

# Religious Books in Wartime

*Reading Today Reflects the Preoccupations of People*

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**A**FIGHTING man, Col. W. F. Kernan, furnished the text<sup>1</sup> for this brief commentary on religious books in wartime: "As we advance the colors against the New Paganism, let us repeat the creed of the ancient Christendom." Confident words these, which are echoed with deep sincerity in the fox-holes of the South Pacific, in the African desert, and even (so rumor would have it) in the trenches which not so long ago defended Stalingrad. They seem, indeed, to rise from the depths of the sorely troubled modern spirit. In Hitler's Germany itself the Bible has been more popular during recent years than "Mein Kampf." Some of the finest modern versions of the sacred texts have been published there since 1933, despite official hostility to both Testaments. Nor was Mr. Churchill serving the interests of rhetoric merely when, in commenting upon the discernible outlines of future society, he spoke of the reverence in which Englishmen have held the Christian faith. Finally, when the record of fearful persecution can eventually be written, there will be much to tell of the faith and fortitude of the Jew. Already we have one remarkable book—"The World of Sholom Aleichem," by Maurice Samuel, an extraordinary revelation of spiritual riches hitherto buried for most of us in the Yiddish tongue<sup>2</sup>.

Not infrequently the worriers declare that their fellow-men are insufficiently awake to the challenge of this war. If one hearkened to them, stiff draughts of patriotic exhortation would be washed down with buckets of propaganda analysis. But you have only to step into a New York church to find out that the citizen is by no means asleep. What are these crowds desperately praying for if not for the privilege of realizing the import of Dante's unforgettable sentence, "In His will there is our peace"? You may be sure that every last man or woman among them is heart-sick and proud alike about some boy or girl in uniform; and that is considerably more important than a dozen more naughty

words about Hitler. It is only natural that their reading should reflect their preoccupations. The fairly surprising popularity which has come to certain religious novels—"The Robe," "The Song of Bernadette," "The Keys of the Kingdom," "The Nazarene"—testifies to the realism of the American outlook. Not all these books are first-rate. I shall agree that there is something factitious about Mr. Cronin's best-seller, and something unnecessarily fictitious about Mr. Douglas's historical imagination. But a public eager to read such books is a public concerned with the basic values which are at stake in this war. And in addition it is a public resolved "to put on the armor against danger, which is fearlessness," if I may quote John Erskine<sup>3</sup>.

**I**T is a public, above all, which is tired of being fooled. It knows that while forty times as many bathtubs as we now possess would add measurably to the sources of pride in many domestic establishments and still more to the triumphs of hygiene, they would contribute nothing towards cleansing the mind of man. And to the accumulated festering dirt in that mind we owe the grim disease of this conflict. Hitler is the product of a code of ethics, not the result of a column of figures. Our tragedy, "with its unlimited destructiveness and its utter disregard of legal and moral restrictions, is only the external symptom of the disease from which not only Germany and not only Europe but the whole world is suffering."<sup>4</sup> I find these words

3. *THE COMPLETE LIFE*. By John Erskine. New York: Julian Messner. April 20, 1943. 350 pp., and index. \$3.

4. *THE JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONS*. By Christopher Dawson. New York: Sheed and Ward. 1942. 222 pp. \$2.50.



in Christopher Dawson, an excellent Catholic writer, but they could be quoted from Protestant or Jewish sources equally well.

Yet, though these things are true, it is a noteworthy fact that genuine contemporary religious thought does not seek to flay a patient already bruised to the bone and faint unto the point of death. Christ comes now as He once came to the leper and the woman of sin. The prophet's voice is choked with sorrow, but there is in it the luminous hope of Isaiah. A number of anthologies—the list is headed by Dr. E. Stanley Jones's "Abundant Living"<sup>5</sup>—are rich in the comfort and fervor of the Christian tradition. There is no other book in all the world from which so much inner healing has come as from Thomas A. Kempis's "Imitation of Christ"; and Father Edward Klein's edition of a glorious old English version of the text seems to me the best religious treasure of many years<sup>6</sup>. Of course, one may also try to bring the regenerating energies of faith to bear on harassed and disconsolate individuals. It may be that Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick's "On Being a Real Person"<sup>7</sup> is a treatise on ethical pathology rather than an addition to theological discussion, but it does show us a devoted minister of the Gospel hard at work to help bring about the meaningful transfiguration of trouble into victory.

