

COMPARATIVE RELIGION. By A. C. Bouquet. (Penguin Books; 9d.)

It is no small achievement to give some account of religion in general and religions in particular in 239 pages, to throw in some illustrations and maps, a chart, a short bibliography and an index, and offer the whole to the reader at 9d. Detailed criticism of the treatment of so wide a field almost requires a board of experts. But as Dr. Bouquet claims to approach his subject strictly scientifically and impartially, something can at once be said about the section allotted to Christianity and many incidental references to it in the course of the book. The scientific method requires, as he says, that each religion must be allowed 'to speak for itself.' It is necessary to enter the caveat that his version of Christianity's account of itself is not that which would be given by the vast majority of Christians in this or any earlier period. That view is largely unrepresented. What is given is the view of those who hold 'that the understanding of the essential Christian announcement is much clearer now than it was fifty years ago.' The characteristic positions of that school of thought are displayed in all references to the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Eucharist, and by a somewhat patronising attitude to anything with which it happens to disagree. This is frequently described as 'sub-Christian.' Thus Dr. Bouquet remarks that 'a very considerable part of existing institutional Christian prayer and liturgy still lags at the sub-Christian level,' and adds 'this is no mere opinion, but is based upon a scientific observation of the materials available.' How the Christian datum-line is established we are not told, but this particular instance of sub-Christianity is discussed at some length, and it is possible to see 'scientific observation' at work upon it. Its purpose is to ascertain what Christ taught about petitionary prayer, and the stages in the argument are these:—

1. Most of the early Christians 'included in the large-scale conversions' already believed in 'naïve petitionary prayer.'

2. 'The Gospel records as we have them show signs here and there of having been corrupted (at least unconsciously) in a sub-Christian direction.'

3. 'These two considerations make it necessary that in stating the teaching of Jesus about petitionary prayer we should confine ourselves to the very few Logia which seem to give his teaching on the subject at first hand beyond a doubt.'

4. Exegesis of four Gospel passages thus selected, in considering one of which the datum-line is expressly used to decide interpretation ('such an interpretation, though common and conventional, is sub-Christian, and must be rejected'). It is surely impossible to avoid the conclusion that a Christian datum-line has been assumed from the outset and freely used, although the whole object of the investigation is precisely to ascertain what Christ's teaching about prayer really was. And a similar prejudgment lies behind a number of other references to traditional Christianity throughout the book. Dr.

Bouquet has told very readably what is really the most exciting and fascinating story in the world, and he would be the last to wish the reader not to do some thinking of his own upon it. But unfortunately the danger of such books as this in such series as this is that they may encourage the taste for effortless generalisation which is so popular a substitute for thinking. At least so far as Christian (and to a degree Hebrew) religion is concerned, there are presuppositions underlying some very confident assertions in this book which should be taken with more than a grain of thought.

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THE BURIAL OF CHRIST. By Professor Rahilly. (Cork University Press; 2s.)

Professor Rahilly, of Cork University, has given us a study on the Gospels and the Holy Shroud. Though the title of the book gives no clue to its thesis, the thesis is summed up thus:—

‘ . . . the Gospel accounts of our Lord’s burial leave a great number of details quite unsettled. The Evangelists deal only with the essential facts preceding the Resurrection . . . .

‘ It is therefore quite untenable to assert in the name of exegesis that we possess such a full account of all the events connected with the treatment and entombment of Christ’s body that we can, without further investigation, reject any alleged evidence that presents itself.

‘ A relic such as the Shroud of Turin must be examined on its merits ’ (p. 57).

We are of opinion that this moderate and scholarly thesis has been proved by Professor Rahilly. The wise limitations of his thesis are given in the following words: ‘ Perhaps—like the so-called Shroud of Cadonin, now shown to be an eleventh-century Mohammedan shawl—the Turin Shroud may one day be proved to be unauthentic. It is a question for Science and not for exegetical reasons ’ (p. 57).

A remark of Professor Rahilly suggests something of an investigation and reply. He says: ‘ The fact remains that Mary did not keep it ’ (*i.e.* the remainder of the alabaster box of ointment—*muron*). The use of *muron* is worth investigating; we give all the references.

We must never overlook the fact that almost every line in St. John’s Gospel is designed to fill a gap or resolve an ambiguity left by previous gossellers. If then our Lord’s defence of the Magdalen’s lavish outpouring of precious ointment is ambiguous in Matthew and Mark, St. John’s clear account settles the ambiguity. Judas, who seems to wish to save at least the remainder of the precious ointment still in the alabaster vase, is told to leave it (or her) alone, because she is keeping it against His burial.

Now this keeping of the remainder against His burial is precisely what is implied further on by St. Mark in the words: ‘ Mary Magdalen . . . bought sweet spices that coming they might anoint