

*Renaissance to Reformation: A Critical Review of the  
Spiritual and Temporal Influence on Medieval Europe*

BY ALBERT HYMA

(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951.) Pp. 591.

In this volume Professor Albert Hyma once more deals with the arguments and historical problems of the Renaissance and the Reformation which have already furnished material for many of his previous books. He does so not only in order to make them more accessible to a wider reading public and to synthesise in one volume the results of his patient research but also to test the validity and consistency of his previous conclusions in the light of later studies and investigations. The body of the large volume is made up of the chapters on Erasmus, on the "Devotio moderna," and on the political and economic thought of Luther and of Calvin;

but of notable interest are also the pages in which the writer deals with Church and State in the Middle Ages, with politics during the Renaissance period, with the French reformers "before the Reformation" (in which, as would be expected, much space is allotted to the well known research work of Renaudet on Standonk and on *Préréforme et humanisme à Paris pendant les premières guerres d'Italie*), and on protestantism and the origin of capitalism. An entire library of volumes, essays, articles and polemical notes has been written about these problems and it would be impossible to attempt even to summarize them here. The author, however,

shows that he possesses a sound knowledge of the essential limits of the questions treated, as well as a wide acquaintance with critical literature—which we could have wished to find more carefully and systematically quoted and discussed; and even one who does not use his criteria for methodological arrangement, and does not always agree with his conclusions, will admit that this book draws effectively the lines of a general interpretation of European culture, and that its sub-title is therefore not over-ambitious.

Some points, however, must be raised: the volume proposes to delineate the essential aspects of the Renaissance and Reformation through the examination of problems of special historic interest, but does not, however, succeed in fusing these in one coherent review of the subject, and in avoiding the pitfalls of non-essential details and unjustified omissions. Professor Hyma is well aware that the differences between Marsilio of Padua and Occam, between Machiavelli and Thomas More and, in general, between the culture of the Italian Renaissance and that of the European Renaissance are many and profound, nor does he fail to warn the reader repeatedly of this fact. But this warning rarely goes beyond pure and simple statement, and does not develop into concrete historical research into the genesis and development of the thought and cultural movements he is examining. Thus, Occam follows Marsilio, and Thomas More follows Machiavelli, without any attempt on the author's part to give a historical explanation of the differences, which he himself knows

as basic, between these specific political conceptions. Similar observations could be made concerning what he says about the attitude of Lorenzo Valla and of Machiavelli towards the Church and the Popes: they are placed on a common footing as regards their hostility towards those institutions, and, once again, without any attempt to investigate the nature and individuality of their respective positions. This is undoubtedly a defect in the author's critical attitude, and it becomes even more clear when the problem is no longer that of justifying differences between various types of culture, but rather that of grasping the intricate connection between political thought and the historical situation. The author clearly realises that it is generally impossible, in tracing a political thought, to follow the extrinsic coherence and the reciprocal inference of the parts which constitute it, and his preoccupation is to understand the historical climate in which the thinker is evolving his ideas, and the political problems that stir his passions and stimulate his thought and expression. With Marsilio da Padova he tries, accordingly, to catch the reflection of the changed historical conditions under which that thinker was living ("Marsilius reflected the age of turmoil in which he lived," p. 49), and in this he finds the reason for which he, "unlike Aquinas, paid less attention to literary sources than to actual conditions" (p. 50). "In the midst of the bustle of a rapidly rising flow of commerce and industrial activity, and aided by the contact with many foreign lands, both European and Asiatic, the

## Book Reviews

Italian communes had become restless and chafed at the fetters which the Canon Law and the papal chair had employed to restrict local independence and the incipient development of capitalisms. It was very well for Aquinas to reason coherently and somewhat abstractly about monarchy, but Marsilius saw the need of new bottles for the new wine of commercialism and political ferment, which threatened to burst the old bottles provided by the Canon Law, the Corpus Juris Civilis, and the writings of the scholastic philosophers" (pp. 49–50). In the above passage, except for the remark about Thomas Aquinas with which it seems to us quite impossible to agree, there is undoubtedly a notable attempt on the author's part to individualise the historical genesis of Marsilio's thought; nevertheless, the reader of the foregoing pages in which this thought is treated has the impression that the preceding considerations do not balance with this later account, and that, between the two, it is not possible to trace the connection which the writer seems anxious to establish.

