

over, according to Fr. Ong, who relates the work of Milman Perry and other scholars, "it became evident that only a tiny fraction of the words in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not parts of formulas, and to a degree devastatingly predictable formulas." He adds, "Homeric Greeks valued clichés because not only the poets but the entire oral poetic world or thought world relied upon the formulaic constitution of thought." Smugness about being beyond cliché is hard to maintain in light of the approach taken by the most revered of all ancients.

Fr. Ong's book is part of a series published by Methuen with the colophon "New Accents." The series includes *Structuralism and Semiotics*, *Linguistics and the Novel*, *Formalism and Marxism*, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, and other similar titles. The topics covered by those books are influencing or will influence the way people read and write. Fr.

Ong's text is both an excellent starting point for the pursuit of studies in those areas, and, more, a challenge to some of the theories proposed in them. To wit: "Jacques Derrida has made the point that 'there is no linguistic sign before writing.' But neither is there a linguistic 'sign' after writing if the oral reference of the written text is averted to." As Fr. Ong explains in a passage worth pondering by deconstructionists as well as other intelligent literates: "What the reader is seeing on this page are not real words but coded symbols whereby a properly informed human being can evoke in his or her consciousness real words, in actual or imagined sound. It is impossible for script to be more than marks on a surface unless it is used by a conscious human being as a cue to sounded words, real or imagined, directly or indirectly." Such rigor indicates that the Church is still an abiding force in the maintenance of literature. □

IN FOCUS

The Trials of Translators

Acts and Letters of the Apostles; Translated by Richard Lattimore; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

The difficulties that translators of Scripture face have changed rather dramatically over the centuries. John Wycliffe, "The Morning Star of the Reformation" who initiated the first English translation of the Bible, battled vigorous Church opposition to his efforts. Indeed, after his death, the Pope ordered his body exhumed and burned to express antipathy for his attempt to render Scrip-

ture in the vernacular. More than a century later when William Tyndale printed the first English New Testament in Cologne, Church authorities were again fiery in their wrath, burning all copies sent to England for distribution and putting the torch to the translator himself—this time *before* death. Nowadays, Bible translators could almost (but not quite) *wish* for such heated attention. No one is now burning Tyndale's masterful prose, largely preserved in the Authorized or King James Version of the Bible, but then relatively few people are reading it

either—except perhaps as a purely philological exercise. One of the reasons for this neglect is that English is not now quite the same language that Tyndale wrote; many modern readers are put off by *ye* and *thou* and are confused when *let* is used to mean "hinder," *coasts* to mean "boundaries," and *prevent* to mean "go or speak before." A less important reason is that modern scholars have discovered a number of errors in the King James Version. (The KJV, for instance, gives *dragon* for the Hebrew word meaning "jackal" and *unicorn* for "wild ox.") But that these are not the primary reasons that Scripture has become a closed book is evident in the failure of excellent modern translations such as the Revised Standard Version or the Revised Berkeley Version to capture large and ardent readership.

In a curious way, modern translations are not read for the same reason that modern translators are never burned; neither are now taken seriously. Church leaders, Catholic and Protestant, are now almost unanimous in encouraging the efforts of contemporary translators, but in a coldly secular culture, spiritual leaders can kindle neither the faggots of the Inquisition nor the fires of popular acclaim. Further, because so much modern scholarship rests on skeptical premises, those in whom the embers of faith still glow are often somewhat distrustful of the unscathed living translator and rely instead on the talents of the martyred dead. Consequently, Richard Lattimore will probably receive neither persecution nor especially large royalty checks for his fresh and independent translation of *Acts and Letters of the Apostles*. However, since Lattimore is an intelligent and accomplished translator of Greek who can often illuminate constructions not clear in older translations,

believers as well as academics would do well to follow the Apostle Paul's admonition to "examine everything, hold fast to the good" by including Lattimore's work in their scriptural library. Readers should remember, nonetheless, that Lattimore does work alone and that his work has not been systematically checked by any group of scholars of the sort jointly responsible for the KJV, RSV, and RBV. And since the insertions Lattimore feels are necessary for sentence sense are not italicized (as in the KJV) and are occasionally dictated by a doctrinal interpretation (as when he "clarifies" Paul's reference to "baptism for the dead" with the *ex cathedra* addition of words for which there is no analog in other translations), the scriptural law requiring that every word be established in the mouths of two or three witnesses is surely applicable. (BC) □

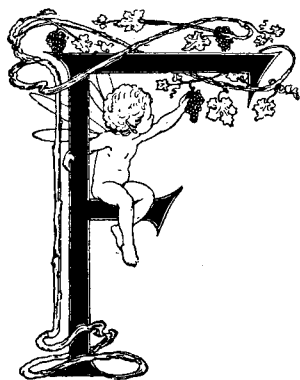
Of Parsis and Presbyterians

Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions; Wm. B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI.

A Documentary History of Religion in America: To the Civil War; Edited by Edwin S. Gaustad; Wm. B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI.

