

BOOK REVIEWS

Joseph FARRUGIA, *The Church and the Muslims. The Church's Consideration of Islam and the Muslims in the Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (Media Centre; Malta 1988) 88 pp.

Next year will see the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church's first ever official statement on relations with the followers of other religions. Fr Farrugia's study is therefore very timely. He has extracted for publication three chapters of the doctoral dissertation that he successfully presented to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He wisely does not confine himself to an examination of *Nostra Aetate*, but considers this text in relationship with other conciliar documents, particularly the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), but also the Pastoral Constitution (*Gaudium et Spes*), the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*), and others. On the other hand, as the title indicates, the focus of his book is relationship with Muslims.

The author proceeds by way of three careful steps. He first makes clear the theological framework in which the Council's affirmations on Islam are to be seen. The Council's understanding of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation points

to the larger reality of God's universal salvific will, and God's activity in the world, and thus also in peoples and cultures, through Word and Spirit. Nevertheless, because sin is as it were interwoven into the texture of this world, values that can be perceived stand in need of redemption and elevation, and will only reach their perfection in eschatological fulness. In a final paragraph the author sums up this chapter with what he terms "a brief conciliar statement on Muslims", in other words an application of the principles to the case of Islam. "Muslims are embraced by God's salvific grace... They are enriched with values of truth and holiness, but these values... are in need of redemption and elevation." This is why the Church feels bound "to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life' (N.A.2)" (p. 32).

There follows a closer examination of what the Council actually said about Islam and Muslims. The Introduction had already explained briefly how the Council came to tackle this theme in the first place. The most solemn document, *Lumen Gentium*, states that Muslims "acknowledge the Creator... (and) together with us they adore the one, merciful God (L.G. 16).

Fr Farrugia is right to insist, following R. Caspar, on the importance of the little words *together with us*. Even today one can find people who say that Muslims worship another god, and so to join with

them in prayer, in whatever way, is tantamount to being unfaithful to our God. The Council states without any ambiguity that Christians and Muslims worship the *same* God, the one, true God, though they differ in their understanding of God and their approach to Him. The author then elucidates, with the help of sound commentators, the Council's statements on God, on the reference to Abraham, on Jesus and Mary, on future life, and on moral attitudes.

The final chapter goes over this material once again, but this time in order to make absolutely clear what the Council said and what it did not say. So reference is made to the silence about Muhammad, the lack of mention of pilgrimage as an important feature in Islamic worship, the rather general treatment of moral life. Recourse to the Council records helps to explain the choices made and how the final text was arrived at. The full importance of what is stated is clearly brought out.

Perhaps the main criticism one could level at this study is its tendency to concentrate on the dogmatic at the expense of the pastoral. *Nostra Aetate* has an important passage where Christians and Muslims are exhorted to strive for "mutual understanding". This is mentioned by the author, but is perhaps not given sufficient weight. The task of building up "mutual understanding" has been taken up, by many people of good will on both sides. Efforts are by no means confined to

the Catholic Church. The World Council of Churches has also been to the fore in this field. Yet there is still much to do. Situations differ from place to place, so it is dangerous to generalize. Yet one can say that history still lies like a heavy weight on mutual relations in some places. In others new tensions arise. What is certain is that in today's world Christians and Muslims are more frequently in contact than ever. Fr Farrugia's useful study can help Catholics to return to the documents of Vatican II, so that they may live these contacts and enter into these relationships in the true spirit of the Council.

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Nicola CIOLA, *Introduzione alla cristologia*. (Queriniana; Brescia 1986) 136 pp.

While during the decade immediately following the close of the Second Vatican Council we have witnessed a concentration of theological reflection upon topics having to do with ecclesiology, the attention of theologians during the past decade has shown a marked focus on Christology and related topics. And this was, in a way, to be expected. The Church herself cannot possibly be understood, even after the many elucidations offered us by the Council, unless one

reflects upon its mystery in the light of Christ himself, who prolongs his presence in her and gives her life.

A valuable contribution to theological reflection in this regard is the present publication by Nicola Ciola, a lecturer of Christology at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome and author of a number of other works.

What the author here actually proposes to do is to identify the main problems connected with the study of Christology and then suggest in each case the methodological approach that, in his view, would help for their solution. These problems, according to him, are the following: the problem of the historical Jesus and of the Christ of faith, the relationship between trinitarian theology and Christology, the anthropological significance of Christology, the place of Christology in the ecclesial tradition.

