

## Point of Frustration

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION. By Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc. 1948. 369 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by WILLIAM S. LYNCH

THE relationship between human reason and religion is for many moderns one of the most baffling of all personal relationships. The certitudes which could comfort whole generations have been shaken by science and philosophy, by economics and history, until, as Rauschnig has said of man, "he is bludgeoned into the limbo of gloomy reality without any place to set his feet." And now the new cosmology which seemed to be taking form as the physicists made the law and the mathematicians its eschatology leaves us wondering as we hear hints that even Copernicus and Galileo may not have been as right as we have believed.

Monsignor Sheen's thesis is that in leaving the traditional philosophies, Western civilization has reached a point of frustration, where its people, confused and unstable, are reduced to no other value than that of being instruments of power, political or other. To him the great paradox of our time is that the modern world, which started out to glorify rationalism, ended in irrationalism. In order to show what he regards as the true relationship between reason and religion he sets himself the task of examining four distinct and relevant problems: first, the history of the abandonment of reason and the final descent into irrationalism; second, a recall to the right use of reason in discovering the existence and nature of God; third, a study of the impact of the physical and historical sciences on religion; fourth, the value of the new approach to religion from man instead of nature.

In brief, what this distinguished Catholic prelate does is reexamine the philosophy of his Church in reference to the secular philosophies of our day as they seem to have challenged it. With St. Thomas and his "Philosophia Perennis" as guide he offers proof of the transcendence and immanence of God and challenges those widely held theories of science and philosophy which would leave out the supernatural or would deny these attributes. "Having made God synonymous with the unscientific, the progress of science naturally came to mean a disbelief in God. The day that philosophy returns to the conception that the existence of God is not



—M. I. Boris.

Fulton J. Sheen—"No quarrel with science as it exists in the laboratory."

founded on the scientifically inexplicable, but on the rationally explicable, it will undo a false principle that has been haunting the philosophy of religion since the days of Newton."

Monsignor Sheen has no quarrel with science as it exists in the laboratory. Its discoveries and laws seem to him compatible with his Church and its beliefs. In fact they would seem to support them. It is in the metaphysical realm that he takes issue with the disciples of Descartes, of Marx, of Freud, of Whitehead, of Eddington, *et al.* With some of them he agrees that Frustrated Man is the problem of our times. Classical philosophy, he maintains, is as much concerned with this subject as is modern thought, and in a far more profound way.

For the non-Catholic reader this book should serve to show the philosophic thought and claims of the Thomist thinkers of our day. For the Catholic reader it is a cogent statement of the relation of modern thought to his basic philosophy. It is, too, for the latter a much needed exhortation to revitalize his thinking and to center it on aspects which have real significance for contemporary minds. For as the author says, "Many branches of scholastic philosophy are directed toward an exposition of the fallacies of an antiquated deism and rationalism which no longer exist." The subject of man as he is himself, as he stands in relation to the cosmos, to fellowman, to God is that with which he should be most concerned.

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## Collection of Lies

THE AFFAIRS OF DAME RUMOR. By David J. Jacobson. New York: Rinehart & Co. 1948. 492 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by LEONARD W. DOOB

IT is virtually impossible to recommend this book on any count. The author considers all falsehoods rumors. With this loose definition as a guide, he has assembled a miscellaneous collection of exotic and rather well-known lies recorded during the history of Western man. The range extends from "that silly old tale about the ostrich" to "rumors concerning Premier Stalin's sudden end." This hodgepodge has been roughly classified into eight categories: lies involving natural phenomena, minority groups, commercial enterprises, Presidential candidates, get-rich-quick schemes, labor unions, war, and deceased personages. Within a category, to which a separate chapter is devoted, Mr. Jacobson describes each lie indignantly, sometimes guesses how and why it circulated, and frequently sermonizes on the gullibility of human nature.

No coherent method of organization is followed within a chapter. One lie reminds the author of another; eventually he may or may not return to a chronological presentation. Loose generalizations about people and falsehoods appear irrelevantly at irregular and unpredictable intervals. Almost every page yields an exaggerated or oversimplified account of an historical event.