The social teaching of religion is likewise being clarified by the insight which comes through suffering. Some years ago, the bitter appraisal of modern civilization by such writers as Eric Gill<sup>8</sup> and Alfred Noyes<sup>9</sup> reflected the widespread apocalyptic mood which ushered in Nazism and the war. Perhaps it is not injudicious to say that one finds now a new and finer quality—an attitude blended of repentance and humility, of courage and hopeful resolution, which one can only wish to

5. *ABUNDANT LIVING*. By E. Stanley Jones. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press. 1943. 371 pp. \$1.

6. *IMITATION OF CHRIST*. Edited by Edward J. Klein. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1942. 267 pp. \$3.

7. *ON BEING A REAL PERSON*. By Harry Emerson Fosdick. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1943. 295 pp. \$2.50.

8. *AUTOBIOGRAPHY*. By Eric Gill. New York: Devin-Adair. 1941. 318 pp., plus 32 pp. illustrations. \$3.50.

9. *THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS*. By Alfred Noyes. New York: E. P. Dutton. 1942. 172 pp. \$2.

1. *WE CAN WIN THIS WAR*. By W. F. Kernan. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1943. 176 pp. \$1.50.

2. *THE WORLD OF SHOLOM ALEICHEM*. By Maurice Samuel. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1943. 331 pp. \$3.

see grow stronger and more pervasive. Inevitably the social gospel addresses an audience in tension. Mr. Low's *Blimp* has been reported as eager "to save religion from the Archbishop of Canterbury"; and anyone who reads "The Hope of a New World,"<sup>10</sup> by William Temple, will discover the reasons for *Blimp's* concern. In general the theological and philosophical perspectives are widening. Dr. John A. Mackay is the President of Princeton Theological Seminary. But if he held no academic office he would still remain as noble and effective a thinker as American Protestantism can muster. "Heritage and Destiny"<sup>11</sup> is a small book, having to do with the aberrations of modern man and yet also with the challenging tasks which lie ahead. One may not share either its premises or its conclusions and still put it down with a feeling of having been sustained if not soothed. The memory of it remains as would that of conversation with a great person who had achieved a goodly measure of wisdom. In like manner the foremost of Catholic philosophers in our day, Jacques Maritain, has shown his readiness to move with the shifting drama of humanity in "France, My Country,"<sup>12</sup> as moving a little book as you are likely to find. While it has to do with the *terre sacrée* fallen so inexplicably under the heel of Hitler, it is also a commentary on the Christian conscience and an introduction to the vistas which now open to the imagination of Christians. Professor Maritain is a refugee who now abides with us. May I call your attention to a less well-known but nevertheless illustrious exile, Mr. Hayim Greenberg? If you have not already followed him in the pages of the *Jewish Frontier*,<sup>13</sup> you have something to which to look forward.

THERE can be no doubt that the Christian Church has borne the brunt of resistance to Nazism in the countries which that plague has overrun. In Germany itself, only the faithful, clinging with passionate and imperilled fidelity to the Gospels, have resisted the tyrant and his mandates. That they and their pastors will form the centers round which orderly reconstruction can begin to take place after the fighting is over has been well understood by observers interested in post-war political and economic problems. Hiram Motherwell, observant

journalist and student, is a good example. Just now the religious conflict itself is at last beginning to sink into the consciousness of America. Mr. J. C. Maier's compilation of all the pastoral letters and other documents which reflect the grim battle for Catholic survival has not yet been published, but when it appears it will give readers a chance to piece together utterances and chronicles which have so far been presented piecemeal. There are, regretably enough, no books about Catholic leaders in the German struggle. By comparison, Protestant literature is rich. There is Kressman Taylor's "Until That Day,"<sup>14</sup> an absorbing and excellently written narrative of Lutheran fidelity and resistance, one of the very best books written about Germany under the Nazis. "It's Your Souls We Want," by Stewart W. Herman, Jr.,<sup>15</sup> records in absorbing chapters the experience of the pastor of the American Church in Berlin. A great story is told here with poignancy and objectivity by a Christian who stood on the edge

of the abyss. Attention should also be called to "God Is My Fuehrer,"<sup>16</sup> which consists of the last 28 sermons preached by Pastor Martin Niemöller and a preface by Thomas Mann; to "I Was in Hell with Niemöller,"<sup>17</sup> by Leo Stein, a breath-taking tale although the author has recently been under some criticism; and to "Christian Europe Today,"<sup>18</sup> by Adolf Keller, a tragic commentary which emphasizes the heroism of the resisters.

