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ATHEISM, HATRED AND THE LOVE OF GOD IN *THE END OF THE AFFAIR*

Stewart R. Sutherland

What is the difference between atheism and belief? As philosophical questions go, this one seems to be remarkably straightforward. Anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with classical Greek surely knows that the term 'atheism' is derived from the Greek negative prefix '*a*' and the Greek word for God—'*theos*'. Obviously an atheist is one who does not believe in God, as opposed to a 'believer', which in this context means 'one who does believe in God'.

My argument will be that although this may well be for some what the difference between atheism and belief amounts to, it is by no means the whole story: nor perhaps is it the philosophically most interesting story, nor even the most religiously significant story. The nature of the argument offered in support of this claim is derived from a principle suggested by Cook Wilson:

> 'One's first thought when trying to prove anything about God or morality should be - did I really get this conviction myself in this way?'.

Rather than follow out the letter of Cook Wilson's remark and write a paper which could run the severe risk of becoming self-indulgent reminiscence, the intention is rather to honour the spirit of the injunction by focusing the discussion upon Graham Greene's novel, *The End of the Affair*. The discussion which follows will, I hope, justify the move from autobiography to fiction. My argument will be that in this novel we are given an account of one form which the difference between atheism and belief might take. The central features of this account, as we shall see, have little to do with the simple affirmation or denial of the proposition 'God exists'. Nor, again as we shall see, is the difference between Bendrix and Sarah, a difference over whether a series of 'coincidences' is to count as evidence for the existence of a God who intervenes in human affairs. This is how Bendrix tries to construe the situation for most of the novel, but in doing so he fails abysmally to understand what separates Sarah from himself. What Greene brings out, which is very much in accord with the spirit of Cook Wilson's injunction, is what led to belief in the case of Sarah, and to the reaffirmation of the rejection of the belief in the case of Bendrix. As one might expect of a talented and skilled novelist, Greene does succeed in penetrating, in the case of his two central characters, to the ways in which some people can actually come to accept or reject belief.

The affair which has ended is between Bendrix, a writer, who narrates most of the story, and Sarah the wife of Henry, a rather drab and almost pathetic civil servant. Bendrix's initial assumption is that the affair has ended because Sarah has tired of him, or because she has found someone else. Two years or so later, he comes into possession of a journal which Sarah had been keeping at the time, and in the interim period. From an entry for June 17, 1944, it became clear that the end of the affair was not as Bendrix had imagined it. On June 16 they had been making love in his flat. An air-raid had started and Bendrix had gone downstairs to check whether they could discreetly take shelter in his landlady's cellar. A bomb landed in the street outside as he was passing the front door and he was partially buried in the debris of the explosion. Sarah rushed out to the landing, and seeing him lying there she feared the worst. She touched the hand protruding from underneath the door and believed it to be the hand of a dead man. She described her reaction as follows:

> 'I knelt down on the floor. I was mad to do such a thing: I never even had to do it as a child - my parents never believed in prayer, any more than I do. I hadn't any idea what to say. Maurice was dead. Extinct. There wasn't such a thing as a soul. Even the half-happiness I gave him was drained out of him like blood. He would never have the chance to be happy again. With anybody I thought: somebody else could have loved him and made him happier than I could, but now we won't have that choice. I knelt down and put my hand on the bed and

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wished I could believe. Dear God, I said – why dear? make me believe. I can't believe. Make me. I said, I'm a bitch and a fake and I hate myself. I can't do anything of myself. *Make* me believe. I shut my eyes tight, and I pressed my nails into the palms of my hands until I could feel nothing but the pain, and I said, I will believe. Let him be alive and I *will* believe. Give him a chance. Let him have his happiness. Do this and I'll believe. But that wasn't enough. It doesn't hurt to believe. So I said, I love him and I'll give him up forever, only let him be alive with a chance, and I pressed and pressed and I could feel the skin break, and I said: People can love without seeing each other, can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You, and then he came in at the door and he was alive, and I thought how the agony of being without him starts, and I wished he was safely back dead again under the door'.

Sarah believed herself to have made a vow to give up Bendrix should he be alive, and although she certainly wanted to, she did not feel herself able to break that vow. Thus the affair ended.

It would, of course, be easy to characterise the difference between Sarah's 'belief' here and Bendrix's refusal to see any sense in it, as the difference between hysteria and sanity, and that was, as we saw above, a characterisation of her belief which Sarah had already considered. Even if this is to be our final evaluation of the situation, it would be both precipitate and superficial to arrive at it quite as quickly as that.

