

## THE ILIAD ILLUMINATED

NO civilization worthy of the name can reach a climactic point in its development without producing clear expressions of its meaning, and some account, also, of its fatal flaws. In the case of our own civilization, a technological and analytical culture, the most valuable "revelations" have been critical—disclosures of weakness, blindness, and delusion. One such disclosure is the essay by Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, first published in the December 1940 and January 1941 issues of the Marseilles monthly, *Cahiers du Sud*, later printed in Mary McCarthy's translation by Dwight Macdonald in *Politics* for November 1945, and now issued by Pendle Hill, the Quaker Center for religious and social studies (Wallingford, Pennsylvania), as Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 91 (35 cents).

Simone Weil's *Iliad* is not a commentary on the Homeric epic, but rather an illumination of its moral, comprised of a series of profound musings on the significance of the *Iliad* for our time. She begins:

The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of force it submits to. For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the *Iliad* could appear as an historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and loveliest of mirrors.

To define force—it is that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody at all; this is a spectacle the *Iliad* never wearies of showing us. . .

The revulsion felt by Simone Weil toward force is so complete, and at the same time so impersonal

and thoroughly human, that the agreement of the reader with her comes as a blinding light of truth. The use of force by men against one another is seen as a dread atavism, an intrusion from the irrational past. It is the blind energy of matter which men set in motion—*As when a ravening fire breaks out deep in a bushy wood*; or it is the instinct of wild animals run amok—*As when a lion, murderous, springs among the cattle*. The victim of force becomes a "thing." His speech loses meaning, he suffers his fate like a clod, defenseless, impotent. And the triumphant wielder of force also becomes a thing, for he too loses the power of speech. He becomes wanton in his violence, reduced to something less than man by his victory.

The juggernaut of force degrades all. There is no glory in the *Iliad*, only the pitiless compulsion to destroy:

The whole of the *Iliad* lies under the shadow of the greatest calamity the human race can experience—the destruction of a city. This calamity could not tear more at the heart had the poet been born in Troy. But the tone is not different when the Achæans are dying, far from home.

Insofar as this other life, the life of the living, seems calm and full, the brief evocations of the world of peace are felt as pain:

*With the break of dawn and the rising of  
the day,  
On both sides arrows few, men fell.  
But at the very hour that the woodcutter  
goes home to fix his meal,  
In the mountain valleys when his arms  
have had enough  
Of hacking great trees, and disgust rises in  
his heart,  
And the desire for sweet food seizes his  
entrails,  
At that hour, by their valor, the Danaans  
broke the front.*

Whatever is not war, whatever war destroys or threatens the *Iliad* wraps in poetry; the realities of

war, never. No reticence veils the step from life to death:

*Then his teeth flew out; from two sides,  
Blood came to his eyes; the blood that  
from lips and nostrils  
He was spilling, open-mouthed; death  
enveloped him in its black cloud.*

The cold brutality of the deeds of war is left undisguised; neither victors nor vanquished are admired, scorned, or hated. Almost always, fate and the gods decide the changing lot of the battle. Within the limits fixed by fate, the gods determine with sovereign authority victory and defeat. It is always they who provoke those fits of madness, those treacheries, which are forever blocking peace; war is their true business; their only motives caprice and malice. As for the warriors, victors or vanquished, those comparisons which liken them to beasts or things can inspire neither admiration nor contempt, but only regret that men are capable of being so transformed.

From a reading of this essay by Simone Weil, a new searching of the human visage may result. Who are these men who are willing, and even eager, to wreak violence? From what ancient madness do they suffer, and how has this ill so widely gripped the human race? In the *Iliad*, Simone Weil finds a consistent bitterness, "the only justifiable bitterness, for it springs from the subjection of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter."

In this sense, Simone Weil has restored metaphysics to criticism. For here is a judgment on the nature of man. This resort to force and violence is the continuing subjection of man to the law of the jungle, red in tooth and claw. From its use, men are men no longer, but "things." The man of violence is surrounded by an atmosphere, so that his deficit in humanity is felt by others. The horror we experience of a man engaged in acts of violence is like the horror of a psychopath: here is one who has forgotten what it means to be a man. He borrows from the less-than-human forces, becoming an illicit trafficker in blind and irresponsible energies, which thereupon obsess him, like a wicked spirit. Why should not "the gods" allot the destiny of those who choose to act with force? They have given away their birthright and no longer own their lives.