In all these books—and indeed in the better theological writing of every mould—one seems to notice a refreshing dearth of self-righteousness. It appears to be understood by all of us that, whether we be Lutherans or not, we have manifestly lived according to the *pecca fortiter* maxim and must take the consequences. Hitler is not merely Satan rising like a star. He is the materialization of our own errors and shortcomings. He could not have made the headsman's axe the grim

14. *UNTIL THAT DAY*. By Kressman Taylor. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 1942. 314 pp. \$2.75.

15. *IT'S YOUR SOULS WE WANT*. By Stewart W. Herman, Jr. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1943. 331 pp., and index. \$2.50.

16. *GOD IS MY FUEHRER*. By Martin Niemöller: His Last Twenty-Eight Sermons. With a preface by Thomas Mann. New York: Philosophical Library. 1942. 294 pp. \$2.75.

17. *I WAS IN HELL WITH NIEMÖLLER*. By Leo Stein. New York: Fleming H. Revell. 1942. 253 pp. \$2.50.

18. *CHRISTIAN EUROPE TODAY*. By Adolf Keller. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1942. 310 pp. \$3.

"History from its makers' point of view." - Dr. Emil Lengyel

# OUR SOLDIERS

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10. *THE HOPE OF A NEW WORLD*. By William Temple. New York: Macmillan. 1941. 125 pp. \$1.35.

11. *HERITAGE AND DESTINY*. By John A. Mackay. New York: Macmillan. 1943. 109 pp. \$1.50.

12. *FRANCE, MY COUNTRY*. By Jacques Maritain. New York: Longmans, Green. 1941. 117 pp. \$1.25.

13. Published monthly at 275 Seventh Avenue, New York.

symbolic device of our time had we not left humanity stripped of other symbols in which there was glory and radiance. Obviously, though the heart of man has not been at rest, religion must be sought else than a soporific. It remains, therefore, to sense anew the truth enshrined in Augustine's "City of God," that happiness springs from discipline of the mind and the mood under God. This, it seems, is the dominant religious outlook today.

THAT the major communions express this truth differently is an historical commonplace. It may be that upon occasion they do not express it at all. The mordant pages of Dr. Bernard Iddings Bell's "The Church in Disrepute,"<sup>19</sup> remind us that ecclesiastical complacency and treacle have not disappeared. It was a saintly bishop who wrote of his clergy that they talked of original sin as if originality had ceased therewith. But there is much to be said on the other side. I surmise that in several sections of American Protestantism the name of Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr is associated with earthquakes, thunder storms, and other more or less Divine visitations. "The Nature and Destiny of Man," volume II of which has just appeared under the sub-title of "Human Destiny,"<sup>20</sup> is a "hard" book which grips one's attention by reason of its remarkable dialectic and eloquence. It has been my fortune to read, often for professional reasons, a good deal of American Protestant literature; and while I am often in dissent, I am certain that the virility of the religious life manifested in it is prevalently badly underestimated. Therefore I may, perhaps, confess that Niebuhr is for me a summons to what is latent in myself of his own spirit of contradiction. He has uncanny insight into the nature of man, seeing it as the stuff of eternally imperfect drama, antipathetic and violent, soothing and ironic, foolish and wise. The human being is a creature who escapes from treadmills of his own industrious making by reason of a Divine law against treadmills which he apprehends but does not comprehend. There is no easy truth here. It is a book of manly faith, which pushes both tolerance and intransigence as far as either can go. But one may perhaps wonder, and not irreverently, whether it is after all a case of Niebuhr nailing down God, or of God nailing down Niebuhr.

By comparison the Catholic position may appear to be intellectually serene, but this is only because the tension

has been shifted to the drama of the natural come to grips with the compelling supernatural. Father Walter Farrell's "Companion to the Summa"<sup>21</sup> is now complete in four volumes, and these make available in quite readable form the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, the most illustrious Doctor of the Church. Of course there are other books which tell part of the story—Jacques Maritain's "Ransoming the Time,"<sup>22</sup> Michael de la Bedoyere's "Christian Crisis,"<sup>23</sup> and Thomas Woodlock's "The Catholic Pattern."<sup>24</sup> But Father Farrell's "Companion" is a good place to start if one desires to see how the problem of authority and conscience is resolved in Catholic thought. It may possibly be true that in his fallen state man may sometimes risk thinking that when he has become a Thomist he had also become something more than a Thomist, but that would not be Father Farrell's fault.