Bendrix, as the narrator, reveals much about himself and not a great deal of it shows him in an attractive light. He tells us at the outset that his record is a 'record of hate far more than of love'. The love which he knows, is both egotistic and jealous. His capacity for suspicion and jealousy is such that any ambiguities in Sarah's speech and action are understood in their worst possible light. For example, the look of horror on Sarah's face as she realised that in the light of her vow she must now begin to live without Bendrix, is mis-read as the disappointment of not being rid of him as she had hoped, on seeing him buried in the bomb-blast. Sarah's surreptitious visits to church and to the home of Smythe an antitheistic soap-box preacher, were each read as another rendezvous with a new lover. The sense in which the former was true did eventually strike Bendrix as he came to see God, or at least Sarah's belief in God, as his rival for her love. The irony of seeing the visits to Smythe in that light escaped him. The point of these visits, of course, was largely the hope that Smythe might persuade her that the whole idea of a God and of a vow to him, was utter nonsense, so that she might then return to Bendrix. Perhaps the remark that signifies the depths of Bendrix's suspicion and jealousy, is his 'Distrust grows with a lover's success'. If she is so competent at deceiving her husband, if she is so ready to throw him over for me, how secure am I? The picture is not wholly black, however and he does have moments of compassion and tenderness, though these are the exception rather than the rule.

Sarah, on the other hand, is not a victim of jealousy. Even in her extreme reaction to the belief that Bendrix is dead she can consider the possibility that *someone else* might have made him happier. In general she has a strong sense of compassion: for example, she first took Smythe's card largely because she felt sorry for the way in which others were ignoring him. But, of course, she was deceitful, and although she felt the need to protect her husband, to support him, she seemed to have few scruples about being unfaithful to him. One other factor which will be relevant to later discussion is that she seemed at times acutely aware of the nature of the situations in which she found herself, and she did not seem over-disposed to self-deception. Her journal shows at times a passionate love for Bendrix side by side with a firm grasp of the dangers which the relationship seemed to hold for both of them.

Bendrix, even when he discovers about Sarah's vow, can make nothing of it, nor of her seeming religious belief. He simply cannot understand how this sort of thing could ever be strong enough to keep two lovers apart. Of course, he utterly rejects Sarah's God and her belief, and in his attempt to make intelligible what has happened, he tries to characterise the difference between his own rejection of belief and Sarah's acceptance of it in one way rather than in another. He wants to see the difference between Sarah and himself, between belief and unbelief as the difference over the interpretation

of 'coincidences'. On this view, the rational attitude, his attitude, is to view the various 'coincidences' as coincidences and no more: the emotional or superstitious attitude, Sarah's attitude, is to see some magical or superstitious force at work. If this is the truth of the matter, then he can be secure in his anger at Sarah, and in his contempt for her weakness.

These apparent but striking 'coincidences' are strewn throughout the second half of the novel. Their appearances in an almost *deus-ex-machina* air of abruptness and finality, could lead one, on a superficial reading, to view the novel as a rather badly written apologetic tract. It would seem as if Greene's finesse and judgment have left him as these inert lead-based 'pointers to God' weigh the novel down like so much unwanted ballast in a racing yacht. But to make that judgment is to presuppose that Greene's conception of the difference between belief and unbelief is the same as that of Bendrix.

The 'coincidences', however, are numerously and purposively deployed. The most obvious and striking one we have already encountered -- Sarah's prayer and the appearance of Bendrix in the doorway. Again there is the fact that, as her mother reveals, Sarah was as a small child baptised as a Catholic. Did this make it inevitable that she, who was at a time which she could not recall, baptised, should unwittingly return to the fold. Does baptism 'take' in that way, like a vaccination, as her mother had already hoped? Her final prayer to God that she should no longer be kept alive is . . . . should we say 'granted'?

Two further instances strike Bendrix as the sort of nonsense which people might quote as 'evidence': one concerns Bendrix directly. On the way to the crematorium for Sarah's funeral he had picked up an acquaintance's girl-friend. All the signs and intentions were that he would begin an affair with her:

> 'I implored Sarah, Get me out of it. I don't want to begin it all over again and injure her'.

Whatever sort of forgetfulness sparked off this wish, he mused on it later in the following terms:

> 'Last month in the crematorium I asked you to save that girl from me and you pushed your mother between us—or so they might say. But if I start believing that, then I have to believe in your God. I'd rather love the men you slept with'.

