations.’ (p.12) So Professor Osborn opts for the fifth method — that of problematic elucidation. This method seeks to recognise the problems that recur in different guise in different authors, and to elucidate the ways in which the problems and questions are tackled by the individual authors. Professor Osborn is very critical of the first four approaches and tends to dismiss them out of hand; he admits his own method has its limitations too, but one is left with the feeling that he is less than fair to scholars who have used these other methods. There is of course danger in absolutising any method, and Professor Osborn gives us some timely warnings, but we are left with the uneasy feeling at the end that his own chosen method may be open to more criticism than he has admitted.

Chapter 2 consists of a sketch of each of the four writers whose work is to be considered. Called ‘People and Places’ it puts each writer into his geographical and cultural context. Professor Osborn’s facility at putting things succinctly is shown at its best here. The chapter concludes with some notes on the general setting, including a resumé of the history and thought of the 2nd century and the noting of parallels with the 20th century.

The first of the five themes to be considered is the God above, and Chapter 3 is concerned with this. Belief in the unity of God was the common Christian possession. This unity was known through Jesus Christ, and it meant that living, thinking and dying went together. This made the greatest difference to the lives of those who accepted this belief and it was this which stood behind the acts of the martyrs.

The first question arising from this theme is this: Is there one God and can we speak of Him? Justin speaks of God as unbegotten, ineffable, invisible. Irenaeus demonstrates how the God of the heretics is not transcendent enough — ‘his argument is: either one God or no God. The theme of unity and sovereignty of God constantly returns: there is only one living God, who formed the world, who shaped man and, having given the faculty of growth to creation, called man upward to greater things in his presence’. (p.40) Turning to Tertullian, we are shown his negative theology; his faithfulness to the scriptural tradition; his passionate insistence on monotheism. Against Gnosticism and Marcion he insisted that ‘two Gods meant no God: God is not, if He is not one’. (p.44) Clement draws freely on philosophical ideas and ‘giving the most extended account of the God who is not.’ (p.45) This leads to a detailed discussion of Clement’s two
statements in *Stromateis* 5 in which he links purification by confession with contemplative vision by analysis; the second is an extended statement on the unity and ineffability of God.

The second question to be raised is: is God good? The discussion centres on the supposition that the existence of things inconsistent with the love of an infinitely good God must give rise to belief in the existence of an inferior being. Again there follows a summary of the treatment of this question by each of the four writers.

The third question is: can God be three as well as one? Here it is shown that Tertullian especially ‘does not anticipate all that the 4th and 5th centuries were to say; but he does invent the later terminology and points the direction along which the trinitarian thought was to go’. (p.54) Clement’s treatment differs from that of Tertullian, and especially notable is his development of symbol and enigma in a way that had not been done by Christians before.

Question 4 is: is God best understood as the first cause? There are inherent difficulties in such a question, since ‘it depends on denying, with respect to itself, what is asserted of every other instance, namely that it has been caused. . .’. (p.56) This leads to a long section in which the modern ring of many of the arguments is especially noticeable. Professor Osborn’s selection of quotations here demonstrates the relevance of the 2nd century writers to today.

If anyone should doubt the relevance of the study of the 2nd century, the section on Problems and Parallels will show how wrong he is. We are led here to a consideration of modern religious language in relation to the writings of Ian Ramsay, Austin Farrer, and Boyce Gibson. There are interesting comments on the difficulty of the approach represented by negative theology. ‘The theology of the comic strip is the antithesis of Christian theology’ because it represents the kind of fantasy that Christianity wishes to destroy and represents a God who is too small. (p.65) This leads to one of Professor Osborn’s general statements: ‘Christianity has a better chance of being understood in a secular world than in a pagan religious one. For Christianity has more trouble from “godlets” than from the godless. The recognition that God, whether he exists or not, is not a part of the world, is more important to the Christian than the vague belief that there is some divinity of some sort. This is why Christians were called “atheists” when they rejected the immanent deities of the ancient world.’ (p.69) This should also indicate that Christianity has a better chance of acceptance now than previously.

