

REVIEWS

PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY

ENQUIRIES INTO RELIGION AND CULTURE. By Christopher Dawson. (Sheed and Ward; 8/6.)

'All genuine thought,' writes Mr. Dawson, 'is rooted in personal needs, and my own thought is due to the need that so many of us feel to-day for social readjustment and for the recovery of a vital contact between the spiritual life of the individual and the social and economic organisation of modern culture . . . Men to-day are divided between those who have kept their spiritual roots and lost their contact with the existing order of society, and those who have preserved their social contacts but lost their spiritual roots.' Mr. Dawson shows that these spiritual roots are ultimately religious, and that a society or culture which has become divorced from the religious beliefs and sanctions from which it originated is doomed to dissolution. He believes that theology and sociology, although autonomous in their respective spheres, are complementary, and that each will prove sterile if it has no reference to the other.

In this volume of collected essays this central thesis is approached from different standpoints, and is developed and exemplified in various ways. The value of Mr. Dawson's thought for the solving of our present perplexities is due to his combination of a theological understanding of the implications of Catholic Christianity with exceptional powers of analysis of social drifts and tendencies. He is too good a theologian to allow his theology to be debased by opportunist considerations, and his sociology, based on the demonstrable historic fact of the Christian origins of our civilisation, escapes all theological and philosophical apriority.

A wide knowledge of past and present history enables Mr. Dawson to write with authority on a vast range of subjects, and his detachment gives weight to his judgments on each and all. He writes with equal assurance on Marxism and industrialism, archaic religions and contemporary rationalism, Chinese civilisation and Christian ethics, Islamic mysticism and Thomist epistemology, Donatism and sex. He could anticipate Spengler with a theory of historic cultural cycles free of Spengler's pseudo-metaphysical assumptions. Particularly opportune is the reprint of his analysis of Fascism (pp. 14 *sqq.*), and his study of *The World Crisis and the English Tradition* clearly reflects the face of our nativity and its present disfigurements. The

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essay on *Religion and Life* is a permanently valuable exposition of the principles of Christian life and Catholic Action. All this variety of interests converges to support a central theme.

Mr. Dawson is one of the most helpful thinkers of our time. This book is one not only to be read, but to be kept for constant reference. Its usefulness would have been enhanced by an index.

V.W.

ERASMUS. By Christopher Hollis. (Eyre & Spottiswoode; pp. 370; 10/6.)

Mr. Hollis's pen has again been at work. His latest victim is Erasmus. We are shown, with Mr. Hollis's customary skill, most of the unpleasant sides of the Dutch humanist's character. The amount of relevant comment and historical perspective that is omitted is remarkably large—especially as Mr. Hollis is not without historical imagination. He regards Erasmus as the heir of Valla and the progenitor of Rabelais, to whom he gives a rarely accorded justice as a man with a philosophy. He might also have credited Erasmus with some religion, although to the superficial mind it is not very obvious, any more than Rabelais' philosophy. In ignoring Erasmus as a religious figure, he ignores almost everything about him. The idea of a secular-minded person having a personal religion independent of tradition or religious status and derived directly from an individual use of the New Testament, was an innovation in Christian history. Erasmus was its originator; his fault was that he did not foresee that human weakness would make his ideal the basis of a protestant schism. Erasmus seems irreligious because he was an intellectual who concealed his religious feelings from the general public. But the author of the *Praise of Folly* was also the first editor of the Fathers and almost the first exegete.

Again, Mr. Hollis mentions Erasmus' intimacy with Servatius as evidence of moral depravity. If this was the uncontrolled sentimentality of youth it was indeed a blot on his character. But it was more probably a misfortune of his birth and not his fault, by which much of Erasmus is excused: his loss of himself in literature was a creditable salvaging of his self-respect; his fussiness about his person is explicable. Such a man would naturally have become a stylist, and Erasmus was nothing if not a stylist. He was more a Latinist than a satirist. He taught Europe to write Latin well, and it happened that he taught many other things because they were the subject-matter of Latin exercises. His renown was due more to his having something to say, but his motive was due more to his ability to say things well. He loved to wield