These problems, which are no doubt among the main ones in Christology, are carefully and very clearly described. While the author does not offer the reader an exhaustive solution to any of them, he does refer to the opinions of leading theologians and to the way they have attempted to solve them.

The book is richly annotated and provides the reader with a most useful bibliography and provides the reader with a most useful bibliography, a sure guide through such a dense and rich proliferation of literature on the subject of Christology in recent years.

Although the work is meant by the author to be only introductory, in many ways it is very much more than that; for it leads the reader right into the whole subject of Christology, gives him a birds-eye-view of the panorama as it appears from the heights of the long ecclesial tradition, and at the same time allures him to come down to grips with the mysterious reality itself and explore its various facets.

The author, modestly enough, does not promise much to the reader, but he certainly gives much more than he promises. With its limitations, mostly due to the length of the treatise, the book can be indeed a valuable help for the study of Christology. Any reader, whether student or scholar, is bound to enjoy it and derive much profit from it.

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Carmel TABONE, *The Secularization of the Family in Changing Malta* (Dominican Publication; Malta 1987) pp. xx + 268.

The family is generally regarded as a fundamental institution of Maltese society not only because it provides, until now, the only legitimate form of procreation but also as a focal point for many other activities. It socializes the young, teaching

basic behaviour patterns and developing appropriate attitudes which constitute the basic ingredients for the various roles and relations of later life. For these reasons, it attracts the attention both of those interested in preserving or in bringing about fundamental changes in such societies. It is equally interesting for sociologists who seek to explain the forces of social continuity and change.

Tabone's study adopts a classical sociological perspective yet it is clearly intended to identify the main areas where the traditional family is threatened. Efforts to preserve the family may thus be concentrated on such 'problem' areas.

The author makes a very rigorous attempt to study the family as a major institution in Maltese society — which many see as undergoing a rapid rate of social change. The perspective of secularization is adopted since religion is regarded as the major unifying force behind all traditional institutions in this society. Yet, religion itself is currently in danger of being swept away by the powerful wave of change processes. In this context, Tabone's study provides a serious, comprehensive attempt to analyze these changes and to interpret them in the light of sociological theory.

The first part of the study presents a wide-ranging review of sociological studies about the family, social change and secularization. Here the main concepts used are clearly defined and traced back

to their historical antecedents.

The second part deals with the secularization of the Maltese family from a micro-sociological aspect. Here the Maltese family is analyzed as an institution with a number of functions and interactions among its members which are governed by established values and norms. The impact of secularization upon these norms and relationships is explored both internally and externally.

The third part of the study examines systematically the external factors and institutions affecting the secularization of the Maltese family from a macro-sociological aspect. These factors include the other major institutions of society namely the economy, politics, religion and education as well as the media of mass communication and migration/tourism as important contemporary phenomena which affect the secularization of the Maltese family.

The outcome of this analysis is summarized very competently in a general concluding chapter. Finally the study includes an appendix where the questionnaire used and some complementary statistical findings are presented in tabular form. There is also a short bibliography which lists the references consulted.

The analysis is based mainly on the empirical evidence gathered from a structured questionnaire administered on a sample of 400 Maltese adults randomly selected and geographically spread out over all geographical areas of Malta. The

analysis is based upon standard statistical techniques which are handled quite competently by the author.

In the course of presenting his study, Tabone has put together a very valid body of data which should be of interest to anyone concerned with the study of Maltese society, social policy and particularly with the welfare of the family from a traditionalist point of view. Such serious studies unfortunately only appear rarely in print and therefore this one adds significantly to our knowledge of an important aspect of Maltese society.

I now turn to the limitations of the study which, I hasten to add by no means outweigh the significant positive values which have been stated above.

The theoretical approach used throughout the study leads to an analysis of the Maltese family as a 'social system' within a structural – functionalist framework. This approach – best developed by Talcott Parsons and others – leaves much to be desired as exposed by many critics during the past three decades: It particularly leads to an idealized harmonious view of social relations within a system where change and conflict are generally introduced as a result of contact with the world outside. Such systems are often portrayed as threatened by outside factors. As a result of this approach, the internal conflicts *within* the Maltese, traditional family tend to be played down if not completely ignored. For instance,

the current tensions between generations for the educational achievement of the children sometimes boarding on the level of a national obsession for academic qualifications as a means to upward mobility between generations, the current resort to drugs and the frantic efforts to build bigger and more luxurious houses as the Maltese families get smaller and smaller. These indicate serious *social* problems within families which are barely touched upon within this study. Religion may sometimes even contribute to these symptoms.

