

LETTERS TO FORTUNE

A BANKER ON RELIGION

To the Editors:

FORTUNE's recent entry into the field of philosophy is an event of the utmost significance. A series of brilliant essays by four distinguished scholars like Hocking, Maritain, Sperry, and Niebuhr would be an important contribution to religious thought wherever and whenever published. Appearing at this time in our leading magazine of affairs, the articles indicate not only that a widespread desire to seek the answers to life's serious questions has been aroused by the present terrible world conflict, but also that the search for the answers will be made outside of the mystical atmosphere in which religious discussions are too often conducted.

Of the serious questions by which we are all confronted, the two biggest are whether there is a God and whether there is a hereafter. Hocking, Maritain, Sperry, and Niebuhr travel different roads, but they all reach a common destination: all four conclude that there is a God and a hereafter, and that acceptance of these beliefs enables us to solve the dark riddle of the universe and is thus essential to the highest interests of mankind. They hold that a knowledge of these truths, which are not capable of proof by actual experiment and observation, can be attained by intuition and does not need any proof. This, of course, is the view of religion proclaimed most widely in the U.S., whether or not it is accepted by a majority of the American population.

But what of the many who question or deny the existence of God and immortality? Included in their ranks are such profound philosophers as Dewey, Russell, Santayana, and Haydon, along with large numbers of the 76 million Americans who acknowledge no relationship to any religious body. Why have these given up or refused to adopt traditional religion, with its promise of consolation to the grief-stricken, strength to the weak, forgiveness to the sinful, rest to the weary, and eternal life to the faithful?

Those in this second group who have gone far enough with their thinking to reach conclusions are convinced that reason, however weak, is our sole guide and that man, standing alone, must work out his own salvation. They see traditional religion as a continuous delusion, promising everything but delivering nothing, offering imaginary remedies for mortal ills that might really be cured by well-directed effort. By them, belief in God and belief in immortality are recognized as the chief buttresses of superstition, which have again and again stood in the way of the adoption of practical measures for improving the health, the intelligence, and the character of mankind.

Pointing to the graveyard of the gods of the past, they assert that the gods of the half-dozen living religions, of which Christianity is but a small part, are all earthborn and will perish. They agree with the late President Eliot of Harvard that the religion of the future will contain nothing of the supernatural.

Whatever the religion of the future, it will not succeed where the religions of the past and the present have failed unless it represents the sum total of all the knowledge we can assemble about man and the world in which he lives. It must be a synthesis of the best thinking, not of the theologians and the philosophers alone, but of the scholars from other fields, of artists and writers, and of those whose main concern is the practical affairs of the world. The scientist, for instance, may someday be able to throw new light on the questions of God and immortality. If there is a divine force that makes for righteousness, may not the astronomer or the physicist be our best hope of finding it out? If there is life after death, should we perhaps not look to the physician or the biologist to demonstrate it?

Sperry, in his FORTUNE article, noted the reluctance of many people to express their philosophical convictions publicly and, with a fine spirit of tolerance, pleaded for wider and franker discussion. Since the religion each of us holds is largely an accident of birth, all of us need to follow Sperry's example by seeking the honest opinions of others, even at the risk of the destruction of our most cherished beliefs. FORTUNE can do much to help us toward this goal if it will continue to open its pages to philosophical essays reflecting all points of view.

Cleveland, Ohio

CYRUS EATON

Mr. Eaton, whose name was a Wall Street byword in the twenties, is an unusual combination of businessman and scholar. Currently he is senior partner of Otis & Co., Cleveland investment bankers and brokers, and a Director of Cliffs Corp., in whose iron ore and Great Lakes shipping interests he is still active. His interest in philosophy and comparative theology dates from his youth, when he studied for the Baptist ministry. He has done considerable research in the field, and likes to classify himself as a member of the Humanist school, along with his good friends John Dewey of Columbia University and Dr. A. E. Haydon of the University of Chicago. The latter dedicated his Biography of the Gods to Cyrus Eaton.

As Mr. Eaton points out, FORTUNE's series of philosophical articles was indeed inspired by "the widespread desire to seek answers to life's serious questions." His interesting letter is confirmation of that desire. As to future articles, FORTUNE's pages will always be open to sincere and cogent statement of any important philosophical position. The Editors.