

Editorial

THERE is certainly no dearth of works relating to the Reformation of the sixteenth century in our bookshops today. The steady flow of both new studies on the Reformation and also of reprints of the writings of the Reformers themselves from our publishing houses is, in itself, an indication of the vitality and significance of the Reformation for the present as well as in the past. It confirms the judgment that enshrined in this historic movement of four hundred years ago lay a dynamic principle which is of perennial validity and relevance, so that the extent of the attention it is receiving today cannot be dismissed as mere antiquarianism or as a fixation for the past. The continuing relevance of the Reformation is something that is fully recognized by Professor A. G. Dickens in his book entitled *The English Reformation* (Batsford, 374 pp., 50s.), which is both the most recent study of the subject to be published and the most constructive contribution to our understanding of the period to be made by a contemporary scholar. He divines, for example, that "the Reformation of the sixteenth century was an early if involuntary stage in the rise of societies which permit a multiplicity of religions, liberty of choice to the individual, and freedom of worship even to minor and unpopular sects". "What do they know of the Reformation who have not met John Wesley and his friends or who have not sensed the solid and devout beneficence of late Georgian England?" he asks, observing that "the Methodist and evangelical movements sprang almost directly from spiritual impulses initiated by the Reformers".

Professor Dickens sees the capacity for expansion as another consequence of the rise of British Protestantism. "The English and Scottish Reformations," he says, "came to resemble an intense source of light projected across time and falling upon great screens of space", and displaying "in abundance the finest Christian missionary qualities". British Protestantism, indeed, "placed its ineradicable stamp upon the image of Britain throughout the world"—a phenomenon exhibited in its capacity to give birth to self-governing churches and also in the manner in which "men of many nations continue to use Thomas Cranmer's Prayer Book—or adaptations of it—and to owe deep if unconscious debts to a host of Tudor and Stuart Englishmen". The Reformation, he affirms, "still stands in mountainous bulk across the landscapes of western Christianity. It concerned most vital issues which still live to perplex and divide us." The desire of the Reformers "to free man's image of God from anthropomorphism and marginal cults, to envisage the magnitude and the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice, to cast aside misleading unessentials and accretions, to bring men nearer in love to the real person of the Founder, this type of aspiration lies at the heart of their message for our own century".

The Reformers, in fact, recaptured that same dynamic principle which impelled the Apostle Paul forward in his missionary labours, living, suffering, and dying in single-minded devotion to the cause of the unique cosmic Gospel that had been entrusted to him. To thank God for the Reformation, therefore, and to seek to keep this principle alive, is not to be backward-looking and unrealistic any more than was the determination of the Reformers to return to and restore the authentic apostolic Christianity of the New Testament. On the contrary, when applied to the demands and circumstances of our own times, it is to be in the truest sense practical and progressive.

Professor Dickens' book is an outstanding example of historiography at its best. The objectivity of his approach is impressive (not that objectivity is the sole or even necessarily the main virtue of the good writer of history : the good historian, while being sufficiently detached to allow due weight, as far as possible, to whatever facts may come to light, will not smother his faculty of critical assessment—the facts are not just a string of names and dates ; they must be understood and interpreted in relation to each other and to the experience of humanity as a whole—and he will not affect to be uninvolved in sympathy for the truth and worth of the personalities, the beliefs, and the movements of the past—history must be *felt*). In Dr. Dickens the scholar and the human being are admirably balanced. Erudite as his work is, he gives ample evidence that he possesses a mind and a heart of his own. There are places, indeed, where one feels that he is unduly critical or even deficient in comprehension. He tends, it would seem, to take too bland a view of the state of religion prior to the Reformation (there is no mention of the damning evidences amassed by the late Dr. G. G. Coulton), to be susceptible to the all too common explanation of the literally burning issues of the sixteenth century as involving matters which were only peripheral or incidental to the main core of papal faith and practice (has he read Francis Clark, S. J. ?), and to have an inadequate understanding of the position and struggle of Calvin in Geneva (perhaps he will give consideration to the article that follows in this issue of *The Churchman*). Yet it must also be said that even where he finds himself out of step with the Reformers he does not allow himself to be blinded to their greatness or to the significance of their achievements.

