

REVIEWS

GESCHIEDENIS VAN DE VROOMHEID IN DE NEDERLANDEN, vol. I: *De Vroomheid tot rond the Jaar 1300*. By Stephanus Axters, o.p. (De Sikkel, Antwerp, 1950: Belgian francs 320).

In a small preliminary volume which Fr Stephanus Axters wrote in French, an English translation of which the present writer recently reviewed (LIFE OF THE SPIRIT IX, pp. 137-8), a beginning was made by considering how far it is possible to write of a type or of types of Christian devotion in the Middle Ages which are recognizably peculiar to the Low Countries. In this major work, his *History of Piety in the Netherlands*, the author has a two-fold aim, to trace the developments of such devotion (this first volume begins with the very earliest manifestations and takes the history to circa 1300) and to demonstrate his thesis that the men and women of the Low Countries had, in worshipping God, ways of their own. It is inevitable, and it is by no means to be deplored, that today in Western Europe men's passionate pride in the antiquities and achievements of their native lands, a pride increased by the sorrows and the triumphs of war, should extend even to the life of scholarship and of religion. The extraordinary manifestations of popular devotion which accompanied the canonization of St Nicholas of Flüe in 1947 were characteristic of this spirit: in part they were the rejoicings of the usually undemonstrative Swiss that their country had once again been spared, in part too they were an assertion of a nation's love for a saint whose life and character are marked by qualities which they regard as specially their own. It is very welcome that by this great work of scholarship Fr Axters should have recorded for us the unique contributions which have been made in the past to the spirituality of Europe by Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg, countries which today are dear to all good Europeans.

This is not at all to say that his work has in any way been occasioned by recent political events. It is the fruit of a lifetime of scholarly toil; and one cannot too highly praise its author's erudition. His copious bibliographies alone will make his history an essential work of reference, and it is throughout informed by a particularly sensitive awareness of the most recent findings and developments in his own academic discipline and in others vitally related to his subject. Had it not been for the pioneer work of such scholars as Denifle, Wilmart, Delehaye and Combes, this work could not have attained its present form; and to signalise such indebtedness is to praise its author.

This is not a history of mysticism, such as Denifle wrote, nor is it an application of rigorous historical discipline either to a whole class

of records, following Delehaye, or to a narrower field like that investigated by Combes. It is rather a history of the spiritual ambience out of which mysticism grew in the Low Countries, and of which mysticism is only one manifestation. Without necessarily assenting to all Charles Williams' theories, one may recall what he and, following him, Dr Dorothy Sayers have written of Dante as a product of medieval Italian spirituality. More and more, it seems, scholars are once again appealing to 'the spirit of the age', at which most of us were taught to laugh when we were young. Not long ago Dom Combes wrote, with a wisdom which subsequent events have justified, that we should do better, instead of writing of how Tauler influenced Ruysbroek or Ruysbroek Tauler, to try to understand how much both men reflected in their writings spiritual traits which characterized the whole epoch which formed them.

Like wisdom is to be found in Axters's account of the origins of the Beguine movement, which, next to the *Devotio Moderna*, will be reckoned as the outstanding contribution of the Low Countries to medieval religious life. With great clarity and succinctness he develops his theory that the emergence of the Beguines is to be associated with the preaching of the first Crusades and with the sudden appearance, everywhere in Western Europe, of isolated yet similar waves of religious enthusiasm. With great economy he confines himself to the mention, by way of demonstration, of St Francis and of the growth of devotions to the Passion: yet those who may think this account of the *Zeitgeist* partial, in both senses, would be well advised to read, as independent testimony to the forces of enthusiasm released in St Francis' days, the pitiful story of the Children's Crusade as it has now been retold in his latest volume by Steven Runciman, an authority innocent of any partiality towards the Western Church.

Axters shows a particular fineness of touch in sketching for us the beginnings of the Beguines: how almost the first sign that we have that they exist is in the prohibitions of various orders (the Premonstratensians in 1174, for example, the Cistercians in 1228, and soon after the Franciscans and the Dominicans) against further admitting women into their confraternity: how, none the less, groups of pious women attached themselves to various monasteries and relied upon monks and friars for spiritual guidance. We today should call them 'tertiaries': their contemporaries found other, less decorous names for them. Few anecdotes could better evoke the temper of those early days than that in which Caesarius of Heisterbach, writing c. 1222, tells how, as a Cistercian, Walter of Vaucelles, was travelling to Brabant in order to seek for the gift of tears through communing with a pious laywoman, another traveller reviled him, saying 'Why do

you want to run around after these Beguines? If you like, I can show you a decent, God-fearing woman who obtains all that she asks of him.' This incident probably took place before 1199, and in this story we have perhaps the earliest record of the use, pejorative, be it observed, of the name 'Beguine': the next, also recounted by Axters, is Thomas of Cantimpré's tale of the woman who suffered cruelly from *incendium amoris*, and who in her anguish cried out: 'O blessed Gertrude, I'm not a Beguine! Why must I burn like this?'

