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The Biography of Every God Is an Epic

BIOGRAPHY OF THE GODS. By A. Eustace Haydon. 352 pp. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$2.50.

THE book which bears the above beckoning and provocative title is neither a harvest of legend nor a history of religion, and yet it includes—or at least it infers—both, in a fascinating study which is, like the divine figures which are its subject, rooted in man's age-long aspirations and social needs. It is not a book for either pietistic or superficial reading, of course, but it will hold a compelling interest for the mind which, between those two extremes, cares to give a humanist's attention to the spiritual demands and developments of human history. For such readers, "fascinating" is indeed the word to describe this story, by the Professor of History of Religions at the University of Chicago, of man's gods: all, "like man, earthborn."

It is, needless to say, in no spirit of materialism or what we call irreverence that Dr. Haydon points to the gods' anthropomorphic nature (that word, by the way, is one which he avoids). The biography of every god, he says in his preface, is "an epic into which are written the dreams and sorrows, tragedies and achievements of some human group. The history of the gods, he adds, is the story of "human adventures

in cooperation with what seemed helpful and trustworthy amid the dearth and danger of the changing centuries." The gods change, grow in moral character; myriads have died and been forgotten as man's mental development has taken him away from his primitive dependence or his ethical and spiritual standards have advanced beyond those of his divinities. "The biography of a god can be written only as a phase of the life process of a people," Dr. Haydon sums up. And although the birth of the gods long antedates man's knowledge, this scholar traces them to very early days. Here is great Enlil of the Sumerians, and then the gods of the Babylonians and the Persians and the Egyptians, and then the Greek gods who were done to death at last by philosophy, and the "intercultural, international family" of the gods of Rome.

All these are gods who have died. By far the larger part of Dr. Haydon's book is devoted to a detailed study—which should, again, be described as a social study—of the gods which still rule the faith of men. In its tracing of the development of the moral law and the trust in God's loving fatherhood, the account of the Hebrew Yahweh is the most interesting of all, and Dr. Haydon also points out how the Hebrew prophets "gave to

Western culture one of its basic beliefs—that a divine plan undergirds the universe, that a divine purpose runs through time." The chapter on the Christian God is less concerned with Christ than with the doctrines of the churches, from the first mystery of the Trinity, on through discussions in the Middle Ages and the Reformation period, to the problems of today. The Allah of the Mohammedans is the latest comer to the great gods' company, but his "clear, well-defined personality" has already lost some of its distinctness.

As chapter-head for his final conclusion Dr. Haydon has borrowed the phrase "Twilight of the gods." But what he actually points to is "twilight" only in the sense that darkness swings the cycle into dawn. All the great gods still living have their life-stories of development, "all are different and all are alike. The qualities men most highly esteem and the powers needful to guarantee human values belong to them all." But the unanswered question of evil has never been more pressing, and the need for creating the good society weighs heavily upon the hearts of religious men. To this human need we come, at the end of this vivid, resonant, beautifully written story of man's seekings after divinity.

L. B. ...