Simone Weil makes frontal attack on an all-consuming delusion of the West: the delusion that it is possible to give rational measure to the employment of force or violence. The man who relies on force becomes its debtor, finally its slave. It was America's debt to violence which loosed the atom bombs over Hiroshima. Britain's violent heritage exerted its compulsion against all modern ideas of international morality to cause the bombing of Port Said. And in Hungary, the same cruel master issues its commands to the Communist administrators.

The gracious and tender soldier—the compassionate conqueror—where is he? There may have been such commanders and fighting men in ancient times. Lao-tze speaks of them as though they have existed. Asoka became such, perhaps, when he renounced war. In the *Iliad* he is represented by Patroclus—

who "knew how to be sweet to everybody," and who throughout the *Iliad* commits no cruel or brutal act. But then how many men do we know, in several thousand years of human history, who would have displayed such god-like generosity? Two or three—even this is doubtful. Lacking this generosity, the conquering soldier is like a scourge of nature. Possessed by war, he, like the slave, becomes a thing, though his manner of doing so is different—over him too, words are as powerless as over matter itself. And both, at the touch of force, experience its inevitable effects: they become deaf and dumb. . . .

A moderate use for force, which alone would enable man to escape being enmeshed in its machinery, would require superhuman virtue, which is as rare as dignity in weakness. Moreover, moderation itself is not without its perils, since prestige, from which force derives at least three quarters of its strength, rests principally upon that marvellous indifference that the strong feel toward the weak, an indifference so contagious that it infects the very people who are the objects of it.

Simone Weil declares the *Iliad* a work of genius, a true epic—the only one possessed by the West—for the reason that it shows man at grips with his destiny, in an hour of retributive justice. Here, nakedly portrayed, are the forces which play about man, and the destiny which is of his own making. This is a peculiarly Greek conception, although

Simone Weil Ends it repeated for the last time in the Gospels—"The Gospels," she says "are the last marvelous expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first."

The *Iliad*, Simone Weil suggests, shows how "those who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed." She continues:

But at the time their own destruction seems impossible to them. For they do not see that the force in their possession is only a limited quantity; nor do they see their relations with other human beings as a kind of balance between unequal amounts of force. Since other people do not impose on their movements that halt, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity, they conclude that destiny has given complete license to them, and none at all to their inferiors. And at this point they exceed the measure of the force that is actually at their disposal. Inevitably they exceed it, since they are not aware that it is limited. And now we see them committed irretrievably to chance; suddenly things cease to obey them. Sometimes chance is kind to them, sometimes cruel. But in any case there they are, exposed, open to misfortune; gone is the armor of power that formerly protected their naked souls; nothing, no shield, stands between them and tears.

This retribution, which has a geometrical rigor, which operates automatically to penalize the abuse of force, was the main subject of Greek thought. It is the soul of the epic. Under the name of Nemesis, it functions as the mainspring of Æschylus' tragedies. To the Pythagoreans, to Socrates and Plato, it was the jumping-off point of speculation upon the nature of man and the universe. Wherever Hellenism has penetrated, we find the idea of it familiar. In Oriental countries which are steeped in Buddhism, it is perhaps this Greek idea that has lived on under the name of Karma. The Occident, however, has lost it, and no longer has even a word to express it in any of its languages: conceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics. We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all, geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue.

Whether or not the Greeks were the teachers or the learners in relation to Eastern ideas of Karma is not now a point needing argument; the question which demands attention is whether the West should

take account of its need of a sense of proportion, of measure, in relation to its destiny. Are we able to reveal the meaning of our wars and addiction to violence, so that future generations will be able to say that, for all our follies and vanities, we at least learned some truth?

No one has written so verbosely of the dignity of man as Western authors; yet no civilization has found less grounds for faith in human dignity in its theories and beliefs. We have a literature, and we have made discoveries of both physical and psychological scope, but where are our epics to contain a sense of the sweep of meaning in human life?

We have nationalist chants, but no great declarations of the human spirit to be compared with the *Iliad*. As Simone Weil says:

. . . nothing is so rare as to see misfortune fairly portrayed; the tendency is either to treat the unfortunate person as though catastrophe were his natural vocation, or to ignore the effects of misfortune on the soul, to assume, that is, that the soul can suffer and remain unmarked by it, can fail, in fact, to be recast in misfortune's image. The Greeks, generally speaking, were endowed with spiritual force that allowed them to avoid self-deception. The rewards of this were great; they discovered how to achieve in all their acts the greatest lucidity, purity, and simplicity. But the spirit that was transmitted from the *Iliad* to the Gospels by way of the tragic poets was destroyed, nothing remained of this spirit but pale reflections.

