

REVIEWS

MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM. By Gershom G. Scholem.
(New York: Schocken Books; \$5.50.)

If mysticism must be written about, this volume based on lectures given in New York should provide a model of the way in which the subject should be approached. It combines that sympathy for the subject with scientific detachment which such works seldom display. On the one hand, the author takes his subject at its face value and never attempts either to explain it away in other terms, to exploit it in the interests of some theory or thesis, or to apologise for it. On the other, he refuses to be intimidated by it, to become uncritically identified with it, or to take *omne ignotum pro magifico*.

But not only is the book's manner admirable; its matter also is of absorbing interest. It rightly insists at the outset that 'there is no such thing as mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon of experience which has no particular relation to other religious phenomena'. Quoting St Thomas, and declining further restrictive qualifications, it understands by mysticism any experiential awareness of God, and traces the main currents of such manifestations in post-Biblical Judaism from the Merkabah ('Throne') visions and meditations of the early apocalypses down to contemporary Hassidism. In the course of this long and fascinating journey, it takes a very thorough view of the various and often contrasting 'schools' of Kabbalism, stripped of all the nonsense with which it has become encumbered, and does not disdain the 'anarchism' and 'nihilism' of the Sabbatian heresy.

Many a reader, for whom all this is unknown territory, could wish that these studies could be supplemented with many more texts and quotations from original sources: such few as he is given can only whet his appetite, and the remainder which the Notes leave in untranslated Hebrew will only tantalise his linguistic incompetence. Few instructed Christians could read the book without profit and instruction; but it will leave us with many perplexing problems. The author notes as characteristic of Jewish mysticism, in all its remarkable variety, its astonishing anonymity—the mystical writer (whose very identity is often unknown to us) is almost always concerned solely with describing the Glory of God and its manifestations, hardly ever himself or his own reactions (moreover 'he' is always a he, never a she!). On the other hand, while there is mystical union, there is seldom a trace of mystical identification—the infinite distance between Creator and Creature is always somehow but firmly upheld and realised. The puzzle, which it is no part

of the author's task to solve, is not so much that these features are characteristic of Jewry as that they are not always characteristic of Christianity. The solution of the problem presented by the fact that mysticism in Christendom seems often more akin to Plotinus or Sankaracharya than to anything rooted in the same Bible might illuminate many other mysteries of the ways of God.

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

DIE STIMME DER OSTKIRCHE. By Karl Fritz. (Evangelisches Verlagswerk; DM.7.20.)

The *Evangelisches Verlagswerk* in Stuttgart is constantly providing its Catholic brethren with fresh surprises and delights, as it has done by publishing the works of Hans Asmursen and by giving us this extremely attractive and nicely produced book on the spirituality of the Eastern Church by Karl Fritz. This is a subject upon which it is so easy for enthusiasts to lose their heads, and it is a tribute to Pastor Fritz that he has retained his head along with his enthusiasm. Perhaps this is to be set down to his having spent many years in vital contact with the Eastern Churches, four of them as a prisoner of war in Russia. In consequence *Die Stimme der Ostkirche* presents those of us who are interested in Eastern spirituality (but inexpert as well) with the concisest and most readable work that we have yet encountered.

Amongst the most valuable sections of the book is that in which Pastor Fritz illustrates, by quotations, how irrelevant are the accusations of 'anarchy' which Westerners so often direct against the Eastern Churches, and how different the whole question of dogma appears in the eyes of those for whom the liturgy itself is 'lived dogma', requiring no external guarantee. That is a point which touches Catholic critics most, but it is almost the only point in the book which does hit Catholics. For the surprising feature of Pastor Fritz's thesis lies in the very trenchant observations on the poverty of the Protestant tradition as compared with the Catholic tradition. It is surprising, because a Catholic cannot help wondering how Pastor Fritz would himself state the principles which keep him from accepting the fulness of the Catholic tradition which he has so brilliantly illustrated in these pages. It may even be that his personal contacts with Roman Catholics has convinced him that the Church has abandoned the great tradition and smothered the great basic truths of the Trinity and Transfiguration beneath a heap of petty devotions and stifling sentimentality. If so, we can only say '*Mea culpa*'—and that the Church has *not* abandoned the great tradition.

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