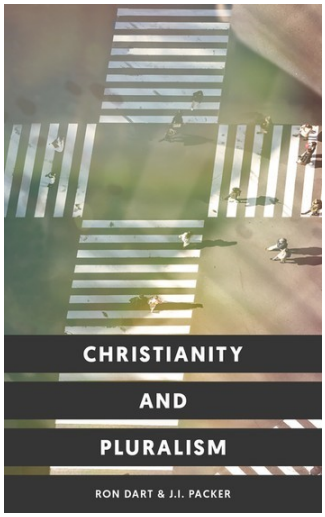

Book Review of *Christianity and Pluralism*, Ron Dart and J. I. Packer, Lexham Press, 2019; 70 pages

Another publication, *In a Pluralist World*, was an earlier iteration of the book under review. In that Preface we read: "In the autumn of 1997, Bishop Michael Ingham reopened a longstanding debate within the Anglican Church of Canada (and within most other denominations as well) by the publication of his book, *Mansions of the Spirit: The Gospel in a Multi-Faith World* . . . This booklet contains some early responses to *Mansions of the Spirit* from two members, one lay and one ordained, of the Bishop's [in 1997] own Diocese of New Westminster." (p. 7)

Bishop Ingham has since retired. He was not pleased with that initial publication as demonstrated in personal interaction with one of the authors. Ron Dart writes in the Preface to the updated book, "This extreme form of ideological liberalism—as also embodied in the life and work of John Hick and Bishops Ingham, John Spong, William Swing, and Richard Holloway (to name a few)—alerted conservatives to a more serious problem in the life of the church: the subversion of Christian truth claims." (p. vii)

In this reviewer's experience, there is none so *fundamentalist* as one who has grown to reject what once was held near and dear. (Not of course, that such rejection automatically predisposes one to fundamentalism.) I have lived for decades with not a few in my extended family. Dart writes again in the new Preface: "It is not very liberal of a liberal not to critique liberalism. But many liberals seem unable to question their blind spots—such is the nature of ideology. They signal openness to the legitimate nature of alternate readings of timely and timeless issues, yet they are actually closed to such." (p. ix) Though one must feel for those genuinely harmed or worse by religious fundamentalists—or any kind of such. A sordid business. Dart ends the Preface with this sentence: "Pluralism and syncretism can be as exclusivist as any of the positions they rail against as being exclusive." (p. ix) I reflect in part on my experience of this within our extended family on my website post, Easter Song.

Chapter 1 begins with a review of Ingham's book by Dart. Ron welcomes the issues raised by Ingham, which of course in the twenty-first century are pressing on any faith tradition new or old the world over. There are ten points Dart adduces, hoping that "these questions will nudge the issues raised in *Mansions of the Spirit* to a deeper level and enrich the meaning of dialogue." (p. 2)

Irenic throughout, Ron concludes on a personal note: "As someone who has been taught and nurtured by the radical Anglo-Catholics, I find that *Mansions of the Spirit* lacks a rigorous mystical theology, a radical politics, and a high Christology-ecclesiology. I think, without such a full vision of what Christianity has been, is, and ever shall be, inter-faith dialogue will lack a certain depth and challenging honesty." (p. 8)

Before Christmas I was at a gathering of mainly Anglicans to celebrate a vicar's birthday. In conversation with a former rector attending St. Matthew's Anglican Church in Abbotsford, as we began chatting he mentioned that Church. I asked for clarification as to which he meant, since

there had been a Church split several years ago over in part the direction Bishop Ingham had taken the diocese. The sharp retort was that there is only one *real Anglican* Church in Abbotsford by that name; that he didn't know "whatever else" the other was. In that I joined Sons of the Holy Cross, a men's Order through induction by that "whatever-else" Church of which Ron Dart is a member, I felt taken aback. I of course know of no back story to his comments. But I know the Anglican Tradition (and that Church) enough to know it has charitably housed not a few disparate expressions of faith over 2,000 plus years, of which the "whatever-else" Church is as authentically Anglican as any other. In my experience, fundamentalists of whatever stripe seem lacking in embrace of charitable dialogue. The former rector in that brief encounter seemed not interested in such dialogue . . . thus adding one more fundamentalist instance to my experience.

