

RELIGIOUS FIXITY AND REFORMATION

JUST as a particular life, though largely conditioned by material needs, is on occasion given a new direction by unpredictable forces of religion, culture, election and whim, so general history is determined by the stresses set up by forces that economics cannot measure, by the opposition of spiritual ideas, the incalculable action of personalities, the tendencies of the acquired prejudices, conventions and enthusiasms of a period. The economic interpretation of history, indispensable as it is, must appear singularly partial when applied to the sixteenth century. It is the merit of a recent book of Reformation studies—*The Reformation and the Contemplative Life*'—to relate a wide and learned selection of facts to a significant aspect of the time, and to

¹ *A Study of the Conflict between the Carthusians and the State.* By David Mathew and Gervase Mathew, O.P. (Sheed & Ward ; pp. 321 ; 7/6.)

In sixteen papers, with full notes on the text, the authors consider the first rush of the Reformation on the Carthusians, its retreat and return : how it was viewed from the Grande Chartreuse : its effect on the houses in Swabia and Franconia, and beyond in the Marches and the Baltic countries. To the east the Turk was riding into the lands of the charterhouses in Hungary and Carinthia; but the chief interest is the position in England, which is made the subject of delicate and allusive writing.

The period was particularly rich in personalities ; Europe was wider in experience than it had been in the medieval centuries and complication had not yet set into patterns. To all this the style of the authors is admirably fitted ; the knack of suggesting real individuals, not types ; the adjectival justice of the descriptions, often supported by references. How fresh, for instance, to be told of the devotion of Pope Leo X to the stark sanctity of St. Bruno and of the fundamental scholasticism of Blessed Thomas More. One point I would question: that a long calm settled upon Bavarian religion between the Peasants' War and the *Aufklärung* of the eighteenth century (p. 132). It is true that the Dukes and Electors of Bavaria, politically astute and Catholic by conviction, succeeded in holding the country for the Church; nevertheless, it was the central battle-field of the Counter-Reformation. — T. G.

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watch them in the medium of biographical religious psychology.

It is true that the merchants and princes, who principally benefited by the changes, were far from being wholeheartedly religious, but even they had their theological interests. There were not many Thomas Cromwells with detached and temperate Machiavellian minds, and the Councillors of Nuremburg were characteristic in turning from the international ramifications of their commercial concerns to play the part of somewhat fussy sacristans. Minds were consciously if narrowly religious, and history was shaped by the conflict of theological doctrines.

The only class aloof from such issues was that dying generation of Catholics represented, perhaps not at its best but typically enough, by the elegance and grace of Pietro Bembo—*vide Colcho Medea lieta e securo* is the allusive quotation at the head of the first essay. The space and symmetry of Bramante and the high-pitched crowded roofs of Wittenberg were architectural symbols of two different habits of mind; before the new apostolic spirit of the Counter-Reformation awoke, Rome was too occupied with the clearer if intricate affairs of Mediterranean civilization to bother overmuch with the rumours drifting out from the Saxonies. This wrangling over texts seemed a throw-back to the Dark Ages; the inheritors of the tradition of Bessarion, Æneas Sylvius Piccolomini and Ximenes, what had they to do with this mixture of superannuated scholasticism and crude popular religion? Even in the North, Erasmus represented the aristocratic, even sophisticated, initial Catholic reaction to Luther; while in the South, for culture there were the rich and fastidious editions from the presses of Aldus Manutius. for politics the saving of Christendom from the Turk, and for thought, the daring but assured speculations of Cajetan in the authentic tradition of St. Thomas, and his engagements with Scotus and Sylvester of Ferrara on such transcendental matters as the analogical nature of Being.

But if the future of England will be decided in Lancashire and not in Oxford, so was Europe in the first half

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of the sixteenth century formed from the spiritual turbulence this side of the Alps, and not from the cool and secure theological order of Rome. The Eternal City never entirely belongs to a particular period; was not, had never been, merely medieval. To the religious historian, the conflict in the early stages of the Reformation was not between heresy and Rome, but between the new Evangelical religions and the medieval Church of the Empire; the former rioting to one extreme in the apocalyptic extravagance of the Anabaptists and the rule of Enoch-friend-of-God, the latter hardening to the other extreme in the legalism of a vested interest . . . 'many chalices of gold,' Bishop Fisher remarked, 'but almost no golden priests.' The cry of 'Evangel, Evangel' on one side, the abuse of Indulgences on the other. The first conflicts lay between two religious cultures, the one new and disorderly, the other ancient and impressive in its appearance of settled possession.

