

ishly well. By 1995, the Grameen Bank had two million borrowers in Bangladesh and 90 percent of its stock was held by borrowers (who are required to buy shares). While still dependent on donors, the bank is close to self-sustaining.

What's missing from Bornstein's otherwise fine reporting is a sense of the broader institutional arrangements in the Bangladeshi economy. He mentions corruption in passing, but he neglects the vital issue, so pertinently raised by the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, of how government corruption and overregulation stunt the growth of grassroots entrepreneurship. The tough question is whether Grameen Bank borrowers will graduate from micro-

enterprise into fully legal business operations, or whether they will be driven by bureaucratic red tape into the vast "informal economy."

Despite such gaps in his story, Bornstein makes it dramatically clear that the Grameen Bank has pioneered a far better way to help the poor than the massive, top-down schemes so long favored by the World Bank and other international development agencies. Already, several countries, including Chile, are attempting to replicate the bank's success. Bornstein's superb account may drum up even more business for Muhammed Yunus's excellent idea.

—Ronald Bailey

Religion & Philosophy

THE POLITICS OF FAITH AND THE POLITICS OF SKEPTICISM.

By Michael Oakeshott. Yale Univ. Press. 128 pp. \$25

In this volume, released six years after his death, the distinguished British political philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) crystallizes what for him are the two "poles" of modern political thought. "The politics of faith" begins in Francis Bacon's assertion that human beings can achieve perfection, and that government can be the primary agent of human betterment. Such a regime places all human activity under the surveillance of its notion of the good.

"The politics of skepticism," by contrast, originating in Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, rejects any attempt to order human experience according to a single standard. In this view, government should strive not to be the expression or fulfillment of the common good but rather to serve as the instrument for assuring basic order, rights, and liberties. Beyond this, the regime should abstain from involvement "with the souls of men."

Oakeshott seeks neither to inform our practical decisions about public policy nor to plead for one form of government over the other. Rather, he would redirect the contemporary discussion of politics away from an ambiguous lexicon (of which the present uses of "liberal" and "conservative" are but

the most egregious examples) and toward a new vernacular. His principle of moderation, or "appropriateness," eschews the "nemesis" of pure faith on the one hand, pure skepticism on the other. Where the middle ground lies at the moment, he does not say. Nor does he need to. By clarifying "the 'charges' of the poles of our political activity, each exerting a pull which makes itself felt over the whole range of government," he has written a guide to the future of political thought.

—Joseph Landau

THREE GOSPELS.

By Reynolds Price. Scribner. 288 pp. \$23

"Forget that you ever read a gospel; forget you ever heard of Jesus." With these startling words, Reynolds Price invites readers to ignore the accumulated knowledge of centuries of Christian theology. The invitation is easier to accept than one might think. Price—the author of numerous works of fiction and nonfiction, including *A Palpable God* (1978), a consideration of the Old and New Testaments—provides fresh access to the foundational texts of Christianity. Bringing decades of study to the task, he has produced convincingly faithful translations of what he believes are the two central Gospels: the Book of Mark, arguably the oldest Gospel (though recent

archaeological evidence casts some doubt on that claim) and the Book of John, which purports to be an eyewitness account set down by John bar Zebedee, one of Jesus' own disciples, in his old age.

Reading these translations in the narrative form in which they first appeared (chapter and verse breaks were, respectively, 13th- and 16th-century additions), and in English that closely mirrors the original Koiné Greek, is almost like encountering the Gospels for the first time. Gone are the transitional embellishments and vernacular updates present in so many modern translations, as well as the weighty marginalia which, in Price's view, distract the reader from the experience of these stories: "These texts were not written for, nor can they be successfully read by, the inattentive."

What emerges—or, perhaps more accurately, reappears—is the strangeness and excitement of these narratives. It is possible, as Price acknowledges in his preface, to view Jesus of Nazareth merely as "an itinerant Jewish healer and teacher who worked briefly in an obscure corner of the Roman empire." In the Gospel of Mark, partly because of the writer's awkward narrative style and parsimonious reporting, the reader (like Jesus' own disciples) remains unsure whether Jesus truly claims to be the Son of God, whether he is simply delusional, or whether he is only accepting the mantle thrust upon him by others. Even his promised Resurrection is only hinted at in the story's abrupt ending.

By contrast, the Jesus of John's more intimate narrative is a frightening figure. When he pronounces "I Am!," he is not merely claiming his self-revelation; his words are a conscious echo of the Hebraic

name for the Being who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. The words strike Jesus' listeners like a thunderclap. At least twice before the final confrontation with the high Jewish authorities that leads to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, the claims he makes to divinity provoke attempts on his life. Each time, almost magically, he eludes his enemies. The three appearances of the risen Christ described by John are dramatically rendered: the encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden, the appearance to the Twelve (and the proof offered to "doubting" Thomas), and, most movingly, the encounter on the shores of Galilee, when Jesus entrusts his teaching to impetuous Peter. To the critic C. S. Lewis, the scenes ring so true that either John's Gospel is reportage or else "some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative."

In the learned commentaries that precede his two translations, Price acknowledges his acceptance of and belief in Jesus. But to the reader, this is secondary to Price's enchantment with the Gospels as a fantastic story—the *most* fantastic story, whether real or imagined, ever composed. Price's admiration for this story leads him to compose his own gospel, which he calls *An Honest Account of a Memorable Life*. Using the Gospels of Mark and John for narrative structure, and adding the scenes from Matthew, Luke, and other New Testament sources that ring truest to his ear, Price so enlivens the tale that it becomes not just a testament of his own faith but a kind of revelation: the "good news" arriving afresh.

—James Carman

