

Reviews

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE FOURTH CENTURY: Essays edited by Arnaldo Momigliano; Oxford University Press; 35s.

We are inclined, rightly enough, nowadays to think that the Christianity of the early centuries has more to say to us, and is more relevant to our condition, than that of the Middle Ages; and for that reason we are sometimes inclined to romanticise our picture of those centuries as our ancestors romanticised the Gothic world, and to base proposals for the present on inadequate and inaccurate generalisations about the past. It is therefore fortunate that so much excellent scholarly work is now being done on the first Christian centuries and the period of the Christian Roman Empire. This collection of eight essays by distinguished scholars is an excellent sample of this, and should be read by everyone who wants to discover how complex, and at times disconcerting, the truth is about the great formative and conquering period in the Church's life. Two of the best are by the editor, Professor Momigliano, one of the great Roman historians of our time, on *Christianity and the Decline of the Roman Empire* and *Pagan and Christian Historiography*. In the first he shows convincingly that there was something in the thesis of Gibbon after all: the success of the Church was both a consequence and a cause of the decline of the Empire, though the reasons for this were not on the whole discreditable to the Church, which weakened the Empire mainly by developing her own life and institutions and attracting wealth and men, especially the best men, to her service. It is an essay which should be pondered by anyone who is inclined to assert too unreservedly that Catholicism at its best is always a source of social and political strength. Professor A. H. M. Jones's *Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity* is also interesting and important, with its clear reminder that Christianity at the time of the conversion of Constantine was still very much a minority religion, which had made little impression on the peasants (in most parts of the Empire) or the educated upper classes. This should be remembered by those who are inclined to overrate the achievement of the early Christian missionaries and apologists. (From my own knowledge of the educated pagans of the period, I am disposed to think that, then as now, most Christian apologetics and polemics did more harm than good to the cause of the Church). And Professor E. A. Thompson, in his *Christianity and the Northern Barbarians* shows how completely lacking in the Church of the Empire at this period (and for long afterwards) was any interest or enthusiasm for the conversion of the barbarians beyond the imperial frontiers.

The other essays vary in interest and importance, though they are all solid pieces of scholarly work and worth reading. Professor Marrou's account of that

attractive Christian humanist, Synesius of Cyrene, and his Alexandrian Neoplatonist milieu, is however quite outstanding, a little masterpiece of its kind.

A. H. ARMSTRONG

GREEK MYTHS AND CHRISTIAN MYSTERY, by Hugo Rahner; Burns & Oates; 63s.

The title of Fr Rahner's book, even in its present English translation, runs the risk of misleading anyone who does not know his writings. To say that it is concerned with Greek myths and their meaning for Christianity, while true, is one of those half-truths which obscures the real value and importance of the book. Fr Rahner is, like his brother, a distinguished theologian; he is a patristic scholar, deeply immersed in the symbolism in terms of which the early Church thought and felt about the central doctrines and rituals of its faith. He is also one of those theologians whose insight into the life of the spirit has been deepened by the psychology of symbolism. With these interests he combines a quality of writing which is essentially poetic. He has the gift of allowing the symbols which he analyses to come to life in his hands and to illuminate. What he is concerned with are some of the central mysteries of the Christian life. The Greek myths, and their assimilation by Christian fathers, are the source of the living symbols; the focus of interests is not on the symbols, still less on their sources, but on their power to illuminate. This much it is worth saying to prevent possible misunderstanding of the title from discouraging readers who may have little interest in either Greek mythology or patristic theology.

Fr Rahner, then, seeks 'to trace a way of ascent to the heights of Christian illumination' (p. xviii) behind the concealing images of Greek mythology. He devotes a preliminary chapter to a study of the relation between Christianity and the Greek mystery religions. He rightly rejects the theories, common in the first flush of enthusiasm early in this century, which saw this relation in genetic terms. Theories which traced Christian belief and sacraments back to the pagan mysteries as their source can no longer be taken seriously. He is also reserved about Dom Odo Casel's *Mysterienlehre* and its adumbrations at Maria Laach. Christianity, as he says in concluding his argument, 'is a thing that is wholly *sui generis*; it is something unique and not derivative from any cult or other human institution, nor has its essential character been changed or touched by any such influence. As against this, Christianity is not a thing humanly apart, an entity which has no common scale of values with any of the works of man' (p. 28). When St Paul or the fathers of later centuries adopted words, images or gestures from the world of the mystery religions, 'they did so not as seekers after treasure but as possessors thereof' (p. 11). The conviction which underlay their borrowing is the same as that which underlies Fr Rahner's book. He calls it the standpoint of Christian humanism, 'of that wonderfully bold and widely rang-