In this essay—for it is essentially a masterly essay and not an exhaustive chronicle of events—he has set before himself what he regards as the historian's primary task, namely, to explain why things happened ; he has ably justified his conviction that " the development and spread of Protestantism should play a far more prominent rôle than that assigned to it by most modern historians of the English Reformation " ; and he has " sought to depict the movement as it affected ordinary men and women, who have somehow tended to fall and disappear through the gaps between the kings, the prelates, the monasteries, and the prayer books ", without, however, minimizing the importance of the leading figures in the drama. Those who are familiar with Dr. Dickens' earlier work, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York* will have had a preview of the fresh light which this approach throws on the scene. The attainment of further knowledge

is unlikely to challenge the substance or the main conclusions of this study ; but Professor Dickens ventures the forecast that the researches now being carried on into local and regional records and particularly into Tudor diocesan archives (of which he is a pioneer and instigator) will make possible twenty years hence a far more complete and definitive treatment of the period in both its social and its institutional aspects.

In previous publications Professor Dickens has already adduced evidence to demonstrate that, so far from being, as some would have it, a foreign growth imported from Luther's Germany, the English Reformation had its own indigenous roots reaching back for a century and a half through the Lollards to John Wycliffe in the fourteenth century. The main function of the Lollards in this respect he discerns as lying in "the fact that they provided a spring-board of critical dissent from which the Protestant Reformation could overleap the walls of orthodoxy". Lollardy afforded a meeting-point for early Lutheran influence, the chief vehicle of which was Tyndale's New Testament of 1526 with its doctrinal prefaces. This factor has been largely overlooked because of the prejudice of historians against Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* as a reliable source of information. Dr. Dickens, however, champions the integrity of John Foxe, due allowance having been made for the historiographical methods and standards of his day. "It cannot sanely be maintained," he says, "that Foxe fabricated this mass of detailed and circumstantial information about early Tudor Lollardy", pointing out that to have done so would have necessitated "diabolical inventive powers and erudition" and that "such wholesale forgery would also have been highly foolish at a date . . . when so many of the people and events remained well within living memory". Though many of Foxe's sources have been lost, there are other contemporary records which survive and give him detailed support. If there is a complaint against Foxe, Dr. Dicken's suggests it should not be one of exaggeration but of incompleteness.

False and biased judgments concerning the matter of the dissolution of the monasteries are also exposed at their true worth. For one thing, as Professor Dickens remarks, the massive size of so many of the religious houses was not matched by the number of their inhabitants, and it is accordingly easy to overestimate the scale of English monasticism towards the end of the middle ages. For another, "the fate of the monasteries had only indirect connections with the rise of Protestantism", and, what is more, "in the destruction, division, and purchase of the monastic lands the lead was emphatically not taken by men of the new faith but by men who hated Luther and Cranmer, men who in time became pillars of the Catholic reaction under Queen Mary". He dismisses the "tragic view", characteristic of a certain doctrinaire approach, of thousands of monks and nuns being pathetically reduced to beggary and "proverbially liberal" abbots being replaced by rack-renting landlords as "based upon no valid contemporary evidence", as "today held by no competent economic historians", and as a view which "will never re-establish itself in the field of serious scholarship".

