

The Contemporary Challenge of Modernist Theology, Paul Badham, University of Wales Press 1998 (0-7083-1503-8), pp. viii + 179, £12.99

This book is reviewed from the standpoint of a pastor working within the church, rather than an academic within the academy. As such it is read with the undergirding presupposition that the church runs the danger of a certain kind of intellectual bankruptcy. Much of its energy has gone into managing internal disputes between traditionalists and liberals. This, combined with increasing financial pressures and the appropriation of management and psychological tools for the pastoral task, has led the churches down the road towards some failure of intellectual nerve. The ability to be 'media friendly' is rated as highly as intellectual honesty and reflectiveness.

Worse still, as seen at Lambeth 1998, the gulf between traditionalists and liberals seems to be getting wider. There seems to be little dialogue on the basis of mutual respect between the respective range of positions and this is viewed by outside commentators with increased incredulity. Polarization and conflict may make good headlines; they are not good news for the quality of intellectual exploration and discussion. Against the background of these presuppositions (or prejudices) Badham's book is welcomed as a persuasive case for one variant of the classic modernist position in today's Christianity. Writing for the centenary of the Modern Church People's Union, he argues that modern science and philosophy can be shown to support faith in God and that religious and near-death experiences provide new evidence for life after death

In contrast to sonic liberals or post-modern radicals, such as Don Cupitt, Badham holds a strongly realist understanding of God. In contrast to the traditionalist (and majority?) position, he does not believe in the virgin birth, in the physical resurrection of Christ, or in interventionist understandings of miracles. He is highly critical of the thought and influence of Barth and argues for a position of mutual understanding and dialogue between world faiths that can lead to a more inclusive and credible account of faith within contemporary society. This position (modernism) offers a middle way, Badham argues, between a traditionalist Christianity that cannot be reconciled with modern thought and the kind of radical Christianity that hardly believes in God at all. Badham defends the validity of modernism against both alternatives and argues for a positive reinterpretation of the essence of Christianity. This believer needed little convincing of the bases (though not necessarily all aspects) of this position having been formed within King's College, London in the late 1970s, before that department's rigorous defence of the orthodox or traditionalist position. Others will, take a different view.

Whatever the conclusion, modern believing faces a kind of crisis from which we can only be rescued through open dialogue and an awareness of how far removed the internal debates of the church are from the modern, consumerist, secular mind- Badham's honesty is attractive - it is left to theorists and practitioners to respond with as much energy and integrity as they can muster.

James Woodward