The second concerns the illness of the son of the private detective Parkis whom Bendrix had employed to report on Sarah's movements. In a raging fever the boy had two dreams in which Sarah, who was by then dead, had visited him, promised to give him a book, and had taken the pain away. All this took place in a background of the sceptical but desperate prayers of Parkis, and of his successful attempt to get hold of a book which had belonged to Sarah in her childhood to give to his son. As it turned out, inside the book there was an inscription written years before by Sarah which led Bendrix to ask Henry, Sarah's husband:

> ' "Did you read what Sarah had written in it before you gave it to Parkis?"
> "No. Why?"
> "A coincidence, that's all. But it seems you don't need to belong to Father Crompton's persuasion to be superstitious".'

Always the rather crude emphasis seems to be seeing the options as being, either mesmerised by coincidence or persuaded rationally.

If this is the view one takes of the novel, one will find the last example of 'coincidence' one self-indulgent, melodramatic chord too many. In the final pages it turns out that the rationalist propagandist, Smythe, has undergone what looked like some sort of miraculous cure for a deforming facial birth mark. He had first lied to Bendrix and had pretended that some new form of treatment had been the cause, but later he had told him 'Nobody had treated my face. It cleared up suddenly in the night'. Whether the supposed supernatural agency was the kiss which Sarah had once given it in a moment of symbolic passion, or the lock of hair which at his request she had given him, is left unanswered by Smythe.

As these events recur throughout the second half of the novel Bendrix becomes more strident than ever in what he comes to call his 'faith in coincidences', for he sees this as his protection against all the nonsense which led to the end of the affair. He tells Sarah's husband:

> ' "During the last year, Henry, I've been so bored I've even collected car numbers.

That teaches you about coincidences. Ten thousand possible numbers and God knows how many combinations, and yet over and over again I've seen two cars with the same figures side by side in a traffic block".'

Yet as his protest becomes more strident, it seems to lose something of the unemotional rationality which at first characterises it. His unbelief seems initially to be of the sort which equates 'I don't believe in God', with 'I don't believe that God exists, for reason tells me that all the so-called evidence can be explained as a combination of coincidence and psychological vulnerability'. And, of course, as the coincidences have been structured by Greene, this is true. Such effect as they might have in life, as in the novel, depends on their being juxtaposed as part of a pattern, and that is something far more easily arranged in a work of fiction than in the fragmented and perhaps dispassionate view which many of us have of our lives. On the other hand, clearly there is a kind of belief which depends, primarily, perhaps even exclusively, upon the believer's capacity to construct just such a pattern out of his experience. That kind of belief is the opposite of the atheism which equates 'I believe in God' with 'I believe that God exists', and which sees the stockpiling of 'evidence' as providing security against the chilling draughts of unbelief. In the end, however, to see the difference between belief and unbelief presented in the novel to be of this sort, is to mis-read it completely.

It is true that Greene seems to allow this to be part of, or a version of, the difference between belief and unbelief as we encounter it in the various characters - Smythe, Parkis, Father Crompton. The lengths to which the latter will go to open the gates of belief comes out in the following comic exchange:

' "I'm afraid I've never been able to pray much," Henry said, "since I was a boy. I used to pray to get into the second XV."
"And did you?"
"I got into the third. I'm afraid that kind of prayer isn't much good, is it, father?"
"Any sort's better than none. It is a recognition of God's power anyway, and that's a kind of praise, I suppose." I hadn't heard him talk so much since dinner had started.
"I should have thought", I said, "it was more like touching wood or avoiding the lines on the pavement. At that age anyway."
"Oh well," he said, "I'm not against a bit of superstition. It gives people the idea that this world is not everything." He scowled at me down his nose. "It could be the beginning of wisdom." '

The irony of this is not missed, of course. They talk of prayers to get into the second XV, whilst the woman who had brought them together had through prayer brought much unhappiness and eventually death upon herself. Surely we cannot be talking about the same kind of religious belief? Greene's response to that question is not in the novel unambiguous, though there are pointers, for example the fact that Sarah never actually took mass, never actually made the implied public confession of belief. Here, however, as in other of his novels, he does raise the question of whether this man 'ugly, haggard, graceless with the Torquemada nose' could in some sense be the representative of God on earth.

