BOOK REVIEWS

Irenaeus. By DENIS MINNS, O.P. Outstanding Christian Thinkers. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994. vi + 143 pp.

This volume is part of a larger series edited by Brian Davies that seeks to provide clear and critical accounts of outstanding Christian thinkers from New Testament times to the present. A book on Irenaeus rightly deserves a special place of honor in that venerable tradition. The author informs us that “The present work aims to be an introduction to the theology of Irenaeus, not an introduction to all the various problems associated with the study of his writings” (p. ix).

To that end, Minns provides a brief biography of Irenaeus and his writings set against the background of his day. He then outlines the issues developed by the Gnostic adversaries of Irenaeus in order to explain why Irenaeus’s theology took the shape it did. Since it is in the works of Irenaeus that one finds what modern scholars call “early catholicism” (Frühkatholizismus), Minns examines the development and integration of ideas which have singled him out as the “father” of this theology. Features of “early catholicism” include the development of the monarchical episcopacy (rather than an exclusively charismatic church), a definite “rule of faith” which summarizes essential points of Christian orthodoxy, a principle of apostolic succession, a distinction between priests and laity, an authoritative ecclesial interpretation of Scripture, sacramentalism, and other elements. These characteristics are more pronounced in some writings than in others. The rest of Minns’s work, therefore, is essentially an exposition of these and other principal themes in Irenaeus’s theology as revealed in selected books of Irenaeus’s Against Heresies and the Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching.

“From our point of view,” concludes Minns in his final chapter, “this confidence [in a uniform and universal faith throughout the world] may be considered naive. For the ‘early catholicism’ which Irenaeus represents was a relatively new phenomenon, even in his time; as a coherent and functioning system, it is hardly traceable earlier than the first decades of the second century. There is wide scope for argument that Irenaeus’ view of the uniformity of unchanging tradition was rosier than the facts allowed” (p. 133). Moreover, “Irenaeus has been appealed to as a witness to the Catholic teaching on tradition, but, in truth, his teaching is radically different from the latter. Even while quoting Irenaeus, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council speaks of tradition in a way which would have deeply perplexed him. . . . For him, as Yves Congar noted, the ‘sure charism of truth’ resides not in the subject of the tradition, the church or its leadership, but in the objective tradition itself” (pp. 133–134).
If Minns's conclusions are right, then Roman Catholicism has some catching up to do with Irenaeus and his successors in the Byzantine patristic tradition and beyond. Christian truth resides not exclusively in a particular historical succession of church leaders, but in all faith communities which adhere to the truth itself as expressed preeminently in Scripture and witnessed to by the church’s "rule of faith." It seems unlikely, however, that "early catholicism" was as late and innovative as Minns suggests, for one would expect to hear a kind of Hegelian antithesis from mainstream Christianity (different from that of the Gnostics). But this we do not have. The New Testament Christianity which Irenaeus reflects very likely had some blend (it is hard to define exactly) of an evangelical vision combined with sacramental theology. This seems to account better for the common themes present in the theological literature and early liturgical traditions as we find them in the first three centuries.

Apart from some debatable conclusions, this book is a first-rate monograph that deserves a wide readership. The author has written a masterful study that is highly readable and extremely valuable to beginners and professionals alike. There has not been a general volume on Irenaeus published in English since G. Wingren’s *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (1959). This one will surely become its modern companion as a standard introduction to the theology of Irenaeus.

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*Die Anfänge der abendländischen Rezeption des Nizänums.* By JÖRG ULRICH. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994. xi + 327 pp. DM 198.

Ulrich, in his thorough and judicious investigation of the Western reception of Nicaea, concludes that "the identification Western = Nicene, often depicted in scholarly literature, rests on a retrojection from a later time and is highly in need of modification" (my translation). He thus makes a clean break with the tendency, not yet defunct, to evaluate early theologians in terms of a later orthodoxy. He also breaks with the romantic interpretation of Nicaea's aftermath as a struggle of truth against power which thrilled the young John Henry Newman in H. H. Milman's account and still haunts us today. The picture that emerges is, rather, consistent with the gradual groping toward an adequate conceptualization of the Trinity recounted in Hanson's *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*. Ulrich demonstrates that until 357 the *homoousion* (the confession that the Son was "of the same being" with the Father) played no role in the reception of Nicaea. When the controversy over Nicaea eventually did become an issue for many in the Western church at the abortive Council of Serdica (modern Sofiya in Bulgaria) in 343, they understood it in terms of the anti-Origenist "one hypostasis" theology of Marcellus of Ancyra, with whom Athanasius, his fellow exile, then made common cause.