

MYSTIQUE ET CONTINENCE. Travaux Scientifiques du VIIe Congrès International d'Avon. Etudes Carmélitaines. (Desclée; n.p.)

This volume, *hors série*, of the *Etudes* is devoted to answering the question whether continence (virginity, celibacy) is practised 'through fear of sex, or because sexual sublimation is necessary for the life of mysticism—in which case, to what extent is mysticism bound up with a life of celibacy?' (p. 10). A statement of the theological principles involved is followed by papers on belief and practice in primitive peoples, ancient Greece, India, Judaism, Islam, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. A third section deals with the attitude of various heresies; the fourth is devoted to the findings of psychology and psychiatry; and the volume ends with a discussion of the Catholic tradition—the treatises *De Virginitate*, the views of Augustine and Jerome—and with an important paper by P. Tesson, S.J., on Sexual Morality and Mysticism, and by other papers on marriage symbolism in mystical life and literature.

It is impossible to assess all twenty-six essays in detail. Some are interesting and useful, some very valuable; others are disappointingly sketchy, or seem merely to touch the fringes of the problem. As with other volumes of this series, the book is useful for reference on various points rather than as a single statement of a thesis—for which reason it is absurd that there should be no index. But it is equally a pity that there is no final essay drawing together the very diverse threads of the preceding discussions, and stating explicitly conclusions which are implicit in the volume but may pass unnoticed. Thus the early papers establish the double fact that sexual abstinence (in initiation rites and the like) is to be viewed only as part of a general pattern of death-and-resurrection, and that sex itself is considered as a *force sacrée*; the 'direct manifestation of the sacred in the cosmic life' (p. 38). Later pages point the christian lesson that marriage is a way to perfection precisely as fulfilling the same pattern of death-to-life: the discovery of love through the death of selfishness. Thirdly, other papers discuss the tendencies, in the history of christendom, to regard sex as either evil or at least profane; whereas in fact, as P. Tesson points out, the sacramental character of christian marriage is proof both that the full conjugal life can be meritorious and that it can become part of 'a deep mystical life and indeed of a life of sanctity' (p. 368). Had these points been gathered together in a concluding essay, the moral—so important in these days—could have been made clear: that marriage is indeed a way to mysticism and holiness provided only that it fulfils the death-life pattern and that sex is seen not as something irredeemably profane but on the contrary as something redeemed and sanctified through the grace of the sacrament and therefore sacred.

GERALD VANN, O.P.