

attractive Christian humanist, Synesius of Cyrene, and his Alexandrian Neoplatonist milieu, is however quite outstanding, a little masterpiece of its kind.

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GREEK MYTHS AND CHRISTIAN MYSTERY, by Hugo Rahner; Burns & Oates; 63s.

The title of Fr Rahner's book, even in its present English translation, runs the risk of misleading anyone who does not know his writings. To say that it is concerned with Greek myths and their meaning for Christianity, while true, is one of those half-truths which obscures the real value and importance of the book. Fr Rahner is, like his brother, a distinguished theologian; he is a patristic scholar, deeply immersed in the symbolism in terms of which the early Church thought and felt about the central doctrines and rituals of its faith. He is also one of those theologians whose insight into the life of the spirit has been deepened by the psychology of symbolism. With these interests he combines a quality of writing which is essentially poetic. He has the gift of allowing the symbols which he analyses to come to life in his hands and to illuminate. What he is concerned with are some of the central mysteries of the Christian life. The Greek myths, and their assimilation by Christian fathers, are the source of the living symbols; the focus of interests is not on the symbols, still less on their sources, but on their power to illuminate. This much it is worth saying to prevent possible misunderstanding of the title from discouraging readers who may have little interest in either Greek mythology or patristic theology.

Fr Rahner, then, seeks 'to trace a way of ascent to the heights of Christian illumination' (p. xviii) behind the concealing images of Greek mythology. He devotes a preliminary chapter to a study of the relation between Christianity and the Greek mystery religions. He rightly rejects the theories, common in the first flush of enthusiasm early in this century, which saw this relation in genetic terms. Theories which traced Christian belief and sacraments back to the pagan mysteries as their source can no longer be taken seriously. He is also reserved about Dom Odo Casel's *Mysterienlehre* and its adumbrations at Maria Laach. Christianity, as he says in concluding his argument, 'is a thing that is wholly *sui generis*; it is something unique and not derivative from any cult or other human institution, nor has its essential character been changed or touched by any such influence. As against this, Christianity is not a thing humanly apart, an entity which has no common scale of values with any of the works of man' (p. 28). When St Paul or the fathers of later centuries adopted words, images or gestures from the world of the mystery religions, 'they did so not as seekers after treasure but as possessors thereof' (p. 11). The conviction which underlay their borrowing is the same as that which underlies Fr Rahner's book. He calls it the standpoint of Christian humanism, 'of that wonderfully bold and widely rang-

ing gesture of the Hellenic Christian, that gesture whereby he fetches everything home to Christ' (p. xix).

The first part of the book consists of illustrations of this attitude in the case of the mystery of the Cross, of baptism, and of the seasonal cycle of the ecclesiastical year, with Christmas and Easter linking it to the rich symbolism of Sun and Moon. The second part contains two essays concerned with the symbolism of the process of maturing, of reaching perfection and fullness of life in the midst of death and corruption. The third and last part of the book is perhaps the section which displays the poetic qualities of Fr Rahner's scholarship at their deepest and most moving. Entitled 'Holy Homer', it takes up the theme of the second section ('The healing of the soul') in following Odysseus on his homeward journey and the Christian in his heavenward striving. A passage from the introduction to this section may serve to conclude this review. It does less violence to Fr Rahner than any attempt to summarise inevitably would, and it states some of his main themes as clearly as any short passage can:

' . . . Christian humanism reposes on the simple truth that the successful fashioning of this our earthly life, the fashioning of it into a life of true humane goodness and nobility, can only be achieved if we go beyond our present world and take our stand in the world to come; for only thus can we find and learn to love what is eternal in man. Only by relaxing his hold on created things can man hope to make their hidden worth his own. To find we must first renounce, and it is only by the light that streams from the door which we only enter in death that earthly things disclose their clear and truly lovely forms. That is why Odysseus, the eternal voyager, had first to sail to the dark doors of Persephone—and how strange it is that should have been Circe herself who sent him thither—ere he was permitted to find the way to his sweet earthly home; for this story of Odysseus rests on an intimation, even though dim and fleeting, of that truth that is the foundation of Christian humanism, the humanism that is proof against all illusion; the truth is this: God has willed it that heaven is not the only thing that man should enjoy. Earth also, transfigured but still delectably tangible, earth with its loveliness is also there, here and now, for his delight . . .' (p. 281).

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THE HISTORIAN AND CHARACTER, AND OTHER ESSAYS, by Dom David Knowles; Cambridge University Press; 45s.

When a distinguished Professor retires from his chair, it is not unusual for his colleagues and his former pupils to mark the occasion by presenting him with a collection of essays written in his honour. Those responsible for this book conceived the even happier idea of paying tribute to Professor Knowles by giving him a farewell present made up of a number of his own lectures and essays which have been printed either separately or in the pages of various