

## REVIEWS

EAST AND WEST. By René Guénon. Translated by William Massey. (Luzac & Co.; 6s.)

Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy has placed M. Guénon among the most significant writers of contemporary Europe. Those who are acquainted with his more profound works will readily agree. But it may be doubted whether the choice of the present work to introduce him to the English-reading public is an altogether happy one. M. Guénon has a healthy contempt of popularisation and intellectual 'levelling down.' It is perhaps unfortunate that he should have lent his hand to a class of literature for which he has little sympathy and less aptitude. His undisguised contempt, not only for his book but for his readers, is unlikely to attract disciples. And if he would urge that proselytism is not his aim, it is difficult to understand why the book should have been written. For the already converted it has little to offer except motivation for self-complacency.

It is a pity, for the book is very much on the side of the angels, and, written with more care, less crude simplification of complex issues, less arrogance and more compassion (the author has still much to learn from his beloved Gautama), it might have provided an invaluable antidote to the poisons of western civilisation. It is to be feared that the average reader will find only irritants. To contrast the 'East' at its most esoteric best with the 'West' at its most exoteric worst is to compare incommensurables. It is an undertaking which engenders much heat, but all too little light.

It contributes little to Occidental understanding of the Orient to present 'the East'—even this esoteric, 'metaphysical' East—as a homogeneous unity, disregarding the enormous variety and contrariety of Eastern schools of thought and spirituality. Many of these can show affinities with Western modes of thought and attitudes far more readily than the crude monistic *Advaita* which M. Guénon would here suggest to be characteristic of them all. But even more *simpliste* and superficial is his conception of 'the West.' His denunciations—often justifiable enough for all their over-statement—seldom reach beneath more manifest symptoms to radical causes.

Catholicism in general, and Thomistic metaphysical thought in particular, M. Guénon regards as the one relic of authentic Wisdom remaining in the West. 'The East' alone conserves that Wisdom in its pristine purity, but in Catholicism and Thomism, he hopes, the West may yet find a vehicle which will lead it back to the unsullied sources of life. The assertion suggests a strange myopia in M. Guénon's vision. For Christianity—the Incarnation—means precisely the penetration of time by eternity and the realisation of eter-

nity through temporal processes. Christianity opposes both the acosmic 'metaphysics' of M. Guénon's 'East' and the pure dynamism of the modern, apostate West. In so doing it affirms and reconciles the values of each.

Oblivious of the meaning of Christianity, M. Guénon can actually commend (for instance) the Hindu caste system. Self-confined in the 'metaphysical,' disregarding the world of 'Maya,' he can see its eminent soundness of principle while remaining blind to the ravages which time has made upon it, rendering it an instrument of hideous social injustice and oppression.

There is perhaps more truth than he himself recognises in his contention that it is through the living traditions and spiritual techniques of the East that the West may rediscover itself. But the thesis is more convincingly established in the concrete exemplification of his other more detailed works than in the bald reiterations of the present volume. Our Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxleys have already shown how light may come to the West, less *from* than *through* the East. M. Guénon's other works on Hindu teaching, on the Vedantist apprehension of man, on spiritual authority and temporal power—still more, perhaps, his profound study on the symbolism of the Cross—open up vast and healing vistas. We await the appearance of their translations with eagerness.

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

POEMS OF CLOISTER AND JUNGLE. By Mrs. Rhys Davids. (Wisdom of the East Series; Murray; 3s. 6d.)

Though described as an anthology, this is less a collection of Buddhist monastic poems than a discussion of their origins and their teaching, illustrated by frequent quotations. The discussion is learned and often interesting, but too specialised for the general reader, who will scarcely have the requisite previous acquaintance with Buddhist thought, history and terminology. The book will be valued chiefly by those who know other writings of Mrs. Rhys Davids and who share her interest in what may be called the higher criticism of Buddhist doctrine and literature. It would be presumptuous in myself to venture any opinion whatever on such matters as the relations of Vedic and Buddhist thought, the passage from *amata* to *nirvana*, or the transmission of the poems themselves. But there are two criticisms which I think I can reasonably make.

One is that the author's allusions to Christianity and her use of Christian terms are too often unsatisfactory. Thus her contrast of faith and knowledge (pp. 33, 34) is extremely confused. And her association (p. 115) of nuptial imagery in religion with the *youthfulness* of our Lord implies a quite superficial reading of Christian spiritual classics; in any case, the notion may easily be exploded by reference to the Old Testament and to Mohammedan mystics—not to trespass further East. More generally, one wishes that Wes-