

Library Signpost

By Rev. Benedict Khmann

Brother Atom or Frankenstein Monster?

God and the Atom, by Ronald Knox. (Sheed & Ward: \$2).

Nothing could be more fatal to the security of the Atomic Age than to be so frightened that no one can think clearly. We must calm down, and take counsel as never before in the affairs of the world; and this, at a time when fear and a kind of despair are paralyzing the function of thought.

Monsignor Ronald Knox, who is perhaps England's most brilliant priest, has taken time away from his work of Scripture translation, to write this remarkable essay of ten chapters, so as to help Christians everywhere to calm down and take in the enormity of the atomic age. The book was written, he says, "for the benefit of people like myself. Of people, that is, whose faith is always more or less at strain in a world where faith is so little set by, and so rarely professed; who are quick, therefore, to scent out the discovering element in any new discovery, and cannot be at rest till they have straightened the thing out." The book "is an attempt to dispel an atmosphere unfriendly to the appeal of religion, an atmosphere psychologically conditioned by the prominence which will necessarily be given to atomic power in the popular literature of the coming decade."

Monsignor Knox does not essay to discuss whether it was wrong to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not because he is indifferent to that urgent question, but because the purpose of his book is rather to help us all adjust our thinking to the immensely important presence of atomic energy. The enormous pillar of smoke and flame that towered above Hiroshima like a cosmic question mark, was a signal of other and more perplexing questions than the rather obvious one of the morality of atomic bombs. Monsignor Knox's book would still serve its purpose even if atomic energy had first flashed before the world as a kindly servant instead of a Frankenstein monster. It is most unfortunate that man's first news of atomic energy should have been so terrifying and almost internal.

Publisher Sees New Authors Attracted to Catholic Field

Milwaukee — (NC) — Many "new but competent authors" should be attracted in 1946 to the field offered by 25 million potential Catholic readers, says Frank Bruce, Sr., secretary of the Bruce Publishing Company, in discussing trends in Catholic book publishing.

Catholic book reading has emerged "from the brick and mortar stage," he declares, and only books of merit, from a structural point of view as well as to content, have a chance of for now it will take years for him to overcome all the perplexities and phobias that were churned up in him by the bomb, and to evaluate clearly the presence of atomic energy among us. Monsignor Knox desires to accelerate the arrival of that day, before it is too late. His words are like the sensible, soothing voice of a friend standing by us in a time of terror.

I think that most readers — ordinary readers like myself — will find the last chapter the most interesting and helpful. Many readers may find some of the other chapters hard going, though the style is always clear and crisp. But the last chapter on Brother Atom is for everybody; and everybody had better take time to read what it says, if we hope to move ahead on the road that now lies before us with the toll-gate closed behind us. The following excerpt gives the clue to it:

"... these favored souls (the spiritual man and woman) do not find that radio-actively, theoretical or applied, comes in to distract them at their prayer. It is only (as it were) a new verse in the hymn of praise which God's creatures sing to him; St. Francis would have fitted in Brother Atom with the rest. It is only a variation, at most, on the old theme; you are not over-excited about a new source of power, when your daily theme is Omnipotence."

Beautifully said, indeed, this gives in a nutshell the core of Monsignor Knox's discussion. He sees the Atom as a tiny window opening wide upon Eternity, expanding our concept of Omnipotence as the sight of Niagara

success. "Catholic readers want good fiction. They want good biography. They want a good devotional book," he declares.

While what Mr. Bruce terms "the pentecostal taste" of Catholic readers must be satisfied, he insists that "the formal repetition of doctrinal truth and in an uninteresting manner is unfair to the reader." "He should not be compelled to read as Mgr. Fulton Sheen once said to me, 'with a bottle of aspirin at his elbow,'" Mr. Bruce observes.

Falls would expand a dweller's concept of water-power. The spiritual man sees the Atom as God's gift, as it surely is, "one of a series, fire, the wheel, gunpowder, the lens, steam, electricity... all these hidden away in the great branch of creation, to be fished for by children's hands, every now and then we think we have got to the bottom, but always we prove wrong." "God's gifts, but a terrible one; all His gifts are terrible. Gold and the beauty of women have made and unmade empires; what blessings wine has called down upon itself, what maledictions; Once God has given us free will, He has given us a wand that turns everything to meat or poison for us."

But what if man uses his freedom to abuse the Atom? What would Monsignor Knox say to allay our fears? Simply this: that, like Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "in the great hand of God we stand," and we may accept our fears as penance to purify us for whatever may follow. If the society of mankind is now under a dark cloud of fear over what may come to pass, Monsignor Knox suggests that history, even like individuals, has every so often to pass through a phase of the "dark night of the soul," and that, through dark cloud or bright sunshine, God's purpose of love is being worked out. Every chapter of this stimulating and encouraging book has excellent things for our meditation on Brother Atom. Whether you get all of them will depend upon your education or your persistence. But there is enough and more than enough for every reader to bring him to some clear thinking and to some intense praying about the prospects of the Atomic Age.

