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Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision (Book Review)

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The Spiritual Nature of Man, by Alister Hardy. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. 162 pp. \$6.95.
Reviewed by James Vanden Bosch, Associate Professor of English.

William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) has become a classic in the literature of the psychology of religion. James worked on this subject as a scientist, but as a scientist persuaded that religious experience was part of human reality, and thus worthy of study and capable of at least limited comprehension. His classifications have become part of our mental furnishings: we all learned from him the distinction between "healthy-mindedness" and the "sick soul." James's curiosity about the religious *experiences* of people allowed for a study of religion which did not start with tradition, theology, or denominations, but rather with what people actually experienced as the religious in their lives.

Alister Hardy's small book continues in the same tradition. It is not destined to be a classic in the literature of the field, but that is due not to some failure of execution, but to the modest and limited intention of the book. In chapter 1 ("Spiritual Feeling in a Scientific Age"), Hardy describes the limited scientific research which has been done since James's day; because so little has been done, he has set himself the task of "investigating man's transcendental experiences and of building up a body of knowledge about them from first-hand accounts" (p. 3). Hardy's work in this area began in 1925, but this book is an interim report of the first eight years of study conducted by his Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford. While admitting that such research (or at least this manifestation of it) "does not *as yet* constitute a con-

tribution to *science* in the strict sense," it does provide at least "a quantitative, sociological survey" which allows for "repetition and confirmation by other workers," and thus makes possible a solid foundation upon which further work may be built.

After a chapter explaining his research techniques, Hardy uses the rest of the book to publish a generous sample of the religious experiences reported to the Research Unit. His classification scheme is interesting, of course—religious experiences are sorted out into the appropriate slots: sensory, extra-sensory, behavioral, and cognitive; and the experiences are analyzed to discern their development, their dynamic patterns, their antecedents, and their consequences. But the reported experiences are, naturally, of even greater interest. It is here that James's emphasis on *variety* asserts itself. Each reader will be surprised or amused or moved by different sorts of reports, but if nothing else is established by Hardy's work, this must be: that experiences of something like transcendence are common and regular enough that they can be (and are, in Hardy's book) charted for frequency of occurrence per thousand reports. With James, Hardy considers this experiencing as among "the most important biological functions of man" (p. 5). Hardy does have the modesty to confess that there never will be a "science of the inner essence of spirituality." Hardy's modesty, together with his obvious dedication and sincerity, will allow most readers to experience his book with profit.

Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision, by Edward E. Ericson, Jr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980. 239 pp. \$12.95. Reviewed by James Vanden Bosch, Associate Professor of English.

Early on in this book, Ericson explains what it is that he hopes to accomplish by his work: not to judge Solzhenitsyn's literary worth or greatness, but to explicate Solzhenitsyn's vision of life, a vision which permeates all of his writing. Such an explication is necessary, says Ericson, not only because of the size and variety of his work, but largely because Solzhenitsyn is misunderstood, misinterpreted. And this misreading is due, in turn, to the fact that Solzhenitsyn's work moves against the currents of contemporary life, particularly against secular humanism and an undue reliance upon politics for the solution of human problems.

As an explication and a guide, Ericson's work is as valuable as Malcolm Muggeridge says it is in his preface to the book: "any serious student . . . could not fail to benefit from a preliminary reading of Solzhenitsyn. . . ,

and . . . he would be greatly assisted in so doing by keeping Professor Ericson's book within convenient reach."

Ericson patiently and capably leads the reader through the corpus of Solzhenitsyn's work available in English, from his earliest prose poems and short stories to his *Gulag Archipelago* and his polemical essays, including the Nobel Lecture of 1970 and the Harvard University address of 1978. He has a ready command of this diverse body of materials, and his explication, if not uniformly brilliant, is always adequate, marked by clarity and intensity. He is more than an explicator of Solzhenitsyn's vision: he is its advocate as well, and most often a very persuasive one.

Ericson's treatment of the two features of modern life which tend to skew our reading of Solzhenitsyn (secular

humanism and a faith in political solutions) deserves comment, because his discussion of these two forces or habits of thought seems, at times, inconsistent. Although Ericson cannot fairly be accused of joining those whose principle sport seems to be the baiting of "secular humanists," he does at times send out those sorts of signals. At other times he invokes the Great Tradition of humanism which animates Solzhenitsyn's sensibilities and work. It is not until late in the book that Ericson makes clear his distinctions between varieties of humanism, some of which he rejects, others of which he embraces. A similar problem arises in his treatment of politics. For nearly every statement which declares his low view of politics, there is a counterstatement which admits that a moral vision inevitably has connections to politics and ideology—they cannot consistently be treated as mutually exclusive. A moral vision such as

Solzhenitsyn's demands a politics appropriate to it, no matter how low politics falls in his regard. Neo-conservative political ideologues, for example, have quickly carted Solzhenitsyn into their camp. But it is a measure of Solzhenitsyn (and of Ericson's honest treatment of his work) that his actual presence in their camp would be radically unsettling, as unsettling as his presence already has been in the camp of contemporary liberals.

These two demurrers aside, I must commend Ericson for a very useful book. The reader is as well served by the text as he is by the serviceable documentation and index. And although Ericson does not want to judge more than Solzhenitsyn's moral vision, his literary analysis of Solzhenitsyn's work can be seen as a testimony to its significance as literature as well.