

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Nancy L. Eisland** *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Abingdon Press 1995

In this fascinating and deeply challenging essay, Nancy Eisland presents an important practical theological perspective not simply on the nature of disability and its impact on individuals and communities, but also on the nature of human beings and what it means to live one's life humanly. The book is an exercise in constructive contextual theology which takes seriously liberationist critiques of power, justice and sociopolitical oppression. The particular struggle within which she grounds her liberatory praxis is the struggle of people with disabilities to transform the oppressive structures, beliefs, values and attitudes which lead to the social and theological exclusion of the disabled. Moving away from definitions of disability which view it as located within individual impairments, Eisland provides a strong argument to suggest that the unifying factor that forms the category of 'the disabled,' is not shared psychological or physical impairments, but the stigmatising values and exclusionary social arrangements forced upon disabled people by 'temporarily able-bodied' persons. In other words much of the disablement experienced by individuals is socially constructed and thus open to the possibility of transformation. Unfortunately theological formulations which equate disability with sin and focus on the purity of the body have meant that the church has been as exclusive in its practice and doctrine as the rest of society. Eisland's intention is to present a practical theological framework within which the church can critically analyse her practices and begin to live faithfully.

It is however important not to limit the focus of this study only to the theology of disability. Equally as important is this book's contribution to the study of the body and the importance of understanding human life as embodied existence. It is this emphasis on the embodiedness of human existence that offers the basic dynamic and the radical cutting edge which drives and underlies this study. Eisland suggests that many of the problems experienced by people with disabilities within society stem from contemporary misunderstandings about the nature of the body and human embodied existence. She argues that the body is not simply a set of biological drives which somehow stands

apart from society and has merely to be identified and named. The body is in fact a social object, the product of complex socio-political processes. 'In a society where denial of our particular bodies and questing for a better body is "normal" respect for our own bodies is an act of resistance and liberation.' We constantly construct and deconstruct our bodies, an observation that has radical consequences for people with disabilities. To re-conceptualise disablement in a way which challenges society to rethink its ideas of normality and embodiedness is a radical and countercultural act. It is precisely such deconstruction and reconstruction of the body that forms a major thrust of this work.

As the book progresses, Eisland develops a powerful contextualised Christology which speaks of the incarnation of God with us now. Perhaps the most startling image which she presents is the image of the disabled God. Arguing against conceptions of personhood and normality that demand physical perfection, she highlights the fact that at the centre of the Christian faith stands a God who is Himself disabled. The disabled God 'emerges in the particular situation in which people with disabilities ... find themselves as they try to live out their faith and to fulfil their calling to live ordinary lives of worth and dignity.' Highlighting the resurrected Christ's revelation of his wounds to his followers,

In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Saviour, calls his frightened companions to recognise in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.

Such a conceptualisation of God reveals that personhood in all of its fullness is to be lived out amidst the ambiguities of life 'in the need for care from others in hope for justice.' Eisland's challenge is powerful and at times quite poignant and disturbing. This book should be read by all who wish to develop a deeper more inclusive sense of who and what we are as human beings and what we should be as a church community. For too long theological anthropology has

failed to listen to the voices of the disabled as it quests after the essence of what is 'normal' human existence. 'The disabled God' provides a much needed corrective of individualistic, essentialist conceptions of human life and disability and in so doing opens the way for a radical re-conceptualisation of what it means to be disabled and precisely what it is that is the disabling factor.

**In Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling. By Emmanuel Y. Lartey. Cassel, London 1947 147pp**

Anyone with a genuine interest in discovering what pastoral care and counselling might mean within a multi-cultural Britain would do well to take this book seriously. The intention of the book is to offer a critical introduction to the praxis of pastoral care and counselling within a multi-cultural context. It centres around the concept of 'interculturality,' a term which (unlike 'transcultural' or 'cross-cultural' approaches), highlights the importance of acknowledging the multiple contexts and variety of cultural influences which impact upon individuals and communities within multicultural Britain. Rather than assuming that whole cultures think and act in particular ways, the book sets out the importance of the church listening to the many voices of culture, particularly those voices which are oppressed and marginalised within contemporary Brit-

ain. In challenging the 'traditional model' of pastoral care as something which is done by ordained, white, middle class males Lartey seeks to radically challenge contemporary understandings of what pastoral care within contemporary Britain should be and who should be doing it. The book helpfully and clearly guides the reader through familiar and unfamiliar territory and gently introduces them to new models of pastoral care and new and challenging ways of viewing situations. As a teaching text this book is invaluable. Particularly helpful is Lartey's working out of the relationship between pastoral care and liberation theology, and his discussion on the implications of taking seriously issues of spirituality within a multicultural society. As a practical text it is also very helpful, highlighting a number of constructive pastoral possibilities for those who seek to minister authentically in a way which respects the cultural diversity of contemporary Britain.

The book moves beyond established paradigms of pastoral care as something which is done by ordained, white, middle class males, and seeks to radically challenge contemporary understandings of what pastoral care is and who should be doing it. In doing this Lartey lays the foundations for a pastoral theology of care which is not bounded by race, gender, denomination or culture, but is open to the needs and talents of the whole community in all of its diversity.