

THE CHRISTIAN SOCIETY. By Stephen Neill. (Library of Constructive Theology; Nisbet; 17s. 6d.)

Bishop Stephen Neill has written what he calls a phenomenology of the Christian religion. His approach is empirical, starting with the fact that from the first there have been such people as Christians, living in a community or communities, whose continued existence is due to their allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ, and to what they believe to be his teaching. He traces the course of this Christian society through the centuries; its reaction to the cultural environment in which it has found itself, and to which in its turn it has given its own creative impress.

*The Christian Society* appears as the tenth in the series of the Library of Constructive Theology, edited by the Dean of St Paul's. This is an indication of the main emphases of its thought: stress on freedom as against external authority, reliance on experience and distrust of any form of compulsion upon conscience. Inevitably the author's own convictions obtrude themselves at times, but as far as possible he has put dogmatic presuppositions aside and written the story of events as they occurred.

The result is unexpectedly absorbing. There is genius in Bishop Neill's ability to select and compress without being merely factual. A Catholic looks with special interest at those parts which have to do with the Church, and in particular with Reformation history. The story is objectively told, with studied fairness and at times with generosity. Two other points stand out: the treatment of Catholic missionary work through the centuries, and the account of the expansion of Protestantism and in particular of Anglicanism in the mission field, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This latter is an area of Christian history little known or recognised among us. The outline of it sketched here will engender a deep respect for the zeal and wisdom of much non-Catholic missionary effort. The book reaches its climax in the history of the Ecumenical Movement; and here Bishop Neill writes with a first-hand knowledge which is unsurpassed.

In answer to those who maintain that our Lord was concerned only with the proclamation of the Gospel and that the society which came to embody it was a Christian afterthought, Bishop Neill has written, in his first chapter, a striking defence of the view that inseparably bound up with our Lord's own conception of his Messiahship was the idea of the New Israel, which his redemptive work would create and send into the world to mediate his redemption to it. But the argument is based upon a series of guesses made necessary by certain of the assumptions of critical scholarship. Bishop Neill rejects the doctrine that Scriptural inspiration involves immunity from error and where, following the lead of the form critics, he suspects a later interpretation superimposed within the New Testament text upon the original sayings and actions of our Lord, he can

only hope that the Apostles or their immediate followers had divined correctly the mind and purpose of the Master. A Catholic, while unable to go to the lengths of many of the form critics, may well admit the existence of such interpretations, but he holds their truth safeguarded by inspiration and sees in the interpretative activity of the Christian community within the pages of the New Testament the *ecclesia docens* already at work under the secure guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The many moderns who think as Bishop Neill does, in spite of the paradox of their deep and even passionate faith in Jesus Christ, have in fact left themselves no means by which the Word of God to men can be certainly known and distinguished from human accretion and error.

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

**THE COASTS OF THE COUNTRY.** An Anthology of Prayer drawn from the Early English Spiritual Writers. Edited by Clare Kirchberger; Introduction by Godfrey Anstruther, O.P. (The Harvill Press; 15s.)

In this book Miss Kirchberger has gathered together a number of passages from English medieval writers of which the majority—though not all—are concerned in one way or another with the practice of prayer. Naturally she draws heavily on the well-known writers whose works have been published, but she also quotes many passages from little-known and for the most part still unpublished sources, which her great knowledge of medieval English devotional manuscripts enables her to do.

It is unfortunate that fourteenth-century English appears quaint to us, and particularly, it must be said, when it is semi-modernised, for quaintness is not in itself a literary merit; indeed, if it is conscious, it is a defect. But, as Father Godfrey Anstruther usefully points out in his Introduction, these writers were not conscious of being quaint. They were using the language as they knew it, and it is a pity if we allow their seeming quaintness—as may easily happen—to blind us to the fact that they had always sound advice to give, and often profound theological truths to impart. In this connection, perhaps, it is a pity that Hilton's conception of contemplation as a 'lively feeling of grace' was not illustrated.

But the book is well calculated to give an idea of the serious pursuit of the life of prayer that was made in fourteenth-century England, a fact which can perhaps be too easily overlooked in considering other aspects of the religious history of the time. But these extracts may also, as I am sure their compiler intended, be of great practical use, and she has once more put us in her debt by bringing them together.

GERARD SITWELL, O.S.B.

**THE TWO VOICES**—Spiritual Conferences of Father R. H. J. Steuart, S.J., with a Memoir by C. C. Martindale, S.J. (Burns Oates; 18s.)

It has been felt that Miss Katharine Kendall's affectionate biography of