Imagery and symbolism are next discussed in the context that they generally fail to grip the imagination as they once did. The question: in what sense is the One real? is dealt with in reference to the work of Duméry and
Iris Murdoch. In both cases Professor Osborn shows that we are given a restatement of the Platonic tradition. The problem of believing in a good God in the face of an evil world leads to the writings of von Balthasar and D. M. Mackinnon. The nearness of God brings us to the importance of the cross and its centrality in Christian theology; E Jüngel illustrates the modern treatment. Finally Simone Weil's 'waiting on God' is our guide to the significance of silence. Again Professor Osborn gives us a general statement of compelling truth. 'A great deal of modern analysis of religion fails because it takes no account of worship and prayer. To reduce Christianity to a humanist ethic is to rob it of its cutting edge, when the substantive concept of God is indissolubly linked to the practice of worship'.

There is much else in this section which is of great interest and worth, both to the professional pastor and to anyone who is concerned with the theological/philosophical basis of his faith. At the very least, we are given a useful summary of modern discussion on the theme.

Chapter 4 is entitled 'The rational laughing animal' and deals with the question of man and his freedom. There are 5 questions evident in the 2nd century writers:

(a) In what way is man related to God?
(b) How can man's present misery be reconciled with his divine origin?
(c) Is man free?
(d) Of what does man consist?
(e) Can man know the truth?

After the established manner we are given a summary of what each author has to say on each of these questions. Under (a) there is a discussion of Justin's spermatikos logos. (b) raises the question of the Fall and the doctrine of original sin and the nature of grace; for Clement in particular the answer to sin is to be found in assimilation to God and apatheia. The question (c) was urgent in the 2nd century in the face of gnostic determinism, and each writer is shown to have come to grips with the question of free will and responsibility. Of particular interest here is 'Justin's use of a new word, autexousios' (possessing free will) in the face of the usual decay in Christian ranks brought about by the gnostic denial of free will.

The question 'of what does man consist?' leads to an illustration of how Justin uses different accounts of man's composition in rebuttal of different objections — an important point for the method of problematic elucidation. Tertullian believed the soul to be passed on from parent to child (traducianism).

The last question as to whether man can know the truth is dealt with by each of the four writers in the context of the apprehension of ultimate reality.
Of particular interest in this section is the account of Clement’s picture of man in *Stromateis* 4 and 7.

The problems and parallels to this chapter form the most difficult part of the book. The first problem concerns the use of the term deification at a time when the popular trend is to humanisation. Professor Osborn reminds us again of the need to elucidate the problems, but he does not help us very much. Quotation, summary and comment are so closely associated that it is sometimes difficult to be certain what is intended to be a statement of one of the ancient writers and what is Professor Osborn’s comment on it. Page 115 ad init. is a case in point. The section exhibits a tendency to string together a number of quotations into sentences. On page 119 nine such quotes are used in this way. This style makes for difficult and slow reading, and illustrates what can be a real drawback to the method of problematic elucidation. We are nevertheless led in the end to a helpful discussion of the differences between freedom and determinism, and the conclusion is that true Christian freedom is to be found in the way of the cross.

The exposition in Chapter 5 centres on the apparent dissimilarity between God and his creation. There are four questions raised by the ancient writers:

(a) Is the world created by the one supreme God?
(b) What has happened to make parts of the world so unlike their creator?
(c) Where in the world can God’s hand be seen?
(d) Is evil in the world compatible with its divine maker?

We are in easier territory here, and Professor Osborn gives us appealing sections from the authors as they express their appreciation of the natural world, and wrestle with the place of sinful man in the created world. Tertullian in particular has a clear exposition of the problem of evil in his work against Marcion and there is a helpful summary of his argument. A shorter summary of Clement’s teaching that free will is the sole source of evil concludes the treatment of the problem of evil in God’s creation.