There is, nonetheless, in the novel an implied account of the difference between belief and unbelief which can be considered quite independently of the question of its relation to the form of belief which is the shortest of steps from superstition. It is this which denies that the second half of the novel is clumsy with the caricature of propaganda tracts. As a counterpoint to the melodramatic attention-begging coincidences Greene has been developing a different theme. In the culminating few pages of the novel Greene gives this alternative theme the dominant role, and brings out well what underlies the later stridency of Bendrix's insistences upon 'coincidence'. In so doing, an account of the difference between atheism and belief is offered which suggests the irrelevance of this seeming weighing of the evidences which has been going on, and which implies the comparative unimportance of the statement 'God exists' in characterising the difference between belief and unbelief.

In the end Bendrix's rejection of God is a refusal to have anything to do with a God who divided him from the woman he loved. To question, 'Are you saying then that he

believed that God existed?', is to miss the point. The important difference between Sarah who embraced religious belief and Bendrix who repudiated it, is not a difference over whether or not the coincidences are acts of God, nor of whether there is a God by reference to whom an odd pattern of events could be explained in terms other than those of coincidence. The difference is between someone who could accept the possibility of two lovers being kept apart in this way, and one who cannot accept such a possibility. To talk in these terms is to raise the question of the nature of the attachment between Bendrix and Sarah: it is to introduce the question of how each saw 'the affair'. There is no doubt of the strength and intensity of the bond between them. For each there was an emotional involvement in the other of depth to to the point of extremity. Yet there was a difference between them. For Bendrix the only conceivable end to an affair such as theirs was that one should tire of the love of the other, or that a new lover should be found. Not so, it seems, for Sarah. Behind this lies their differing concepts of love. In rejecting Sarah's God, in the end Bendrix was rejecting Sarah's conception of love, and what it could lead to. He admits as much in his closing, 'I'm too tired and old to learn to love'.

For Sarah, the possibility of belief in God is bound up with the possibility of belief in the love which, the Christian would claim, God shows towards men. The underlying emphasis is Christological, and the love in question, the Christian might claim, definitively exemplified in the self-giving of the incarnation and crucifixion. Bendrix, however, sees the possibility of belief in God in a different light:

> 'When we get to the end of human beings we have to delude ourselves into belief in God'.

It was this capacity for self-deception which could explain the irrationality of belief. But in Sarah was no such naivety. For her, psychological need was not a sufficient condition of the existence of belief. There were other barriers to be surmounted:

> 'If I loved God, then I would believe in his love for me. It's not enough to need it. We have to love first, and I don't know how'.

Throughout the novel there is very considerable play on the parallel between love for God and love between man and woman. It is Bendrix indeed, who first introduces the connection when he compares the language of the lover to the language of the religious mystic. An alternative account of religious belief to that of regarding coincidences as evidence for the existence of God is being offered. In this account, to believe in God is to see certain possibilities of divine love and that in turn is connected to seeing certain possibilities of the form which human love may take. Sarah cannot believe in God because she cannot believe in God's love for her and she cannot do that because she cannot love God: she does not, she says, know how. My argument is that, in fact, what is at issue here is not initially a question about the object of love, it is a question of the nature of love. It is not that Sarah finds it difficult to extend her love to include God as one of its objects: it is a question of whether an alternative kind or form of love is possible.

In the end Sarah at least saw what such an alternative form of love could amount to, and saw it as something to strive after. As such she saw the possibility of what God's love for her could be. Bendrix, in so far as he saw what such a love might be like, rejected it. Initially and most importantly he rejected it in Sarah as he had rejected its antecedents in her, because of the implications it had for his hold over her. In the end, as we have seen, he also rejected in himself any sense of its value, its desirability. The roots of this divergence of response are to be seen long before the end of the affair. Even in their relationship to one another there were to be discerned two quite different conceptions of love.

Sarah's love for Bendrix was, in a sense, totally self-giving, and self-forgetful. We see this, be it in her cry of abandonment as they make love, or in the comment,

> 'He thinks I still sleep with other men, and if I did, would it matter so much? If sometimes he had a woman, do I complain? I wouldn't rob him of some small companionship in the middle of the desert if we can't have each other here'.

For Bendrix such would be inconceivable. He

cannot see or understand the possibility of such a love, and they often quarrel about this. His love is quite different from that of Sarah. Already we have seen, it is a suspicious and jealous love. Indeed 'anyone who loves is jealous'. It was too, a love based on power and possession. Consider, for example, the one moment at which his hatred of Sarah's God subsides—when he believes he has won her back:

> 'I hadn't during that period any hatred of her God, for hadn't I in the end proved stronger?'

Further, it was a love which was self-pitying and egotistic. He remarks:

> 'We had begun to look beyond love but *it was only I who was aware of the way we were being driven'.*

As has already been noticed, Sarah also was well aware of the dangers which the relationship held for each of them. She too was asking, 'What are we doing to each other?'

