

**CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA**, by John S. Mbiti. *S.P.C.K.*, London, 1970. 348 pp. 60s.

Generally speaking, African religions have never quite managed to make much impression on outsiders. Possibly they are not spectacular enough and lack the great variety of colourful religious practices so characteristic of many other religions. So it seemed to Europeans that the 'Dark Continent' was thirsting for the religious light from Europe: for Christianity, which was preached with great success. The misleading factor here was, however, the apparent capacity of the African peoples to incorporate many foreign elements within their own basic patterns of thought without being much affected in their thinking by the origins of these foreign elements. This has been revealed to us only recently, among other things by the astonishing growth of the so-called African Independent Churches.

So suddenly we hear a lot about adaptation, and everyone concerned is trying to get quickly the sort of information needed to present their ware in the disguise of genuine African images. The demand is so great that practically anything published in this field has no difficulty in finding a market. Professor Mbiti's book has the additional advantage that it is written by an African and cannot therefore be criticized on the grounds that the author does not know what he is talking about. In that sense this book is important, for it will be bought and even read by many and it will be a rich source for those would-be writers of adaptation-catechisms.

The book is primarily written for students at universities and theological seminaries and gives them very encyclopaedic information about the religions of 270 African tribes. It seems odd to lump together so many tribes spread over such an enormous area, but this would still be excusable if the material were arranged according to the different tribes, so that each religion could speak for itself. The arrangement here is, however, according to themes, which are then illustrated with some

information taken from the tribes that happen to have something to offer in that particular theme. In the first two parts of the book the author runs through all the notions connected with God, which one would find in any theological manual of late western Christianity. On the whole the scheme seems to work quite well on these terms, and the author has little difficulty in forcing the African religions into some form of western monotheism. On the basis of material contained in the sections on God's Immanence and God's Unity and Plurality, for instance, the reader may still have his doubts about the success of this operation, but such problems are adequately dealt with in Part 3 of the book (Anthropomorphic and Natural Attributes of God), where spirits and natural phenomena are regarded as personifications or expressions of aspects of God. Of course, once you have decided for a certain idea of the divine, nothing is going to prevent you from saying things like that. You can always declare some religious expression an anthropomorphism as long as that particular religion does not get a chance to speak for itself. In the last part of the book (God and Man) information is given about man's religious behaviour and religious reflection upon his situation before God.

We are not suggesting that the book cannot be fruitfully used by those who want to have some vague idea of the things people are doing and saying in African religions. But one should remember that Professor Mbiti presumably belongs to that school of scholars who believe that African religions can be looked at as in most of the fundamental notions of western Christianity are to be found in them. Naturally one has to accept that the author as a Christian is entitled to believe that this point of view is true, but this does not necessarily mean that from the point of view of the African religion an adequate idea has been given.

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**CREATIVE SYNTHESIS AND PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD**, by Charles Hartshorne. *SCM Press* London, 1970. 358 pp. 80s.

In his Lowell lectures for 1926, published under the title of *Religion in the Making* (Meridian Books, new edition 1960), Alfred North Whitehead remarked that 'an actual entity is the outcome of a creative synthesis, individual and passing'. Professor Charles Hartshorne, the distinguished American spokesman for process

philosophy, takes the phrase 'creative synthesis' as part of the title for his latest book (and in many ways his most significant, because it sums up his whole mode of thought). It is also the first of his works actually to be published in this country. We should be greatly thankful to SCM Press for undertaking this publication

since it will mean that English readers, both philosophers and theologians, can now get a 'first-hand' acquaintance with Hartshorne's version of process thought, without being obliged to wait months or years for the American editions of his writings.

The purpose and argument of this book can be summed up nicely in one sentence from p. 56: 'A metaphysics of love, that is, of socially structured, and thus relative, creative experience is what we need, whether in ethics, religion, or politics—and indeed, in all our basic concerns.' It is such a metaphysics which Hartshorne—and others too, including the writer of this review—finds best worked out in that particular conceptuality which in the United States today is known as 'process thought'. The name comes from the title of the Gifford lectures of Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. The point is that reality is processive, hence that 'becoming' is a more inclusive term than 'being'. With it comes the stress on the societal or relational (Hartshorne always says 'relative' here: perhaps this is a slightly misleading term) as characteristic of an 'organismic' cosmos. God himself is no exception to this principle; in his existence he is indeed 'necessary' and absolute, but in his actuality or concrete reality as the supremely worshipful perfection, he is infinitely related—and this means that his perfection is his love in action upon others, while he is also open to the influence which those others can exercise upon him in their genuine, if creaturely, freedom.

In various ways, looking at various philosophical, ethical, religious, and aesthetic questions, Hartshorne makes his case for this position. He does it with that rigour of logic which is so marked a characteristic of his thinking. Here is no philosopher who resorts simply to his 'feelings'; here is a philosopher who with sharp discrimination, with precise syllogisms, and with full dependence upon the modal logic of our day, comments on and criticizes philosophies and theologies which, as he puts it, erect the 'idol' of the sheer absolute-without-relations as the one to be worshipped. But such an 'idol' cannot be worshipped; he is a false concept and the attempt to worship him distorts our thinking and perverts our theology, while at the same moment it contradicts the deliverance of ordinary common religion as people do in fact practise it.

One of the major emphases in this new book by Hartshorne is in his discussion of the possibility of metaphysics. The American thinker is

indeed a strong defender of the metaphysical enterprise, but he believes that the difficulty with the older practitioners of this study has been their attempt to construct grandiose schemes which have little verifiable content; he seems much more friendly to certain of the scholastics than to the 'idealism' which has been dominant since Descartes. A sound metaphysics, he insists, must start from known and experienced fact, from which are derived 'generalizations' which are to be tested by the widest possible application in other areas. The validity of a metaphysical statement is then discovered in this wide general application. Another development in his work is his increasing use of the appeal to 'common language' for the meaning of terms, however 'eminent' may be their application; in this respect, it is interesting to follow his criticism of Tillich for his use of the notion of 'symbolism' when (in Hartshorne's view) 'analogical predication' comes much closer to what in fact one must attempt when speaking, say, of God and of God's ways of acting.

From one point of view, there is not a great deal that is novel in *Creative Synthesis and Philosophical Method*, so far as those readers are concerned who already have mastered the main lines of 'process thought'. But for English readers, much in the book will come as very new indeed. For here is a return to metaphysics, if with a difference; here is an enormous respect for religion, if not always 'orthodox' religion; and here is an insistence that one whole stream of thought in modern times has been narrow and insular—the confining of philosophy to the meaning of words, 'language games', and the like. Since the reviewer shares almost all Hartshorne's views, but could never hope to state them so clearly and with such good humour, he can only trust that this lucid exposition of the philosophical grounds for a theology of process will have the most careful reading in Britain. It is very odd that Hartshorne, unquestionably the outstanding contemporary exponent of process metaphysics, has been so little read in this country; it is even more extraordinary that his philosophical mentor and one-time colleague Whitehead has been so neglected in his own land—even when we allow that Whitehead's major metaphysical efforts were written during his period of residence in 'the other Cambridge', at Harvard University.

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