IMAGES OF BELIEF IN LITERATURE

The National Conference of Literature and Religion was founded to explore the borders between the study of theology and the study of literature. The essays in this book are drawn from the first meeting of the Conference and while they are deliberately diverse, they are united by a common concern to seek in the imaginative and metaphorical world of literature for a lively and perhaps radical expression of religious faith and belief.

The topics covered include the modern American writers Joan Didion and Flannery O'Connor, whose 'experience of mystery' must be mediated through the manners of a literary artifact; W. H. Auden and George Herbert are examined from the point of view of the border of literature and Christian devotion, spirituality and the life of prayer; while Simone Weil, who interpreted her own life and death in terms of the sacrifice of Christ, gives rise to a discussion of 'sacrificial suffering' in a writer.

Other essays range across a wide expanse of Western literature, from the Book of Job and Greek tragedy to the English Romantic poets and George Eliot. Finally, attention is given to more general problems which are raised when religion and literature attempt to focus on common concerns: the problem of religious commitment in art; of exegesis; and the nature and theory of narrative.

As a whole the book raises issues which are of deep interest to theologians and churchmen and women, students of literature and anyone concerned with the matter of exploring a communicating religious belief in the modern world.

The editor

David Jasper is Fellow and Chaplain of Hatfield College, Durham. He graduated in English from Jesus College, Cambridge, and subsequently trained for the Anglican ministry at St Stephen's House, Oxford, where he also took a degree in theology.

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Preface

The papers in this Symposium were read at the first National Conference on Literature and Religion in Durham, 23–25 September 1982. They are evidence of the wide range of interests which were represented at the Conference – theologians and literary critics, philosophers and churchmen. Each paper is individual and self-sufficient, yet the collection as a whole sets in motion a series of cross-currents, as tools of different disciplines engage matter of common interest in sacred and secular literature. A coherent attention, therefore, comes to be given to such key issues for both theology and literature as revelation, imagination, commitment and prophecy.

The joint study of literature and theology has for some years flourished in the United States, and the Conference was honoured by the presence of Professor Robert G. Collmer of Baylor University, Texas, the President of the American Conference on Christianity and Literature. It is our hope to begin to draw together the considerable amount of work in this field at present being carried out on this side of the Atlantic, to give it focus and to foster fruitful discussion.

Part of Stephen Prickett's paper was published in *Centrum*, Spring 1981. Michael Edwards' paper is to appear as part of a book, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, to be published by Macmillan in 1984. My editorial duties have been eased immensely by the help of Professor J. R. Watson and Mrs M. M. Gilley. Thanks are also due to Mrs Frances Durkin, who typed the final script and to Christopher Helliwell who prepared the index.

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