The final egotism, and most complete, and the most crucial, was Bendrix's insistence,

> 'I refused to believe that love could take any other form than mine.'

Sarah's love, of course, did take a different form and this is what lay behind Bendrix's inability to understand her before or after the end of the affair. He refused to believe in the kind of self-giving love which Sarah professed, and in his own love, even when he spoke of 'losing one's identity' when 'happiness annihilates us', this was, at most, momentary. By contrast, Sarah's love was neither jealous nor suspicious, nor rooted in power and possession. Most crucially she did see and came increasingly to see the possibility of other sorts and dimensions of love.

In her struggles to reject the validity of the vow by which she had bound herself, Sarah brooded unceasingly upon the nature of the God to whom she had made this vow. She could, she tells us, believe in a God who was 'a vapour', but as for a God who was supposed to have become man, and who was worshipped through images of stone, iron, and plaster, that seemed to be incredible. What images pointed to, however, was precisely the difference between what could not be loved, 'a vapour', and what could be loved, a God who was, or had been a 'body like that'. The crucial question was still for her not 'Does God exist?' , but, 'Does God exist in such a way that he can be loved or hated?'. The philosophical point here has been stated in more formal terms by Cook Wilson:

> 'That the conception of God can only be realized by us with certain emotions, is not only a very interesting fact but it is an essential characteristic of the conception'.

The importance of the 'materialism' here, of which Sarah speaks, can, however, be developed in two different ways. One would be to emphasise as Smythe, Henry, and Bendrix would, the connections between the use of material objects as focuses of worship, on the one hand, and totemism, and the various forms of magic outlined in J.G. Fraser's *Golden Bough* on the other. The other way is to connect the notion of the love of God with that of the love of man. Greene does not separate these two possibilities explicitly, but in the end Sarah comes to tolerate the former only insofar as it leads to the latter.

Philosophically the interest here is in the latter as providing some account of what in Cook Wilson's terms it means 'to realize the conception of God'. Sarah does learn how to love God, which as we have already seen, was a precondition to her coming to believe that God loved her, and so of coming to believe in God. How then does she learn to love God, to see the possibility of God's love for her?

I have argued that her conception of love was quite different from that of Bendrix. It was a self-giving, self-emptying love which she felt for him. This, in a sense, mirrors or reflects the Christian conception of the love of God for men shown in the crucifixion. What then, did Sarah still have to learn in order to know what the love of God amounted to? There were still two aspects of love to be discovered and assimilated. One was stumbled over, when she realized that the love of God cannot be love of 'a vapour', any more than the love of Maurice could be. It was then that she began seriously to confront the possibility that the love of God must in some sense take the form of love of what has flesh and blood.

> 'Suppose God did exist, suppose he was a body like that (a bowler-hatted man nearby), what's wrong in believing that his body existed as much as mine? Could anyone love him or hate him if he hadn't got a body?

The importance of the 'like that' there, might be seen as a means of giving one an image of what or who it is one loves in loving God, and this point is partially developed. But the greater significance of the 'like that', is that it gives Sarah the possibility of seeing those around her in a different light.

Sarah's love for Bendrix had the divine quality of self-giving to a marked and unusual degree. Bendrix was right when he argued that for most, love is jealous love. Where he was wrong was in implying that love *could not* take any other form. If he is right in that, then the whole idea of the love of God is empty, as therefore is Sarah's belief. What left Sarah still asking 'teach me to love', was the fact that this self-giving love was essentially directed towards and consumed by one individual. It was love for *this* man, particular love for him because of who or what *he* was. What she did not know was what is meant by the command 'love thy neighbour'. Kierkegaard drew the distinction in this way.

> 'One's neighbour is one's equal. One's neighbour is not the beloved for whom you have a passionate preference .... Your neighbour is every man ... He is your neighbour on the basis of equality with you before God ...'[4]

The important point in believing that God could have a body 'like that' could be in providing an image for the focus of worship. Alternatively, and this is my point here, it could be in transforming one's conception of the worth, or worthiness to be loved, of human beings *qua* human beings - to see them, in Kierkegaard's sense, as 'one's neighbour'.