The study is largely addressed to an audience concerned with maintaining the traditional model of the Maltese family. Thus its main appeal is more likely to be among ecclesiastical and like minded quarters than among those eager to promote radical changes in this central institution. This view of the author appears in an occasional statement like 'the relationship between parents and children is also satisfactory'. There is an assumed model of the traditional family of the past as a point of departure which is not empirically substantiated. Overall the general tone of the study as proposed in the Introduction, is 'apologetic' in a philosophical – theological sense.

Finally the style used throughout the study may be more appropriate for presentation as an academic thesis than as a book for a wider readership.

Nevertheless, as stated above,

these are relatively minor points, when compared to the great intrinsic worth which the data presented has for those who, for different reasons, are interested in the dynamics of change in our society.

That the Maltese family – like the whole of society – is changing is not for one moment in doubt. Indeed if both the family and its host society are to survive at all, they must change and develop in the right directions. Tabone's study shows the directions which social policy must take in order to ensure such development.

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Patrick W. SKEHAN/Alexander A. DI LELLA, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (Anchor Bible 39, Doubleday; New York 1987) XXIII. 620 pp.

There are various reasons for welcoming this new volume in the Anchor Bible series. First of all interest in Jewish literature of the intertestamental period has been on the increase during the last few decades, and the *Wisdom of Ben Sira* offers a prominent representative of this literature. Besides, the problem of the Old Testament canon of the Christian Church is again attracting attention, especially

in the context of ecumenical dialogue – cfr P. Grech, *Biblica* 68 (1987) 286-289; and this wisdom book seems to have been the earliest of the 'apocrypha' or, for the catholic tradition, 'deuterocanonicals', to find itself left out of the Jewish canon. These two reasons would suffice to explain why the scholarly world should be grateful to Doubleday for including the work of Yeshua ben Eleazar ben Sira (Sir 50, 27) in their AB series.

But the present volume has the added value of being the result of efforts from two leading scholars, Patrick W. Skehan (PWS) and Alexander A. Di Lella (AADL). Unfortunately these efforts ran parallel as Professor Skehan died on September 9, 1980, before the two authors could have the occasion to "discuss a few disputed matters" (Preface, p. X). To this volume PWS contributed the translation and notes of the greater part of the text (excluding Sir 38, 24-34; 39, 1-11; 40, 1-43, 33 and 51, 13-30); AADL completed the translation and compiled the notes of the pericopes left unfinished by PWS, following "Skehan's procedure of adopting and revising the *New American Bible* translation of Sirach" (ibid), and wrote the Introduction, the General Bibliography, and the Commentary to the entire book. The misfortune of PWS's death, and the generous treatment of his translation and notes by AADL ensured that in this volume we have two scholarly views not

one, even though "the occasional differences of opinion" may not be perceptible to the general reader.

In format and procedure this volume follows in the wake of its brothers in the series: a good introduction to the biblical book (pp. 3-92) precedes its translation and exegesis through notes and commentaries (pp. 131-580). Thirty-six pages of bibliography, divided according to six areas of relevant research, follows the general introduction (pp. 93-127), while thirty-seven pages of indexes covering author and subject-matter items (one for scriptural citations would have been useful indeed), come after the commentary itself (pp. 583-620). The preface by AADL explaining the volume's genesis as well as the numbering system adopted (pp. IX-XI) is important to read.

AADL provides quite a good introductory treatise to the study of the *Wisdom of Ben Sira (WBS)*. This introduction is made up of ten chapters which are worth going through. The present reviewer means to consider some of the questions this treatise raises.

AADL starts with identifying the title and contents of *WBS* (chapter I, pp. 3-7). The complex redactional and textual history of this *biblion* (as Ben Sira's grandson suggests in his Prologue we should consider this scripture) makes the reconstruction of the book's title necessary; while the fact that "the book manifests no particular order of subject matter or obvious coherence" (p. 4) makes the

thematic list of contents a must. AADL's classification of pericopes by themes shall prove very useful for the general reader who would approach Ben Sira's spring of fresh water about "almost every major topic with regard to religious and secular wisdom and personal behaviour" (p. 6).