Even more significant in this sense are the pages on Machiavelli in the chapter concerning "Politics in the Age of the Renaissance." Here, in order to justify for himself the unusual tone of Machiavelli's reflections, to arrive at a solution to the mystery of a thought so implacably interwoven with cruel and, we may well say, perverse maxims, the author tries to enlist, as an "accomplice," the age itself—a time of semi-paganism, of individualism, of merciless criticism of Church and of Pope. What could be expected, he seems to ask, from a

writer who wasted his wits on a world of that kind? And so Professor Hyma finds it natural that Machiavelli should write the disconcerting Chapter XVIII of the *Principe*, that hitherto unheard-of profession of programmatic rascality and betrayal of bonds; natural, too, that he should judge as he did the deeds of the son of Alexander VI, "the notorious Caesar Borgia" (p. 108). Must one point out that Machiavelli's thought, far from having been understood in the context of his age, has not even been faintly clarified, despite the efforts of many would-be interpreters? The fact is that Hyma bases his judgment of the Renaissance on biased texts, certainly worthy of the greatest respect, but antiquated and inadequate. The judgment of history renders justice and gives their rightful place to the works of Symonds, Monnier, and to Burckhardt's great work; but it does not recognise "immortal works" and Professor Hyma, who considers the works of Symonds as such, has paid the price of his own subtle ambiguity. He speaks of the paganism of the Renaissance, but he has not troubled to discuss the opinions of more up-to-date historians (certainly not unknown to him) who have given much labour and learning to the task of placing this question within its right limits. If he had taken these works into account, not alone Machiavelli's thoughts but the thought of the Renaissance as a whole would have doubtless appeared to him in a more elastic perspective. To bring this about the author would also have had to enlarge the historical range of his own researches, to cover, for example, that vein of mingled magic

and astrology which historians such as Boll and Cassirer had for some time noted, and which in recent times, in his particularly penetrating studies, Garin has proved to be essential to a real comprehension of the culture of that period. This vein of magic and astrology, interestingly enough, is found not only in Italian writers of the time, but throughout Europe: whoever follows it in its developments, sometimes subterranean and tortuous, can succeed in discovering bonds and connections which at first sight might easily escape attention.

Concerning another aspect of Renaissance culture, Professor Hyma, who has been making a special study of the Italian humanists, ought not to have entirely overlooked that type of Florentine civil humanism which is fundamental, as shown by the studies of Baron and Garin, for the comprehension in a new light of certain aspects and developments of Italian culture. We do not raise these objections from a taste, always questionable, for seeking out and indicating uncertainties and lacunae in the researches of a historian of great merit, but because it seems to us that a broader and less schematic consideration of Renaissance culture would certainly have enabled him to write with more precision on the problem of the cultural formation of Erasmus, which is the central point of his book. It is not possible to enter fully

here into the merits of this problem, but a minute and profound study will perhaps incline specialists in matters Erasmian towards this conclusion.

The preceding criticisms should not cause any misconceptions as to the high value of Professor Hyma's research work. So numerous and complex are the points touched on by his analysis, so interesting his arguments, that to deal with them in detail would require not only a minute and highly specialized examination of the various questions, but, above all, much more space than can be reserved for a book notice. We must limit ourselves to saying again that the author's general interpretation of the Reformation admits of criticism and reservation. The student will certainly profit greatly by reading not only the studies on Erasmus, but also the pages on the economic and political thought of Luther and Calvin. In them are assembled, with precision and respect for the texts, their essential lines of thought.

This book may, and probably will, arouse dissent, and be much discussed, and it would be interesting to discuss it, point by point, without space limitations. It must undoubtedly be considered as a particularly useful medium of reference for anyone who, among the many problems examined by its author, has chosen one or another for special study and reflection.