The problems and parallels section contains some very valuable material. There are several short statements, and then a treatment of the idea of creation as process. Here Professor Osborn shows us that the traditional dependence on Genesis tends to overlook the importance of Romans 8, where creation is shown to be not so much a single act as a process. Charles Raven, theologian and scientist, has provided insights into the process of creation, and he shows that creation can be viewed not so much as tainted by evil as deliberately frustrated by God; by involvement in nature man can learn much about God as creator, and of the meaning of sacrifice, love and
pain. Raven’s view is that the 2nd century writers had understood the world better than any of their successors.

We are led next to a theology of conservation, and we are told that much can be gained in our appreciation of nature by reading the 2nd century writers because they have such a delight in the world of nature. Moreover, if creation is a process, then man has a part to play in that process. There is significance in this for the problem of evil too, because it means that this does not have to be explained totally in terms of creation, but part of the answer belongs to history. ‘It is important that the creation does not give unambiguous evidence for God; that would mean the creation was complete and perfect, and that God would be understood in terms of this world without qualification.’ Professor Osborn goes on to quote Moltmann: ‘The world is not yet finished, but is understood as engaged in history.’ (p.154)

In this context there is a discussion of Auschwitz in modern times and of martyrdom in the early period. In what sense can such things be regarded as punishment? What is the Christian response to those who perpetrate such acts? The chapter ends with a discussion of ways in which Christians can deal effectively with the problem of evil. These matters are important for the pastor and theologian alike, as they are indeed for any person trying to live as a Christian amid all the contradictions of the modern world.

This discussion of creation leads naturally to an exposition of the meaning of history in Chapter 6. The main concern of the 2nd century writers was why Jesus came so late in history. There are five questions:

(a) Is there continuity in history?
(b) Has history a centre?
(c) Where do we stand in history now?
(d) Does man make progress in history?
(e) How will it all end?

Question (a) is given a full treatment, for each writer sees history as an expression of God’s plan of salvation. This leads naturally to Jesus’ place at the centre of history, dealt with under (b). The place of the Church is the concern of (c), and especially the importance of the changed lives of those within the Church. (d) brings us back to a consideration of the idea of process; if history is to make progress then it is the place of man to develop the world and its resources. The end of history is seen by the four writers in different ways — for Justin it is the vindication of the crucified; for Irenaeus it is a universal restoration; for Tertullian it is ethical and reveals the justice of God; for Clement the end is in ‘a celestial scheme in which individual choice plays a dominant part’.

In the problems and parallels we begin with eschatology and hope, and the meaning of evil. Teilhard de Chardin leads us again to the idea of pro-
gress, and this is set against the Fall as being a more positive way forward than this latter doctrine. There is a discussion of the ambiguities involved in the various views of history (progressive-regressive, cyclic, chaotic), and then a section on the finality of Jesus in which the place of the Spirit is helpfully described, and a demonstration is given of the danger of ignoring the 2nd century writers in a telling criticism of recent work by Dom Cupitt (p.203ff). It is a fact that many of the theological debates of the present have already taken place in the early centuries. There is a widespread ignorance of patristic studies in the New Zealand Church at present, and Professor Osborn shows how much confusion could be avoided. There are timely warnings here that ought to be widely heeded.

The problems relating to God and His creation are endless, and they can be discussed and debated infinitely. God has provided the short answer in his own Word. The final chapter of the book considers this ‘Short Word’. The four writers speak of Christ as the simple answer to all man’s needs; the Gospel is simple, ‘salvation in a nutshell’ and gnostic attempts at elaboration are rejected; Christ is a summing up of history and the process of creation. There is a blessed and refreshing brevity in all this. There are five questions:

(a) How did God’s Word become flesh?
(b) How is the Word related to God the Father?
(c) What did the Word achieve by being both man and God?
(d) How does the Word bring knowledge of God?
(e) How can He be particular and universal?