Are there any new insights to be obtained from reading this book? Clearly it is not necessary to document the fact that some people lie deliberately or unintentionally and that other people may believe and perhaps circulate the lies. It is, however, amusing to note how practically all phases of human activity can be distorted. It is interesting to observe that the same lies crop up again and again, and that often their progenitors do not take the trouble to attire them in a new look. It is important to speculate about the function of falsehoods within liars and within those believing the lies. It is crucial to discover antidotes to lies, though not in the manner of Mr. Jacobson, who hysterically shouts that lies are lies and are responsible for all the evil in the universe. The basic problem of "The Affairs of Dame Rumor" is challenging, and hence it is a pity that only in the last four pages—or about eight-tenths of one per cent of the total—is there a serious, responsible discussion of its implications.

**Personal History.** *He who undertakes to write the life of another man discovers that biography is a munificent form, offering many paths to his goal. Three of the chief routes are exemplified in books reviewed this week. If his subject has left a large and revealing collection of papers, the writer can content himself with reproducing salient items—as Walter Shewring does in his “Letters of Eric Gill.” Or, if he is possessed of talents exceedingly rare, he will combine scrupulous accuracy with literary charm—as Maurice Collis does in his book about Confucius, “The First Holy One.” If he is anxious to reach the widest public, he may fictionize his material, trifling with the truth to heighten interest—as do Daniel Q. Posin in his life of the chemist “Mendeleyev” and Opal Leigh Berryman in her filial “Frontier Preacher.”*

## A Chemist and His Cohorts

**MENDELEYEV.** *The Story of a Great Scientist.* By Daniel Q. Posin. New York: Whittlesey House. 1948. 345 pp. \$4.50.

Reviewed by WALDEMAR KAEMPFERT

NO matter on what page the reader opens this biography of Mendeleyev, one of the greatest figures in the annals of chemistry, it looks like a novel. Page after page is given over to dialogue. In other words, Dr. Posin, formerly of the University of Panama and of the Radiation Laboratory of MIT and now of North Dakota State College, follows the current pernicious fashion of writing science as if it were fiction. A biography so written makes livelier reading than if it were more didactically treated, but doubts constantly arise in the mind of a critical reader. What of such characters as Natvei, the night watchman? Was there really such a person? So with Timofei and the *strannik* and, above all, with the conversations.

Dr. Posin has gone to such extremes in writing Mendeleyev's life story that he is impelled to supply a sort of *apologia* entitled “Concerning This Biography—How Much Is Fiction?” He confesses that some liberties have been taken, but we are assured that the characters are for the most part real persons. Even so the doubts remain. Lytton Strachey found no difficulty in making Queen Elizabeth and Victoria live without resorting to Dr. Posin's tricks and thus bewildering the reader.

Apart from a method of treatment that arouses ire and suspicion, Dr. Posin does more than justice to Mendeleyev as a chemist and as the inventor of the periodic table of elements. Indeed Dr. Posin's biography is a panegyric. Anyone who ever thought Mendeleyev queer or rather too suggestive of a Russian bear

arouses displeasure. The truth is that Mendeleyev was not a modest person. According to a few accounts that have come down he was often arrogant, vain, and given to lording it over others. But you would hardly suspect any of this from Posin's account. Sir William Ramsay, whom this reviewer happened to know, may or may not have regarded Mendeleyev as a strange hairy foreigner at a first meeting, but Ramsay was certainly not the supercilious, self-satisfied, “aristocratic” prig depicted by Dr. Posin.

The periodic table of elements is one of the great structures of science. It showed relationships between groups of elements, and it made possible the prediction that missing

elements would be discovered. Mendeleyev was not alone in perceiving these relationships. Lothar Meyer, the German, whom Mendeleyev knew, worked at a periodic table. So did the Englishman J. A. R. Newlands. It seems to this reviewer that these two worthies might have been more generously treated by Dr. Posin without in the least detracting from his hero's remarkable creative ability. No one thinks any the worse of Newton because he found it necessary, under some pressure, to give Sir Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke some credit, in the “*Principia*,” for what inspiration he may have derived from their heavy thinking on the laws of gravitation. Mendeleyev eclipsed both Meyer and Newlands in the thoroughness of his work, the range of his conception, and in his daring prediction of elements still to be discovered, just as Newton surpassed Wren and Hooke in his formulation of the laws of gravitation.

There is no question that Dr. Posin's biography holds the interest and that it links a great man with his social times and background. Despite his occasional chasing of stylistic affectations, such as “the waters under the frigid kiss” and “the cracks making convulsive frigid designs on the window panes,” Dr. Posin writes well and with a command of English remarkable in one who may have had difficulty in shaking off the Russian idiom. Occasionally, Americanisms do manage to creep into conversations, but these do not mar the effect as a whole.



“I'm writing to Santa Claus—how do you spell hydromatic drive?”