

The Experience of the Numinous

The Holy and the Daemonic from Sir Thomas Browne to William Blake, by R. D. Stock, *Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982. 395 pp. \$27.50.*

ONE OF THE CONCERNS of Professor R. D. Stock's latest book is to investigate "the non-rational or suprarational side of religious experience" as it is variously enunciated in primarily English literary works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "Religious experience" is a tricky subject for discourse as only shadows of it can be represented after the fact. With orthodoxy and heterodoxy in these two centuries, the subject of Ronald Knox's still definitive *Enthusiasm*, Stock is but incidentally concerned; rather, using Rudolf Otto's vocabulary of religious experience, he considers the pertinence of the human sense of the numinous, whether that sense be framed by theology or aesthetics.

For Rudolf Otto, the sense of the numinous has two apparently inextricable elements: a sense of the holy, or the numen properly so-called; and a sense of the daemonic, in Stock's phrase a "mysterious, energetic, non-rational, non-moral" presence not to be necessarily confused with the demonic. Stock notes Jung's speculations on the development of religious sensibility, but wisely refrains from giving them his approbation. In his commentary on the Book of Job, a *locus classicus* for discussions of religious sensibility, Jung suggested the ancient hypothesis that the daemonic power had "split" by stages from the Godhead and would be eventually reconciled to it. Jung, unlike Otto, confused human sensibility with the reality of which it is sensible. Stock keeps to the *via media* by observing simply that, in human experience, "the holy and the daemonic are ineluctably linked: *Sine Diabolo nullus Deus*."

The seventeenth and eighteenth cen-

turies are routinely labeled "The Age of Reason." The other of Stock's major concerns in this book is to question the ubiquity of skeptical reason in these centuries. Stock contends that the new philosophy did not provoke an intellectual crisis which sent conservative souls scurrying for the putative comforts of fideism. Whig criticism habitually refers to Sir Thomas Browne, John Dryden, and Blaise Pascal as such; but after reviewing the texts, Stock maintains that these three never embraced that radical religious position. Certainly, none of them shared with Voltaire and the *philosophes* either an extravagant estimation of human reason or a hatred for Christianity; but all three were willing and quite able to reason effectively in their defense of religion against the rationalists. All three were able to articulate a sense of the holy in terms of philosophy and theology. Although in the decades to follow a sense of the holy would degenerate and the mode of articulation of numinous experience would be transformed, the sense itself was never suppressed, and its defense was, at least initially, reasonable.

With a well-wrought chapter entitled "The Debate over Witchcraft and Miracles in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," Stock provides an insight into the currents of thought in these centuries. The debates were largely incited by the publication of *Leviathan* in 1651. Hobbes's skeptical materialism demanded a reasonable defense of belief in immaterial power as manifest in both witchcraft and miracles. A wide variety of apologetical and skeptical treatments of these subjects was forthcoming for well over half a century. After treating the contributions made to the debate by apologists (Henry More, Casaubon, and Glanville) and by skeptics (Webster, Hutchinson, and the curious Thomas Vaughn), Stock observes that "whatever our own persuasions, I think we might agree that the apologists were more reasonable, more textually responsible in exegesis than their opponents . . . the apologists wished to retain the Bible as a consequential document . . . [and]

to keep alive the sense of wonder and reverence . . . and also of evil." It is not Stock's contention that the apologists were the only reasonable men in the debate, only that they were at least as reasonable as, and in many cases more so than, their skeptical opponents. The ideological revisionism which would have the skeptics as the vanguard of reasonable progress is simply too facile to be credible.

The apologists for religion and the numinous sense were not the reactionary diehards they are so often portrayed; but the skeptics were able to undermine the credible basis of traditional belief. Yet even as the traditional forms of belief decayed beneath the persistent corrosives of skepticism, the sense of the numinous encountered the suppression desired by ranters such as Voltaire. A "high sense of the holy" becomes less evident as the eighteenth century progresses, but even in the rationalism of Pope and Swift there is clearly enunciated a sense of the daemonic, in *The Dunciad* no less than in Swift's satires.

In his consideration of the poetry of Watts, Akenside, Thompson, and Young, Stock contends that while this time may be called from afar "The Age of Reason," the depiction on non-rational and religious subjects was in great demand throughout the century. These poets were to develop an aesthetics of the daemonic. The difference between the new daemonism of these poets and that expressed by Pope in his portrayal of the reign of Dulness, is that here the reader is invited to enter into the experience of the daemonic with the poet. These poems do exhibit "the crumbling away of such settled theological foundations as underlie, for example, *Religio Laici*." But they also exhibit the perennial human capacity for terror and awe. It is a capacity that would be variously satisfied by the novels and poetry of the later eighteenth century.