That this was the significance for Sarah can be seen in the following passage:

> 'I wish I knew a prayer that wasn't me, me, me. Help me. Let *me* die soon. Me, me, me. Let me think of the strawberry-mark on Richard's cheek. Let me see Henry's face with the tears falling. Let me forget me. Dear God I've tried to love and I've made such a hash of it ... Teach me to love ... I don't mind my pain. It's their pain I can't stand. Let my pain go on and on, but stop theirs. Dear God, if only you could come down from your Cross for a while and let me get up there instead. If I could suffer like you, I could heal like you.'

What Sarah had come to here was an extension of that self-giving love beyond one man. This in the end, was what finally kept her and Bendrix apart. It follows precisely Sarah's attempt to return to Bendrix, and finally leave Henry. She found that confronted by Henry and the pain which such a move would cause him, she could not leave him. It is the expression of that sort of love which leads her finally to attach significance to the idea that God might love her. It is this kind of love which is denied by the exclusive particularity of the love which is essentially a jealous love. This is the core of the difference between Sarah and Bendrix.

The second feature which her love up to that point had lacked, is brought out also in the above passage: the connection between love and suffering. The connection is two-fold. What Sarah cannot stand is the pain of others. Further than this, however, she seems to believe in the end that to love others, to shield them from suffering, is to take their suffering upon oneself. This is, of course, a central feature of most theological accounts of the Atonement, though that in itself does not make the notion any easier to grasp. My purpose here, however, is neither to defend, nor to commend Sarah's beliefs. The point of this analysis is initially to bring out the differences between Sarah, the believer, and Bendrix the atheist who rejects her God. In the end he rejects such a conception of love as the one which comes between himself and Sarah.

It might be interposed at this point, that surely the affair had ended long before the kind of love which has been outlined had formulated itself in Sarah's thoughts and deeds, and that what comes after is irrelevant to Bendrix's judgment that Sarah's belief had begun in hysteria. My reply at this point would

have to take the form of another paper raising the question of just what it is that distinguishes hysteria from sanity. The implications of the present paper are that that question is not to be settled solely by a study of the extract from Sarah's diary which described the circumstances in which she made her rather strange vow. It was not hysteria which prevented her finally leaving Henry. What she was and what she became are central to this quesion. Nor is the difference between hysteria and sanity, between belief and unbelief, to be settled by appeal to the difference between superstition and belief in coincidences. Greene develops a counterpoint to that account of the difference between Sarah and Bendrix. Bendrix in the end cannot understand Sarah because

> 'I refuse to believe that love could take any other form than mine'.

If this analysis is at least partially adequate as an account of *one* form which the difference between belief and unbelief can take, then to that extent it questions the adequacy of the definition of atheism as the belief that God does not exist.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Historical Selections in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. R.N. Smart. S.C.M., 1962. p. 452.
2. Published by Heinemann. All references to the Uniform Edition 1955.
3. *op.cit.*, p. 459.
4. *Works of Love*, Collins, 1962, p. 72. See also D.Z. Phillips, *The Christian Concept of Love*, in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. I.T. Ramsey, S.C.M. Press, 1966.

AN INTRODUCTION TO NAG HAMMADI STUDIES

T.V. Smith

Despite the appearance of several books and articles dealing with the subject (1), personal experience reveals that mention of the Nag Hammadi discovery is often met with a shrug of the shoulders and a quizzical frown. It is not difficult to point out several reasons why the Nag Hammadi find has failed to attract the same public and scholarly attention, particularly in Britain, as that which surrounded the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For one thing, the gnostic texts belong to the Christian era, and in several cases are clearly influenced by Christianity, whilst the Dead Sea Scrolls relate to the period of Christian origins and uncover the scriptures of a hitherto unknown Jewish sect. In addition, fewer scholars are able to deal at first-hand with Coptic texts than with Hebrew, and the publication of the Nag Hammadi library has been plagued with far more problems and delays than attended the publication of the Scrolls (2). Recent months, however, have witnessed three significant events in Nag Hammadi Studies: the publication of the final volume of the facsimile edition of the texts; the appearance of a one-volume English translation; and an International Conference on Gnosticism, held at Yale University, at which over two hundred and fifty scholars met to discuss some of the issues raised by the Nag Hammadi documents. In view of these developments, but bearing in mind the feeling of unfamiliarity, it seems appropriate to introduce the discovery and study of the Nag Hammadi texts (3).

The town of Nag Hammadi is situated on the southern bank of the River Nile, about six hundred kilometres south of Cairo. A few miles east of the town lies the ancient site of Chenoboskion, where Pachomius established the first Christian monastery at the beginning of the fourth century. The area around Nag Hammadi was in fact one of the major centres of Christian monasticism from the fourth century onwards. The gnostic texts were not discovered in the