

Correspondence

America's Two Religions

To the Editors: Dr. Martin E. Marty, long a delightful purveyor of the penultimate, is a person of such high visibility that his pronouncement on a book cannot be ignored. In this case it is not the content but the tone of the review that is noteworthy (Books: "The Two Religions of America," *Worldview*, March). It demonstrates the wisdom of wise old Montaigne's observation of something I learned when, at about Marty's present age, I briefly occupied what he calls "high Unitarian office": that no matter how lofty the throne we occupy "we are still sitting only on our own rump." And thereby hangs this tale of two perspectives.

Dr. Marty credits me with being clear about the fact that "America's two religions are in competition." But he chides me for thinking that the "unresolved tension" between them may be a symptom of intellectual indigestion. His alternative view is that "the points of conflict or messiness between the two" have stimulated "much of the creative drama of American history." I agree. But I have supposed that the task of the intellectual is to try to clarify basic issues, while Marty seems to make intellectual "messiness" the ideal state. Noting that "some conflicts [between them] there are," he cheerfully observes that "people live with them rather creatively." This is noble but not enlightening or helpful. For so they do also with the four horsemen of the Apocalypse; and with Watergate, which has provided plenty of "creative drama" in recent months.

But while on the one hand "messiness" is the ideal invoked, and he reproaches me for expecting "a certain neatness in history," yet on the other hand he assumes at times a dogmatic, either/or, black/white stance as if, to

*Actually I do not expect neatness in "history," for I think that disorder is as much a part of experienced reality as order. But I do expect neatness in "histories," as I assume Dr. Marty does, for example, in dissertations done in his field.

paraphrase one of his cuter lines, a greater than Chesterton is here whose saying something makes it true. Donning this hat, he says that one must be either a "historian" or a "philosopher and theologian"; either in Ahlstrom's camp or in Mead's (an implied insult to hundreds of laborers in this vineyard who are in neither); either a "Monist" or a messy-ist. Perhaps this is meant to suggest the new shape of the modern schism. But it entirely misses the Me[aj]rdian line I have been walking for many years. It seems that within the messy-antic posture presuming to be a theory of American pluralism there lurks a Parson Thwackum slouching back toward old Missouri.

Putting on the other hat, Dr. Marty holds up as the ideal F. Scott Fitzgerald's dictum that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." But this sentence occurs in the essay "The Crack-Up," in which Fitzgerald tried to explain how and why he lost his "ability to function." It would be more aptly quoted to illustrate my point that such a stance may result in a "psychosomatic indigestion" that can be fatal.

But even granted Fitzgerald's test of "a first-rate intelligence" (which I should like to see one of Dr. Marty's Ph.D. students use to defend sloppy thinking in an oral examination), demonstration of its validity would require very clear definition of each of the "two opposed ideas." Dr. Marty concedes that I have made the Republic's idea reasonably clear, but snidely misunderstand and misrepresent that of the "temple-ists." I grant that from his perspective that is true, just as from my perspective he is snide and defensive in misunderstanding and misrepresenting my position, and pontifical in criticizing it. What I miss in his writings is some attempt to make his position clear.

The absence of such attempt makes his adverse comments a bushwhacking attack that leaves me feeling ambushed by a ghostly Janus-headed critic. Or perhaps it is only Plato's frightened little boy, who dwells within every man, who is lashing out at his bogey.

Dr. Marty has often at least implicitly referred to me as perhaps his real academic father. Assuming that role, I want it to be perfectly clear in what follows that while I admire his abilities,

WORLDVIEW

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ment with Lionel Tiger, E.O. Wilson, and others, Des Pres notes a "biogrammatical" base in human behavior, but he seems to assume that the cultural superstructure, including religion and ethics, is no longer serviceable in our situation—indeed culture has become the enemy. There are hints in the survivor literature that this abandonment of cultural forms was necessary in the death camp situation, although there is other evidence, neglected by Des Pres, indicating that some survivors did find sustaining strength and hope from cultural sources and memories, including religion. (It is stunning, for example, that the author ignores this dimension in Viktor Frankl's writings and Solzhenitsyn's description of the Gulag.) In sum, the last chapter's Nietzschean conclusion is not necessary, nor is it even warranted by the prior narrative and analysis that make this book such a memorable and important contribution.