In the chapter on Hume and Johnson, Stock again focuses on the heterogeneous currents of the time. Both men were empiricists, though of different stripes; both were able "to see through all the varieties

of contemporary speculation." Stock sees these two as the "two half-men of their time," to use Carlyle's phrase. Hume, an intellectual rascal and distinctly modern, is, according to Stock, "a Pascal who will not take the wager . . . [but who] refused to sentimentalize or adulterate him, like Pope and Young." Peter Gay's remark, that Hume is "the complete modern pagan," Stock finds curiously inappropriate, as "the pagans had a strong sense of the numinous . . . [whereas] Hume was one of the first, and he remains one of the most sedulous and insinuating, to try to extirpate from the human consciousness all sense of the sacred and transcendent."

Stock's thesis concerning Johnson is that "he was struggling to preserve a reasonable, but reverent spirit in an age that he saw as increasingly diffident or overtly skeptical." In Johnson we find echoes of the older religious sensibility, but also a dislike for the merely fashionable supports given that sensibility. Contempt, which leads in Hume to a curiously chameleon aspect, "yields in Johnson to an unsentimental solicitude for man and a truly modern sense of the daemons that infest him."

Stock asks at last whether the Enlightenment did "free man from the gods and demons that have infested his fancy"? His answer is that it did not, indeed, it could not. The gods and demons have not been banished, only the mode of our discourse concerning them has been altered and eviscerated. The greatness of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "lies in the efforts of certain of its thinkers to fortify certain elements in the human consciousness against forces increasingly hostile and bold." Contrary to the blithe pronouncements of contemporary whiggery, the battle joined in the Enlightenment has not been decided. We may have reached a stage of a largely secularized imagination, but the demons keep popping up in different guises. Stock closes his study with the observation that "the Christian scheme avoids the cyclicalism, evolutionism, or dialectic so relished by modern

Gnosticism and naturalism alike. In Christianity the holy and the daemonic, howsoever like dancers they may seem, are antagonists through all time. The next stage comes after that."

— Reviewed by Laurens MacDonald Dorsey

Reality and the Socialist Dream

Marxism and Beyond, by Sidney Hook,
Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983. xii + 225 pp. \$19.95.

MARXISM AND BEYOND brings together eighteen pieces written by Sidney Hook over the last twelve years. Professor Hook has been writing and publishing on Marx and Marxism for more than fifty years and in that time his intellectual and political viewpoint has shifted in emphasis rather than changing in any fundamental sense. Hook remains what he was when *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* was first published in 1933 — a secular humanist in ethics and a social democrat in politics. Anyone who looks in *Marxism and Beyond* for new revelations either about Karl Marx or Sidney Hook will be disappointed.

The essential continuity in Hook's outlook over the half century is not perhaps immediately obvious. In that time the man once characterized as "the foremost Marxist among American philosophers" has become a noted exponent of the need to wage a vigorous cold war in order to evade the need to fight a hot one. Addressing the staff and cadets of West Point on the meaning of Western freedom, he mercilessly castigates all those who, wittingly or not, play the Soviet propaganda game by placing the failings of the nations of the free world on the same moral level as the evils of Com-

munist tyranny. Old reprobates like Malcolm Cowley share Hook's condemnation with those who, like David Caute, have sought to establish some sort of equivalence between the Soviet suppression of dissidents and the anti-communist activities of the McCarthy years.

What has changed down the years is not Hook's practical or theoretical philosophy — his *maitres à penser* are the same as they were in the Thirties — but the political and economic map of the world. When he published his first influential book, capitalism, it seemed, had entered that definitive crisis which Marx had predicted. Hitler had just achieved power in Germany, and to many intellectuals it appeared that only transition to some, always vaguely defined, form of socialism could prevent general destitution and total war. Now, as Hook puts it,

... the scene is quite different. Capitalism, despite its many crises and difficulties, is not on the verge of collapse. In most countries it has developed into a Welfare State not anticipated by Marx. The three cardinal doctrines of classical Marxism lie in ruins. The theory of historical materialism — which holds either (in its strong form) that the mode of economic production determines political change or (in its weak form) that it conditions such change — has been refuted by Lenin and Mao Tse-tung. . . . By seizing political power they built a new economic foundation under it, whereas Marx had anticipated that the economic structure of socialist society would be built antecedently to the transfer of political power to the working class. . . . Society has not been increasingly polarized between a handful of capitalists and the workers. The working class has not been progressively pauperized; nor has there been a decline in the rate of profit. . . . The emergence and persistence of nationalism have revealed the limitations of Marx's conception of the overriding significance and weight of the