In the second chapter (pp. 8-16) we find background information about Ben Sira and his times. The professional reader will hardly escape the impression of schematism and superficiality in this section of the Introduction. "During this period little is known of the fortunes of the Jews", states AADL (p. 13). And while details about the general political framework are furnished, little or nothing is said about the social macrocosm as well as microcosm. This is unfortunate since *WBS* was mainly addressed to specific situations and concrete *modi vivendi* which were causing concern (one should read the Prologue and Sir 33, 16-18 among others). In *WBS* we have not a theoretical exercise in wisdom writing by some having-nothing-to-do intellectual, but a counter cultural response to a foreign-inspired hellenization onslaught which was threatening to obliterate the specifics of the Jewish cultural identity. If this third/second century writer drew heavily from tradition (Scriptures in general, but especially from the Book of Proverbs) for inspiration and thought categories with which to judge, and dialogue with, contem-

porary behaviour trends, this means that he was dissatisfied with current developments and with the solutions proposed for the perennial social and personal problems. How were the Jews of the period, both as an ethnic reality and as individuals, responding to the hellenization policy as to solicit the writing of this anthology of wisdom poems and exhortations?

The canonicity of *WBS* and its place within the canon form the subject matter of chapter III (pp. 17-20) AADL's perspective is obviously Catholic and fits well within that current of canonical studies in the United States represented by A.C. Sundberg. In his well-known monograph *The Old Testament of the Early Church* and in other minor studies – cfr Bibliography p. 125 for details – Sundberg proved that by the turn of the Christian Era, the whole issue of the canon as a *numerus clausus* was still vague. Unfortunately AADL makes no use of (or reference to) another important monograph published in 1985 in England, Roger Beckwith's *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism*, which offers quite a different interpretation of both Ben Sira's grandson's prologue as it relates to the matter of the canon, as well as of rabbinic literature in its treatment of this deutero-canonical. One leaves this third chapter with the conviction that it has not said the last word as to how Ben Sira's

writing found itself within the OT canon of the Christian Church.

What literary forms has Ben Sira employed in his book? The answer to this question is given in chapter IV (pp. 21-30). Among the literary types Ben Sira found in tradition and adoperated to express his thoughts we find: the *mashal* the hymn of praise, prayer of petition, autobiographical narratives, lists or onomastica, and didactic narrative. AADL offers a brief description and discussion on each of these forms; one would not quarrel with the way AADL treats these genres except for one detail: his classification of the *meshalim* is thematic rather than form-critical: his adopting R.B.Y. Scott's seven categories of proverb described in his Anchor Bible (no. 18) commentary on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (pp. 5-8). (Details of this volume are no where to be found in this Introduction) prove this point.

In chapter V (pp. 31-39) AADL turns to the wisdom traditions in the OT. He distinguishes two basic types of wisdom, 'recipe' wisdom, by which he means the pre-theoretical or practical wisdom, and 'existential' wisdom "that attempts to provide some answers to man's perennial quest for meaning for such anomic phenomena such as suffering, moral evil and untimely death". The author examines also the hermeneutical implications of both types of wisdom, in other words, what meaning can a book like this have for a modern reader.

The next two chapters, VI (pp. 40-45) and VII (pp. 46-50) are devoted to an examination of *WBS*'s relationship to its sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The "other books of the Old Testament" couldn't but have influenced the writer "who had devoted himself for a long time to the study of the Law, the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and developed a thorough familiarity with them" (Prologue). According to AADL Ben Sira's creative spirit was not directed towards forming new literary genres or to offering novel solutions to man's eternal problems of his existence. Rather, his contribution consisted in having contextualized the scriptures in order to render them understandable to his contemporaries (cfr p. 40).

But here a question arises. Beckwith (*Old Testament Canon*, p. 111 and passim) contends that Ben Sira's intention to interpret the Scriptures would necessarily exclude his book from liability to enter the canon. For within the canon were admitted only these books intending to convey revelation. *WBS* meant to offer only commentary. A possible answer to this objection is by referring to the fact that text and commentary within the same biblical book, or the text in one book and the commentary in another is not exclusive to Ben Sira's work. One has to distinguish sharply between revelation and inspiration: to be inspired and hence canonical does

not necessarily imply to offer new revelatory material. On the other hand, to be inspired and canonical means to be revelation.

In the following chapter AADL reviews the undeniable "dependence of Ben Sira on several non-Jewish writings" (p. 49), mostly of Egyptian and Hellenistic origin. In drawing from these non-Jewish sources our sage integrated his borrowings within Jewish thought categories. His drinking from foreign springs reflects rather a pastoral strategy: "...he made use of these foreign sources, not because he has caught up in the spirit of compromise and syncretism that was rampant at the time, but because he felt he had to show others how the best of Gentile thought is no danger to the faith but could be incorporated into an authentically Jewish work, the purpose of which was to encourage fidelity to their ancestral practices.

