

Reviews

GIORDANO BRUNO AND THE HERMETIC TRADITION, by Frances A. Yates; Routledge and Kegan Paul; 55s.

By a curious accident we do not know exactly on what grounds the Inquisition at Rome finally condemned Giordano Bruno as an impenitent heretic, and handed him over, in February 1600, to the civil authorities to be burned alive. And this at least was not the Inquisitors' fault, but, of all people, Napoleon's; for the final official summary of Bruno's case—containing presumably the eight heretical propositions that Bellarmine had extracted from his works—happened to form part of the loot which Napoleon had transported from Rome to Paris, where with many other archives it ended as pulp in a cardboard factory. But Bruno had been in prison for eight years, first at Venice and then at Rome, and we have reports and summaries of his interrogations by the Venetian Inquisitors, together with other material, and from all this it is fairly clear that he was condemned, *inter alia*, for denying the Incarnation, for identifying the Holy Ghost with the *anima mundi* and for upholding magical practices. Among those *alia* there may well also have been Bruno's passionately held belief, often repeated in his works, in the infinity of the universe and in innumerable worlds; but we shall presumably never know just what part these scientific or philosophical views played in his condemnation by a theological tribunal. What we do know however—Miss Yates makes this abundantly clear and it is evident in any case from Bruno's works—is that all his science and philosophy were integral to and inseparable from his religion. He was a sort of cosmic mystic, and he used Copernican heliocentrism merely as a way through to a vision of God and nature which took him right out of orthodox Christianity. This seems to be his difference, in this respect, from Galileo; and Miss Yates makes the interesting suggestion that the theologians' suspicion of Galileo may possibly have been influenced by their earlier clash with Bruno—by their having seen what a religious but non-Christian mind was capable of doing with Copernicanism. Of course the official theologians felt 'safer' with the old closed Ptolemaic universe, and we can now see how trivial *sub specie eternitatis* their feeling was; we can mentally undo the condemnation of Galileo. But Bruno's we cannot so withdraw—whatever our horror at its penal effect—without ourselves ceasing to be Christians.

This is not to say anything new: it has long been realised that Bruno's religion was not Christian. The novelty and importance of Miss Yates's learned and fascinating book is that in it she goes a long way towards showing what kind of religion Bruno's was. This she does by placing him firmly in the context of that revival of gnostic speculation and, concomitantly, of magic (a learned philosophical magic this, not the disreputable, hole-and-corner medieval necromancy

the profound influence of which on Renaissance Europe has become increasingly clear in recent years thanks to the work of scholars like Kristeller, Garin, D. P. Walker and Miss Yates herself. This movement, so to call it, had its medieval antecedents of course, but it is essentially a Renaissance phenomenon, stemming in general from the Humanist desire to get back behind scholastic theology to a wider wisdom based on the pagan sages of antiquity (the *prisca theologia*) regarded as co-recipients with the Jews of divine revelation—as prophets, in fact, of Christ—and stemming in particular from Marsilio Ficino's immensely influential translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* made in the 1460s. Introduced by the worthy Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus (the 'thrice-great'—philosopher, priest and king) walks on to the Renaissance stage, crowned with Egyptian mysteries and speaking the tongue of Plato; and his power over the Renaissance mind, never undisputed but always formidable, was to last till the first decades of the seventeenth century when two quite independent factors destroyed him: the scholarship of Casaubon who proved that the Hermetic writings, far from being more or less contemporary with Moses, were in fact post-Christian; and the rise of exact science based on mathematics and mechanics which displaced the magical animistic universe of religious Neoplatonism (not without danger too, of course, to the Christian vision of a universe penetrated by God and not unaffected by angels).

