

Bottomley, Frank. *Attitudes to the Body in Western Christendom*. London: Lepus Books, 1979. Pp. v, 257. Index, bibliography, notes. \$21.00.

Frank Bottomley contends that the cardinal belief of the Christian religion is the “enfleshment of God” and that the penetration of this concept into the Graeco-Roman world broke the ancient dualism of body and spirit. The consequence of the eternal joining of human flesh with the nature of God was a heightened respect for the body. Unfortunately, the Western Church, itself a product of the social pressures and thought forms of its environment, has not always remained faithful to its original teachings. *Attitudes to the Body in Western Christendom* is an ambitious attempt to trace over nearly two millennia the variegated teachings of the Western Church on the human body and its relationship with the Divine.

In the opening chapters, Bottomley places the emergence of Christian thought within the historical context of the Graeco-Roman culture. The ancient world portrayed by Bottomley was brutal and decadent, filled with public crucifixions, ghastly gladiatorial contests, and unbridled sexual license. Life was cheap, and the body had no dignity. Even the philosophers denigrated the flesh in order to contemplate the higher things of the spirit. Hebrew thinkers, although influenced by the Hellenists, resisted this tendency and insisted that man—the only true image of God Himself—was a “psychosomatic entity” of both body and soul. Early Christian writers inherited and expanded the Old Testament motif that the body was the manifestation of the soul. Paul, for instance, taught that “the physical body was created by God and therefore not to be despised as inferior or lacking in dignity.” Bottomley contends that Paul’s juxtaposition of the flesh against the spirit was intended to contrast “fallen perverted humanity” with “redeemed converted humanity,” not the lower urges of the body with the higher yearnings of the soul. Although the new religion proved too materialistic for the Gnostics, New Testament Christianity with its emphasis on the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and the Bodily Resurrection, elevated the status of the body to an unprecedented level.

After demonstrating the early church's high regard for the human body, Bottomley surveys the evolution of Christian doctrines on the body from the era of the sub-apostolic fathers to the age of the Reformation. He acknowledges that the corruption and decay of the Roman world and the famine and degradation of the Dark Ages drove some churchmen to the ascetic ideal which denied the good in order to praise the better. But for every "incipient Puritan" like Tertullian who demanded bodily mortification, Bottomley describes a passionate intellect like Augustine who insisted with Paul that the body and soul alike were created and redeemed by God. Hence throughout the middle chapters, Bottomley depicts a Western Church struggling to obtain a balanced world view which embraced the body in its strengths and weaknesses.

The rational medieval synthesis, if ever actualized, did not survive. In the fourteenth century the bubonic plague devastated Europe, leaving in its aftermath an obsession with death which undercut Christendom's reverent view of the body. Even more disrupting to the medieval order was the "anthropocentrism of the Renaissance" which overstressed the human personality, and the "unbalanced theology" of the Reformation which overemphasized human frailty. Bottomley portrays the Reformers in general and the Puritans in particular as psychological misfits who opposed anything that gave pleasure. Unfortunately, this stereotype revives the old myth that cultural historians of the past half century have tried to destroy.

Bottomley concludes with two summary chapters entitled "A Backward Look" and "The Way Ahead." Here he dons the hat of theologian. In his typical ponderous style, he enters a final plea: "The Christian, true to his beginnings and authentic tradition, should not reject the body, but he may have great need of distinguishing between a false acceptance in terms of machines and sensuality from a true acceptance in terms of sacrament and sensuousness."

Bottomley asserts in the opening paragraph that his subject should be of interest and concern to those "involved in physical education in all its aspects, to sociologists, general and cultural historians, theologians and concerned Christians, as well as the general public." This is an overstatement, for the work was not written for a wide audience. It is an erudite treatment of the development of one aspect of Christian doctrine, authored by a devout Christian scholar of strong Catholic sympathies. Students of ecclesiastical history will appreciate the seventy-five pages of endnotes and bibliography, but few others who begin the volume will follow Bottomley's arguments to their conclusions. Those who do persevere, however, will not be disappointed.