

THE VIRGIN, by Geoffrey Ashe, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1976.
262 pp. £5.25.

The publication of this book may or may not be a sign of demand for an unconventional treatment of Marian themes that will recognise pagan elements. Mr Ashe, an authority on King Arthur, plays safe at first to the point of acknowledging the Marian authorship of the Magnificat and the angelic salutation, and the historical truth of nearly everything in the canonical gospels, including the magi and the miracle at Cana, but nothing apocryphal except that 'an Ethiopian book makes Mary relate that she had no symptoms of pregnancy and was unsure what was going on till' the visitation. Nevertheless 'at the heart of the labyrinth' it appears that Christ disappointed her rather as Krishnamurti disappointed Annie Besant. His mother does not appear among the witnesses to the resurrection (or at Pentecost, according to Mr Ashe), but a Marian religion grew up around the idea of her as another Elijah, an immortal heavenly being. This was fostered in a circle of devoted women who provided Luke with the Magnificat and John with ideas for the Apocalypse after Mary vanished into the wilderness. Described by St. Epiphanius as the heresy of the Collyridians, this religion was integrated into the Catholic Church after 377 but before 429, largely through the influence of St. Ephrem on the Cappadocian fathers, and the circumstances in which St Gregory Nazianzen had to preach at Constantinople in 380-1.

The subordination of Marian to Christian themes is regarded as a weakness

in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, fatal to Nestorianism and Protestantism. Catholicism owes its vitality to a mother-goddess who is never recognised as such, and could become 'moribund' if progressive and ecumenical programmes led to her elimination. 'The first need is that the numinous figures at the source'—sc. the Madonna and Child—'should be rethought, reinterpreted, and differently related to each other'.

The author would deny that his book was anti-Christian, allow it to be anti-Protestant. This makes it the more odd that he takes the history in the canonical gospels so very literally. He also accepts uncritically St Jerome's diatribe against Helvidius on the Lord's brethren. Other views of the question were later ascribed to St Jerome himself, and widely current in the West as well as in the East. Mr Ashe has nothing to say of the critical issues involved in the complex relations of canonical and apocryphal texts. His material comes from such compilations as *Man, Myth and Magic*, the *Apocryphal New Testament* of M. R. James (not Hennecke-Schneemelcher), Hilda Graef, Boslooper and Miegge, and not from the texts themselves apart from the Bible. His combination of Biblical fundamentalism with fantasy recalls the later developments of the Gnostical imagination, where the apocrypha really are *deliramenta*, but he misses the contribution of the earlier apocrypha to tradition.

GEORGE EVERY

POLYGAMY RECONSIDERED: AFRICAN PLURAL MARRIAGE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, by Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp., Orbis Books, New York, 1975.
266 pp. \$ 15.00, \$ 7.95 paper.

Fr Hillman's thesis is "that the traditional ecclesiastical discipline regarding African polygamy is not as well founded, biblically and theologically, as has been supposed hitherto." (p. 206) To my mind, he has proved his point so conclusively that any further hesitation on the part of the authorities radically to modify this discipline would constitute at once a

summum of bad faith and the height of pastoral irresponsibility. However, just as the highest instances of the Church still have their doubts about, say, ordaining women, so too, the African hierarchy will no doubt cling to the prevailing dispensation for motives which have little to do with theology or exegesis. Ecclesiastics usually hide their resistance to change be-