Herein lies the religious genius and literary skill of Ben Sira" (p. 50). "The original Hebrew text and Ancient Versions" is the title of the eighth chapter of the Introduction. The textual and reductional history of this deuterocanonical has been very complex, so that reading this chapter is essential in order to comprehend the textual criticism our scholars carried out before they gave us this commentary. History complicated matters for *WBS*. Before the Jews' decision that this 'scripture' does not 'make the hands unclean' and had therefore to be 'stored away' - cfr Beckwith, *Old*

Testament Canon, pp. 278-286. 388-380, *WBS* enjoyed huge popularity with the Jews. But when it was left out of their canon for dogmatic reasons – they decided that prophecy (and scriptural inspiration) dried out with the termination of the Persian Period (c. 332 BC); one rabbinic writing stated: “With the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the latter prophets, the Holy Spirit ceased out of Israel” – cfr Beckwith, *Old Testament Canon*, pp. 369-376 – this popularity subsided among Jewish readers. Its sustained use within the Christian communities, as to become ‘Ecclesiasticus’, did not help either to avert the cruel fate of the Hebrew text, since Christians read the scriptures in their Greek version. The Hebrew text finished with being disused, forgotten and lost.

It was only in AD 1896 that fragments from this Hebrew text began to be discovered and to be taken into consideration for the reconstruction of *WBS* ‘original’ text. In this chapter AADL provides us with an up-dated list of all extant Hebrew fragments – one has to add his article: Alexander A. Di Lella, “The Newly Discovered Sixth Manuscript of Ben Sira from the Cairo Geniza” *Biblica* 69 (1988) 226-238: this manuscript AADL has been unable to use (p. 52) – together with a brief evaluation of all existing Hebrew, Greek, Old Latin and Syriac witnesses. In the text variants from the various MSS are offered, so that reading chapter

VIII is essential for whoever would like to use this commentary.

‘Form’ and ‘Matter’ may be said to be the subject matter of the last two chapters. In chapter IX (pp. 63-74) the poetry of Ben Sira is examined; AADL works mostly on the Hebrew fragments and several literary procedures are briefly discussed: assonance, alliteration, rhyme, chiasmus, inclusio, and the alphabetic acrostics. One comment: AADL assumes that the Hebrew text beneath present-day Greek version of Sir 1, 11-30 must have been one such alphabetic acrostic, originally meant to form an *inclusio* with the twenty-three line alphabetic poem at the end of the book, 51, 13-30 (p. 74). This may have been the case, but as (i) we do not possess the Hebrew original of 1, 11-30 and (ii) Ben Sira’s work resembles an anthology rather than a well structured literary unity – cfr pp. 4-6 – one should be more cautious and less dogmatic both as to the nature and function of 1, 11-30 as to the integrity and authenticity of *WBS* as a whole: for AADL the *inclusio* between 1, 11-30 and 51, 13-30 would prove “that the book was planned in the form in which we have it by a single compiler, namely Ben Sira himself” (p. 74). Which sounds rather as an overstatement.

In the concluding chapter X (pp. 75-92) AADL passes under review the ‘teaching of Ben Sira’ without pretending to be exhaustive or strictly systematic (p. 75). Before examining some of the teaching items

he selects AADL comments briefly on Ben Sira's doctrine as being "above all traditional or conservative" reflecting the teaching of Israel's scriptures on basic themes. He labels 'deuteronomic' Ben Sira's pervading outlook.

As already seen, the bulk of this volume is taken by the translation, exegesis and commentary of *WBS*. Ben Sira's work is divided into eight parts and a conclusion (besides his grandson's Prologue). In turn, each part is subdivided into units, taking into consideration the literary integrity of each unit. In this way 63 literary units have been identified. This division of the text into micro-units facilitates its study and use especially by the general reader. Each micro-unit contains the translation of the text (with variant reading

offered at the bottom of the page), short linguistic notes, and commentary. The translation is based on the Septuagint Greek text while variants come from later editions of this text or from the Hebrew fragments. The approach to the text is 'concordantial'. In the commentary references are usually made to parallel passages, possible sources, literary procedures employed, the theological significance of each passage, and to the textual criticism involved.

A valid contribution indeed to the study of Ben Sira's wisdom writing.

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