# Pantheism in modern dress

ALISTER HARDY is not the only distinguished biologist to believe in god, or to attempt the reconciliation of that belief with the findings of modern science. In this book* he touches on many of the common arguments, but makes no excessive claims for them, alone or together. Human societies have commonly adopted religions, however disparate—thus, religious belief may be held to be natural to man. Human moral values have varied, and do vary, but to possess them at all is evidence of divine inspiration. The subjective, but clearly not rare, experience of an exaltation, which does not have an obvious explanation in drugs or other definable agents, is in one sense quite real. Hardy sees them all as simultaneously manifestations of natural law (with their analogues present in infra-human species) and of the divine.

Thus he is prepared to see a dog's adoration of its master as equivalent to man's of his gods. Life in a hunting pack gave selective advantages to the capacity to be a follower. The rituals of worship he finds to be ethologically respectable gestures of submission, and this leads him to invite us not to feel embarrassed at reciting the Lord's prayer on our knees. It is nature's way of expressing devotion. But to what? To nature, seems to be the answer.

Indeed, if I understand Hardy's position correctly, it is not easily distinguishable from pantheism, and this will present both his theist sympathisers and his atheist critics with difficulties. The gods which old-fashioned atheists are accustomed to be without are fairly well defined. Their interventions in our affairs are particularly impressive when they flaunt natural law. As swans or as the holy ghost they impregnate women and tangible offspring are the result. They listen to human prayers and may or may not, as they see fit, save the king, connive at the destruction of Troy, or give us our daily bread. But Hardy's version of natural theology must leave us very much in doubt about what it is we are being invited to accept or provoked to reject.

One difficulty lies in his rather ambivalent approach to "paranormal" phenomena. He discusses extrasensory perception (ESP) telekinesis and apparitions, but rather tentatively. Paradoxically these phenomena are only especially relevant if they do not normally occur. If ESP and psychokinesis are reproducible phenomena they are on the agenda of science. If they are not, but occur as rare and unpredictable events which might reflect the decisions of a supernatural power, then it is open to believers to use them in support of the hypothesis of god. We cannot forget, however, that our history is littered with phenomena which started as unpredictable, but are now regarded without undue awe—floods, for example.

We may accept that otherwise sane and sober people have 'seen' apparitions, without admitting that these were objectively visible. Hardy does not imply, for example, that a stranger bursting in on one of Canon Phillips' interviews with the ghost of C. S. Lewis would have seen it too. The question is whether dreams, apparitions, and the like are going to yield entirely to psychological, neurophysiological and psychopharmacological analysis, or are events through which supernatural powers have access to our minds. Hardy seems to want to have it both ways. He accepts scientific analysis and the natural origin of the human faculties he discusses, and he is therefore forced to find the divine permeating nature, but only achieving its full stature with the evolution of man. For this, I suspect, traditional believers will not thank him. A god that is not in some sense independent of nature cannot really compete with Zeus.

Hardy presents his views discursively, modestly, and for my taste in altogether too good-natured a manner. If atheist biologists, such as Monod, are wrong their works should be criticised, not combed for sympathetic quotation. Just a little asperity would have done this book a world of good.

**D. R. Newth**

**The Biology of God; a Scientist's Study of Man the Religious Animal.* By Alister Hardy. Pp. 238. (Jonathan Cape: London, July 1975. £4.50.

# Origins of modern science


Collection Allen G. Debus

*Robert Fludd (1574–1637).* From the Integrum Morborum Mysterium: sive Medicinae Catholicae Tomi Primi Tractacus Secondus (*Fitzer, Frankfurt, 1631*)

ALTHOUGH some might be misled by the title of this book† into expecting rather more than is delivered, this is nonetheless a very useful and interesting book. What it does not provide is a serious discussion of the relationships between the three 'themes' of the title. But it does contain useful essays on the separate aspects, as well as a review of the current controversy among historians of the scientific revolution.

The most provocative essay, from the 'mystical' side, is that on Newton's alchemy, by Professor Richard Westfall. Having argued in earlier studies that Newton was not above breaking the rules of scientific method, Westfall describes the enormous bulk and complete technical mastery of the Newtonian alchemical corpus. What else can be said? Newton was clearly committed to chemistry far more than his publications indicate: he was sure that the alchemical tradition contained important secrets; and yet it is highly unlikely that he participated in the mystical aspects of the great work. But was it only chemistry? The matter rests undecided as yet.

A reminder of the importance of the genuinely alchemical and mystical traditions even in the 17th century is given by Alan Dobus. He reviews the career of von Helmont, the mildly Paracelsian chemist, whose sufferings at the hands of the Inquisition are totally neglected in the folk histories of science, perhaps because they were in the cause of a 'prescientific' world view. Also, there is Robert Fludd, the propagandist for a mystical philosophy, who was a close friend of William Harvey, and who defended the circulation of the blood against Gascendi's claims of the existence of the interventricular septum.

Another lively topic canvassed here is the quality of Galileo's reports of his