Let me add that since the begin-

21. COMPANION TO THE SUMMA. By Walter Farrell. New York: Sheed and Ward. 1938-1942. 4 vols. \$3.75 each.

22. RANSOMING THE TIME. By Jacques Maritain. Translated by Harry Lorin Binsse. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1941. 322 pp. \$3.

23. CHRISTIAN CRISIS. By Michael de la Bedoyere. New York: Macmillan. 1942. 210 pp. \$1.75.

24. THE CATHOLIC PATTERN. By Thomas Woodlock. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1942. 201 pp. \$2.

ning religion has in all its best hours found expression in poetry. Dr. Samuel Johnson did not think so, for reasons complimentary to himself, but he was manifestly wrong. Thus there is "Charles Péguy: Basic Verities,"<sup>25</sup> as translated by Anne and Julian Green, a beautiful book of selections from a French poet who will be read as long as men remember his language. Rainer Maria Rilke was one who went in quest of religion, which he never quite found. But his "Poems," so ably translated by Jessie Lemont,<sup>26</sup> are all on the side of the angels. Finally the "Poems" of Charles L. O'Donnell<sup>27</sup> have been rescued from the oblivion into which they had unfortunately fallen.

There is abroad in the land what men term a "revival" of religion. We do well to remember, as we speak those words, that religion is something for which the best of our contemporaries, in many dark lands, have stood and died, thus helping to earn for mankind the right to freedom.

25. CHARLES PÉGU: BASIC VERITIES. Translated by Anne and Julian Green. New York: Pantheon Books. 1943. 277 pp., and index. \$2.75.

26. RAINER MARIA RILKE POEMS. Translated by Jessie Lemont. New York: Columbia University Press. 1943. 185 pp. \$3.

27. POEMS. By Charles L. O'Donnell. Notre Dame University Press. 1943. \$2.

## History's Biggest Best-Seller

THE STORY OF THE BIBLE PEOPLE. By Muriel Streibert Curtis. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1943. 118 pp. \$1.75.

Reviewed by GLADYS GRAHAM

MURIEL STREIBERT CURTIS, Professor of Biblical History at Wellesley College, has done a real service for parents in preparing this collection of tales from the Bible in a form which will entertain young readers, or hearers, while giving them a thorough basis for later appreciation of the book of books. The suggested age group is nine to fourteen but the boundaries may well be extended both ways as the stories have intrinsic interest for those older and a simplicity that makes them understandable to any child who has reached the tell-me-a-story age.

The pageantry of the Old Testament furnishes rich material for tale-telling with the individual heroes to highlight the great mass movements, with the clang of battle alternating with the quiet recordings of contemplative withdrawals, and the moral precepts vivified by personal episodes. The stories are necessarily "gentled" a little for young comprehension and pleasure but there is no falsification and very little editorial comment.

The story of the boyhood of Jesus,

his quiet days and humble occupations is filled with detail which will especially appeal to readers of comparable age. The ethical teaching is admirably simplified—how well it is adapted to simplest exposition—and the parables hold their own in sheer good story merit, as always.

The author says of her book, "Nobody in these stories forgets God for very long. Nobody can read the stories without thinking about God." And it is true that throughout the work the sense of God's presence and concern for his people is evident even when those people are turning temporarily to very ungodlike activities.

### ANSWERS TO LITERARY QUIZ

1. Tiny Tim Cratchit, in "A Christmas Carol."
2. Oliver Twist, in "Oliver Twist."
3. Little Nell Trent, in "The Old Curiosity Shop."
4. David Copperfield, in "David Copperfield."
5. Joe, the fat boy, in "Pickwick Papers."
6. The Marchioness, in "The Old Curiosity Shop."
7. The little Kenwigs, in "Nicholas Nickleby."
8. Paul Dombey, in "Dombey & Son."
9. Pip, in "Great Expectations."
10. Ninnetta Crummles, in "Nicholas Nickleby."