But Simone Weil is no pale reflection. This essay deserves a place with the writings of those who have remade and regenerated their times. If another Renaissance is to come, Simone Weil will have had a part in the rebirth.

## *Letter from* **ENGLAND**

SUSSEX.—It is probably true to say that not since the Boer War has this country felt so intensely about a government's actions as it has about the invasion of Egypt. Men and women feel equally passionately, both in the rightness of the invasion, and in its criminality. From the first stunning news the issue has been fogged for millions by a confusion of motives: we invaded to forestall Russia; we invaded, in the role of self-appointed police, to separate two combatants. We acted to "put out a forest fire"—to obviate the danger of the outburst of a third world war. And so on. Only later, obliquely, and through indiscretions, and the unconsidered phrase, did the central disturbing truth emerge: we were out to capture the Suez Canal by force of arms.

In England the popular press is conservative, with the exception of Labour's *Daily Herald*, and London's *News-Chronicle*, and Manchester's great organ of opinion, the *Guardian*, and the *Sunday Observer*. Consequently, the pro-government voice was so loud as to drown the opposition's, so far as the press was concerned. Estimates of the country's reactions varied. We were told the great majority were behind the government, and, undoubtedly, many whose daily diet has been one of half-truths and distortions, have lost their way in an excusable confusion. For this bloc of opinion has considered the invasion of Egypt from any angle save the only one, in the writer's opinion, which was germane to the issue, namely, its morality and legality. By both those criteria this country must stand condemned today before the bar of world opinion, and it is that knowledge which is as bitter aloes in the mouth, for not only what has evolved as the Rule of Law in the House of Commons, but for unnumbered simple men and women who are shocked and bewildered by an act which—though the parallel has not anywhere been made—challenges some degree of comparison with Pearl Harbour.

But, now, slowly, and, one hopes, inevitably, are coming second thoughts. They have been stimulated by no change of heart, one may hazard, so much as by the dawning realization of the political and economic consequences which are already following hard upon the heels of Eden's policy. Factories, long encouraged by the government to go over to heavy oil, are beginning to work part time. Petrol is by ration by the time this letter sees the light. And gradually one senses the articulation of a nation-wide dislocation of daily life, with decreasing employment, rising cost of living, and shortage of commodities.

Where, then, should one look for one's values? The motivation behind this amazing coup? The political case is, as has been observed, befogged, as it is also bedevilled. Yet the issue is as simple as any issue could be, namely, the morality of the act. It is not pleasant to write as a critic of one's own country, but to say that this aggression against Egypt was a crime is not to do that, for such is the view of some of the best minds in Britain today. For decades we have hammered on the theme of the central necessity of the world today—the rule of law. And now we stand convicted of an act which constitutes its cynical abrogation. Had we declared war on Egypt, saying, in effect: We simply *must* have the Suez Canal, the world might have felt a certain sympathy for Britain. But we struck behind the backs of our friends at a state with which we were, technically, in terms of peace, striking after the issue of an ultimatum no state could have accepted and before the zero hour named therein.

Prophecy is dangerous, but the signs are not wanting that sooner or later the swing of public opinion will tend towards condemnation of the government, rather than condonation. For many who, though not in the Conservative camp, have always deemed Sir Anthony Eden a man of honour and integrity, the Suez Affair has come as a tremendous shock. One falls back in astonishment that an honest man can be so dishonest. And that stricture goes, too, for those

members of the government who have gone all out to convince the country that black is white, and that dragon's teeth can provide a good and sustaining meal. As to the effect of this tragedy—for that it is, and, at that, not only for the innocent slain—upon Anglo-American relations, one can do no better than paraphrase the broadcast phrases of Alistair Cook which came over the air this afternoon, namely, that one cannot speak of "American" and "British" opinion, feeling or what-not, since the two starkly opposed viewpoints have adherents on both sides of the Atlantic. There remains but one disservice the present Government could add to the disaster it has brought upon Britain: it is to denigrate the President of the United States, and to suggest hostility where righteous wrath very properly animates the occupant of the White House. And how many millions of lesser folk throughout the world, who can say!

ENGLISH CORRESPONDENT

## *REVIEW*

### MORALITY AND VIRTUE

THE inner as well as the outer life of a nun of the Roman Catholic Church is not a subject which commonly excites the interest of MANAS reviewers, but Kathryn Hulme's *Atlantic* novel, *The Nun's Story* (Little, Brown, 1956), is a book that compels attention. It has in common with Dostoevsky's famous chapter on the Grand Inquisitor (in *The Brothers Karamazov*) the quality of simple, untendentious recital, which never condemns nor even "criticizes," yet completely reveals.