Chapter 2 by J. I. Packer, doubtless the best known living Evangelical theologian in the world, challenges Ingham in typical Evangelical theological fashion. He states that Ingham does not understand well the key tenets of the historic Church Traditions, including Anglican until about 70 years ago, by Packer's accounting. (Both publications use the same number, so I accordingly updated.)

Packer states that "the book in fact challenges everyone who has any sense of historic Anglican identity, and it must be dealt with accordingly." (p. 14 I presume my former rector conversation partner would demur.)

Packer presents Ingham's "Story Line": in essence exclusivist Christianity is "an imperialism that makes the all-on-a-level dialogue he favors impossible, so naturally he is hard on it and sweeps it aside." (p. 16) The steps to this story line are traced.

Packer is unimpressed, and says that the Bishop is trying to ride two horses in his Bishop's role, but that "Trying to ride two horses at once, Michael comes to grief." (p. 22) The rest of the chapter develops why.

Chapter 3 by Dart looks at the Parliament of World Religions. With reference also to the United Church of Canada, Dart flags "a rethinking of the historic Christian tradition that needs to be examined in some depth and detail." He asks in the next sentence: "Are we bringing Trojan horses into the camp?" (p. 36)

Dart then proceeds to look at four main models of inter-faith dialogue: exclusive, inclusive, pluralist, and syncretist. Each has strengths and weaknesses, he avers; and gives short shrift to "tribalists" religious or secular unwilling "to engage both our tradition and other traditions in a challenging yet respectful manner." (p. 37) The warning from Dart is that "the notion that *my* tribe is right, other clans are wrong . . . runs through culture wars, economics, politics, education, ethnic cleansing, nationalism, and patriotism, *not just religion*." (p. 58, emphasis added) In the religious realm for instance, Karl Barth, *the* sophisticated theological Mount Everest of the twentieth century, was both an exclusivist and a universalist.

Dart succinctly presents numerous instances of contradictory/exclusivist approaches to spirituality in a variety of Oriental traditions. He sums up: "The fact that these differences do exist should not be minimized or ignored; this stubborn reality means that some sort of exclusion

is built into the very nature of the human quest to receive, articulate, and live forth a vision of the renewed life." (p. 40) Dart therefore calls for "Authentic and genuine dialogue [that] means being thoroughly rooted in a tradition and speaking from it." (p. 40) He suggests: "I think it can be argued that the most profound understanding of tolerance rises from the traditions in which the exclusive model has the deepest hold." (p. 41 Note however that Dart makes no claim that it invariably does! It does not!) And even the meaning of dialogue is distorted when abiding differences are glossed over "with the best of pluralist intentions." (p. 41)

Within my extended family, there have been for decades various shades of dogmatic fundamentalists about for instance "prophecy" interpretations in the Book of Revelation à la "Left Behind" series, or the "historicity" of the first eleven chapters of Genesis à la Creation "Scientists"; fundamentalists who variously have called me a heretic, or denied I can even be a Christian who believes in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus. (I do!) There are also dogmatic liberal secularists who, once "Christian" now deny and scorn anything good about the Church (displaying a grotesque ignorance and misreading of Western history and about the relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith); who say "Paul, damn him!" in incredible misrepresentation and profound ignorance of Paul's place in laying the groundwork for democracy, equality, human rights, and freedom—all cherished values at the heart of Western society, at its best. Others are self-described agnostics or atheists with a major in rejection of religion and a minor in meaningful rational thought or dialogue. There are others who take pains to excoriate and mock the "liberals" and "progressives" for their failure to see their blind spots, all the time woefully blind to their own. By these I hear epithets that I am a "liberal", or a "progressive", or a "Leftist"—despite my steadfast refusal to be defined by any such label, not even (though aspiringly) "Follower of Jesus"—given my failings. And this all within my extended family! A huge dose of respectful dialogue as Ron points to is sorely wanting (and wanted!) in this family; one that is indeed a microcosm of some of the current Western culture wars religious and secular.