Under (a) we are given an interesting summary of the views and different emphases of the four writers in their discussion of the Incarnation; ‘but what did (the Incarnation) do to the concept of God? Who was the Word and how could He be God if there were one God only?’ (p.215) The answers provided by the four writers are dealt with under (b) and this time we are given a summary of their Christology. (c) faces the question of the work of Christ — to reconcile, and to bring man into union with God. An exposition of Clement’s theme in *Stromateis* 4 that ‘unity with God is an important definition of faith’ is particularly helpful. Union with God is not an ‘irrational ecstasy’, and in (d) we have a treatment of the meaning of the knowledge of God through his Word. For each writer Christian faith is rational and the truth is all important. The final question is concerned with the problem of how the Word can be the man Jesus or the risen Christ and the universal Word of God. In dealing with Irenaeus’ treatment of this question, there is a moving description of the significance of the cross — we live between the resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection, and this is not so much the way of triumph as it is the way of suffering. Irenaeus’
thought is deeply influenced by the experience of the martyrs. 'The move­
ment from resurrection to parousia is not mystical but earthy; it is more
travail than triumph. It is marked not by the empty tomb but by the way of
the cross, which is the only way to resurrection.' (p.234) Clement is more
mystical — the travail of life is real, but Christ’s rule is total and He has
overcome the world. There is a good amount of what Clement has to say on
this theme, together with its antecedents in earlier Greek philosophy.

The problems and parallels in this final section become problems and
comment; and Professor Osborn concentrates again on method. The
doxographical method comes in for some criticism, especially in relation to
Wolfson and Lilla. There is warning of the danger of ignoring context, and
of drawing conclusions about the source of an author’s ideas when those
ideas are widespread. It is not enough to merely look for verbal parallels.

For the second century writers ‘the Word is the unity of the powers of the
Spirit, which are spread throughout the world in the bodies of believers’.
(p.246) At this point we are given an exposition of I Corinthians 12 and
other Pauline passages dealing with the gifts and work of the Spirit.
Kasemann is quoted with approval: ‘There is no divine gift that does not
bring with it a task, there is no grace that does not move to action.’ We are
led finally to a discussion of other passages relating to the Church —
Colossians 1 and Ephesians 1 and 2, and these are elucidated with reference
to Clement’s account of the universal Logos.

The concept of Logos is central to Christian theology and has been much
discussed in ancient as well as modern times. In this chapter, Professor
Osborn has given a concise account of this discussion, together with some
applications for everyday Christian life and experience. His approach is
balanced and reasoned, and helpful in the face of some modern extremism.

In the conclusion there is a summary of the themes investigated in the
2nd century writers and their modern counterparts. We are reminded that a
knowledge of the ancient writers will avoid mistakes because it is assumed
that modern problems are new. In the end there is no greater need for men
than the love of truth, as the 2nd century writers knew. Professor Osborn
gives a summary of what each writer has to say on this theme. They saw that
the established beliefs needed challenging because so much in them was
anti-Christian. In the same way modern Christianity has inherited an
attitude ‘tenderly solicitous of the detail of correct belief’ which was only
incipient in the 2nd century. Modern Christians need to be ‘critical of all
that does not belong to the central scandal of the Gospel’. In this we have
much to learn from the 2nd century writers, both as to what needs to be
questioned and as to the method of questioning.

There is an Appendix on ‘Alternative methods in the history of ideas in
the patristic period’ in which the problem of method is discussed in depth.
There is a full bibliography, an index of biblical citations, of citations from ancient authors, of citations from modern authors and a General Index.

There can be no doubt of the importance of this book. It reflects the great breadth of knowledge that one expects from Professor Osborn's work. The book is not easy to read, and this arises in part from the method of problematic elucidation which requires the extensive use of summary and quotation. It is necessary to read some parts several times before the sense becomes clear. Nevertheless it is worth the effort for those who share the 2nd century writers' love of truth.