Some suppose that the investigation of churches or faiths other than one's own implies doubt concerning one's own path. Actually, such study may make the devout more effective witnesses to their own faith, as is evident in the Apostle Paul's skillful use of Greek polytheism when preaching on Mars' hill. Even more important as a motivation for studying others' faiths

should be the kind of genuine love which seeks to understand even those human endeavors it cannot fully endorse. Consequently, believers as well as scholars should find much of value in *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions*. Though brevity does require



simplification and selection and though the ideological orientation of contributors seems suspect when they hail the "liberation theology" as a promising new development and glibly endorse the World Council of Churches' efforts on behalf of "oppressed peoples," this volume is a good introduction to most of the world's various religions—primal and sophisticated, communal and solitary, extinct and living, Western and Eastern. It is compact, well organized, fully illustrated and indexed, and includes a helpful "Rapid Fact-finder" for quick reference. The reader will discern evidence of the 50 contributors' avowed "Christian concern"; however, all of the writers genuinely strive to be evenhanded, accurate, and even respectful in their assessment of non-Christian faiths. Their intent, as one contributor explains, is to "fill out and underline and tell in a new vocabulary the glory of God."

The glory of God is sounded in many distinctively American vocabularies—Christian and Deist, utopian and antinomian,

Pentecostal and rational—in Edwin S. Gaustad's *Documentary History of Religion in America*. To be sure, it is no unified church choir the reader hears: Northern Presbyterian abolitionists rage against Southern Presbyterian slaveholders; Puritans expel and publicly whip Baptists; Christian whites slaughter and remove to reservations pagan Amerindians; monogamous Protestants martyr polygamous Mormons and drive their church west. Nevertheless, despite these tensions, blotches, ironies, and inhumanities, this collection of 200 documents—letters, sermons, proclamations, narratives—is united by a persistent and unmistakably sincere devotion to God among Ameri-

cans in general and by a profound confidence in America as the land where that devotion may best flourish.

The freedom of individuals and communities in worshiping God as they will is still vouchsafed in America, but one rather fears that when Gaustad publishes his second volume concerning religious beliefs since the Civil War it will do less to substantiate Eerdmans's optimistic belief that "Christianity is more deeply rooted . . . than it or any religion has ever been" than it will to echo the pessimistic question concerning the longevity of faith posed by Jesus Himself: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (BC) □

WASTE OF MONEY

Paradise Regained?

Robert Muller: *New Genesis: Shaping a Global Spirituality*
Doubleday; New York.

Tradition assigns authorship of the first book in the Judeo-Christian canon to Moses; most modern scholars disagree, variously assigning parts of it to two, four, or even more postulated writers. Whoever wrote it, Genesis's account of man's beginnings has captured the imagination of readers for centuries. Even many who do not accept Scripture literally concede that man's origin does seem rather miraculous and that *something* like the Fall must be invoked to explain man's endless struggle with evil and death and his consequent alienation from self, nature, and God. Robert Muller, who describes himself as "a good Catholic" and says that he believes in "the wise precepts

and divine commandments of the Bible," nevertheless feels that the sacred text should be revised to create "a Bible which would show how the United Nations is a modern biblical institution." Accordingly, Muller wants to replace the chronicle of a fallible Adam and Eve cast out of Eden into a world of briars, decay, sin, and suffering with his *New Genesis*, "a proclamation of faith" in the inevitable triumph of the glorious "new, transcended species" of supermen who joyfully recognize in the United Nations the incipient creation of a New Eden fulfilling all that "the great prophets, visionaries, philosophers, and humanists had been dreaming of." No need to worry about any Serpent in this paradise: the "ever ascending course" of evolution is now inexorably transforming all men into marvel-

ously loving creatures like U Thant and Dag Hammarskjöld. With all other noxious thistles and weeds, violent aggression, pornography, repressive secret police, racism, terrorism, greed, and hatred will shortly be left outside the adamant walls of an idyllic world state. Very soon, the New Adam may simply reach out and pick spontaneously growing rights—the right to material well-being, the right to peace, the right to self-determination, the right to education. Enforcement of these rights will be guaranteed by an all-powerful and all-beneficent U.N. and will be quite simple since the whole human race (including, one must assume, Arafat and Andropov) is waxing ever more enthusiastic about all U.N. recommendations.

Any sensible reader who has witnessed the irreducible rancor and stupidity manifest in most U.N. debates will soon conclude that Muller's worshipful adoration of "the glass house on the East River of New York City" as the key to "the protection, survival and fulfillment of the human race on planet Earth" manifests a delirious mind, not intellectual insight. Bible readers will not be surprised: the old Genesis records that a previous attempt to gain access to heaven for mortals by erecting an international tower likewise produced incoherent babble. (BC) □

Box Office Bitterness

Ernest Lehman: *Screening Sickness and Other Tales of Tinsel Town*; Perigee Books; New York.

In Gulliver's third voyage there is an encounter with a breed called the Struldbruggs.