Dart's depiction of the "inclusive (Catholic) model" posits a "fulfillment thesis" (p. 41) through Christ: Christ fulfills not only humanity's noblest yearnings, he also fulfills all positive spiritualities. While commendable Dart indicates, other religions have similar fulfillment theses. He asserts: "But there comes a point when the inclusivist must draw boundaries and lines in the sand, and such a step means the demands of a sophisticated exclusivism must be faced and not flinched from." (p. 45) A great example from this reviewer's experience was working on a project with the eventual title, *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*. There was respect shown by all for all religious perspectives/lenses through which Restorative Justice was observed, each occupying a chapter in the final edit. A highly rewarding experience for me!

Pluralism is certainly a well-meaning model. But, Dart warns, "Pluralism, in short, can be most imperialistic and bully-like, and in the name of tolerance, much intolerance can rule the day." (p. 48) My former Christian family members tend in that direction, *openly intolerant* of Christianity or any religions daring to defy their ban on making truth statements about the Ultimate. Scorn takes the form of, "But *surely* . . .", or patently ridiculous notions are articulated not unlike the subtitle of Christopher Hitchins' *God is Not Great*: ***How Religion Poisons Everything***. Really? I mean **really?!** A statement of such sweeping magnitude and dogmatic certainty rather shatters the boundaries of language inadequacy in defining its substance to be

"fundamentalist". I do an extended essay/book review of the brilliant take-downs of such overreaching irrationalism found described in Terry Eagleton's *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. Some things I guess remain simply beyond ludicrous, intentionally "imperialistic and bully-like", even hopelessly intolerant and silly . . .

Dart says: "The pluralist model, like the exclusive and inclusive methods, excludes ways of knowing that cannot be trapped in its filter." (p. 49) And, " . . . while liberal pluralism can tell us what we should be free *from* (negative freedom), it tends to be weak and limp on the large and competing questions of what we are called to be free *for* (positive freedom)." (p. 50; emphasis added)

The final model is the syncretist. Dart notes that there are three forms currently of syncretism, not unlike in the past.

In summing up his observations, we read: "So, it is crucial to recognize that the exclusive tendency is at work in the inclusive, pluralist, and syncretist models; those who would avoid this reality are not facing the hard facts." (p. 55)

Dart also warns against "chronological snobbery" claiming rightly I believe, "the motion and movement of history will betray their highest aspirations." (p. 57); namely those who claim we are in a new age of humanity's progression towards ever greater clarity and unity. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing at the beginning of the Enlightenment claimed such in his essay, "Die Erziehung des Menschengechlechts" ("The Education of the Human Race"), and Hegel philosophized that "each new epoch in history both critiques and builds on previous periods of history." (p. 58) Others such as Ewert Cousins' *Christ of the 21st Century* Dart believes will fall prey to disappointment as history grinds on. "It is much more insightful," he claims, "to realize we have been here before many times in the unfolding drama of history, and our task is to learn from the best of the saints of the past while sidestepping many of their foolish mistakes." (p. 59)

Christianity was born in a very similar spiritual milieu to our own, and in being true to itself, Dart observes, it adopted neither pluralism nor syncretism. He goes on to suggest that "the Christian tradition, at its wisest and best, is most at home in a prophetic exclusivism, an enlightened inclusivism, and a critical and principled pluralism." (p. 60) He notes that the Roman Empire was syncretist and pluralist towards all religions—provided they bought into the ways of Empire. Dart writes in this respect: "If the Christian vision is going to be more than a mere personal conversion to a bourgeois ethic and lifestyle, then the prophetic voice must be heard again. (p. 62) For, "The kingdom of God will collide with the kingdoms of this world, and it is in such a kingdom that the costly grace of genuine evangelism and dialogue takes place." (p. 63)

Dart in the end calls for a "most meaningful inter-faith dialogue [that] in the future, will be grassroots dialogue, grounded and rooted in the human struggle for a just and meaningful world, [which] means that our understanding will need to be much more connected to the church and prophetic politics." (p. 63) I think as well the inter-faith dynamic will include witness to the joyfulness and consolation of experiencing the Ultimate through Christ.