It is the story of Sister Luke, a Belgian girl who gives up marriage (her physician father believed marriage unwise for reasons of heredity) to enter a nursing order of Catholic nuns. Rigor, resolve, self-denial, and a flaming intensity of purpose are the qualities which grow to maturity in Sister Luke, as she follows her path through months as a novice, to final vows, and then to a hospital in the Belgian Congo.

There is something about the life of these nuns which recalls the incredible discipline of the ballet dancer. The life has its own formal sort of beauty, yet the rigid pattern of behavior that results seems an unbearable mutilation of the human psyche. One begins the book, expecting to dislike it intensely—or, at any rate, to dislike the gross insensibility of monasticism to normal life. Miss Hulme does not win the reader with an apologetic for nunneries, but her account of this extraordinary experience which came to a young woman of more than ordinary intelligence succeeds in winning at least the grudging admission that here was a girl who made the most of being a nun. One finds with relief that when Sister Luke is blocked by her nun's "way of life" from continuing to greater fulfillment as a nurse, she stops being a nun.

The lesson which grows from this book is that almost any sort of life, lived to the limit, produces values which are worth-while in

themselves and at the same time creates a portal to better things. Sister Luke is never half-hearted in what she does. When she finds it impossible to be the kind of a nun she feels she ought to be, she returns to the world without reluctance and without regret. She feels no bitterness toward the order and suffers no torturing indecision in the final choice. She is freed of worried agonizing by the honest knowledge that she has done her best.

Externally, the conflict centers about Sister Luke's resistance to particular rules of the order. Eventually, however, she comes to realize that a principle is involved. It was the demand for "obedience" to the extent of violating her natural feelings that drove Sister Luke from the order. She tries to explain why she is leaving to the Superior General, whom she greatly respects:

"In the beginning," she said, "each struggle seemed different from the preceding. No two ever seemed for the same cause, until they began to repeat and then I saw they all had the same core. Obedience, Reverend Mother. Obedience without question, obedience without inner murmuring, obedience blind, instantaneous, perfect in its acceptance as Christ practiced it. . . as I can no longer do. My conscience asks questions, Reverend Mother. When the bell calls to chapel and I have to sacrifice what might be the psychological moment in a spiritual talk with a patient, my conscience asks which has priority—it or the Holy Rule. In my mind, I have never been able to make this clear. . . ."

"I believe that most of my failure stems from this conflict. There are times, Reverend Mother, when my conscience decides I must do something opposite to my Superior's wishes. . . . Late every day for chapel or refectory or both. That's how far this has gone, you see. I hear the bells but I can no longer cut short a talk with a patient who seems to need me. When I have night duty, I break the grand silence, because that is the time when nature relaxes, gives a little peace and sometimes makes men in trouble want to talk about their souls. And that is the time when reason begins to query the Rule most unanswerably. Why must God's helpers be struck dumb by five bells in the very hours when spirits expand and seek to communicate?"

So Sister Luke leaves the order and rebecomes Gabrielle Van der Mal, after nearly

twenty years within the cloister. Her hair is not yet gray.

There is no theology in this book, no questioning of dogma or wondering about creed. There is not the slightest feeling of irreligion. Yet the entire book poses one great question—a question which must be forever asked and yet can never be finally answered in any but individual terms. The imposing institutions which in large measure shape, if they do not control, our lives—how badly do we need them?

Could Gabrielle have found in some other way the strength and the personal dignity which she obtained from her training in the order? It would be easy to jeer at the conventionality of her father's desire that she refuse marriage because of insanity in the family, and to feel superior to this young girl's dream of a life as a self-sacrificing nursing sister among the primitive people of the Congo. But the book makes short conquest of such reactions. Gabrielle turns these decisions into acts of high integrity. The social criticism of nunneries may stand, but the humanity of this woman can only be admired.

Then there is the discipline of the order, the daily examination of conscience, the ruthless exposure of every vagrant impulse which deviates from the commitment to a life in the service of Christ. Can anything like this be duplicated *without* the oppressions of an external "obedience" to some human Superior? Could an individual decide to be answerable to conscience alone? The sagacity of centuries is behind the routines of the monastic life. The discipline it produces has a pale glory, but what, exactly, is the price?

Every man who seeks the security of a human institution can gain the order and discipline it affords. From institutions a man—or woman—can obtain the full morality of his time, but what does he give up?