To bring this contrast into sharper focus, Dr. David Mathew and Fr. Gervase Mathew, O.P. have had the happy idea of studying the effect of the new movements on the Carthusians. Here was a body within the Church, organized from a centre remote from Rome, which still exhibited unchanged and unimpaired after four-and-a-half centuries the simple and heroic religious ideals of the early middle ages. The Carthusian life worked from a theocentric system of thought based on the apprehension of a world coterminous with Catholicism; its theology, unconcerned with metaphysical speculation and unaffected alike by the bright and brittle thought of the Nominalists—*impertinentes subtilitates*, says Denys the Carthusian—and by the New Humanism, was content to quarry slowly and constantly in the great mass of symbolical theology left by that same *Doctor Ecstaticus*, who describes how in his youth he had been taught the distinction of essence and existence by the Dominicans of Cologne, but now does not see that it matters much. And the *Margareta Philosophica*, a Carthusian textbook of the period, is content to explain comets as portents of the death of princes and signals of divine wrath. There

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was no curiosity as to the whole universe and every part of life such as had marked the thought of St. Albert and was later to be expressed in the versatility of the Jesuits. The cleavage between sacred and profane was almost complete.

Similarly, the Carthusians were remote from the social movements of the time; the monks in the London Charterhouse were hardly concerned by the crowded population in the tall ramshackle houses piled closely in the lanes about their walls: and as for politics, they relied on the piety and strength of the princes in much the same way as they accepted without question the Aristotelian formulas of the Old Learning. They were committed neither to the political power of the princes nor to the academic position of the Dominicans whose realist grammar they adopted. Both were outside supports behind which they could unfold their own Victorine thought, simple in its devotion, immense in its digressions on the symbolical meanings of Scripture, secure in its sense of the actuality of the Mass and the Liturgy, almost more certain of Purgatory and Heaven than of Earth. Thus insulated from the world, Space and Time shrank to their least possible significance; in steadfast tranquillity the traditional histories of their Order represented features of the actual world; and life was no different in the Charterhouse of the Tower of Calabria where St. Bruno lay buried than it was in the recently established Charterhouse of the Peace of Mary at Gripsholm in Sweden.

These studies on the Carthusians and the Reformation do not slip into the habit of regarding the conflict as being precisely between heresy and the Church, between the world and the spirit. It is true that the Carthusians had renounced the world, but they were already stamped with a medieval character, and they had left one world only to found another. Their way of life, their customs, their thought, if reflections of eternity in their unchanging stability, were yet all marked with the century of the Order's origin. Consequently, to measure the new religious and political movements by the Carthusian idea and life is not to apply the Catholic, but only one Catholic, formula.

But the test is useful because the measure was remarkably simple and fixed. The Carthusians were set apart from a changing world; their concentration on certain elementary enduring values gave them a clear perception of dogmatic truths, and the courage to die for them. The issues were not so defined to ecclesiastics occupied with the shifting currents of religious policy. But the self-contained organization of the Carthusians which gave them their strength also put them at a disadvantage. For it aimed at an almost exclusive preoccupation with a secluded contemplative vocation in a state of society pictured as stable. Their retirement from the world led to a complete misreading of the politico-religious situation. This was not surprising, for, to take one instance, the worldly experience of the Prior of the Grande Chartreuse had ended in 1499, and he was expected to deal with the situation of 1528. Themselves in no need of reform, the Carthusians were unaware of the depth and extent of the religious disaffection about them, which they tended to regard as a *Jacquerie* or agrarian disorders with an admixture of the fervid apocalyptic elements of the Hussite revolts. But in Germany there was no Czech nationalism to give strength to such a movement, and the Carthusians were confident of the power and zeal of the princes to suppress it—not unnatural, considering the Catholic façade of such rulers as the Elector of Saxony and the King of England.

Where Catholicism was upheld by the secular power, there the Carthusians remained; elsewhere they were destroyed by a flood they had never expected nor attempted to control. Sharply separated in their enclosure from their social environment, their action, in so far as it concerns the historian, unlike that of the other Orders, did not work out into the world about them. They were the correspondence in the Church to the spirit of Tibet. They witnessed to the truth with their silence and their lives; but the Church had still to wait for the work of Ignatius.

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.