One brief Appendix, "The Enlightenment, the Liberal Establishment, and Religious Pluralism" completes the 70-page missive. Religious pluralism dominates, Dart claims, the liberal establishment, which in turn in the West is culturally hegemonic. He concludes: " . . . but those who dare to think from a position of critical theory (rather than merely saluting at the shrine of Enlightenment social liberalism) need to raise some troubling and nagging doubts about the validity of religious pluralism itself. How and should the spell be broken? Is it possible to engage in the difficult questions of good, better, best and bad, worse, worst without slipping into reactionary fundamentalism? It certainly is, and a much deeper religious pluralism might take us in that direction. Perhaps this is the path of a prophetic exclusivism and an enlightened inclusivism." (p. 68)

I indicated earlier that our extended family is microcosmic of the minefields of fundamentalisms at work in today's culture. In particular the hegemonic liberal fundamentalisms are embraced by some amongst us who never were trained to read history or literature—let alone theology! Yet their dogmatic pronouncements are indicated to be "unassailable", such as "Jesus was no more than purveyor amongst many avatars of universal Wisdom". Of course if so, one must ask, why in the world was he crucified, and why did so many early followers cheerfully embrace martyrdom, and were indeed martyred?

Renowned Irish literary critic and public intellectual Terry Eagleton puts the matter colourfully:

> Messiahs are not born in stables. Jesus is a sick joke of a Savior. Nothing about his suffering and his death is presented as heroic. The idea of a crucified Messiah [or an all-sweetness-and-light Wisdom Teacher, one might add] is as absurd an oxymoron as the notion of a tender-hearted tyrant. A failed Messiah would constitute an absolute novelty in the Jewish tradition. It would also have been a grotesquely offensive notion. The first Christians were risking their necks for the sake of a claim which their fellow Jews would have found both repellent and utterly outrageous." (*The Gospels: Jesus Christ—Introduction by Terry Eagleton*, London: Verso, 2009; pp. xv and xvi.)

Another such, that the historical Jesus is not to be found in the received Gospels of the Church, but by generally post-Enlightenment white male (usually) theological scholars who for over 500 years have played the game called "*Jesus Historical Reconstructionism*" . . . And so many reconstructions turn out making Jesus look like those same white, liberal, tenured professors . . . [1]

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[1] Premier historian/theologian James D. G. Dunn (see more below) writes:

> All we have in the NT Gospels is Jesus seen with the eyes of faith. We do not have a 'historical Jesus', only the 'historic Christ'. As [Martin] Kähler noted, the proof of the pudding is in the diverse Jesuses constructed by questers generally, not least the Liberal and now neo-Liberal Jesuses. In each case, the distinctiveness of the 'objective Jesus' is largely the creation of the historical critic. The irony indeed is that the typical 'historical Jesus' is as much a theological Jesus as in any Gospel portrayal, since the constructed Jesus has been almost always an amalgam of the historian's own ideals (the fifth Gospel according to Kähler) and the critically (selectively) worked data. [Ref 103: . . . My point is rather that the only Jesus we can realistically expect to emerge from the critical dialogue with our sources is the Jesus who made the impact on the

But I indulge my *cynicism* by continuing (a nonconformist Christian virtue nonetheless according to Paul in Romans 12) . . .

Years ago, when just discovering theological peace and justice issues thanks to a former seminary professor, Clark Pinnock, and my volunteering with the Mennonite Central Committee working at putting them into practice, I was shocked in discovering as well that a Mennonite Old Testament scholar who headed our small House Church rejected outright Jesus' divinity and any notion of the Trinity. After first questioning the scholar, I turned to a leading Mennonite pastor whom I also knew in the region, and found the same denial. Both were nice men to be sure, and openly confessed their "pick-and-choose" approach to the Christian Tradition. I since learned that this was not only function of the theological liberalism by them so chosen, but a longstanding strain in the so-called Radical Reformation (Anabaptism) beginning in the16th century. They were respectful at least . . . and unconvincing. Forty-three years later, with much more history and theology under my belt (my academic training, and in literary criticism, and ongoing study), their positions now seem highly uninformed. Though one was at least a scholar.