We are warned to avoid the temptation (to which so many doctrinaire writers have succumbed) to equate Henry's break-away from Rome, which was occasioned by the famous divorce, with the Protestant Reformation. Far more than the divorce, of course, there lay behind Henry's action the developing doctrine of the divine right of kings, influenced in large measure by the celebrated *Defensor Pacis* of Marsiglio of Padua which had been written two centuries previously. In this connection we are treated to an important and rehabilitating study of that brilliant statesman Thomas Cromwell as the one who laid the legal foundations of the national church. "The still-prevalent opinion that Cromwell's attitude to religion was purely worldly, negative, and sinister" is attacked on the ground that it rests "not on a serious study of Cromwell's character and designs but on an obsession with the monastic dissolution to the neglect of the innumerable proofs that Cromwell had creative and positive views on ecclesiastical reform". Professor Dickens finds it impossible to doubt Cromwell's "desire to establish a religion based upon the Bible" and "his zeal to create a scripturally-educated laity as the backbone of an orderly Christian commonwealth". As he so rightly discerns, it was "in the Bible, in the notion of a return to the original spirit of Christianity, in the rebirth of a fragment of the ancient world so infinitely more precious to Christians than the glories of Greece and the grandeurs of Rome", that "the true strength of the Reformation" lay. Again, it was Thomas Cromwell who advocated the authentic delineation of the Anglican *via media* as lying "between Romish superstition and licentious heresy" (not, as it is prevalently misrepresented, between Rome and Geneva). So, too, as Dr. Dickens observes, Cranmer's Forty-Two Articles—the blueprint of our Thirty-Nine—"leave no doubt as to the medial position of the 'new' Church, yet it is chiefly medial between Rome and the Anabaptists, rather than between Rome and the Calvinists or between Rome and the Lutherans". This is a crucial distinction which has been emphasized in these pages in the past.

The truth of the matter is, of course, that in its hey-day under Elizabeth, the Church of England came under the leadership of men whose theology was strongly Calvinistic, and many of whom had enjoyed the hospitality of the Continental Reformed churches as exiles during the period of the Marian persecutions. There was, moreover, complete theological continuity between them and their predecessors, the Edwardian Reformers. Their theology, too, was essentially one with that of the Puritans. One of the most valuable sections in Professor Dickens' book is devoted to a "brief anatomy" of Puritanism. He insists that Puritanism belonged to the mainstream of the Reformation. "It became a most pervasive spirit, and even at the height of Laud's career the Church of England did not begin to look like a church of the Counter-Reformation. Puritanism in our sense was never limited to Nonconformists; it was a powerful element in the origins of the Anglican Church and it was first through that church that it won its abiding rôle in the life and outlook of the nation". He reminds us that "even Archbishop Whitgift, who so fiercely disciplined Puritan mislikers of the surplice, did not differ from them upon the

essential points of theology. He was a strict Calvinist, who upbraided Cartwright himself for venturing to say that the doctrine of free will was 'not repugnant to salvation'. He complains that Puritanism "has often suffered unduly at the hands of doctrinaire critics who have fixed their gaze upon some unrepresentative aspect of a large and complicated phenomenon", and urges that if we are to assess the true character of the Puritan movement "we must free our minds from the present popular use of the term, deriving in large part from satire directed against Victorian religious hypocrisy".

This volume is itself a notable vindication of its author's contention that, "whatever our various confessional allegiances, we can scarcely begin to understand the Reformation without some sober and sympathetic effort to examine Protestantism from the inside", indeed that "any other approach is in danger of ignoring some of the plainest realities in our national history". One of these realities is that "the rise of Protestantism was based upon a positive evangel". Accordingly we are warned that "we deceive ourselves if we describe the process in terms of drab negation or attribute its success merely to the shortcomings of contemporary Catholicism". Thus, for example, "we should view with scepticism those theories which blame a supposed Protestant deprecation of good works", since, as is very rightly pointed out, "Protestantism even at its most uncompromising never disbelieved in good works: it merely disbelieved that they availed to justify or save the doer". The salutary admonition is given that "confusion has usually resulted from attempts to denounce or to justify essentially religious movements by reference to the non-religious phenomena accompanying them". Consequently, "when the Reformation is being debated in terms of religious and ethical values, its political, economic, and social background, which sprang in large part from a pre-existent order, should be introduced into the debate with restraint and discrimination". It is indeed sadly true that "the Reformation has been too often distorted, its worldly effects misrepresented, by all sorts of doctrinaires, anachronists, and wishful thinkers, both sacred and profane by inspiration". Dr. Dickens' estimable work will do much to ensure that things are seen again in their true perspective.

P.E.H.

(Note: The book for which the Editorial of our last issue was written is *Evangelicals and Unity: Nottingham Before and After*, edited by Dr. J. D. Douglas and published by the Marcham Manor Press, 6s. 6d.)
