

'THE TREE OF LIFE.'

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS.

SIR,—In his anxiety to expose the poverty of my theological and philosophical qualifications, your reviewer of my *The Tree of Life* makes the controversial mistake of trying to prove too much. As an example of the 'haziness' and obsolete Protestantism of my notions of 'doctrine' he adduces pp. 182-186 of the book. Now all except the last page of this section is devoted exclusively to an abstract of the views of Dr. Temple, of Reinhold Niebuhr, of Dr. Toynbee, of Berdyaev, of Mr. E. I. Watkin and of Mr. Christopher Dawson. A glance at this list reveals my purpose, namely to bring together the views of contemporaries upon the modern scene who, in spite of their very wide divergences in religious principles, all 'express a liberal view of religious authority' (p. 185). My own views find no place whatever in this section. Your reviewer even accuses me of an 'invective against "credal formulae"' when in the passage referred to I was abbreviating Dr. Temple's attitude as 'Credal formulae were signposts, not revelation.' The last page of the section in question merely contrasts the modern Doctrine of Progress with that of the Fall of Man. I think that all of your fair-minded readers will therefore agree that as a misrepresentation of my meaning your reviewer's statement takes some beating.

Your reviewer then goes on to insinuate that I have completely ignored various parts of Christian doctrine which do not touch upon my particular theme of the relations between nature and religion, suggesting that this disqualifies me as an interpreter of Christianity and puts my thesis on the levels of the South Sea Islander. Naturally I did not discuss those elements of the Christian faith which were not directly pertinent to that theme. But I expressly guarded myself against just such an animadversion as your reviewer has made by the following: 'What of Christian doctrine should receive a new emphasis in order to restore a Christianity which in a better proportion of faith should embrace both the natural world and the vocational or cultural or organic life of mankind?' And again, 'This is a readjustment that does not depress the other elements of Christian dogma but rescues those more distinctively creative ones from the moth and the rust.' To have discussed such doctrinal categories as 'the sanctity of marriage, the need for contemplative prayer, the moral theology of war (whatever that means)' would obviously have been totally foreign to the purpose of my book.

Lastly, your reviewer declares that I have defended 'all peasant beliefs without distinction.' Throughout, I never attempted to gloss over nor champion the pagan substratum of peasant beliefs; I merely stated it as an example of the peasant's freedom from free-thinking intellectualism. My point was that the 'paganus,' when converted,

proved none the less tenaciously Christian from his pagan folk-memory.

Your reviewer argues from these twistings of my argument that I am a poor kind of Christian to discuss Christianity. I might not unjustly reply that one capable of thus distorting the text of my book, or any book, is hardly likely to carry conviction in any quarter as a defender of Christian orthodoxy.

H. J. MASSINGHAM.

Long Crendon.

Mr. Shewring writes:—

I am sorry to have offended Mr. Massingham, whose work in general I much admire and whose other books I have been at some pains to recommend both publicly and privately. But after reading his letter and re-reading a great part of *The Tree of Life*, I stand by the judgments expressed in my review. I may indeed have misunderstood some of his points, as he has some of mine; but I do not think I have 'twisted' his argument (which to me at least would imply ill-will).

A writer may be misunderstood through carelessness or stupidity in the reader, or again through some obscurity in his own writing. Without excluding the former possibilities, I suggest that Mr. Massingham's writing is sometimes in fact needlessly obscure. Thus he constantly paraphrases other writers without making it clear where the paraphrase begins and ends. He prints in a continuous paraphrase sentences which should be in brackets or in footnotes. (On p. 201 of this book he writes continuously: 'The Danish Folk High Schools are the only European example of a richly integrated and cultural education. It is an education of hand as well as of brain, of how to become an Englishman.') He fails to define terms which badly need defining. (He generally uses 'modernism' in a bad sense, but on p. 182 it appears to have a good sense. The distinctions usefully made on p. 124 should have been extended to such words as 'authority' and 'liberalism.') Finally, his use of some terms is imprecise. (His use of 'microcosm' is certainly odd; and on p. 121 he has surely misunderstood Bradley's use of 'sympathetic'.)

