

# Rites, Dogmas, and Survival

**THE HEATHENS:** *Primitive Man and His Religions.* By William Howells. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1948. 293 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by CLYDE KLUCKHOHN

THIS book is both learned and lively. Professor Howells is one of the few anthropologists who can write. A new and better book on the religions of primitives has long been needed. Robert Lowie's "Primitive Religion" has many excellent features but suffers from his ceremonial avoidance of psychoanalytic theory and his failure to understand the work of the great French sociologists of the Durkheim school. Apart from Lowie, one had to choose between the brilliant but somewhat private speculations of people like Paul Radin, and dull compendia. These latter are useful enough if one is seeking a selective digest of well-authenticated data on such topics as "Sacred Trees" or "Fast, Feast, and Vision"; if one, in short, is willing to take the data and let the concepts go. However, the facts speak for themselves only through the manipulations of a kind of ventriloquism on the part of the author. The very selection of data and their arrangement in categories proceeds in terms of premises which are the more questionable because suppressed and because often the writer himself is not consciously aware of his standards and hence cannot subject his concepts to the rigid

criticism that he applies to his facts.

Mr. Howells has a simple conceptual scheme, and he tells the reader about it in the first chapter. He asks consistently: what kind of sense do specific beliefs and practices make in terms of the whole life of a people? How do rites and dogmas promote the survival of the group, social harmony within the group, and the psychological adjustment of individuals?

The book starts with an excellent brief introduction to the anthropological approach, not neglecting the biological basis of human nature. There follows a sensible discussion of the nature of religion that is integrative as well as eclectic. The heart of the study consists in a series of case histories on mana and tabu, black-and-white-magic, divination, disease and medicine, witchcraft, shamanism, the after-world, souls and ghosts, ancestor worship, totemism, demons, deities, ritual, and the rise and fall of the Plains Indian Ghost Dance cult. Each case study is based on carefully chosen materials from the monographs. Howells's judgment as to what constitutes acceptable evidence is, so far as the reviewer can control it, rigorous. He has discriminated critically, selected wisely, and synthesized interestingly as well as lucidly. The light touch comes off well on the whole, though occasionally the lecturer wise-cracking to keep his class awake throws a shadow on the page.

Howells is primarily a physical anthropologist (and a first-rate one). Therefore the range of his reading in ethnology and social anthropology is astonishing. But it is equaled by its intensity. I suspect that this book gains much of its freshness and integrity from the circumstance that the writer was poaching on the territory of his colleagues in cultural anthropology. As Spencer (or someone) said, you would never expect a goldfish to discover the existence of water. But Howells has poured old wine from many bottles into a new container and produced a heady punch. Some of his bold generalizations are on the startling side, but in the main they appear sound.

The pedant can always, of course, find a few slips. I shall omit these details so boring to the non-specialist. However, two more general criticisms would be made by a good many anthropologists. The first is that he overplays the functional situational theory. The processes that determine events are imbedded in time as well as in situation. Howells gives little attention to concrete bits of religious behavior as the products of historical accident,

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as the end points of specific sequences of events reaching back into the remote past. The second objection is more a question of emphasis. While Howells is by no means as blind to psychology as Lowie, he has drunk all too cautiously from the rich vintage of contemporary psychiatry. Yet this is a book—not a treatise. Within the limits he staked out for himself Mr. Howells has done a job that will win

the respect of the academic and the heartfelt thanks of the general reader.

Clyde Kluckhohn, author of the forthcoming Whittlesey House-Science Illustrated prize book, "Anthropology and the World Today," is professor of anthropology at Harvard and director of Harvard's new Russian Research Center.

## Vision and Discipline

LETTERS OF THE SCATTERED BROTHERHOOD. Edited by Mary Strong. New York: Harper & Bros. 1948. 192 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by PADRAIC COLUM

BOOKS of spiritual guidance like St. Francis de Sales's "Introduction to a Devout Life" or Fénelon's "Christian Perfection" have a short-term as well as a long-term value. Their long-term value, of course, is in the organizing of the intimations we have that we are in relation to eternal being and in the practice they induce to make that relation more and more perceptible. The ruck of us "fear to tread the secret holy place whereto the priest and prophet have access," and for that great concourse something less than the long term might mean a great deal. The short term isn't for everybody, either, but it is for those who have an intellectual life and are discriminating in it. The guides are speaking of vision and discipline; they are telling us (we are taking them on the short term) that instead of the quantity of things in our lives we ought to make an effort to get quality, instead of external interests we ought to have an internal life, instead of scattered multiplicity we ought to have singleness, instead of disorder, things selected and formed. And the gravity and urgency with which they speak make us really take account of these matters.

"Letters of the Scattered Brotherhood" are of the same character as the directions of Fénelon and St. Francis de Sales, and they deal with the special problems of our times. They are, I gather, written by religious in Anglican communities. They are not written in the language of uplift which is so very repelling. The tone of the letters is fervent and it is also manly.

Now the purport of this wisdom is to reveal your character to you and in the very depths of the wisdom that will come to you, if you will listen, is contained the truth for your particular problems. . . . This is prayer, for prayer is actually the filling of a want, the lack, the emptiness. It is an act to take



in quietness by yourself. As it has been said many times before, you teach your outer you by staying within.

Of course the writers of these letters use the language of devotion which, because it has been fixed at a certain period, tends to be familiar and touching on the commonplace. This is acknowledged. "Sometimes when you repeat the great familiar words," runs a passage in one of the letters, "they will sound stale and uninspired, but they will take on a new meaning, and in the quiet will be redeemed for you." They give us assurance. "Be still, impersonal, silent," says one, and the recommendation, backed by an experience and a sincerity that we feel, becomes an accompanying voice. "Keep a retreat like a pool in the rapids."

"Letters of the Scattered Brotherhood" is finely edited by Mary Strong, who makes a contribution of her own: it is in passages of vision and experience drawn from various religions, from philosophers and poets, placed beside the letters; these passages are like candles lighting the matter of the different letters. Whether we take them on the short term that so many of us will be inclined to take them on, or on the long term they are intended to be taken on, "Letters of the Scattered Brotherhood" will help us towards the internal, the formed, the discriminated. "To drift into the lassitude of unrealized potentialities"—even to be brought to understand that there is that danger is a gain for us.