

BLACKFRIARS

Fathers of the Society their *Exercises*, the Carmelites their *Dark Night of the Soul*. We recognize that it would be a temerarious Dominican who would contradict the Discalced Carmelites upon the *Night* or pose as an official interpreter of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Perhaps such reticence may yet become reciprocal.

GERVASE MATHEW, O.P.

THE STRUCTURE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. By John Macmurray. (Faber & Faber; 3/6.)

“Organized religion, on the defensive, tends to range itself . . . with the conservatives and the reactionaries. But the tide of social evolution cannot for ever be dammed by the dykes of vested interest.” That religion in the persons of its exponents has been identified with capitalism and militarism is the reason why, in the Pope’s words, the Church has lost the working classes; there is another way in which religion and reaction may coincide—in the sphere of thought. “The progressive attitude of mind is frankly empirical, while the religious temper remains traditional and dogmatic.” So men have “pinned their faith to science, unaware that science cannot save the world, since it must serve and cannot lead.” If religion could “abandon its traditional dogmatism and become itself empirically minded, it could lead the progressive movement with science as its technical adviser”; if this is impossible it is doomed; it must “either transform itself or fade away.”

Professor Macmurray discusses, in these three significant lectures, how this transformation might be achieved. He begins by arguing that, while science and art are two partial empiricisms which if left unsynthesized lead to chaos, religion, by providing the necessary synthesis, can achieve the “salvation of the world.” “To say that religion belongs to the early stages of human life and is destined to be superseded as human development goes on is to talk foolishness”; for “the field of religious experience is the whole field of common experience organized in relation to the central fact of human relationship . . . its problem is the problem of communion or community”; and the analysis of common human relationships brings out just those terms and forms which are found in religion; the conviction in a community that religion is a childish superstition, “though it is no evidence against the rationality of religion, is the strongest evidence that the personal relationships of its members are irrational and that the community is in process of dissolution.”

In the third of these lectures Professor Macmurray goes on to discuss, in a searching analysis, how religion has in fact become entrenched and remote from daily experience: instead of being

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referred to the world of actual experience, it can be referred away from it to another world; hence escapism, dualism of consciousness, the divorce of religion from life. But "it is only at the level of intention or explicit consciousness that the dissociation can take place. . . The reference remains unconscious. Its ideas, though they are referred in explicit consciousness to the other world, function in the individual or the society as unconscious symbols of the actual community. Now, it is characteristic of unconscious symbols that they remain undeveloped. They refer, that is to say, not to the existing state of social life, but to a state of social life to which they were originally consciously referred at the time of their formation." Hence, "the religion of a society which has become dissociated from the secular relationships of its members will retain an unconscious reference to the secular life of the community as it was at the time when the dissociation set in. For this reason a dissociated religion works as a powerful conservative agency. Indeed, its effect is to attach to the past a sacredness which the present has lost, and to produce a craving for a return to more primitive conditions of life. . . The religion, therefore, has progressively less potentiality of reference to the contemporary reality of common life."

The fundamental facts of religion, so the Christian will argue, are valid equally of any time or place, having themselves a reality greater than that of the transiencies of space-time. Yet we cannot but admit the validity of Professor Macmurray's argument with regard to the temporal and accidental reference which those facts have been given, we cannot deny that dissociation exists, and that religion as it is lived in the lives of many of us becomes progressively less referable to contemporary reality. Is there a solution other than the one advocated here? "The spiritual world to which, by our transcendence of the natural order, we belong is not another world, but the natural world known and intended." The Christian humanist (and the importance of his thesis, it may be suggested, is nowhere more apparent than in this context of religion's dilemma to-day) will substitute, for "known and intended," "uplifted and enlarged"; the natural world, he holds, is penetrated by a Reality which is not dissociable from it but through Which on the contrary it is raised to a higher power; nature and grace not incompatible but continuous, so that the failure to make conscious reference is, without self-contradiction, impossible. Acosmism is undeniably one of the causes which have brought religion to its present pass; acosmism is not Christian but a denial of Christianity; yet practical acosmism is an ever-present danger to the Christian. The urgency of avoiding that danger is, for us, the moral of this deep and stimulating book.

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