In a bulletin reporting the seminar of a psychiatric research group, some comments by Dr. Alan Gregg throw light on this question. The

discussion centered around the issue of conformity. He said to the participants in the seminar:

I think you are in the problem or the area of something that has interested me for a long time, namely, the distinction between the Greek idea of virtue and the Roman idea of morality. The Greek idea of virtue is an extraordinarily simple one. It was that your conduct be consistent with your convictions. The Roman idea of morality was that your conduct be that which is expected of your station in society, your age and maybe your sex, but, at any rate, your station in society, and what is expected of you. It takes only a moment's reflection to realize that you can be virtuous without being moral and you can also be moral without being virtuous.

Institutions, insofar as they are the guardians of order, are quite plainly the source of the rules of morality. People can "get along" if they follow these rules. They can get along with insufficient or even no convictions, so long as they do "what is expected" of them. Further, institutions are useful, even indispensable, for supplying guidance in behavior to those who are as yet uncertain about their convictions—who have not been able to decide what *virtue* is. But institutions easily become subversive of the highest human capacities, when they are allowed to replace convictions. A society heavily dominated by the rules of institutions has the tendency to produce men without convictions, men who do not even realize that there is a difference between virtue and morality. Kathryn Hulme's *A Nun's Story* makes long thoughts of this sort inescapable.

## COMMENTARY SIMONE WEIL

BY happy juxtaposition, two profound appreciations of the ancient Greeks appear in this issue—one in the passages from Simone Weil's *Iliad*, the other in an observation by Alan Gregg at the end of the Review. Simone Weil speaks of the Greeks' "apprenticeship to virtue," and Dr. Gregg gives the Greek understanding of virtue—"that your conduct be consistent with your convictions."

If there be any truth in reincarnation, Simone Weil was surely a Greek reborn. Her life was one long ardor of virtue in the Greek sense, although in years very short. She died in England in 1943, of tuberculosis, and of the privations imposed by war and by herself—she would eat no more than the meagre rations her countrymen were then allowed in occupied France.

A graduate of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Simone Weil was a teacher of philosophy, mathematics, and Greek language and literature. In a biographical note by "Candide" at the end of one of her articles, printed by Macdonald in *Politics*, this is said of her teaching days:

But even more than her encyclopedic knowledge, tirelessly striving to capture the inmost essence of things, it was her personal honesty and her delicate sense of human relations that won the admiration and love of her pupils. Outside the academic world, also, this girl of insignificant appearance and unassuming manner, with a frail body and a fiery spirit, made a deep impression on all who came to know her.

Instinctively she identified herself with the poor and the suffering. In order to grasp at first hand the psychological effects on workers of modern mechanization and technology, she gave up teaching for two years in order to work in the Renault factory and Parisian metal plants. She joined the radical movement, so that as the *Politics* note relates, "In theory as well as in daily practice she came to know Communism, Trotskyism, Syndicalism, outgrowing them all rapidly through experience and through her own intellectual efforts." With the first shots of the Civil War, she went to Spain to help the Loyalists, seeking out the humblest tasks.

Simone Weil accomplished an extraordinary synthesis of classical culture, modern radical idealism, and intuitive, personal religion. The combination is thoroughly articulated in feeling, if not with clear intellectual consistency, in her book, *The Need for Roots* (Putnam, 1952), written just before she died. "Candide" says this about her:

The ten years of her militant life in today's "*monde inhabitable*" (Saint-Exupéry), were years of unspeakable torments: physical suffering from headaches no doctor could cure, and moral suffering at the thought of the cruelties inflicted by the totalitarian regimes and of the hideous foreshadowings of total warfare. She bore it all with a stoic serenity, buoyed up by an ardent religious feeling which grew increasingly strong in her and which brought her ever closer to Christianity. (It is hardly necessary to add that her transcendental concept of Christianity had nothing in common with the business enterprises which go under that name.)

With the fall of France, she was dismissed from her university post because of the racist laws imposed by the Germans. In 1942 she came with her family to the United States, but could not remain. She returned to England to take part in the struggle—and to die.

*The Need for Roots* was written for the Free French authorities in London, who asked Simone Weil to compose recommendations for the regeneration of French education and government after the war. The publishers suggest that the Free French did not quite know how to employ a woman of genius; even less could they have known what to do with so unconventional a "report"! And although, today, the process of making her "respectable" has already set in—did she not show an interest in "religion"?—Simone Weil will remain a true revolutionary spirit of our time, one whose fire was never quenched, but died for lack of fuel.



## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves NOTES IN PASSING

THOUGH both the events and the shouting are long over by this time, a series of "follow-up" comments on the psychological results of the Olympic Games in Australia reminds us that the educational advantages of athletic striving should never be discounted. For one thing, the child who is encouraged to "train" toward creditable performance in any of the Olympic sports becomes a comrade under-the-skin to children in other countries who share in the discipline of physical undertaking. And then, adults interested in amateur athletics often see beyond politics.

Two articles by Larry Montague in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (Nov. 29 and Dec. 13) reveal many of the high hopes of the last Olympic Committee—and that they were fulfilled in part. The opening address of welcome to the assembled athletes at Melbourne, according to Mr. Montague, "dwelt on the fact that the Olympic spirit outrides the storms of international misunderstandings, and expressed the hope that this festival of sport would kindle in all countries the enthusiasm and urgent desire to uphold that spirit." Mr. Montague develops this theme further in a Dec. 13 *Guardian* report, titled "The True Olympic Spirit":

At a special press interview Mr. Avery Brundage, president of the International Olympic Committee, added his word. Speaking of his own and the committee's satisfaction with the organisation and the atmosphere of the Games, he stressed once more the importance of this festival of youth in the world at large. He pointed out that the movement of the Hungarian team out of its country had been made possible only by what was really the first modern example of an Olympic truce, that the Olympics alone had combined the two Germanys into one team, that representatives of countries which have no diplomatic relations have been brought together in harmony here. He reminded us that before now the I.O.C. had been mentioned for the Nobel Peace Prize and thought it would be again. Altogether the success of the Games in a time of such international tension had made both him and the committee most happy.

Even a casual reading of the American sports pages during the Olympiad occasioned some pleasant

surprises. The Russians, standoffish as all-get-out at Helsinki the last time, displayed an entirely different spirit in Australia. No longer holing up in their private village, they fraternized whenever possible with the athletes of other countries, showing what seemed genuine admiration for the capabilities of the American track and field contingent. Even before the games had begun, Russian spokesmen conceded victory in this department, with no show of chagrin—nor, as the press releases indicated, could this have been based on the anticipation that Russia would eventually amass the greater number of points in other areas of competition. The Americans, in their turn, seemed to feel a natural sense of fraternity with friendly Russian rivals.

Any high-school boy who seriously takes up athletic training for other than prestige reasons, we should say, not only finds it the most natural of outlets for his competitive instincts, but also learns more about himself. And learning more about oneself inevitably makes for a greater tolerance and understanding of other people. So, in this age of mechanization, white-collar jobs, and an automobile for everyone, let's give athletic enterprise its due. Girls need this sort of endeavor, also, and further development in the direction of girl athletics will probably follow the challenge set by the U.S.S.R. Today Russian and other female athletes dominate the world's scene, and while this is not the best of all possible inducements for making women's athletics popular in the United States, it should certainly help.

Speaking of Russia, it occurred to us that MANAS readers might be interested in some notes by Morris Ernst on Russian primary schools, which appeared in the *American Scholar* (Winter, 1956-57). Mr. Ernst, of course, reports strict disciplinary procedures in the U.S.S.R., with much less emphasis on individual expression than in our own elementary systems—precisely as one would expect. But the Russians have carried the experiment of the "school community" much further than we have. In all countries, there are children whose parents do not have enough time or attention to give them—or children who are distraught from various pressures. For those, a school community might not be such a bad idea. In any case, Mr. Ernst's notes provide an interesting

outlook on the "human" side of life beyond the Iron Curtain. He writes:

The kindergarten was superb in atmosphere and equipment, run by a kindly, elderly woman who obviously understood kids. She spoke almost no English, and I no Russian, but as fellow teachers we were *en rapport*. The building, in a new industrial section some miles from the center of Moscow, surrounded by modern housing, factories, and leftover log-cabin slums, was two-storied, not new, set in big grounds with trees, playhouses, garden plots, jungle gyms, a small outdoor puppet show stage. When we arrived, about two, all the children were asleep—and I mean *all*—on glassed-in sleeping porches, in iron beds which were made up with clean sheets, blankets, pillows. Each child wore a hooded blue or yellow sleeping bag over a nightgown. Clothes were neatly folded on kindergarten chairs. The kids looked rosy and well. It was remarkable to see even the six-year-olds sound asleep—by the time they become this age, our children are too excited to nap.