I now turn to particular points. (1) In pp. 182-186 Mr. Massingham appeals of course to the writers named, but he surely does so to confirm his own view of religious authority—a view which he calls 'liberal' and I call Liberal Protestant. Any selection of quotations in support of a point is itself an indication of the selector's point of view. Thus a man might quote with textual exactness one passage each from Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine and St. Thomas to support some view which (a) might be in fact common to all these philosophers (in which case the quotations would have been characteristic); or (b) might be in fact disowned by them all

(in which case the quotations would have been uncharacteristic or in need of complementary quotations to show that their meaning was not the surface meaning). In Mr. Massingham's case there is no claim to textual exactness; there are 'abstracts' (without references) in which I still cannot disentangle the original from the paraphrase or decide how far the original may have been misunderstood by the abbreviator (in all good faith, naturally). Mr. Watkin is represented as accusing 'his own Church' of Manichaeism; and he and seemingly Mr. Dawson as well (I'm not sure of Mr. Massingham's English here) are said to claim that the future 'will not be with doctrinal authority and ecclesiastical formalism, but with the emergence of a group of new contemplatives . . .'. A Catholic would be bound to distinguish the Church as such from its fallible members and could not treat 'doctrinal authority' and 'ecclesiastical formalism' as if they were the same kind of thing. But the 'abstract' as it stands is Liberal Protestant. As for Dr. Temple, the relevant sentences are: 'Dr. Temple draws constant attention to Christ's respect for the spiritual liberty of others. He desired none but willing disciples and he formulated no hard and fast doctrines. Credal formulae were signposts, not revelation, which is 'the full actuality of the relationship between Nature, Man and God.' The life of faith is no more acceptance of doctrine than the life of the artist is acceptance of aesthetic canons. Faith is not holding correct doctrines but a personal fellowship with the living God which a creed may assist . . .' I do not know how much of this may be authentically Dr. Temple's; little, I hope. The passage is a mixture of truths, half-truths and nonsense. Finally, at the end of this section, Mr. Massingham in his own person writes: 'The Doctrine of the Fall of Man is shown by the force of events to be not so much an article of faith as a platitude.' This is doubtless orthodox in intention, but it is not so in effect. I repeat my opinion that the section as a whole 'has all the haziness of old-fashioned Liberal Protestantism.'

(2) I did not 'declare' that Mr. Massingham had 'defended all peasant beliefs without distinction.' I said that he 'seemed ready' to do so, and I used the word 'seem' because I was puzzled by his position. I gladly accept his disclaimer, but I am still puzzled by some of his remarks on peasants, pagans and primitives, e.g. (p. 58) 'St. Francis, whose *Fioretti* exhibit an imaginative and acutely sensitive animism, not different *in kind* from that of primitive man'; and (p.99) 'Herrick's idyllic country Muse . . . is certainly more pagan than Christian. We should be glad of it . . .'

(3) I did not suggest that it was any part of Mr. Massingham's duty to discuss such things as the sanctity of marriage and the need for contemplative prayer (nor are these 'doctrinal categories'). I said something completely different, for which the curious may consult my review.

(4) I did not suggest that anything put Mr. Massingham's thesis on the level of the South Sea Islander.

(5) Least of all did I suggest that Mr. Massingham is 'a poor kind of Christian'; I should not dare to. I take it for granted that he is a good kind of Christian, and think it quite likely that his real views are more orthodox than they appear on paper in a terminology which he has insufficiently studied. I will go further; I think that his views on work and property, art and the crafts are nearer than those of some Catholic writers to the teaching of the Popes and St. Thomas Aquinas. Really, as I began by saying, I admire his work very much, and my strictures on his book are a tribute (apparently well disguised) to my sense of his importance and influence—Christian influence.

R E V I E W S

WHY I AM A JEW. By Edmond Fleg. (Victor Gollancz; 2s. 6d.)

This book by a prominent French Jewish writer was written more than fifteen years ago. It appears now in an English translation by Mr. Gollancz. Fleg wrote it for his grandson who was never born, for his only two sons died in the early days of the war, for love of France. But it is written ultimately for all those who are aware of the true nature and mystery of Israel. It would be almost impertinent to scrutinise this 'proud and humble little book,' for it is above all a witness, a confession, even a prayer, rather than a book 'about the Jews.' Fleg tells us how he lost, and then regained, and lived his faith and sense of membership of Israel; and how he came to know anew the eternal mission and endowment of the Chosen People.

We are used, partly through lack of insight and mainly through being consciously or unconsciously under the sway of secularised thought, to regard the Jewish question in merely political or sociological terms. But the Jewish question is in itself a *reductio ad absurdum* of secular thought. It is a unique question demanding a unique answer: an answer in religious terms. Sociology can hardly explain why amongst all minority groups it is the Jewish group alone which has survived all the vicissitudes of history. Only a universal vision of the meaning of history and a religious interpretation of history can explain the destiny of Israel. Such was and is the message of Israel's prophets. Fleg's book is inspired by the same vision. And wherever a true prophetic spirit rules, the walls between Christians and Jews are torn down.

E. LAMPERT.