

RELIGIOUS ADVENTURERS

OUR Western world is said to be looking for a religion: what is more certain is the pretty general feeling that life is an affair of surfaces, most of them monotonous, the others painful either for themselves or because their beauty is already flecked with decay; and following this feeling the desire for something to which our present experience is only penultimate. In this sense perhaps many would adopt the title of a recent book, *God is my Adventure*,¹ an account in the best manner of religious journalism of some personalities outside the official religions who are supposed to have penetrated beyond the obvious into the background of life.

"It has added much," confesses Dr. Hensley Henson, "to my too slight knowledge of the remarkable essays in spiritual exploration, which are certainly not the least impressive indication of the profound religious dislocation of our time." Dislocation, the word is just; the figures in the book bear witness to it: emotion must disavow thought, or the other way round; the peaks of experience must spurn the lower ranges of life from which they rise; the individual is isolated from his social environment and historical antecedents: man is no longer catholic but peculiar; working in a tunnel not living in the universe.

Yet as sin is the choice of good out of place, so error is the pursuit of truth out of place, and Mr. Landau is alert to discover the value of the various messages. Sometimes he has to try hard, but never is he contemptuous; his criticism though keen is humble. Religious types are of many kinds, and not all his subjects are so intellectually impressive as Ouspensky or Steiner.

The credentials of Shri Meher Baba are considerable. A cautious Mr. James Douglas was melted under his enchantment, though the visitor had already noticed a bevy of beautiful young girls among the Baba's disciples. He claims,

¹ *A Book on Modern Mystics, Masters and Teachers*. By Rom Landau. (Ivor Nicholson & Watson, London; pp. 426; illustrated; 10/6.)

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"I am one with God. I live in Him like Buddha, like Christ, like Krishna. They knew Him as I know Him. . . . My work will embrace everything; it will affect and control every phase of life. . . . It is all my supreme will. Everything is because I will it to be."

Yet the performance is not so startling as the promise. Three years ago the Baba prophesied that the world crisis would be over in one year, but that was his one attempt at precision. He is really rather pathetically and likeably human. He was queer as a child. He visits Hollywood and *looks forward* to seeing Marlene Dietrich again. He reads newspapers but not books. He likes Negro tunes but has little use for what he calls classical music. He has his little vanities. He evades reasoned discussion and takes refuge in a cloud of generalities. He goes very often to the cinema, even twice or three times a day. "Of course," added the disciple, and this will indicate a dislocation, "the actual film does not interest Baba."

Dr. Frank Buchman and Principle George Jeffreys represent the epidemic revivalism that is a religious feature of the English-speaking countries. Neither of them are English. The crowd through which both work is different: with the former it is "select," as the new middle-class understand the word; with the latter it is all who feel the simple desire for salvation through the Lord, salvation meaning the forgiveness of sin and the health of the body.

"Why shouldn't we stay in posh hotels?" asks Dr. Buchman. "Isn't God a millionaire?" This remark is a symptom of the essence of the movement, the worship of worldly success, not that of the piker, mind you, but of the rosy-cheeked Rotarian. Nor is snobbishness absent, from the unwarranted appropriation of the name of Oxford to the opportunity it gave of consorting with the titled and opulent. Its English manner, which can only be discerned with difficulty (like Shakespeare in Warner Bros.' *Midsummer Night's Dream*), is sub-Punch, religion gone hearty and simple and frank, affording to dine in the evening. But the radiant, soapy, genial talk cannot offset for the *New Yorker* (valid religious judgments are passed in the most

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unlikely quarters, which only goes to show, etc. . . . but that is another question) the suspicion of something unhealthy and lugubrious.

For if pyrrhoea is the only reason for a certain tooth-paste, sin is the only reason for both the theory and method of Buchmanism. Taken in rather a juvenile sense, as a breach of the regulations of respectable society, it is a matter of constant pre-occupation. A sound principle underlies the sharing of sin, but the procedure as described by Mr. Alva Johnston seems lacking in decent seriousness and reticence. "The washing out, to use the Buchmanites' technical term of confession, starts on a seemingly accidental note with mild or slapstick confessions; talking back to a traffic cop, overspending the weekly allowance. . . . The confession is then stepped up a little, to the smuggling through the customs of earrings in a jar of cold cream. . . . At about this time a *claqueur* breaks down, pleads guilty to an error in a parked car and tells how buoyant he feels because he has confessed it. . . . If the party grows warm . . . the backward ones are exhorted to brace up, be men, play the game, and pull their weight in the boat by furnishing the company with their fair share of purple memoirs."²

Despite its air of athleticism the most necessary discipline of the mind is absent, and perhaps the chief dislocation of which the movement is an indication lies in the rejection of the reason. It is true that religion is not simply an intellectual matter, but Christianity is ill when it fears criticism and refuses to probe into intellectual difficulties.

The same criticism of the absence of the scientific temper might be passed on the Elim Foursquare Gospellers of Principal Jeffreys, but more mildly, for he could not be condemned for spiritual bumptiousness. "Intellectual interpretations of individual parts of the Bible are beyond me." Vast crowds listen to him, believe on the Lord, are immersed, and some of them are healed of their infirmities. How? We do not know. Here it is sufficient that through him so many thousands are comforted in a simple Evangelical faith.

