

Editorial: Gifford Lectures

There is an old and implausible story that the Seatonian Prize at Cambridge was at first reserved for 'a poem on one or more of the virtues of the Supreme Being' and that only 'when these shall have been exhausted' was the prize to be awarded for a treatment of any other sacred subject. Similar difficulties face the Gifford Trustees in an age of unreason that is nevertheless not an age of faith. Some of the problems have come to public attention recently because of an interesting experiment at Edinburgh and because of controversy about a broadcast version of one of Sir Alfred Ayer's Gifford Lectures at St Andrews.

The Edinburgh experiment was an ingenious and successful attempt to make Gifford Lectures as 'public and popular' as the terms of the trust require them to be. *The Nature of Mind* (Edinburgh University Press, 1972, £1.50) gives the texts of eight lectures and two discussions that formed the first year of a two-year programme. The second year's series will be published as *The Development of Mind*. The lecturers are Professor H. C. Longuet-Higgins, Mr J. R. Lucas, Professor C. H. Waddington and Dr A. J. P. Kenny. They have provided a useful survey of current debates about minds, brains, computers, animals and deep structures, faithful even in showing the cross-purposes that are inevitable in discussions of these issues between philosophers and biologists. The liveliness and informality ('... in Chomsky's latest book, which Kenny lent me on the 'plane this morning...') make a change from the dustiness of some earlier monuments, and we must not complain too much that the outcome is physically and spiritually slighter than *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Professor Ayer's critics seem to be confusing Lord Gifford with Lord Reith. It is specified in the founder's will that his lecturers 'may be so-called sceptics or agnostics or freethinkers, provided only that the "patrons" will use diligence to secure that they be able reverent men, true thinkers, sincere lovers of and earnest inquirers after truth'. On the non-legal issues the Trustees' case is equally strong. The most orthodox churchman may recognize that a greater contribution to theological understanding can be made by an able critic than by the vain repetition of traditional pieties. This should be at least as clear in a generation in which bishops and priests may profess an atheism almost as explicit as that of Professor Ayer as it was in the time of Xenophanes or Plato or Aquinas or any other contributor to 'negative theology'. It is not the first time that a series of Gifford Lectures has failed to redound directly to the glory of God. Jaeger's *Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* is hardly a devotional work. We are not so rich in first rate theologians that the Trustees can afford to ignore those who do not carry union cards.