

Near East; with admirable clarity he states the principles he intends to apply in the rest of the work. For example: 'We have not yet taken in their (the prophet's) words until we have reset them—to the extent that this is possible for us—in the concrete historical moment that provoked them into being. When their words remain obscure for us, as often as not this means that we have been unable to recreate this historical moment'. The principle ought to be a truism among educated Catholics; yet the notion that the prophets were mere stenographers taking divine dictation is, in fact, an unconscionably long time a-dying.

This book will help us to avoid falsifying the prophetic message by reading into it meanings that were never there. While maintaining our right to interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New, Fr Vawter rebukes those who would read the prophets 'with an obsessing conviction that they had no function other than to make predictions of the Messiah'. Patient inquiry, historical and linguistic, into what the prophets meant, cannot derogate from either the inspired quality of their message or the fulfilment of it in Christ. 'If our comprehension of the meaning of prophecy is broader than the prophets', it is nevertheless the comprehension of a meaning that was first theirs. If it was never theirs, we have no business thinking of it as prophecy. We must begin, therefore, with what the prophets themselves understood. The first and most necessary commentary on the New Testament is the Old Testament, but an Old Testament critically and honestly interpreted'.

Those who have read *A Path Through Genesis* will not need telling that Fr Vawter does not shirk difficulties. Problems are presented squarely. The solutions offered are firmly followed through. Texts, well selected, are given in the author's own translation. Biblical names are used with 'the spelling customarily found in . . . our general literature': forms which, the Foreword reminds us, are not Protestant so much as standard English. I have already said that Fr Vawter's style is eminently readable: the acceptance of an occasional Americanism is a small price to pay for the scholarship and humanity, to say nothing of the spirituality, which have gone to the making of this book.

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SPIRITUAL CONFERENCES, by John Tauler, O.P., translated and edited by Eric Colledge and Sr Mary Jane, O.P.; B. Herder; 34s.

By the time Tauler had begun to preach, 'Maitre Eckhart avail fait bien des écarts', and more than one innocent Béguine had perished in the fire. Tauler was, with Suso, probably a pupil of Eckhart, and he was on good terms with many of the 'Friends of God'. But the *studium generale* at Cologne in 1325 no doubt had its complement of conventional masters, for Tauler's sermons (the authentic ones at least), half of which are translated in the present volume, have a sober, traditional framework. The higher flights of *Wesensmystik* and *Braut-*

*mystik* are there, but without the 'extreme and paradoxical formulae'.

As early as 1245, Dr Colledge notes in his introduction, Innocent IV had granted incorporation into the Dominican Order to many of the communities of German Béguines. One imagines that in the 1330's the great *Frauenbewegung* had settled down to the regular life, but with little diminution of the original zeal. These, after all, are the women whose national thoroughness still compels them to scrub, not only the doorstep, but the pavement in front of the street. Many of them were extremely intelligent, some genuinely ecstatic. Knowing his congregation, Tauler did not talk down to it, and one can imagine that the sisters at St Gertrude's at Cologne were duly grateful.

Reading these sermons, one can see what a valuable person Tauler really was. The great movement of piety in the Low Countries and the Rhineland began traditionally enough, with short works written for laymen by monastically trained authors. Behind the *Mirror for Simple Souls*, which now appears to be the very work for which Margaret Porette was burned in 1310, we find the influence of William of Saint Thierry's *Golden Epistle*. Eckhart and so many others suffered for trying to express things which are of their nature beyond expression, and they were misrepresented by the malicious as well as by the ignorant. With Tauler the exuberance of Béguine aspirations is harnessed to a safe, workable pattern. The sermons strike one as being perfectly harmonized between the way of Mary and the way of Martha. There is great debunking here of pious illusions and frauds, much repetition of how 'God scrubs the soul with his good stiff brush'. But together with the scrubbing there is a very sure touch in his guidance for those who want to be 'closer, much closer to God than prayers could ever bring them . . . in eternity, beyond creation, in the un-created, beyond multiplicity, in simplicity'. None of this is surprising, of course, in view of the fact that the sermons are so often a development of scripture texts in the traditional mode, developed in all the four meanings, and so applying to every level of the soul's life.

The translation conveys Tauler's tone to perfection. One can imagine that if he had given the sermons in English he would have used just these astringent phrases for making nuns face up to their foibles, while at the same time the gentleness and understanding of a real spiritual director are apparent. It is a manner that reminds one of other great directors—Saint Francis of Sales, Saint Vincent de Paul, and Bossuet.

GEOFFREY WEBB

CHRISTIAN CHARITY IN ACTION, by Michel Riquet, S.J.; Burns and Oates, Faith and Fact Books; 8s. 6d.

Stopping short as it does at St Vincent de Paul, this book is necessarily concerned only with describing how charity went into action in the days when, as