In his history of the Beguine movement, Axters's method is displayed at its best: yet it also shows that this method is not without its drawbacks. In limiting his investigations to the Low Countries, the author has confined himself within frontiers of which the Middle Ages knew nothing: and no account of the Beguines can be considered adequate which fail to relate how the movement grew and spread from the Netherlands into Germany, how the piety of the Beguines there absorbed and popularized the devotions which later were to influence Eckhart's teachings, and how during the course of the thirteenth century the term 'Beguine' came to mean, from Upsala in the north to Barcelona, a female enthusiast of dubious propriety and questionable orthodoxy. It is of course true that Fr Axters did not set out to write a history of European spirituality, still less of European heterodoxy: but within the confines which he has set himself he is liable, as here, to do less than justice to his subject and to his gifts.

One further objection must be raised: although he deals scrupulously with the early Beguine period, he seems to be chiefly interested, later, to trace the growth of the houses in which the Beguines settled and lived to rules. Consequently, he passes over what may be considered one of the most important features of the whole movement, the way in which it anticipates *docta ignorantia* in providing a way of life in which ignorant working women, called to serve God, could find their 'contemplation', their 'sweetness of devotion', not in *πολυλογία* but in tending the sick, ministering to the dying, burying the dead. Grosseteste said (in private) that the Beguines had climbed higher on the *scala paupertatis* than any others: and we today may think that in an over-organized age they were marked not only by holy ignorance but also by holy anarchy. One is bound to admire the discipline and method with which Fr Axters has organized and disposed his vast sources, to treat of the 'dark period', with the possible beginnings of eremetical and cenobitic life which are recorded in the 'Passions' of the first martyrs, of the 'Frankish period' and the emergence of the ordered religious life, and of the third period of the foundation of the great cloisters: but although he has achieved much in this first volume of his history by using not merely devotional writings but also the less

ponderable evidence offered by the liturgists, the archaeologists and the philologists, one is not without an uneasy sense as one reads that there is a yet finer essence, the spirit of devotion as it manifests itself outside of organized religious life and above it, which has not yielded itself even to this superb survey of the Latin, Dutch and French sources of the Middle Ages.

ERIC COLLEDGE

INITIATION THÉOLOGIQUE. Tome IV: *L'Economie du Salut*. (Editions du Cerf; 2100 francs.)

With the appearance of the fourth volume, this courageous attempt to provide a contemporary introduction to Catholic theology is completed, and it will long remain a monument to French Dominican scholarship and zeal. In particular, Père Henry, the editor and principal contributor, deserves congratulation for so intelligent a response to a pressing need: the re-statement of traditional teaching in terms that can command the interest and respect of educated Catholics. This does not mean an 'economy' of truth, an evasion of the awkward, but rather a realistic understanding of the true function of language and the discipline of argument—both alike concerned to serve the perennial truth but not themselves intended to be a mere repetition of what has been said before, in other times to men with very different training and preoccupations.

The present volume is a brilliant example of how the need has been realized. 'The economy of salvation'—Christ, Mary and the Church, the Sacraments, the Second Coming of Christ—is, so to speak, the existent fact of religion. This is what it means to be a Christian: these are the ways in which the salvific work of Christ is made present and operative in his members. And such a treatise as Père Liégé's on the Church reflects a sympathetic understanding of the primary place of a theology of the Church in any living spirituality. Here, stated with authority, are the fundamental theological principles which should be nurturing the piety of Catholics which can otherwise so easily slide away into the sentimental and the subjective. Throughout the whole work indeed one is aware of this realization of the pastoral responsibility of the theologian, who is not simply a manipulator of abstract ideas but rather the mediator of the truths of religion to the people of God.

It is plainly impossible to indicate the wealth of material contained in the thousand pages of this final volume, but one specially welcomes the consistent biblical and liturgical emphasis which gives such strength to the treatment of the sacraments and releases them from the legalistic