REVIEWS

FIVE CENTURIES OF RELIGION, Vol. IV THE LAST DAYS OF MEDIEVAL MONACHISM. By G. G. Coulton. (Cambridge University Press; 45s.)

This, the concluding volume of Dr Coulton's vast work on the Religious Orders, appears posthumously, the author having died in 1947. Since then his daughter has published a charming, frank portrait of her father which reveals many attractive traits (including a sense of humour), that one would not infer from his works. It also amusingly confirms his life-long hatred of Rome, amounting almost to a phobia, which warped his judgment and poisoned his graceful pen. It is a thousand pities that an author who had read so widely, who wrote such limpid prose, and whose translations are so felicitous, should have devoted his great gifts to what must be called propaganda. The present volume, even more than its predecessors, lacks the judgment and proportion that one expects from an historian. It is not history, but a valuable contribution to history. It is the case for the prosecution, put powerfully and persuasively, but with all the devices that are tolerable in counsel but unpardonable in a judge.

Dr Coulton's thesis is not the accepted one, that the monasteries were full of grave abuses that cried urgently for reform. His thesis seems to be that monastic life, except for great saints like St Bernard, led inevitably to gross abuses: that celibacy in practice meant widespread concubinage: that security led to idleness: that exemption from episcopal and state control opened the door to every form of licence. Hence the only possible reform was that pursued by Henry VIII, the French Revolution, and presumably by Communism today, namely to wipe the monks off the face of the earth. To support his theory, Coulton has delicately raked over the monastic middens of all Christendom well beyond the five centuries that were his allotted span. Although this volume purports to deal with the last days of medieval monachism, it contains unsavoury episodes from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. Solemn, ponderous denunciations from papal courts, the findings of visitators, the rhetorical exaggerations of excited preachers, the bawdy jokes of humanists, the satirical verses of contemporary poets, the malicious charges of enemies and rivals, even the filthy *Comperta* of Thomas Cromwell's henchmen—all is grist to the mill: all is welcome so long as it is discreditable to the monks, and all is used without any real discrimination. One would have thought that a certain amount of vivid contrast would have served his purpose, but here we have only black silhouettes against a background of dirty grey. One would also have thought that such a vast field would have yielded enough genuine scandals without distorting the picture by

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careful selection. Yet, if the chapters on the Dominicans are a fair example, there is a good deal of the *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*—terms he was so fond of hurling at his opponents.

There seems a limit to the amount of abuse that even monks can stand. After a time the charges begin to cancel out. They were too rich and too poor: they were out of touch with the common people and spent too much time in taverns: they had a horror of women and a bevy of mistresses: they were intellectually slothful and carried on the liveliest controversies: they built sumptuous monasteries and let them go to ruin: they ran all the schools and were afraid of learning: they stood up for their rights and cravenly surrendered them. St Thomas More has a passage that does not, of course, find a place in Coulton, but might serve as a review of this book. Speaking of the attacks on the clergy of his own day he says (Dialogue III ch. XI):

'We be so studious that neither good nor bad passeth unreproved. If they be familiar we call them light: if they be sad [serious] we call them solemn; if they be merry we call them mad; if they be holy we call them hypocrites: if they keep few servants we call them niggards: if they keep many we call them pompous. If a lewd priest do a lewd deed, then we say: "Lo, see what example the clergy giveth us!", as though that priest were the clergy. But then we forget to look what good men be therein, and what good counsel they give us. But we fare as do the ravens and the carrion-crows that never meddle with any quick flesh, but where they may find a dead dog in a ditch, thereto they flee, and thereon they feed apace.'

CATHOLIC LONDON. By Douglas Newton. (Hale; 21s.)

Mr Newton's London extends east and west from the Tower to Tyburn: north and south the limits are not defined, but coincide roughly with the old city; he concludes with a chapter on Southwark. It is an area that has been devastated by the great fires of 1666 and 1940, but there still remains a wealth of historical associations that are of special interest to Catholics. Mr Newton's knowledge of London is extensive and peculiar: he delights to conduct us not only to the show-places, but through the by-ways and back streets, and to unfold the long story of the Church, which is enshrined in so many old buildings and place-names. Almost every street evokes some Catholic memory, particularly of the penal times, and the book is a mine of accurate information. The author has the gift of writing succinctly but without undue compression, and he avoids the jargon and the breathless superficiality of the guide-book. No Catholic after reading this book can pass certain familiar spots with quite the same indifference. The Tower with the martyrs' inscriptions (here reproduced), High Holborn and the long