

REVIEWS

PROPHECY AND PAPACY. A Study of De Lamennais, the Church and the Revolution. By Alec R. Vidler. (S.P.C.K.; 25s.)

The nineteenth century is coming into the limelight. First we have the numerous publications from France, including the most important, Aubert's life of Pius IX, then in English Mr Hales' Study of Pio Nono, and now this serious study of the ill-starred de Lamennais. It must be said at once, this is an important book for the English reading public. It is solidly documented, it is objective, it is readable, its subject has a poignant actuality which can escape no one. France seems fated to produce the Church's prophets; some survive the test of condemnation, some do not. De Lamennais did not. Dr Vidler keeps up his objectivity almost to the end, but at the end he legitimately attempts to make a few comparisons with the present day and to allot the blame in the catastrophe of Lamennais' later life. These tail-end judgments required more room than he left himself, and they are in consequence most inadequate and not a little unfair to some modern Catholic writers. However, the general impression of the book is good.

De Lamennais is undoubtedly one of the fundamental spirits of the nineteenth century in western Europe. He was a Celt, a visionary, a man whose emotions could carry him away, but a man whose intellect was a match for his emotions. Was his will a match for his imagination? He saw things as they were and foresaw what was to come in some measure.

His story is well-known; it is most apposite in certain respects for today. The France of his youth was a France recovering from the shattering experience, first of the Revolution then of the Empire. It was a France trying to restore what had passed for ever, the *ancien régime*. Indeed Europe was attempting the impossible under the guiding hands of Metternich. Yet underneath seethed the ideas let loose by the years of Revolution, the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality. The Church, as represented by its bishops in France, was as die-hard as the most *plus ultra* of the returned nobility. This seemed disastrous to de Lamennais and his followers. They wished to marry Catholicism to the revolution, to the 'people'. De Lamennais saw clearly into the future, he saw that the future was with the masses, that the world of 1830 was an utterly different place from the world of 1780. The chief instrument of the party's propaganda was the newspaper *L'Avenir*. Its spirit and its policy were looked upon askance by the French Hierarchy. The only solution, so thought de Lamennais and his two chief lieutenants, Lacordaire and Montalembert, was to go to Rome and

ask from the Holy Father himself either an assurance of his support or his condemnation. They went, and Rome refused to commit itself, or if you will, refused to be brutal and condemn.

The two lieutenants left, the leader lingered on in hope. But in the end even he withdrew. The three met at Munich, and it was at Munich during a great dinner in their honour that de Lamennais was handed the papal encyclical *Mirari vos*, which was the condemnation of all his cherished principles. He read it, showed it in secret to his friends. They left Germany and returned to Paris, and finally to Brittany.

At first de Lamennais submitted. But Dr Vidler shows that he did not submit his judgment, he only submitted his outward behaviour. He was sure that the condemnation was not one motivated by dogmatic principle but by political expediency. Metternich was too powerful an ally of the Papacy to be irritated, and *l'Avenir* was undoubtedly irritating him. So de Lamennais and his friends were being sacrificed for peace.

The campaign went on; and Rome, which up to then had not mentioned de Lamennais by name, even in the encyclical *Mirari vos*, now spoke out, for the prophet had turned his eyes towards the people and published—completely ignoring the warnings of *Mirari vos*—*Les Paroles d'un Croquant*, one of the most stirring pieces of rhythmic prose ever written in French. He drew further and further from the Church of his youth. He died unreconciled. That is the story of one of the greatest geniuses of his century. His work apparently died with him.

Dr Vidler would say that the modern Liberal Catholics, i.e. those who preach toleration and democratic ideals, are his true heirs, and that what he preached in 1830 and was condemned for, is now preached and applauded in 1954. We must examine that. For this book is not one written without an eye to the present. It is a book with a thesis. The thesis is that the Catholic Church is unable to recognize the spirit of prophecy when she sees it. The proof is that today she holds or nearly holds what yesterday she burned.

This is an important point, and we should examine it in the short space left to us. A prophet must show his credentials. The self-evidence of the truths he proposes is not enough, for a prophet is precisely a person who is going against the current of present belief. In the Old Testament, his credentials were miracles. In the New Dispensation, miracles too are of use. The saints are in a sense prophets; they show forth the truths of Christ in a new light. But a 'miracle' may be the work of the devil. The first credential of any prophet is his humility, that is to say his spirit of obedience to recognized authority. It matters not if the authority appreciates his messages or not. The authority

cannot recognize it until the prophet or the saint has shown submissiveness to the established authority of the Church. On that rock many a prophet, and—who knows—a real prophet, has foundered. De Lamennais may have been a true prophet, but his will, his spirit of humility was not strong enough to restrain his imagination. He broke away.

In fact there is a difference between the liberalism he preached and that proposed by many Catholics today, including the Pope himself (c.f. the allocution of 6th December, 1953). De Lamennais made this into a principle: that all opinions should be given equal currency, that this in itself was a good thing. Modern Catholics, led by Pius XII, repudiate that statement of the case. They abhor error, and as such refuse to give it the freedom of the city of God in this world. But they allow that in the world such as it is, and granted the absolute right of the individual soul to true liberty of conscience, the suppression of all error would deny that just liberty; and so they would tolerate error, even though many consciences *de facto* would choose wrongly.

There were other prophets in the nineteenth century, and they had the necessary spiritual as well as the necessary intellectual and imaginative equipment: Newman, Lacordaire himself and Montalembert, Ketteler, St John Bosco most of all. Each age has its prophets and its *prophètes manqués*: a St Ignatius and a Luther, a St Francis of Assisi and a Joachim the Abbot. How are we to know which are the true prophets, which the false, unless we have some touchstone by which to judge? As Nestorius said of Eutyches on hearing he had been condemned in Rome: 'He had received judgment. What other judgment was requisite beyond that which the Bishop of Rome had made?'

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THE CHURCH AND INFALLIBILITY. A reply to the Abridged 'Salmon'.

By B. C. Butler, Abbot of Downside. (Sheed and Ward; 12s. 6d.)

When the abridged edition of Salmon's *Infallibility of the Church* was re-issued over a year ago it was hailed in several responsible reviews as a devastating demolition of the Roman position. Indeed, the *Church Times* went so far as to imply that it had never been answered because it was unanswerable. The Abbot of Downside had called attention in a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* to a series of articles written in reply to the original edition of Salmon, over fifty years ago, by the Very Reverend J. Murphy, D.D., in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*. The *Church Times* reviewer brushed this aside by saying that had they met Dr Salmon's arguments adequately they would have been reprinted long ago. They have been reprinted this year in the same journal, and many will have now read them with satisfaction, for they are much