

**The Sky is Red: Discerning the Signs of the Times**, Kenneth Leech Darton, Longman & Todd (1997), 279 pp, £13.95 pbk

Leech's clarity of thought and analysis combined with a wealth of experience find creative expression in this book. He attempts to review the current and future state of religion, politics and human society. The text moves rapidly as it attempts to discern the signs of the times (Matthew 16.3), identifying the trends, dangers, options and opportunities which will characterize the coming century. They are the continued nuclear threat, fragmentation within society, the rise of fascism and the increase of economic hardship. Against this backdrop, Leech examines the role of the churches and the place of theology.

Leech delights in his place on the margins of the institution to cajole, criticize and challenge. The churches have sold out, adopting secular ideologies and practices, both inappropriately and ineptly. Clergy have become insular, diocesan structures have become more managerial and bureaucratic. This has led the Church to respond 'in the wrong way ... the way of panic, the way of safety, the way of risk-avoidance' (p. 232). Bishops are a particular focus of Leech's anger and he exposes inadequate thinking especially from the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Some of this is insightful and uncomfortable, and there is persuasive theological method undergirding it, rooted in the worshipping life of his community of St Botolph's, Aldgate, in London. In particular the picture of the steady decline of English Christianity and the poor quality of Christian theology and action, especially in the area of social and political thought, is disturbing. Some parts of the text are sweeping and demand more reflection. Is it not the case that the Church has always adapted itself in the light of its social context? Also, for example, Leech's dismissal of the work of Cupitt (pp. 216-17) is inadequate and appears somewhat patronizing. However, the text is guaranteed to stimulate and its range of issues would provide a useful starting point for study groups or training courses.

There is little doubt about the force of Leech's thesis but, as one reads, many questions are raised about the process of change and how our own personal agendas in relation to power play their part in the way we think and act. When does conviction (however right) become disabling and blinding? Put another way, ideological purism has its limits in making it possible for change and growth to occur. This is not to say that we should avoid conflict or the making of ultimate claims about truth, but to recognize the paradoxes and limitations of the ideological high ground. Leech's stance makes this reviewer uncomfortable because of uncertainty about how far this approach really encourages or facilitates change, movement and growth. What is the place of compromise, contradiction and recognition of the diversity of perspectives in any journey of exploration? This alternative policy does not avoid risk or marginality but hopes for earthed mutuality in listening and action.

But serious, prayerful and wise thinking is in short supply and Leech helps us to see this. There is (to use a culinary metaphor) too much theological cooking done in the microwave oven and not enough slow marinating and oven cooking. No wonder we are left unsatisfied or un nourished! This book provides a useful starting point for us to deepen discernment of the signs of the times. The ways in which we respond will shape the Church's future and possible survival.

James Woodward  
Middleton Warwickshire