There are one hundred children in this school, with a teacher and an assistant for each twenty-five. The hours are 7:30 to 7:30, the mother leaving the child on her way to work and picking him up *after* her home supper. The school is open twelve months.

When the children woke up, they came in quietly, undressed, from the porch—the nudity of boys and girls is taken as a matter of course—dressed themselves, and then started to play very quietly.

Our lovely Leningrad interpreter told us that before the Revolution only 10 per cent of the population could read and write. Now, except for old people like her grandmother, 90 per cent can. So I guess they've achieved a miracle, though they've got a long way to go in terms of Western education—that is, the best American education. (Some of our schools have a long road, too.)

Some twenty years ago, the present writer made fortunate acquaintance with a college professor who occasionally invited "lay" graduates to return and talk to his senior class in ethics and human problems. This innovation seems now, as it did then, an excellent and natural means for penetrating the veil of professionalism in education. This particular professor taught philosophy, and knew that philosophy was really just the thinking of men. The former student who found time, after graduation, to play an interested

role in Great Books discussion groups, or follow a theme of speculation or ethical theorizing which had direct personal appeal, helped this professor to teach the meaning of philosophy by his very presence—conveying the idea that a university course is ideally intended to prepare students for continuing self-education.

The principle involved in encouraging laymen to share the adventures of open discussion with undergraduates might be invoked in behalf of the present teacher shortage. And we may have greater need for a fresh view of the possible capacities of laymen in education than, even, for a greater number of "qualified" teachers.

The "qualified" teachers are bound to include those who simply "go by the book." Having been carefully guided through their own teacher-training, they may never have had to experience more than a modicum of ingenuity in "breaking through" or "reaching" their pupils. In the same manner that an "up from the ranks" soldier makes an excellent commander, so might laymen who are psychologically ready for the job of teaching—enthusiastic but also hardheaded—enrich the teaching profession.

## FRONTIERS

### Religion—A Philosophic Enterprise

THERE is little doubt that even the partisans among contemporary writers on religion reflect a feeling of obligation to reform theological precepts to suit a philosophical context. With the exception of extreme Fundamentalist sects, even the most popular revivalists seem more rational these days, while Catholic writers are getting to sound more and more like professors! The intelligent Christian believer seems to invite consideration of his faith as having its roots in symbolic rather than in literal truth. If we assess the matter clearly, it appears that we are witnessing a pronounced decline in sectarianism, the chief agent of change being the expanding science of psychology.

An article by George Hedley, Chaplain at Mills College, entitled "Frontiers of Religion" (November *Harper's*), shows some appreciation of this viewpoint. Though, as Dr. Hedley says, "religion is probably the hardest subject in the world to approach objectively, nevertheless in recent years the scholarly study of religion as one of the fundamental ways of human acting, thinking, and feeling—and as our most rewarding way of reaching out beyond ourselves—has developed with a speed and a scope unparalleled in the past." He continues:

The literature, history, and psychology of religion have become separate disciplines. The search for meaning has led to a new and intense interest in the philosophy of religion, and in the exploration of symbolic means of religious expression—in liturgies, in the arts, and above all in theology. Even the emotional and symbolic limitations to what we call the "scientific method" of scholarship are leading to new understanding when studied in themselves.

While Dr. Hedley thinks that "Christ revealed in the historic man Jesus is best designed to reflect the confrontation of infinite man by the infinite God"—thus leaving out of account such beings as Buddha—his interpretation of God is most unsectarian, at least until one comes to the last brief sentence:

These are the inevitable polarities of religion: deity and humanity, intuition and research, spirit and body. Can there be a genuine nexus within each of the pairs? Or are we trapped forever in the abysses that lie between? The basic problem of religious

scholarship seems to be the very problem of religion itself. Questing for answer, St. Anselm of Canterbury asked the question, "*Cur deus homo?*"—"Why a God-man?" The seeker of today continues to inquire, "How does God come to man?"

Why a God-man? The answer is myth, if we will, but it is the kind of myth that alone will lead us nearer to ultimate truth. The myth of the incarnation, "that God became man by necessity," is the nearest that man yet has come to bridging the gap between himself and the creative and sustaining force which undergirds all being. "The *Logos* became flesh, and dwelt among us." This is a considered philosophy. It is vaulting imagination. It is the core of the Christian faith.

