

REVIEWS

THE PARADISE TREE. By Gerald Vann, O.P. (Collins; 18s.)

This book is fascinating and deserves, because of its chiefly symbolically orientated approach to religion, a unique place in religious literature. It might well prove to be the answer for many faithful Christians who run around in search of the soul of their religion and, like the young girl in Graham Greene's *Living Room*, at crucial periods in their lives do not get any real help either from their priest or from their religion. It is a permanent complaint that, for many, religion has become a dried up, almost empty, collection of duties and obligations. In this respect, Father Vann's book strikes a totally different note. Religion, as he is never tired of showing in his book, is first and foremost a mystery to be understood really only by symbols and symbolic thought. The Paradise Tree, the *Arbor Vitae*, Christ, his Wholeness and Oneness, is, apart from its essential value and significance, also an antidote for the over-specialization of modern times in which confusion has replaced understanding. The idea is not new but the way in which the author has succeeded in bringing the significance of the Tree to full blossom and, by this means, revealing the riches in religion and the 'poetry and music of the Bible' is the way of an artist who never forgets his allegiance to theology. Everything—the Commandments, the Sacraments, the Mass—comes to life in a new way and the Tree is seen stretching its roots and ramifications into ancient cultures and religions as well as modern ideas and psychology. The force which links all these seemingly different parts into one whole is the same structural pattern of the Tree which, although in endless variations of the theme, is made visible in all manifestations of life.

The secret behind this approach is the revival of symbolic thinking which, the author tells us, is inescapable. Although disregarded and mutilated in the nineteenth century, symbols were not completely destroyed but continued to have an underground existence. As many modern writers have shown, symbols are pointers to a world which cannot be grasped by reason or by reason alone; they penetrate into mysteries which lose their specific reality and truth if they are rationalized—i.e., if attempts are made to understand and explain them through the methods and concepts of scientific thinking.

Father Vann has found support for his artistic and symbolic approach to life and the life of the Church in the works of continental theologians like Professor Rahner, S.J., and Professor Jungmann, S.J., and, also, in the psychological writings of Professor C. G. Jung. The latter is frequently quoted but, as if to avoid a possible danger of being misunderstood through over-emphasis of the psychological and experiential

aspect, the author has often referred to the Fathers of the Church and brought into relief, for the reader, the realization that Jung echoes, in modern language, the truth expressed in early Christian times.

The book is so rich in ideas and, in any case for a layman, so full of new aspects on religion and spirituality that many will use it as a suitable source of meditation also. Of particular interest is the representation of the Mass. If the reader follows and responds to the author's approach, he will see the Mass in a new light. It will be more than a collection of pious prayers, preceding and following the Sacrifice; more than a Service in which he tries to participate actively. The inner structure of the Mass (half forgotten or hidden in the writings of the Fathers) with its gathering of so many traditional ideas into one whole, is shown afresh with such spontaneity and alertness that the reader may be helped to discover, or re-discover, that meaning in the Mass which was experienced by many in adolescence but lost since.

Father Vann does not present religion and religious questions as matters relating only to the spirit separated from the practical requirements of the life of the individual in our civilization. The Tree has its roots in Mother Earth and, therefore, it is only natural that, in the course of the development of his theme, Father Vann touches on problems, to name only a few, like those of work on Sunday, of nakedness, of sex and of the relation of ancient mystery religions on the one hand and the Christian *mysterium fidei* on the other. Although the book will not help the reader to change his own inner pattern of life (an aim, by the way, which is not only impossible to achieve but also undesirable because it would mean an unwillingness to accept the fundamental pattern of the providential plan); nevertheless it will help him to change his attitude towards himself and the world and, therefore, make him happier. The meaning in 'lactificat juventutem meam' is frequently stressed by Father Vann.

It is interesting to notice that booksellers and librarians have found that, for some long while, there has been an increasing demand by the reading public for religious books, especially those on Eastern religions. Although Buddhism and Yoga might be a craze, this shows that ignorant people and those in search of 'Truth' are unaware of the immense richness of their Christian heritage which includes all the truth found in the Eastern world. Father Vann's book is also a reliable guide to Eastern thought and it is to be hoped that it will find its way to those who, by their longing for metaphysical realities, are easily misled by pseudo-religious groups but whose spiritual longing could be directed to the discovery of the power of Christian symbolism by a primarily non-rational and more creative approach.

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