From Miss Yates's survey of Renaissance Hermetism—from Ficino, through Pico della Mirandola and Reuchlin (who linked it with Cabalistic magic) and Cornelius Agrippa (who wrote the clearest systematic account of Renaissance magical 'science') down to Bruno and beyond—from this survey three points stand out pretty clearly: (a) that man is declared to be in essence 'divine', a sort of god, like the heavenly 'Powers', who came down to earth somehow to inhabit a body; (b) that man can return to the supreme God, the One, by reflecting the divine Mind in his own; and (c) that this 'return' is not, however, to be thought of dualistically as an escape from the physical world, but rather—this at least is the characteristic Renaissance 'line' and the one taken to its furthest extremes by Bruno—as an attempt to absorb the cosmos, the All, into oneself and so become like God, not only in the sense of able to understand God, but also in the sense of having godlike, magical power over the world that one has taken into one's mind and memory and imagination. It is in connexion with this last point that we encounter the Hermetist gnostic dream of the wonderful old Egyptian religion, of the time when earth and heaven were absolutely in tune and man could 'work' the heavenly Powers, magically, by the statues and images he made of them. This dream—contained in a Hermetic treatise, the *Asclepius*, known to the Latin Fathers in translation—was frontally attacked by St Augustine, shot at in passing by St Thomas (*Contra Gentiles*, III, 104), rather nervously evaded or explained away by Christian Hermetists like Ficino, but to all appearances fully accepted by Bruno who seems to have taken it as a sort of historical standard by which to measure and find wanting all post-Egyptian religions, Christianity included of course. And, according to Miss Yates, Bruno

not only deliberately set out to make himself a fully equipped Magus on Trismegistian lines, but really hoped and worked for a restoration of something like that pristine 'Egyptian' religion. And it is here, I think, as a statement of this double ambition in Bruno—to become a great magician and to reform Western religion—that Miss Yates's book, for all its learning and incidental brilliance, may be found not completely convincing—very plausible, but going, in its conclusions, slightly beyond the evidence adduced. But it will, of course, be thoroughly discussed by Renaissance scholars. Speaking as a mere amateur, or less, in this field, I hope that Italian *brunisti* will be absolutely fair to it. There is, I fancy, some lingering prejudice in those quarters against such a view of Bruno as we are given here; of a philosopher whose thinking was pervaded by religion and his religion pervaded by magic. And myself, I wish that Miss Yates had defined more precisely what she means by magic and Bruno's magic in particular, and especially the 'demonic' side of it. 'Bruno's magic', we are told, 'is quite frankly demonic. He . . . entirely abandons Ficino's reservations. Bruno *wants* to reach the demons; it is essential for his magic to do so; nor are there any Christian angels within call in his scheme to keep them in check'. Possibly; but it seems clear that he wasn't consciously a *Satanist*, so that 'demon' here is a term that needs more defining. And no doubt Miss Yates herself will define it more, at any rate implicitly, as well as illuminating many other aspects of the subject, in the book on Bruno's 'art of memory' which she hopes to bring out as a sequel to this one. Meanwhile I hope it is not improper for a Dominican to thank her for so instructive and sympathetic a work on the greatest of ex-Dominicans. It is pleasant to read that Bruno remained 'very proud of his Order', was 'deeply read in Albertus Magnus', and a lifelong admirer of St Thomas. These two, of course, he counted as Magi—along with Christ himself.

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

BYZANTINE AESTHETICS, by Gervase Mathew; John Murray; 35s.

A belated review of so notable a work as Father Gervase Mathew's survey of the art of Byzantium has at least the value of a reminder. For the enthusiastic welcome it received from scholars on its appearance may have suggested to the reader of unspecialized taste and training that it is a monograph of limited appeal. It is indeed a book of consummate scholarship, enriched on every page by an evident familiarity with the works of art themselves as well as with the whole complex history—of events and ideas—which they illuminate. But it is a book in its own right, lucidly organized and beautifully written, with twenty-five illustrations to hold the attention if it should ever falter. No one who cares for the articulation of an unfamiliar thesis in a clear and living language can afford to neglect this quite remarkable book.

'Byzantine' has so often become a loose epithet for a hierarchic and stylised art, an image of Eastern mystery as contrasted with the rationalized understand-