

BOOK REVIEWS

RELIGION AND THE MODERN MIND, by W. T. Stace. 285 pp. Philadelphia and New York, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1952. \$3.75.

One rarely expects a single book to raise important issues in the three fields of philosophy, ethics, and theology, yet W. T. Stace's *Religion and the Modern Mind* is just such a book. Its earlier portions exhibit the philosopher at his lucid best. Writing with a felicitous combination of clarity and insight, the author cuts away a mass of intellectual underbrush which, though it will doubtless grow back, need never again bother the careful student of his penetrating analyses. At a time when genuine philosophy is in danger of being gobbled up by the historical point of view, it is gratifying to hear reaffirmed Socrates' declaration that the point of philosophic concern is not the origin of an idea, but its truth or falsity. And at a time when the preoccupation with symbolism threatens human thinking with fantasy and confusion, it is equally heartening to be reminded that a symbol may legitimately be used only if its literal meaning can be given.

Mr. Stace's chief concern is the problem of moral values and their relation to religion. It will be difficult to refute his conclusions on three important points: that there can be no morality at all unless man is a free, purposive agent; that if values are only subjective, there is no escape from relativism; and that the fact of variety in ethical standards by no means establishes their relativity. He also aims a fatal thrust at traditional answers to the problem of evil, and deflates some of the common arguments for the existence of God.

Much of the book is devoted to a re-examination of the issue between science and religion, the author's thesis being that although the rise of science did in fact accomplish the decline of religion, this was due to an unfortunate misunderstanding of the nature of religion. And what is religion? His answer to this question is the turning point of the entire book. He believes that religion provides the strongest support for moral values, that all religions testify to an objective moral order and purpose at the heart of the universe. Yet his definition of "religion" is: ". . . a way of experiencing the world, in which all distinctions between one thing and another, including the distinction between the subject and object, self and not-self, are abolished, overcome, transcended, so that all the different things in the world become one, become identical with one another" (p. 230). What purports to be a generic definition thus only describes one particular species of religion, mysticism. In order to fit the three Biblical religions into this mold, he systematically ignores their orthodox teachings and appeals to their heretics.

A far more grievous difficulty, however, is the question: Is it possible to wring from this definition of "religion" any of the support for moral values with which Mr. Stace is so genuinely concerned? The answer of the Upanishads is echoed universally by the great mystics whom he elsewhere cites with such erudition. In the undifferentiated unity of "god," the distinction between good and evil no longer obtains: "He who truly understands . . . by no deed of his whatsoever is his world injured" (Kaushitaki Upanishad 3.1). Mr. Stace struggles manfully to deduce morality from this kind of religion. When he finally pulls "love thy neighbor" out of the hat, he has apparently forgotten what was the chief sin of Mahavira's first disciple: his love for Mahavira! Perhaps in tacit recognition of this bit of sleight of hand, he seeks to corroborate the ethic of love by deriving it from a purely naturalistic basis. But the transition from scientific rules of health to the Golden Rule is also done with mirrors.

This mésalliance between mystical metaphysic and ethical intent leads him inexorably to more and more flagrant departures from the very philosophic skill so beautifully exemplified in the earlier parts of the book. "Religious" symbols, he now pleads, are exempt from his own rule; they cannot be translated into literal meanings, but stand for a "deeper," ineffable truth. Human freedom, so stoutly insisted upon at the beginning of the book, is ultimately reduced to determinism. The concept of purpose, so important in the earlier pages, is eventually equated with mere desire. And finally, the objectivity of moral standards,

at first held to be essential to ethical theory, is in the end abandoned. Although the author does explicitly renounce the rules of logical consistency, the gravity of these contradictions is undiminished so long as he so rigorously applies these same logical rules to refute his opponents.

For Christian theology, the implications of Mr. Stace's writings is immense. By illustrating the manifold contradictions with which mystical doctrine is riddled, they exorcise the specter that has haunted so much contemporary thinking: the notion that mysticism is the only "systematic," philosophically respectable religion. Under the influence of this claim, "continental theology" has deliberately presented Christianity as unsystematic and irrational. Mr. Stace confronts this school with a chastening surprise. He shows that its paradoxes derive less from Christianity than from the very mysticism which it seeks to avoid. In consequence, the day may soon return when it is possible to be a Christian and still be reasonable. In return, Christianity might offer Mr. Stace a solid foundation for the moral dimensions of human life which he illumines with so much wisdom.

E. LA B. CHERBONNIER
Barnard College
Columbia University
New York, New York