

CURRENT ISSUES.

DR. F. J. POWICKE has written *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter*. He is a native of Kidderminster, and he dates his interest in Baxter from the day—it was July 25, 1875—when he listened to Dean Stanley's eulogy on Baxter at the unveiling of the statue raised there to his memory. He admires Baxter, naturally, but his biography is not blind to the weak points in his hero's character. Dr. Powicke in particular calls attention to Baxter's failure to appreciate Oliver Cromwell, and the reason he assigns for this defect is interesting. Baxter was above the narrow political and ecclesiastical prejudices which have kept many people from understanding Cromwell's genius, but he did not understand him. And when we ask why, Dr. Powicke replies: "he was not sufficiently mystical."

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Now there are times when the weary student is inclined to propose that for a time and times and half a time the word "mystical" should be dropped from the vocabulary of authors. It is used with incredible looseness. It is made to cover phenomena of a heterogeneous nature. But Dr. Powicke is right in using it where he does. He points out that George Fox and Cromwell at once understood one another. And why? Because they had a temperamental sympathy; theirs was the affinity of genuine mysticism, which drew them together. Now Baxter, for all his learning and ability of character, "was no mystic. The mystic's heights and depths of feeling, and flashes of insight, and often confused intellectual processes, were outside his ken. They were, therefore, outside his faith; and he was not the first, or the last, to set down the mystic as a charlatan."

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Baxter misunderstood Cromwell. And earlier in the century there is another instance of misconception. Men do not always realise the meaning of their own age; they may fail to do justice

to what is happening around them no less than to some specific individual. Sometimes good men fail here. They seem handicapped by their very goodness, which makes them unduly optimistic. Were they less pious, we are tempted to think, they would be more acute and alive to the contemporary situation. They are good, but their judgment is not good. And Bishop Lancelot Andrewes is a case in point.

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Andrewes had to breathe the tainted air of the English Court. He was a saintly bishop, though he was not above the superstitions and prejudices of his age. Historians have sometimes been puzzled to understand how he could ignore what went on under his eyes. Did he see it? Or, seeing it, did he wilfully shut his eyes to it? Was he one of those who love the Lord but do not hate evil? Probably Mr. Gairdner's explanation is more just, as it is more subtle. The bishop, says Mr. Gairdner, was spotless and gentle. "Going in and out as he did amongst the frivolous and grasping courtiers who gathered round the king, he seemed to live in a peculiar atmosphere of holiness, which prevented him from seeing the true nature of the evil times in which his lot had fallen." It is not the highest type of holiness. Certainly it is not the holiness of the Old Testament. Indeed it is nearer to the amiable, deluded spirit which characterises the opinions of a man like Marcus Aurelius upon some of his notorious relatives and contemporaries. But it is at any rate less to be censured than the spirit which swayed Baxter into a false judgment upon Cromwell.

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The Bishop of Durham has published, in *Quo Tendimus?*, the charge delivered by him to the clergy of his diocese in November, and added a Cambridge sermon upon "The Divine Guidance." The text of the sermon is taken from the decree passed by the Jerusalem Council of the Church, in Acts xv. 28: "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us." For the bishop's theme is the divine guidance which is claimed by the corporate church. He asks how this bold formula can be taken over by church councils for their official decisions. Indeed his question falls into two parts. Through what instruments does this divine guidance find intelligible expression? For what subjects may it be rightly claimed?

Dr. Henson is clear that church councils are not suitable media. Take even the Council of Jerusalem. It was a council of the undivided Church, the earliest and most apostolic of all councils. But its decisions were not final; they were addressed to a need of the age, and, as Hooker admitted, this very law, inspired by the Spirit, "is abrogated by decease of the end for which it was given." Nor can subsequent councils claim a greater measure of divine guidance. Dr. Henson will not allow even Dr. Gore's claim on behalf of the Œcumenical Councils. He fastens upon Dr. Gore's admission that some of the General Councils leave a "disagreeable moral impression upon our minds," and pointedly asks if the action of the Holy Spirit ought not to be specially manifest in the moral sphere.

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As for the second part of the question, Dr. Henson argues that Christians cannot expect, simply in virtue of their Christianity, any special illumination upon such complex and difficult problems as those raised, for example, by "Copec." He had already, in his charge, criticised the "Copec" conference. He now protests against the notion that devotion can be a substitute for hard thinking and practical experience, such as are required for any political or economic programme. "There is no short and easy way for Christians through the labyrinths of the social problem."

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What then is the bishop's conclusion. There is such a thing as divine guidance, but, he explains, "we may only concede to ecclesiastical decisions so much weight as their intrinsic quality may justify, and of that in the last resort the private judgment of the individual Christian must decide. That private judgment, exercised responsibly, reverently, and intelligently is the final authority." In matters of social service, again, the individual Christian has a motive which, apart from his religion, he would not possess, a motive, an inspiration, and a source of wisdom. The "constraining power of Christ's Love is the never-failing spring of Christian philanthropy."

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Mr. Augustine Birrell contributes to the *Congregational Quarterly* for July an entertaining article on Dr. Doddridge. He devotes most of his space to the nonconformist activities of his

hero, who chanced to be born in the seventeenth century, which, as Mr. Birrell remarks, "was everywhere a troublesome one for the proprietors of delicate consciences." Doddridge's father had a delicate conscience, and so had his son. Had he been less scrupulous about subscription, he might have become a bishop, and he would have been an honour to the episcopate. For, as Mr. Birrell declares, "the pious, learned, and dignified leaders of Nonconformity, bewigged, begowned, and banded, of Doddridge's day, were far better representatives of the piety, sobriety, and reverence for divine things within the Church of England than were the Paleys, the Warburtons, the Hurds, and the Hoadleys of the period."

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Doddridge as a boy learned the Bible-stories from the pictures on Dutch tiles on the fire-place, explained to him by his mother. So the story goes. Such tiles are still to be seen. One wishes they were used for the same good purpose. Nowadays there is more known about the Bible than of the Bible, I am afraid. There are dozens of people who will leap into a passionate enthusiasm for the Authorised English Version, for example, as if it was the real Bible, and yet it requires little experience to know that three-fifths of all this is merely lip-service. They praise the English Bible, but do they read it? Have they ever been taught it? A clever reporter on one of our daily newspapers came to me lately for an interview, and calmly informed me that by way of preparation for the ordeal he had sent down to the office for a copy of the Bible. And why? To find out—for he was uncertain—whether the psalms were in the Old Testament or in the New Testament! Something is wrong here with our education, either in schools or in the home. Probably if there were more mothers like Doddridge's, the English Bible would not be so often, like Shakespeare, more praised than perused.