

THE BEGINNINGS OF RELIGION. By Rev. Prof. E. O. James. (Hutchinson's University Library, World Religions; 7s. 6d.)

It is a pity that the author of this book on primitive religion has taken no account of recent field-work among primitive peoples. By preferring the observations of earlier writers, who were working more or less haphazardly, and were often dependent on interpreters, he has severely handicapped himself in his attempt to 'provide an intelligible introduction' to the subject. On his showing, primitive beliefs seem quite alien to our ways of thought. As it is now more than ten years since an intelligible account of magical beliefs has been published, we should not still be taught that a magician acts on the premise that 'like produces like', imagining that he produces rain by mere 'mimicry' (p. 44), or that the primitive mind does not use empirical knowledge of cause and effect. Many startling statements are made in the book about primitive behaviour, which are not supported by field-work conducted with modern techniques.

Throughout there are serious failures of interpretation. To take one example: the primitive's supposed sense of 'reverential awe in the presence of transcendental holiness' is made the basis of the whole argument (p. 33). When we think of the difficulty of producing in ourselves anything like the appropriate emotional response to our religious beliefs, we must feel ourselves far removed from the primitive, with his ever-present sense of the numinous. But in fact, trustworthy accounts of actual religious ceremonies of primitive peoples lessen the distance between us. A Ba-ila or Ngonde burial rite, which ends in feasting and jollity, seems to have something in common with Shaw's description of an Irish funeral, and an account of a Bathonga sacrifice, or a Zande blood-brotherhood compact, recalls the agnostic's scandalised description of the congregation in St Peter's, Rome, rather than the display of reverential awe we might expect from theoretical introductions to primitive religion.

The standard monographs on the Ba-thonga and Ba-ila were published in 1912 and 1920, and the author actually refers to their customs in other contexts, but he ignores the facts in them which challenge existing theories of primitive religion. It may not be fair to blame him for selecting his material to suit his theme, for if he had not omitted the intractable facts his book could not have been written. No satisfactory approach to the subject has yet been developed. The full difficulties of interpreting the religious beliefs of alien peoples, and of translating their symbolism into terms of our own, cannot be exaggerated, and Professor James can be criticised for overlooking them. He asserts that 'genuine monotheism is unknown in primitive society' (p. 74). But what is genuine monotheism? It instantly strikes one that an observer of Christian culture, working under similar handicaps of language and superficial contact, would not record Christian monotheism, but rather a whole pantheon of spirits intervening between us and three almighty gods. This

book leaves the impression that it is still too soon for popular introductions to the subject of primitive religion to be written.

M. M. TEW.

THE HEATHENS: PRIMITIVE MAN AND HIS RELIGIONS. By William Howells. (Gollancz; 18s.)

The publishers describe this book as 'learned, peppery, scholarly, sprightly and unexpectedly provocative'. With the exception of the first and third epithets this would seem to be a fair appraisal of a compilation both cynical and naïve. Numerous field-work reports are used uncritically to support the author's theme that religion is the 'normal psychological adjustment by which human societies build a barrier of fantasy against fear'. The jocular style of writing accords well with an approach which is even less profound than it is original.

M. M. TEW.

THE UNITY OF EUROPEAN HISTORY. By John Bowles. (Cape; 18s.)

In the past we took Europe for granted. Today we are divided. Some are convinced that Europe is on its death bed and await its dissolution either with impatience or anxiety. Others are convinced that a splendid if slow recovery is just round the corner. All naturally turn to History. To the prodigal son it offers the support of autobiography while those who will have to compose his obituary must collect their ideas and cultivate their explanations.

Such is the situation today, and Mr Bowles's book is, in more ways than one, an admirable example of what that situation demands. 'To the generation which has grown up under the shadow of war', he writes, 'the unity and success of our civilisation have become obscure; yet still the historian may discover, as through a clearing mist, the permanent structure of the European tradition.' It is with the foundation, the development and the implications of that 'permanent structure' that Mr Bowles's book is concerned.

The broad outlines of the book are, it may be argued, familiar, but this is an argument which is not likely to carry much weight with those who are in touch with contemporary education. In many schools it is only the little patch of history which connects the French Revolution with our day which is seriously taught. An industrial proletariat, without roots, without property and without tradition, with the myths of Marx or of Hollywood for its folk-lore, must of necessity be barbarous. And it is this new barbarism which is forcing itself to the front. It provides us with a problem which is not unlike the problem which faced Bede in the days when England was new. The tradition of English historiography stretches from St Bede's day to our own and, after his own fashion, Mr Bowles is a writer in that august succession. Many English Catholics will see Europe and its past from a different angle, but it will be recognisably the same object as that at which Mr Bowles is looking, and they should learn much from his balance, his concision and his clarity.

T. CHARLES EDWARDS.