² From an article in *The Evening Standard*.

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It is difficult to imagine Gurdjieff preaching the Fundamentalist Bible at the Crystal Palace or Albert Hall. A mysterious figure from Middle Asia, he has now left his Fontainebleau *Institute for Man's Harmonious Development* and set up in America. His aim is to produce a state when mind, emotions and body are no longer antagonistic; his method an attempt to break away from the automatic manner of living common to many. To assimilate his teaching it is necessary to resign oneself to his hypnotic personality; to the detached observer it appears a jumble of evasions, contradictions, pretensions and profundities. Mr. Landau was unable to perceive the harmonious development of man in its teacher, though it is something to have been the Dalai Lama's chief tutor and the main Russian political agent in Tibet, known to the British Intelligence as Lama Dorjjeff, speaking Russian, Tibetan, Tartar, Tadjik, Chinese, Greek, strongly accented French and rather fantastic English. "I am a fairly wise man," says Captain Achmed Abdullah, "but I wish I knew the things which Gurdjieff has forgotten."

A man of the calibre of P. D. Ouspensky admits his debt to the esoteric doctrines propagated by Gurdjieff. Ouspensky was introduced to the Western world by the book *Tertium Organum*, which was followed by *A New Model of the Universe*. Here occult insight is mingled with scientific investigation and personal observation. Without any fancy tricks and in a grimly sober manner, he lectures to small groups, not of the sentimental and novelty-seeking, but of those prepared to be put through a hard course of mental concentration. "None of you here is awake," he begins. "What you all do is—sleep." He goes on to distinguish four states of consciousness: sleeping, waking, self-consciousness and objective consciousness; only in the last can we know truth, and this is his goal, to free our thought from sleep, images and daydreams, self. Though some of his mathematical and neo-physical discoveries are important, he has a contempt for "official university science," and looks for exact truth in the regions of the occult. In his attempt to rescue people from sleep and half-consciousness

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his emphasis is on the need of sheer hard thought, within the development of every human function.

So far so good. But his teaching can only be absorbed by close contact with the teacher, by working patiently within the group. It is an esoteric doctrine, and this in itself contains a hint of dislocation. Salvation, though not easy to find, is not wellnigh inaccessibly hidden away, whether in Tibet or in a never resting cerebration.

Count Hermann Keyserling is chiefly known in this country through translations of the *Travel Diary of a Philosopher* and the *South American Meditations*.³ His School of Wisdom at Darmstadt seems to have succeeded as a response to the yearnings of the Germany of the Weimar Republic; his position in the Third Reich seems somewhat uneasy. Indeed his conversations with Mr. Landau were overshadowed by a bother about his nationality papers. Though his book on immortality has been described by Dean Inge as the finest on the subject written in modern times, and though before the war he boldly taught that belief is the most central form of knowledge, and religious belief its highest variety, it is doubtful whether he would claim to be a religious master.

His thought is voluble, acrobatic from one topic to another. It seems to happen. Now the accidental is not the subject of philosophy, as Aristotle held. Perhaps here lies the dislocation. Thoughts seethe up without method or plan. But criticism is here out of place, since Keyserling does not stand as a messiah or religious leader; he is an artist, a "literary" philosopher who, among other things, discusses religion.

The greatest religious figure in the book appears to be Rudolf Steiner. As a boy he had the sense of seeing beyond the surface of things, but his visions were not so much preternatural as produced by a strongly philosophical temper of mind, which saw "triangle" in every particular triangle. But this power, Platonic "insight" rather than Aristotelean "abstraction" according to his view, did not lead him to dismiss the world of phenomena as illusion.

³ Both published by Jonathan Cape.

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Spirit is something inside nature, not outside it. Some of his teaching is reminiscent of the Thomist, that accidents are the expressions of substance, not curtains hiding it. He found modern science insufficient for the knowledge he was seeking, and turned to the secret traditions of different religions. This led to a brief association with Theosophy, but he would not accept the re-incarnation of the "World Teacher" in the body of Krishnamurti, and broke away to found his own doctrine of "anthroposophy."

It is impossible to do justice to the theory and practice of this religion, which ranges down from the highest speculations to the details of farming. The leading idea is that truth can best be proved through physical things, and this saves it from the queerness of many esoteric groups. Steiner sought, and it seems with success, to develop and control scientifically the power of clairvoyance, the process of getting outside the body and seeing things that are ordinarily hidden for reasons of space and time. He approached truth in all kinds of ways; his movement is primarily a body of doctrine which can be studied objectively apart from the personal attraction of its teacher. As it appears in Mr. Landau's book, the figure of Steiner is too great to be criticized in a paragraph. Yet if one must speak of dislocation, there is the wonder that a man so great, and with such a love for Christ, could yet stand outside the Church into which he was baptized. For all his insight, did he really see beyond that system of religious moods, conventions and politics which was taken for the Church in his Austria before the war?

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.