

CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM AND MODERN MAN. Translated by Walter Mitchell and The Carisbrooke Dominicans. (Blackfriars Publications; 16s.)

This is another of those symposia conducted by the French *Vie Spirituelle* on the subject of the spiritual life, in which a serious effort is made to rethink its fundamental principles in the light of our present circumstances and our modern habits of thought. There is no doubt that asceticism presents a serious problem today. We have inherited from the past certain traditional practices and attitudes of mind which no longer seem to fulfil their purpose and awaken grave doubts as to their efficacy among those who are concerned with the guidance of souls. The practice of fasting and the curtailment of sleep, the use of the discipline and the hairshirt, and the imposition of certain forms of humiliation, are obvious examples of practices whose value is now called in question.

A series of historical studies show how much the form of Christian asceticism has varied in the past. The asceticism of the Patristic age is markedly different from that of the Middle Ages, and that of the Middle Ages from that of the Renaissance. Père Bouyer contributes a characteristic essay on the Patristic period, in which he makes the asceticism of the Fathers the occasion for an attack on modern Christian humanism. But he seems to be quite unaware of the inadequacy of this asceticism for the needs of modern man. There was surely an exaggerated contempt for the 'world' and the 'flesh' in early Christian asceticism, which led to a neglect of the real values of the social order and of the body as the instrument of the spirit, which is in part the cause of our difficulties today.

There is a noticeable development in the later Middle Ages of the cult of suffering which leads on in the seventeenth century to the cult of the 'victim-state' and finds expression in the extremes of asceticism described in a chapter on the Mortification of the Body in the Carmelite Order. In all this it is impossible not to detect an anti-humanist tendency which eventually took shape in Jansenism, but which nevertheless deeply infected the practice of the Church.

It is against this tendency that a modern Christian humanism has necessarily to react in order to find the balance of a genuine Christian asceticism. But the matter is complicated for us by the changes which have come over human nature in the last century. These changes are no doubt partly due to the difference of physical conditions in the modern civilized world, but there seems to be no doubt that there has also been a profound psychological change taking place. This is well-analysed by Père Dubarle, O.P., in his illuminating essay. Above all our knowledge of the processes of the unconscious has deeply modified

our attitude towards ascetic practices. Asceticism has to be seen not as a method of repressing certain tendencies in our nature but as a way of integration by which the whole man is reformed in the image of Christ.

The essay of Père Guiger *Outlining a Theology of Asceticism* gives perhaps the best indication of how this is to be done. It consists first of all in recognizing the absolute primacy of love; every act of Christian asceticism has to be informed by charity and directed towards the end of charity. But as Père Guiger points out, charity is not merely the end of asceticism it is also in a positive sense the means. Charity 'is in a positive sense asceticism itself, that is to say positive purity of heart'. If asceticism is thus identified with purity of heart (as was done incidentally by the Fathers of the Desert), it becomes directly related to charity and all methods and practices can be directly subordinated to this one end. It is no doubt because she realized this that the influence of St Thérèse in discarding so many traditional practices and developing her own way of love has been so great in modern times.

There is a short note on Indian asceticism contributed by M. Oliver Lacombe, but it makes no serious attempt to show how Indian asceticism has any bearing on our modern problems. And yet there are many people both Christian and non-Christian who are finding in Eastern asceticism precisely the answer to the problems of the present day. It would seem in particular that the idea of detachment and devotion (*bhakti*), as we find it in the Bhagavadgita, gives us an answer closely resembling that which we have mentioned of love and purity of heart, while at the same time it has a psychological background, which though not precisely Christian is extremely sympathetic to modern man.

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TIBERIUS. *A Study in Resentment*. By Gregorio Marañon. (Hollis and Carter; 25s.)

We should suffer disastrous loss if our libraries were stripped of all the books that have been written by medical men on subjects outside their province. The Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles would be the first to go. This book, however, might be allowed to stay, for Dr Marañon ranks high both as a professional historian and as a medical practitioner.

It is hard to say which is his principal intention: to explain the manner of man that Tiberius was, or to rig him up as an example showing what a dangerous malady resentment can be. As a study in history the book merits the attention of all who are puzzled by the enigma Tacitus and Suetonius made of Tiberius for all future historians. Few will consider