

**THE CATHOLIC LIBRARY-
14. COMMENTARY ON
THE SEVEN PENITENTIAL
PSALMS. VOL.1**

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JOHN FISHER & J. S. PHILLIMORE

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COMMENTARY ON THE SEVEN PENITENTIAL PSALMS

BY
JOHN FISHER, BISHOP OF ROCHESTER

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WITH PREFACE AND GLOSSARY

BY
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PREFACE.

IN Maarten Maarten's novel, *The Healers*, a Dutch lady, who is just about to become a Catholic, is assailed, as with a final broadside, with the objection that she will be turning round and giving the lie to the whole history of her country. An enormous, oppressive consideration which perhaps reduces to terms some part at least of the vague bewilderment, the shivering diver's *malaise* who funks the plunge, which is the common and the inevitable experience of converts: inevitable, because, let reasoning lead never so straight and personal comforters be never so reassuring, that particular act of faith can never not be an act. The shock of this alteration of spiritual and intellectual climate is greater, perhaps, for a Briton or a Dutchman than for any others, just because that Revolution in the sixteenth century did so far succeed in making, for a time, the new religion overlay the whole length and breadth of public life in the nation.

A Nonconformist, it has been said (perhaps unjustly), could not write the history of England from his Nonconformist point of view, because he is foreign to it, all but a phase which came late and obtained only partially. From his point of view he cannot command the subject. The Alteration of Religion (as Cecil called it, surely knowing what he meant) in England organized a state of things by which Anglican and English should tend to become synonyms, the Establishment and the nation co-extensive, and all such persons as might refuse to accept the sovereign for their "Only Supreme Governor" in matters of religion be guilty not only of national disloyalty but of

self-ostracism. "Bluff King Hal" and "Good Queen Bess" became Shibboleths. And not content with that, the omnipotent exploiters of the new system brought in the subtle forces of convention and etiquette, and "scandal about Queen Elizabeth" was not merely a phrase to discredit, unheard, any dangerous historical revisions, but a social verdict of Bad Form. The great general legend, composed gradually and in the main unconsciously, more by instinct than policy, was composed of many falsifications of detail, all directed to subserve a common bias: namely to give the "colour" (as the old rhetoricians called it) that England's greatness only began with England's Protestantism. The Renaissance, which in fact was arrested and delayed for a century by the Tudors, must (to suit the Ascendancy) be represented as a necessary and characteristic accompaniment of the new religion. English literature must begin with Elizabeth: or rather, that must be its glorious sunrise, harbingered by the glimmerings of a dawn in Wiclif, a person about whom our evangelical mythologists have been peculiarly busy and copious. (See Gasquet's *The Old English Bible and Other Essays*.) Tennyson, a credulous poet, endowed with a journalist's sensitiveness to the fashion of his time, and in whom as in an echo we may measure the clamorous resonance of Froude's fictions, by his

spacious times of Great Elizabeth

phrased just what many people were predisposed to believe. "Spacious times." How gratifying to national self-complacency! What did it matter if in times so spacious there should be no room for a Campion or a Southwell, except a hiding-hole, or a rack or a gibbet? Better still, the great term "Elizabethan" became serviceable for a double equivocal: thus, Elizabethan ("we always thought")=Protestant; but evidently all literature pro-

duced in the reign of Elizabeth is Elizabethan; *Ergo*, the whole glory of English literature is Protestant. In some such style are the syllogisms of prejudice constructed. And then again, as a counterpart to suppressing our Allens and Campions and Parsonses and Stapletons, they will have the word "Elizabethan", with convenient slovenliness, used to include any such Sixteenth Century work whatsoever, as it may suit their purpose to include under any special category. Thus from the first half of that century they pilfer its songs and ballads and sweep them all into the harvest of Elizabethan (*i.e.*, Protestant, *post* Reformation) lyric.

But in the particular instances of Fisher and More a graver *suppressio veri* has been perpetrated. It has been tacitly agreed, in the interests of the Ascendancy, that these two shall be left in darkness. Their martyrdoms are lightly dismissed as regrettable but inevitable unpleasantnesses, such as will happen in the best-regulated Reformations, and which it is bad form to make much ado about. "Oh, yes, such a pity, but of course . . ." Or, when you drive an Anglican friend into a corner by arguing that if Henry's assumption of that Only Supreme Governorship in all questions Spiritual and Ecclesiastical (to which every Anglican prelate to this day swears allegiance) really meant so little, then More and Fisher must have been rather idiots than martyrs, in a moment you will have him guilelessly repeating from his manuals that More and Fisher were eccentrics, doctrinaire exponents of a maximist Papalism. Surely the most impudent and fatuous of lies. More, who had warned Henry that in his *Assertio* he put the Pope's prerogative rather dangerously high, to be represented as an ultramontane fanatic!

Plainly the theory of a sudden outburst and spring-time of literature, arising with the beginnings of the new

religion, is sorely embarrassed if any pre-Elizabethan writer be allowed to appear eminent. More must therefore be buried in silence and obscurity; his claim to rank as the Father of English History or English Prose be hushed up, and no other work of his permitted to be spoken of but *Utopia*. *Utopia* was a youthful trifle which he lived to regret and to disown, and his esteem of which is best shewn by the fact that he never put it into English. The young student who swallows what his handbooks tell him is never allowed to suspect that More's English works fill 1400 pages of folio. Or suppose him to have learned this much (for the literary histories mention it), he is little the forwarder. There is hardly a possibility of his reading them. Since 1557 there has never been a complete reprint; and only three pieces, I think, have been reprinted at all.¹

The famous series which has done so much for the revival of forgotten worthies and re-opened so many choked sources of English, Arber's Reprints, comprised no Catholic work at all. Surely an eloquent fact, and in itself a clinching proof that the Ascendancy has pursued the policy of choking as well as of poisoning the wells of history. If Fisher had been a heretic, you may be sure Arber would have included these Sermons in the series, which contains plenty of stuff inferior to Fisher whether in point of literary merit or of historical significance in the development of style. The bibliography of

¹ Here is an example of the kind of thing that might make one despair. A master of English, discoursing on style and sketching an English Library, "excludes from consideration works whose sole importance is that they form a link in the chain of development. For example, nearly all the productions of authors between Chaucer and the beginning of the Elizabethan period, such as Gower, Hoccleve and Skelton, whose works, for sufficient reason, are read only by professors and students who mean to be professors."—Arnold Bennett, *Literary Taste*, p. 90: London, 1911.