

**THE VIRGIN, by Geoffrey Ashe, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1976. 262 pp. £5.25.**

The publication of this book may or may not be a sign of demand for an unconventional treatment of Marian themes that will recognise pagan elements. Mr Ashe, an authority on King Arthur, plays safe at first to the point of acknowledging the Marian authorship of the Magnificat and the angelic salutation, and the historical truth of nearly everything in the canonical gospels, including the magi and the miracle at Cana, but nothing apocryphal except that 'an Ethiopian book makes Mary relate that she had no symptoms of pregnancy and was unsure what was going on till' the visitation. Nevertheless 'at the heart of the labyrinth' it appears that Christ disappointed her rather as Krishnamurti disappointed Annie Besant. His mother does not appear among the witnesses to the resurrection (or at Pentecost, according to Mr Ashe), but a Marian religion grew up around the idea of her as another Elijah, an immortal heavenly being. This was fostered in a circle of devoted women who provided Luke with the Magnificat and John with ideas for the Apocalypse after Mary vanished into the wilderness. Described by St. Epiphanius as the heresy of the Collyridians, this religion was integrated into the Catholic Church after 377 but before 429, largely through the influence of St. Ephrem on the Cappadocian fathers, and the circumstances in which St Gregory Nazianzen had to preach at Constantinople in 380-1.

The subordination of Marian to Christian themes is regarded as a weakness

in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, fatal to Nestorianism and Protestantism. Catholicism owes its vitality to a mother-goddess who is never recognised as such, and could become 'moribund' if progressive and ecumenical programmes led to her elimination. 'The first need is that the numinous figures at the source'—sc. the Madonna and Child—'should be rethought, reinterpreted, and differently related to each other'.

The author would deny that his book was anti-Christian, allow it to be anti-Protestant. This makes it the more odd that he takes the history in the canonical gospels so very literally. He also accepts uncritically St Jerome's diatribe against Helvidius on the Lord's brethren. Other views of the question were later ascribed to St Jerome himself, and widely current in the West as well as in the East. Mr Ashe has nothing to say of the critical issues involved in the complex relations of canonical and apocryphal texts. His material comes from such compilations as *Man, Myth and Magic*, the *Apocryphal New Testament* of M. R. James (not Hennecke-Schneemelcher), Hilda Graef, Boslooper and Miegge, and not from the texts themselves apart from the Bible. His combination of Biblical fundamentalism with fantasy recalls the later developments of the Gnostical imagination, where the apocrypha really are *deliramenta*, but he misses the contribution of the earlier apocrypha to tradition.

GEORGE EVERY

**POLYGAMY RECONSIDERED: AFRICAN PLURAL MARRIAGE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, by Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp., Orbis Books, New York, 1975. 266 pp. \$ 15.00, \$ 7.95 paper.**

Fr Hillman's thesis is "that the traditional ecclesiastical discipline regarding African polygamy is not as well founded, biblically and theologically, as has been supposed hitherto." (p. 206) To my mind, he has proved his point so conclusively that any further hesitation on the part of the authorities radically to modify this discipline would constitute at once a

summum of bad faith and the height of pastoral irresponsibility. However, just as the highest instances of the Church still have their doubts about, say, ordaining women, so too, the African hierarchy will no doubt cling to the prevailing dispensation for motives which have little to do with theology or exegesis. Ecclesiastics usually hide their resistance to change be-

hind pastoral considerations such as fear of scandalising the simple faithful. Fr Hillman neatly reverses the charges (e.g. p. 192). Consequently it is hard to account more nobly for reluctance to act upon a clear consensus of expert opinion other than in terms of the celibate's insensitivity to marriage problems, the native's resentment against expatriates imposing subversive ideas, the bishop's fear of compromising his reputation with Rome—with its inevitable economic sanctions, or the cleric's blind faith in the textbook theology of his seminary days.

This book is not really about polygamy in Africa but about power in the Church. As soon as theologians refuse to be manipulated by the Magisterium like ventriloquists' dummies and begin to speak directly on behalf of the people, the ultimately vital issue is inevitably who decides when, what and why. There is hardly a major pastoral problem on which the majority of theologians are not agreed. But nothing will happen practically until the power structure within the Church is not only decentralised but above all demuminised. Fr Hillman has so convincingly disposed of any further objections to polygamy on theological or exegetical grounds that the future surveys and studies of the problem requested by the African bishops would seem otiose except in so far as the closer one seems to be to the institution the longer time it takes for the penny to drop.

Meanwhile *Polygamy Reconsidered* is worth considering from another angle. Western theologians have been paying of late a certain amount of lip service to the talk of cross fertilising dialogue with third world Christianity on the basis of a mutual exchange. But apart from listening to the Missa Luba or envisaging a Black Pope for the year 2000, Western theologians wonder privately whether third world theological products are worth importing, given their exotic and at times unscientific nature. What can we do with calabash chalices or learn from Black Theology? It would be a great pity, however, if Western theologians consigned such works as Hillman's to the limbo in which missiological matters usually vegetate. One striking feature of this book is the witness it bears to the way leading Western theologians, of Häring's and Fuch's caliber, have been brought to a reconsideration of their basic positions by contact with the African

field. Would not similar radical rethinking result if we allowed ourselves to be impressed say by the sacramentality specific to independent African Churches with their almost total disregard for a mass centred ministry, or by messianic movements (which could even lead to a more convincing Christology)? Though polygamy would seem to have little relevance for the future of Western Christianity, the issues it indirectly raises—the nature of 'natural law', the value of biblical evidence, group marriage etc.—are of immediate interest to us all, no matter where we might be.

Finally, there are some nitpicking points one could make against the author. Having suggested (p. 33) that a more permissive attitude to polygamy partly accounts for the success of independent African Christianity, one cannot logically assert that mainline Churches which align themselves in this respect with independent Churches will not be inundated with convert polygamists (p. 35). One detects a slight tendency to equate female personality with feminine functions such as child-bearing. Is the failure to produce children really sufficient grounds for divorce? The fact that many African peoples recognise this to be the case is surely indicative of a slightly inauthentic understanding of womanhood! If I had written this book I would have insisted more on the implications the thesis has for the future of the Western family and on the resemblances between previous forms of this family and present-day African patterns. I would have analysed in greater depth the question of marriage motivations as indicative of a certain understanding of male and female roles. I would not have played down so obviously the disadvantages which the Africans themselves recognise in polygamy nor assumed so readily that African women were in favour of it, (first wives, for instance, are more in favour than second or successive ones, as it is upon these that the household chores commonly fall.) However, I signal such shortcomings only to be faithful to my duty as a critical reviewer. If I have not dwelt on them in detail it was for fear of putting off anyone from buying this remarkable book, the latest in a long series related to the problem ... If only it could also be the last!

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