I in fact told the scholar that his response to Jesus made me think of Mary's weeping at the tomb and saying: " . . . *they have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have put him.*" I have often since thought that all I chose to do back then and to this day was stick around long enough to discover that beyond all wildest hopes (and insipid religious liberalisms), *the Jesus story was gloriously true and Christ was risen, was risen indeed!*

In his spiritual autobiography C.S. Lewis describes his conversion from atheism to theism, and later to Christianity. In a conversation with an atheist colleague at Oxford University, Lewis was profoundly impacted by his friend's candor. The professor remarked casually that the gospel narratives found in the Christian Bible are surprisingly reliable historical accounts. In reflecting on the myriad of stories regarding a resurrected god in mythology, Lewis' friend commented, "Rum thing, it really must have happened once." To Lewis' awareness, that professor sadly never proceeded to embrace that "rum thing".

This is however precisely the perspective of another colleague and friend of Lewis at Oxford, J.R.R. Tolkien, in the Epilogue to his *On Fairy-Stories*:

> In [a true fairy-story] when the sudden 'turn' [Tolkien calls this a 'eucatastrophe'] comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through... ["*There is a crack, a crack in everything*
> *That's how the light gets in.*—Leonard Cohen in *Anthem*"[2]] The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-

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disciples which we encapsulate in the word 'faith'. The point is developed in the following pages.] (*Jesus Remembered* (Volume 1), p. 127)

[2] Cohen, who rarely explained his lyrics commented on this:

> And worse, there is a crack in everything that you can put together: physical objects, mental objects, constructions of any kind. But that's where the light gets in, and that's where the resurrection is and that's where the return, that's where the repentance is. It is with the confrontation, with the brokenness of things. (See: "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in": The story of Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem')

> stories. They contain many marvels . . . and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered history and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality'. There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.[3]

For arguably the greatest contemporary account of the first hundred and fifty years of the Church, without doubt the most massive (3,312 pages of three large-size books, bookends in their own right!), one turns to historian/theologian James D. G. Dunn's series, **Christianity in the Making**: *Jesus Remembered* (Volume 1), *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Volume 2), and *Neither Jew Nor Greek: A Contested Identity* (Volume 3). Dunn makes the point in Volume 1 that "The historical text cannot determine the exact translation, but unless the text functions as some kind of norm for the translation, unless it is seen to provide a limiting factor on the diversity of acceptable translations, then translation itself becomes irresponsible." (p. 113) Then as to hermeneutics, Dunn discusses at length as well numerous considerations, writing that "historical criticism does not dictate the meaning of a historical text, but exegesis should be accorded some right to indicate the limits beyond which readings of the text become implausible and illegitimate." (p. 117) There is in other words only so much elasticity in any text or piece of communication.

There is further the endless problem of the hermeneutical circle: " . . . the parts can only be understood in terms of the whole; but understanding of the whole is built up from the parts." (p. 118) Dunn also warns against "the most vicious form of the hermeneutical circle", the postmodernist deconstructionist hermeneutics that launch interpreters on an endless "trivial pursuit" and end in a counsel of despair of shutdown of all meaningful communication. Dunn sums up: "The meaning intended by means of and through the text is still a legitimate and viable goal for the NT exegete and interpreter." (p. 122)

As to the question of the "Historical Jesus" to be constructed outside the biblical text, Martin Kähler is referenced by Dunn that

> The idea that a Jesus *reconstructed from the Gospel traditions* (the so-called 'historical Jesus'), *yet significantly different from the Jesus of the Gospels*, is the Jesus who taught in Galilee (the historical Jesus!) is an illusion. The idea that we can see through the faith perspective of the NT writings to a Jesus who did not inspire faith or who inspired faith in a different way is an illusion. There is no such Jesus. That there was a Jesus who *did* inspire the faith which in due course found expression in the Gospels is not in question. But that we can somehow hope to strip out the theological impact which he actually made on his disciples, to uncover a different Jesus (the real Jesus!) is at best fanciful. It is not

[3] I reflect further on the sheer joyfulness of this "eucatastrophe" in "Easter Song, Keith Green, and Reflections on the Resurrection."

simply that 'we reach Jesus only through the picture his disciples made of him' [Ref 100: H. I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuill, 1954) 108, cited by Reiser, 'Eschatology' 221.], it is also that the only Jesus we reach through that picture is the Jesus who inspired that picture." (pp. 126 & 127)

