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Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology

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Ederhard Jüngel: An Introduction to his Theology

J. B. Webster

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Paperback reprint, 1991

182 pages

Theological Essays

Eberhard Jüngel

Translated, edited and with an Introduction by J. B. Webster

Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989

xii + 235 pages

It is fortunate that the paperback reprint of Webster's introduction to Jüngel has followed so soon upon his translations of selected essays by the Lutheran systematician. Jüngel does not make easy reading, even for those well-versed in theology. Moreover, unlike some other contemporary continental writers, he has not been anxious to market his wares to modern anglophonic post-modernists through regular appointments at major American universities. Nevertheless, his "concern to eschew modernity for its own sake" has not meant that his work, although at times "tangential" to "contemporary theological debates" and in some ways "no longer catch[ing] the imagination of some of his peers" (*Introduction*, 2) is of no value—Much the opposite in fact, as both the Webster books, here under review, demonstrate.

A concise, clear summary of Jüngel's major studies, Webster's *Introduction* guides the reader through the Tübingen theologian's 1962 dissertation, *Paulus und Jesus*, his *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery* (1971; ET 1975), a number of his essays, and his most significant works, the Barth study, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming* (1966; ET 1976), and the wide-ranging *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (1978; ET 1983).

From the beginning of his career Jüngel has been interested in New Testament "speech events" which are "ultimately primary and are not to be resolved into anything beyond themselves...[—]the language of the New Testament" "brings to speech" "revelation... [It] is the place where God's Word is encountered and so is both authoritative and determinative of the mind's response to it" (*Introduction*, 8). New Testament parables, for example, do not point to something beyond themselves; in Jüngel's words "The parables of Jesus bring the Kingdom of God to speech *as* parable" (*Ibid.*,10).

Working from this central insight, Webster goes on to indicate how Jüngel, in his study of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, overcomes the division between God's existence in himself and for us, of the hidden and

the revealed God. If maintained, such divisions make God an object beyond human comprehension or the simple result of human projection. For Jüngel, God's being is in his becoming Jesus. God "has chosen to be himself in identity with the history of Jesus, which is no mere shadow of the divine life but its very substance" (Ibid., 21). By such means Jüngel upholds traditional Protestantism's teaching on the primacy of divine grace, revelation, and the person and work of Christ in human justification, and moves on in his magnum opus, *God as the Mystery of the World*, to discuss language and thought about God in a world in which God is "linguistically displaced".

For Jüngel the problem is that all language about God must be genuine human language, and, yet, language about God "is only possible on the basis of God's revelatory utterance...[It] does not take its rise from within human language since it is demanded of man from beyond the horizons of worldly discourse" (Ibid., 40). The difficulty is solved in Jüngel's analysis of metaphorical and analogical language. The metaphor as non-literal, he insists, has a truth beyond that of literal language. Literal language directs us only to a reality known in the concrete world; metaphorical truth points to possibility beyond actuality. Metaphor is, thus, "the disclosure of new being" (Ibid., 46).

Any thinking about God is, then, not the result of a self-sufficient individual making judgements about the beyond. Human knowledge is rather a *hearing* of God's address to us. Analogies operate not in terms of being, according to which human goodness participates in divine goodness, or in terms of faith, but in terms of relation or event. Analogy in this sense allows God to come to us (the Other to an other) in the comparison of one thing to an other. God comes to us supremely in the crucified Christ. He is "present in the absent one" (Ibid., 67), as love towards his creation, as "being [ever] eminently truer to himself in self-abasement". In Jüngel's own words, "Love is structurally to be described as—in the midst of ever greater self-relatedness—even greater selflessness, that is as a self-relation, freely going beyond itself, flowing beyond itself and giving itself" (Ibid., 71).

The pieces selected for translation in *Theological Essays* are published to provide the reader with greater insights into the general outline of Jüngel's position which Webster so clearly describes and critiques in the *Introduction*. (Special attention must be given to Webster's critiques of both the content and expression of Jüngel's theology which appear at the end of each chapter of the *Introduction* and serve as splendid guides in elucidating both the German theologian's thought and the broader questions with which he is dealing.)

"Metaphorical Truth" (*Theological Essays*, 16-71), "Anthropomorphism" (Ibid., 71-94), and "The World as possibility and actuality" (Ibid., 95-123) deserve the primacy they have been given not only for their interest to theologians, but also for the insights they can continue to provide for contemporary problems raised in philosophy, philosophy of language,

literary theory and interpretation in the humanities as a whole. In these carefully translated essays (Jüngel was not so fortunate in the accuracy of the translation of his *God's Being*) the English-speaking reader can gain a much fuller appreciation of Jüngel's insights into the function of metaphor and a novel, positive approach to anthropomorphic language, according to which Jüngel refuses to accept the human speaker as a "fixed point", but rather as "a subject of movement, a process of self-transcendence, not 'fixed and set in... actuality, but... aligned to the possibility of the world'" (Ibid., 8). The remaining five essays develop the implications of the positions put forward for anthropology, natural theology and the Protestant doctrine of the sacraments.

Those fascinated by Julia Kristeva's critique of the transcendental ego will have in the first three essays in particular much to consider, but all of them have wide importance, not only for Christian theology and religious practice, but for many other dimensions of contemporary life. One might hope, for example, that Webster, who makes some interesting comments on the relationships between Jüngel and Ricoeur, in both the *Introduction* and the *Theological Essays* will expand his comments at some future point to include reflections on "later" French deconstructionist and Lacanian theories. The latter, albeit for the most part in popular forms and sometimes in popular caricatures of themselves, are peculiarly "modern" apologetics for the tradition which Jüngel characterises in *God as the Mystery of the World* as responsible for the "linguistic displacement" of God, and for which his work can almost certainly provide an antidote, taking seriously as it does the roots out of which such post-modernist doctrines have grown.

Lutherans might make one additional request of Professor Webster: Jüngel's reflections on Luther's "Freedom of a Christian", originally printed in 1977 has just appeared in its third German edition; an English translation of the work (*Zur Freiheit eines Christenmenschen: Eine Erinnerung an Luthers Schrift* [München: Ch. Kaiser, 1991]) would be appreciated not only for those interested in Jüngel, but especially for all concerned with the implications of traditional theological positions for our contemporary world.

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Mary for All Christians

John Macquarrie
London: Collins, 1991

One of the subjects which has raised continued discussion in Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue and which has serious implications for Anglican-Lutheran dialogue as a result, is the place of Marian theology and devotion in Christian faith. Contemporary interest in women's issues has, in