

REVIEWS

GNOSIS. By Frithjof Schuon. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer. (John Murray; 18s.)

Those who have read M. Schuon's *Transcendent Unity of Religions and Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* will know that he is one of the greatest exponents of Eastern religious doctrine, especially Hindu and Islamic writing today. He writes from the point of view of a metaphysical wisdom which is common to all religious traditions of East and West and which is capable, he believes, of 'reconciling' all the apparent conflicts between them. In this book M. Schuon is especially concerned with Christianity, and it must be confessed that it is for this reason somewhat unsatisfactory. M. Schuon claims to write as a believer in 'revelation' and 'tradition' and to reconcile the different religious traditions in the light of an esoteric doctrine which is common to all; but it is fatal to this point of view that his conception of Christianity is one which is radically opposed to Orthodox and Catholic tradition and was explicitly rejected by the Fathers of the Church. M. Schuon is, in fact, a Gnostic in the accepted sense of the word. This is shown most clearly in his acceptance of the doctrine that creation is necessarily evil, that it is a degradation of Being—he quotes with approval the 'saying' of Mahomet, 'Your own existence is your greatest sin'—and his belief that history is the 'rhythm of universal decadence'. It is true, of course, that evil has entered into creation and that there is a 'rhythm of decadence' in history, but it is precisely the claim of Christianity that God has entered into history to redeem it from this movement and to restore the universe in a new creation.

Another point in which M. Schuon shows himself opposed to the Christian tradition is in his conception of the relation between knowledge—or gnosis—and love: for M. Schuon 'metaphysics is beyond charity'. This view is due, in part, to the fact that he tends to equate Christian charity with Hindu *bhakti* and to regard Christianity as a 'bhaktic' religion. *Bhakti*, he maintains, is 'still situated on the human plane', while knowledge, or *jnana*, 'lies beyond the ego'. But though this may be in some respects true of Hindu *bhakti*, it is in no way true of Christian charity. For a Christian, on the contrary, charity is the one absolutely direct contact which we have with God, so that the love with which we love God is God's own love in us, whereas knowledge in this world always remains to some extent human and defective. That is why St Paul insists that knowledge like everything human passes, but charity remains.

Yet though we must disagree with M. Schuon, we must admit that the metaphysical wisdom of which he is an exponent is something of

immense value and important. M. Schuon writes in the name of a contemplative wisdom which is the fruit of intellectual intuition, and this is something which is fundamental in Christian tradition both of East and West. He writes of this: 'Intellectual intuition comprises essentially a contemplativity which in no way enters into the rational capacity, the latter being logical rather than contemplative; it is contemplative power, receptivity in respect of the Uncreated Light, the opening of the Eye of the Heart, which distinguishes transcendent intelligence from reason'. This is surely something which we need to recover. In ancient Christian tradition theology was not the rational system which it has now become but essentially a science of contemplation—as St Bede said: 'there is but one theology, the contemplation of God'. It is particularly in our contact with the religious traditions of the East that this perspective needs to be recovered. It is the great task of the theology of the future to incorporate the metaphysical tradition, of which M. Schuon writes, into Christian doctrine and to show how it finds its real fulfilment in Christ, and this can only be done on the basis of a theology which is inspired by contemplative wisdom.

Meanwhile, though we may not agree with M. Schuon, there is much that we can learn from him. Some of the later chapters of his book *On Seeing God Everywhere* and on the Christian Tradition often show a profound insight; his meditation on the Hail Mary is particularly interesting, though it has a strongly Gnostic flavour. The translation has been done by Mr Palmer, who is well known for his admirable translations of the *Philokalia*. M. Schuon's style is never easy and it does not become easier in translation, but the English is as faithful a rendering as one could ask.

BEDE GRIFFITHS, O.S.B.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE. By W. Stark. (Routledge and Kegan Paul; 36s.)

The last twenty years have seen a gradual converging in the social sciences of studies which earlier had been pursued in relative isolation; of psychology and sociology, of anthropology and psychology, of sociology and anthropology, to name but three of the major related subjects. Even within these major categories, the areas of interpenetration have become increasingly significant in recent years. Where, before the two World Wars, there was a parallel existence of studies bearing the name social psychology conducted on the one side by scholars whose training had been primarily psychological and on the other by professional sociologists, it was not until relatively recently, that these two fields of study began to converge.