The Old Country by Abraham Shulman

(Scribners: 210 pp.; \$6.95 [paper])

Subtitled "The Lost World of East European Jews," this handsomely printed collection of hundreds of photographs of the *shetl*, taken between 1860 and 1920, might be better described as a rediscovery. Most of the photos are from the files of *The Jewish Daily Forward*, and the illuminating commentary by Shulman, for many years a writer for *The Forward*, is marked by loving care. (A brief and banal foreword by Isaac Bashevis Singer again raises the minor ethical question about artificially attaching big names to works that stand quite well on their own.) The last section of the book is entitled "A Family Album," but that appropriately describes the whole of it for millions of Ashkenazi Jews and, in truth, for the whole of the human family that identifies with the humility, suffering, and grandeur portrayed in this collection. One waits at the end for a concluding photograph from Auschwitz or Treblinka. It is not there. It is on every page. Shulman notes that in Yiddish "Poland" was "Polen," composed of two Hebrew words, *po* and *lin*—"here shall we spend the night."

Correspondence (from p. 2)

envy his prestige, and fear his power, I also and more genuinely love him as an accepted son in whom I am so well pleased that though he slay me, I will not be separated from him. "But I will maintain mine own ways before him." That, I think, is my job.

One of the penalties even of a mythological academic parenthood is the necessity to live through the "no" phase of a child's painful progress toward adult being. In this context the quality and degree of animosity and explosiveness exhibited in this review suggest a slow burn too long repressed by a super ego domesticated by the amenities of polite academic society.* An old-fashioned amateur Freudian might see in this a long-standing Oedipus complex now finally surfaced and consuming the son. I should have anticipated this outburst that awaited me in the righteous empire of the "no set."

Indeed Dr. Marty has set the stage for a jolly dialogue when, as he says, "our jets and his automobile meet" (wherein I sense his unconscious wish that this be on a runway). I would like it to be a time

"To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing
wax—

Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings,"
and other such innocuous subjects as often characterize a meeting of professors.

But perhaps it will be more therapeutic for this antipodal son to tell me face-to-face about my "misrepresentation," my changes "since the mid-fifties,"** my "polemical tone," my

*It is notable that practically his only substantial criticism of material in the collection is of an essay published fourteen years ago. And of that criticism one might say what Lincoln is reputed to have said of President Polk—that he scored his point by telling the truth, but would have lost it had he told the whole truth.

**Changes I have indeed experienced. But even so, I have not been able to come up with a "New Theology" every year.

"random" and "repetitious" essays, my "fundamentalist conversion," my "sneer," my "snide tones," my "Charges...that are not true," my "misreading," and the *ex cathedra* bull, "Mead is a Monist." 'Tis said that confession is good for the soul, and, as the voice of experience, I recommend it to all impetuous reviewers of books. So perhaps Dr. Marty and I ought to meet in the true church, where, perhaps, I might receive forgiveness for all the sins he has rightly confessed for me.

For as Montaigne said of his essays, "...it seems to me that to anyone who wants to abuse me fairly I give plenty to bite on in my known and avowed imperfections." And thirteen years ago I expressed my conviction that a scholar "may owe more to one who has etched his faults with acid than to the ninety-and-nine who have merely said, 'I enjoyed your article.'" I appreciate the fact that Dr. Marty has tried to do just that. But somehow his acid is too weak to burn (it only irritates the skin), and there is a lacuna in his etching that leaves me, with fatherly affection, asking the question posed by Emerson's soothing "external nature"—"So hot? my little Sir." Why?

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Response:

Given the opportunity to respond, Mr. Marty simply invited *Worldview* readers to compare his review and Mead's response with Mead's book. For the rest, he mumbled in badly broken French a line of Talleyrand: "*Si nous nous expliquons nous cesserons de nous entendre*" (if we go on explaining we shall cease to understand one another)."

Apologies

...to Janice Stapleton, for failing to identify her as the artist who provided the fine line drawings accompanying "Hunger and Christian Duty" in the May issue.