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Books on Religion

# Church, Literature Relation Probed

By Robert O. Kevin

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Lent is approaching for the Christian world and the season, more than any other, encourages the reading of religious books.

The exercise is regarded as good for the soul. However this may be, the study of such works may serve to remind a reader of the presence of God in his poor life; and it can enlist his sympathies and fire his resolution to some good end.

The matter is re-examined, however, in a recent work titled "Mansions of The Spirit" (Hawthorn, 414 pp., \$8.95) and edited by George A. Panichas, associate professor of English at the University of Maryland. The book is a collection of 19 articles on the relation of religion and literature, with an introductory essay by Thomas Merton.

Contributors are recognized literary critics in the United States, Canada, England, France and Belgium. They come from a variety of faiths. Dr. Panichas's contribution is a careful analysis of the influence of a book of Russian Orthodox spirituality on work of the novelist J. D. Salinger.

The question what is meant by "religious literature" is raised by Thomas L. Hanna of the University of Florida. He argues that much of the writing in this genre is there by intrusion, and with little right to the description. He would limit the conception to works where "the divine is a potent presence," which is a thesis that could work a revolution in Lenten piety if it were accepted.

Nevertheless the force of the argument is felt in "A

Gallery of Children" (Acropolis Books, 112 pp., \$5.95), a collection of portraits in color from the National Gallery of Art, with a text by Marian King. The sequence of these children's pictures, with the sensitive understanding of their appeal by Miss King, is more evocative of an elevated feeling than is many a pretentious religious work.

Another Washington area writer is the Rev. Dr. W. Russell Bowie of Alexandria, whose work "Where You Find God" (Harper & Row, 116 pp., \$3.95) is an answer to a plethora of books on religionless religion and secularized sanctity.

His point, a valuable one, is that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German martyr and patron saint of graveyard theologians, was a believer who wanted God at the very center of life, and wanted it intensely, but he has been misrepresented "as being skeptical of God's presence anywhere."

"Instrument of Thy Peace" (Seabury Press, 124 pp., \$3.50) is a devotional book by Alan Paton, author of "Cry, the Beloved Country."

Paton writes that his purpose is "to hold out a way of life that may be followed by those who wish to live a life of usefulness and service, but who find difficulty in accepting rigid doctrines and beliefs. . . It is also intended to help those who are inclined to melancholy, or to self-pity, or who tend to be withdrawn."

Two books on prayer would meet the requirement of the Florida University essayist. "Twentieth-Century Spiritual Letters" (Westminster Press, 170 pp., \$3.95) is by the Very Rev. John B. Coburn, dean of the Episcopal Theological School,

Cambridge, Mass., and president of the House of Deputies of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. The work is called "an introduction to contemporary prayer."

This writer, too, speaks of the influence of Bonhoeffer's thought, repeating the latter's words, "It is not some religious act which makes the Christian what he is, but participation in the sufferings of God in the life of the world." One of his chapters is on "Love Letters to Monks." Helen Smith Shoemaker has written a book "The Secret of Effective Prayer" (Word Books, 171 pp., \$3.95) which is a down-to-earth guide to devotion.

Of an older time but from great periods of Christian history come two classics that have been printed in paperback. One is "St. Thomas More: Selected Letters" (Yale University Press, 271 pp., \$1.95 in paper) edited by Elizabeth Frances Rogers. The book affords remarkable insight to the character of the statesman of the Tudor period whom multitudes have come to know through the moving

picture "A Man For All Seasons."

"The Poems of St. John of The Cross" (Grosset & Dunlap, 99 pp., \$1.95 in paper) are translated by Roy Campbell. The Spanish and English texts are set side by side. And the latter brings to contemporary readers the work and thought of the Spanish mystic and poet who at one time was a prisoner of the Inquisition.