Dunn underscores that "faith" did not begin as routinely claimed in *solely* some post-Easter *kerygma*. It was there from the outset. He writes:

> In short, the tension between faith and history has too often been seen as destructive of good history. On the contrary, however, it is the recognition that Jesus can be perceived *only* through the impact he made on his first disciples (that is, their faith) which is the key to a historical recognition (and assessment) of that impact. (p. 132)

Dunn takes the further exploration of this up in his Chapter 8, which I shall not discuss. He believes that the longstanding claimed divide between the "Jesus of History, and the Christ of Faith" is a problem " . . . occasioned by the fact that further down the stream of faith and history the two have seemed so difficult to reconcile. But if it is in fact possible to trace the two streams, history and faith, back to the origins of the Jesus tradition, we find we can step back and forth across the rivulets (pressing the analogy of a river's sources) with much less difficulty." (p. 133) Put differently and perhaps uncharitably towards Lessing, given benefit of centuries after Lessing declared there was "an ugly broad ditch" between the Jesus of History and the Christ of faith ("*contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason*.") it appears that Lessing and early Enlightenment thinkers dug their ugly broad ditch themselves!

Dunn's Volume 1 is entitled "*Jesus Remembered*". At the end of a long and very detailed discussion about the received Tradition in the Synoptic Gospels, Dunn avers: "In other words, what we today are confronted with in the Gospels is not the top layer (last edition) of a series of increasingly impenetrable layers, but the living tradition of Christian celebration which takes us with surprising immediacy to the heart of the first memories of Jesus." (p. 254)[4] Volume 1, all 1,109 pages, is taken with elucidating those first memories.

It seems that a certain liberal (faultily rationalist) mindset cannot grasp this. Faith however for Terry Eagleton is not so much function of choice (or "necessary truths of reason") but of intuitions already held:

> The Christian way of indicating that faith is not in the end a question of choice is the notion of grace. Like the world itself from a Christian viewpoint, faith is a gift. This means among other things that Christians are not in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in God. But neither is anyone in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in keeping fit, the supreme value of the individual, or the importance of being sincere. Only

[4] Another noted historian, Paul Johnson, writes:

> The Gospels are designed to be read and reread. The oftener we do so, the greater our delight in them, the deeper our understanding, and the more we grasp their realism. They are the truth. What they tell us actually happened. The characters are real. The details are strangely, somewhat mysteriously, convincing. As we go on reading, the many centuries which intervene, gradually slip away… (*Jesus: A Biography from a Believer*, pp, 222 & 223.)

> ultrarationalists imagine they need to be . . . The rationalist tends to mistake the tenacity of faith (other people's faith, anyway) for irrational stubbornness rather than for the sign of a certain interior depth, one which encompasses [necessary truths of] reason but also transcends it. Because certain of our commitments are constitutive of who we are, we cannot alter them without what Christianity traditionally calls a conversion, which involves a lot more than just swapping one opinion for another. This is one reason why other people's faith can look like plain irrationalism, which indeed it sometime is (*Reason, Faith and Revolution*, p. 139).

But of course, in this respect, the "ultrarationalists" appear also to be manifestly and stubbornly irrational!

Further, we hear Eagleton:

> So science is about faith as well—which is not all it shares with theology. Rather, as the churches have largely betrayed their historical mission, so, one might argue, has a good deal of science…. [S]cience belongs to a specific social history that the abstract rationalists too easily forget. Like religion, a good deal of science has betrayed its revolutionary origins, as the pliable tool of the transnational corporations and the military-industrial complex. But this should not induce us to forget its emancipatory history. Like liberalism, socialism, and religion, science stands under the judgment of its own finest traditions (p. 136).[5]

Dart's and Packer's brief *exposé* of the *naïveté* of Michael Ingham's shallow thinking representative of a self-assured *à la mode* dismissal since the Enlightenment of historic Christian Faith, is well worth the read, the pondering, and the further engagement of the ideas presented and, in this reviewer's estimation, the pointing to the supreme consolation and joy of commitment to the "Faith once delivered".

—Wayne Northey

[5] Eagleton at various points makes this case about liberalism and socialism.