One might agree that the idea that "God became man by necessity" is the core of the Christian *faith*, but certainly, God as super-authority, an external symbol of strength, has been the core of orthodox *belief*. Dr. Hedley is apparently willing to recognize this, if only in passing, since he writes that "the danger of symbolism is obvious. It is idolatry. 'These be thy gods, O Israel!' has been applicable not only to the golden calves of Aaron, but also to statues of St. Mary the Virgin, to the creeds of the Church, to days of fasting and festival, to the absolutist formulas of Midwestern fundamentalism. It always is idolatry to confuse the symbol with the reality."

Turning to the December 1956 *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, one encounters a worth-while series on "Science and Religion." The symposium conducted under that title is explained by the editors as a fitting sequel to ten years of *Bulletin* publication. The editors say:

We have intended to deal in this part, as in the whole of our symposium, not so much with the permanent (or supposedly permanent) ideas and relationships as with the changes which the recent explosive development of science has wrought in the political, social, economic, and spiritual state of mankind. We have been only partially successful, and this applies in particular to some of the articles in this issue—perhaps unavoidably, since many will argue that the relation between science and religion is not subject to evolution.

In the first article, Maurice Visscher, representing Scientific Positivism, rephrases an old, "hard-headed" argument against Supernaturalism. He points out that the positivist mood of today has not resulted from

preaching, but from the pressure of "stark realities." He continues:

Perhaps only stark reality can change folkways so firmly imbedded in cultures as those related to international mass killing as the way to settle disputes. Certainly our older religions have not been able to accomplish the change, despite the fact that their ethics prohibit killing and stress the brotherhood of all men. Is it not possible that an ethics based on intelligent long-range self-interest might be more effective in encouraging behavior as brothers? Humanistic or naturalistic ethics arrive at basically the same fundamental moral principles as those that are proclaimed by the historic revealed religions. The major difference is that the humanistic ethics says that men will be better off in the long run if they behave in certain ways, while the revealed religions say that rules of conduct which must be obeyed have been laid down by a Supreme Being. Perhaps we have underestimated human intelligence and would get along better if we appealed to man's self-interest through reason rather than to his fear of punishment or hope for reward in an uncertain after-life. If so, the scientific enterprises would have a great deal to do in implementing such a program.

Visscher obviously cannot agree to Hedley's insistence that the relationship of God to man, as presented by theology, is constructive. The Supreme Being, according to Visscher, is a threatening authoritarian. But it is difficult to be sure that the rational appeal to "self-interest," upon which Visscher relies, is really better than the appeal to fear of punishment in an after-life. The emphasis is still negative, and we still have "man for himself," or "man against himself."

The second article of the *Bulletin* series is by Edmund Sinnott, Dean of the Yale Graduate School. Dr. Sinnott undertakes to link man, nature, and symbolic religion through awareness of the purposefulness of all organic life. Sinnott, like Joseph Wood Krutch, objects to the supposedly scientific claim that man is simply a creature of forces beyond his control. Whether God or biological and economic circumstances determine man's life, he is, on either view, permitted to think of himself only as a pawn in some game he had no hand in making. Though Sinnott may occasionally be vague and mystical, we think he is also more than a little profound:

Psychologists are inclined to regard man as an "empty" organism which receives all its qualities through the effects of environment and conditioning. To think that life naturally seeks beauty and spiritual values will seem to them preposterous.

Beyond the boundaries of intellect, however, man feels the drawing power of goals of quite a different character. Here beauty makes its great appeal to him, not primarily to his intellect (though partly so) but to his inner feelings, to something deeper and more primitive within him. Beauty cannot be measured or described. It must be experienced. We are drawn to it not because of any usefulness it may have for man in evolution, but from a *natural* love of it arising in our value-seeking living systems.

Beyond aesthetic satisfaction, in turn, is for many people the deep inner yearning for a higher value still, for an unseen spiritual presence in the universe, and the conviction, shared by hosts of men through the ages, that one can communicate with it and draw assurance from it through those experiences that are called religious. For this spiritual quest the biological basis, if we can speak of such, is the same as it is for beauty and other values. If one believes that beauty is a part of the universe and not simply a subjective feeling in the mind of man, so he may believe in the existence of a universal spirit. This is man's highest value and one to which life naturally aspires. On this conception religion is to be regarded as an attempt to satisfy man's loftiest desires, the expression of spiritual goals within him toward the attainment of which he is strongly drawn. The closest contact with reality for many people is through this unexplained, mysterious urgency in life experienced in flashes of insight, for these carry with them a great weight of authority.

Remains the absorbing task of defining the meaning of "flashes of insight" and the "mysterious urgency in life" which tends towards realization in the least partisan, and it suggests that the more enlightened man of the future may discover that both psychology and religion are his own personal business.