The Literary Circle Reflection on Authors

By John O'Connor

One hesitates to bring the topic of money into the sacred and pure precincts of American writing, for we all know how far above the crass and the purely commercial are our artists. Yet in looking back over the past few months I have come to the conclusion that England should be given all the billions she demands. If she will only reveal the secret that seems to give her great writers, skilled artists of the pen or the portable.

This isn't a thought idly arrived at because of the tremendous impact of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. This work merely proved to be the final pebble that launched the landslide.

Going over the reviews of 1945 would be enough to start any one reflecting on several modern phenomena.

For one thing, the Book-of-the-Month Club selected two novels in the past four months which were written by converts to the Catholic Church: Bruce Marshall and Evelyn Waugh. While this may be a species of Divine practical joke to have an American high-pressure business outfit, staffed with editors of left-wing persuasion select novels by Catholics on spiritual problems, I think it is even more.

At the moment, however, I am not concerned with Catholic authors. We read too much about them in Catholic periodicals as it is. What I am concerned with is the ability of a number of English authors to continue to write literature while so many of talent in this country have one eye on success in the slick magazine field and one eye on Hollywood and its golden hills.

No American has written a satire as penetrating as Christopher Isherwood's *Friday Night*. The movie and some of the international politicians come in for a merciless but merited treatment. While the locale is London, Isherwood, who lives near Hollywood, doubtless saw at first hand the shams and pretenses that distinguish Baghdad-on-the-Pacific. I should like to see an American do the same thing. Budd Schulberg did in *What Makes Sammy Run* but his was the study of a type of person and lacked the literary quality of Isherwood's short novel... and the cleanliness.

Perrowe Chalmers is another exceptional book in a sense of having fine prose sustained throughout the work. Robert Payne, the author is no war correspondent with his interests divided between the *Asiatic* and the *Asiatic* and the applause at Future lectures

in front of ladies' afternoon tea groups in Suburbia. Robert Payne is concerned with a country and a people and he describes them in what is seldom seen any more: pure literature.

(And Payne, being fluent in Chinese, both written and spoken, carries an extra weapon.) In the Catholic field there is also a notable gap of quality between what is written in this country and what is written abroad.

Maile Ward's biography of Chesterton is one example, although the author's long personal friendship with the great man naturally put her one up on any American biographer. But no one has attempted a critical work on his thought and the principles displayed in his essays. No one here has come anywhere near Wyndham Lewis' *Hammer*. Nor have we any essayists such as Christopher Dawson.

The brick press of Michael de la Bedoyere is lacking and would be discouraged in many Catholic quarters, for "Catholic style" means so one when he writes—and a salutary effect it has.

And I think in Waugh and de la Bedoyere we'll find the answer to the supremacy of expression that manifests itself in English writing. I would say it could be found in the word "integrity."

England has its hacks and commercial writers. But she has a number of men who are able to view the current scene with the detachment necessary for true art. They seek truth — and they seek the best expression of it possible to them. They are sure. None shall defect them. For our part it is of no value to underline the fact that many are converts to the Church, but it is interesting and perhaps significant beyond our present comprehension. The essential fact is they have integrity of purpose, integrity of form, and integrity of the very words they carefully put down.

I constantly think of this when I see and hear American writers, many with neglected talent, make chatter and buzz over agents, "contacts," prices, movie rights, and what-have-you. I frequently conjure up a montage in my mind in which hundreds of well-dressed women authors and tweedy, affected men writers are swept out of a modernistic cocktail lounge by a huge white wave. The building is dissolved and the land cleared for a new structure. We need a wave of common sense to clean out the Augean stables of American literary receipts and establish the integrity and honesty of purpose so necessary to true literature.

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Italian Premier Asks Tolerance

Rome — (NC) — An appeal to world leaders not to judge Italy for a "quarter-hour of folly" but for the centuries of its fruitful and glorious history was made by Premier Alcide de Gasperi of Italy, in an address to a Congress of Catholic Action of university students.

The Premier discussed frankly his deep religious convictions. He recalled the time he had spent as an employee of the Vatican Library during the fascist regime and paid glowing tribute to the work of Giovanni Cardinal Mercati, Vatican Librarian and Archivist of the Holy Roman Church.

"I lived them," the Premier recalled, "by taking refuge in the study of centuries past. I had no contacts with the conduct of Vatican affairs nor the honor of conversing with Pope Pius XI. Only once this great Pontiff sent word to me—that he had answered an ambassador of Mussolini who wanted to expel me from there, that the Pope was proud to give a reward of bread to one from whom the fascists had taken it."

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