

the desperate urgency of the problem that we might the more appreciate the relevance of the answer which faith alone can embrace.

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

AL-GHAZALI THE MYSTIC. By Margaret Smith, M.A., D.Litt. (Luzac & Co.; 21s.).

This is a study of a very uncommon man, written for the common reader, by one who is evidently a scholar and a specialist. For Miss Smith that eleventh-century saint of Islam, whom the Scholastics called Algazel, is not only "the greatest religious teacher of Islam", he is a great religious teacher for everybody. His mystical teaching is not only of historical interest; indeed, Miss Smith writes in a way which suggests that for her no mystical teaching ever has a merely historical interest. She is uncommonly learned, but she has not the typical *savant's* approach. She writes about a real man as if his problems might be hers too, or other people's.

Had this book been written with more art it would have been quite delightful. Shot through with enthusiasm it yet contains no gush. Miss Smith does not presume on her readers. On the other hand one could wish that she had turned a little more conscious reflection upon what are, after all, the delicate issues raised by a work of this kind. What, for instance, are we to think of Islamic mysticism as Islamic and as *not* Christian? Technical theology would be out of place, but Miss Smith hardly seems to feel this problem at all.

But the portrait of al-Ghazali is so attractive and so freshly painted that it seems churlish to grumble. What a marvellous being he was! He was one of those rare people who turn all experience into a passionately apprehended clue to one single mystery—the reality of God; but who can never leave anything out; so that for them the whole richness of the world *converges*, and all the more significantly the more its diversity and detail is apprehended. Extraordinarily gifted as he was—philosopher, poet, naturalist, talker and vagabond—it seems quite fitting that he should be one of the world's great "converts"; he had so much to sacrifice. Yet, when the call came to him, in his mid-thirties, to exchange theoretical "knowledge of the way to God" for actual "experience of that way", when he left the schools of Baghdad for the Syrian desert, how bitter must the choice have been. Thenceforward, if Miss Smith is to be trusted, his life was a splendidly sincere, continuous worship of God.

Much of this book is devoted to the mystical teaching of al-Ghazali; upon which, in the space of a review, it would be futile to comment. He wrote like a born writer, fluently and delightfully. His keen eye for Nature and natural examples reminds one of our own St. Albert or of St. Francis of Sales: "he notes that the gnat,

in spite of his minute size, acts with deliberation . . . that, though so small, it has been created with a body as perfect as that of the elephant . . . He also bids his readers consider the bee, etc." . . . Miss Smith is generous with citations.

Where she is least at her ease is in the chapter on al-Ghazali's influence, especially on his influence in the West. She is obviously a little out of her depths in the Christian middle ages; and a good deal of relevant and indispensable work has been done in the last fifteen years on the Arabic influence in the West which she does not appear to know.

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

AN ESSAY ON MAN. By Ernst Cassirer. (Yale University Press; Humphrey Milford; 20s.).

Seldom does a reviewer meet with a book of such intellectual distinction as this last work of the late Professor Ernst Cassirer. The author drew upon the accumulated wealth of a lifetime's learning and thought. The result would, indeed, be too massive were it presented with less disarming humility and but for its dignified discernment of expression.

Cassirer wrote as a Kantian. According to him, man builds up his own universe of discourse—a universe of meaning. Whereas the animal's response is simply behaviouristic, it is man's prerogative to interpret experience according to symbols, by which he may universalize and objectify what must otherwise remain subjective only. His symbols are manifold; there is his sympathy, his *feeling* for every manifestation of life, and from this develops his universe of Myth and Magic and Religion; there is *Language* by which he stays and lays hold of a physical world; he creates, in his intuition of sensible appearances, *sensuous forms* of Beauty; he quickens even the experience of past generations by freeing it, in his own experience, from the objective *records* in which it is at once stilled and preserved to History; and by an achievement which is the highest and most characteristic to which he attains he perfects language, constructing symbolic systems of *number*, which is the key of Science to objective truth. And all this activity is united in the focus of the human capacity for meaning, a unity, therefore, functional rather than substantial. "We seek not a unity of effects but a unity of action; not a unity of products, but a unity of the creative process" (p. 78). So it comes about that "man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols, or religious rites, that he cannot know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium" (p. 25). This is man's achievement from which he cannot escape. Neither (we must add) can God escape. It is as if Man said: Be God made. And God was made. And Man saw that it was good. And Man went on, after that, to adorn his world with beauty and order and intelligibility.