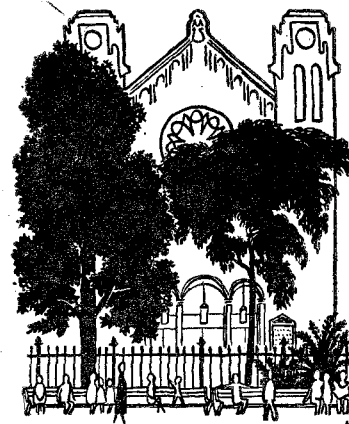


Our Prettified Prophets

By ALBERT N. WILLIAMS, *author of "The Holy City," "The Book by My Side," "Paul, Hero of Tarsus," and other volumes dealing with religion and the Bible.*



THE ANNUAL survey of America's popular reading made by the magazine *Time* discloses the fact that the six top sellers in the non-fiction field during 1953 included the Revised Standard Version of the Bible and three other books of a definite religious or inspirational nature: "The Power of Positive Thinking," "Life Is Worth Living," and "A Man Called Peter." Accepting a fourth ("Angel Unaware") as at least an essay on the outskirts of spiritual conviction, it appears that only one of the top six sellers did not in some way concern itself with our faith in the Christian God. That lone work was, significantly, the Kinsey report on the female of the species.

Despite the fascination of sex, mayhem, war, and salon history, readers today appear to want meat for the spirit and bread for the soul far more than they do a prod in the plexus or a lift to the libido. The pulsing sales records of such works as "The Robe," "The Song of Bernadette," "The Cardinal," and "The Left Hand of God" put authors like Shellabarger, Yerby, and Spillane to shame. The human triangle no longer serves as the granite keystone in plot architecture; it has been replaced by the simple monolith of man's quest for faith, his need for faith, his dependence on faith, or, simply, his faith. James Jones comes and goes; Lloyd Douglas goes on forever.

The tragedy and the paradox of this gratifying situation is that these religious giant-sellers in fiction, and ninety-nine out of 100 non-fiction books sold under the banner of "religion" address themselves only to the spiritual comforts available to a Christian of sure faith, and not at all with the religious foundations of that faith. They concern themselves more with man than with man's concerns. Faith today has a thousand voices; religion flowers in silence.

Religion is, of course, the systematic roster of man's moral and spiritual certainties that breed faith but, more

than that, it is the record of the human experiences that led to those certainties. Religion is not a simple statement of human trust, like the faith which plays so strong a role in so many "religious" books. Religion is the history of man's mistrust, his fear, and his unbelief, all dramatically overcome. It is the record and the saga of man's longest unbroken quest in history. Without a voice to sound its trumpets, the pageantry, the color, and the drama of that age-long quest are abandoned and forgotten, and the focus of readers and writers alike is turned, today, to the shapeless epilogue of that magnificent quest—the faith that this religion made possible.

Faith, so strong and so bold in the novels and histories that deal with it, is looked upon as a knowledge that can float through man's consciousness without any reason for being or without any proof. It has been torn away from the stream of history that brought it into being, and it is now established as a static and extra-human force. It is now something to do only with God, and not, as religion has been throughout history, a record of the quickening relationship between God and man. It is the proud but faceless personification of the tragedy of our time—the pathetic illiteracy that seeks to erect a tower of faith on the quicksands of ignorance of the historic events which first nourished the seeds of that faith.

Our generation has seen the development of the study of the social sciences to a queenly state. Any well-informed individual, the product of any self-respecting college or university, would not dare to hold opinions regarding our democratic form of government without reference to various events in the centuries-long historical process that saw the evolution of political enfranchisement as a condition of life. Any college freshman can report that when the barons cornered King John at Runnymede, something called the Magna Carta came into being, which document had considerable

to do with our present political freedom. But how many college graduates can report what it was that Isaiah learned of God's plan for mankind as a result of Sennacherib's fruitless siege of Jerusalem in the year 701 B.C.?

THANKS to the ineptness of several generations of polite but generally uninformed Sunday School teachers, and to uneasy parents who have torn the Bible out of our public-school curricula, religion has been severed from the stream of its own history, and served up, de-gutted, de-boned, sliced, and boiled, with a garnishment of piety and morbidity that would have turned the wrathful Old Testament Jehovah away from His own people in anguished sorrow. The stern and rugged events that should summon a legion of historians, novelists, and dramatists have been so emasculated by genteel purveyors of faith that it is no wonder that the Christian of our time lacks even the most cursory interest in the dramatic unfolding of events which made possible the faith that prompted one of the world's greatest latter-day prophets to testify, concerning America, that God's hand was still to be seen in history in his own day: "we here highly resolve . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom . . ."

The powder of prettiness and pettiness that has sifted down upon the shoulders of our Old Testament prophets and New Testament fathers has served altogether to smother them as human beings, and to take them, heels dragging in their own greatness, out of the arena of history. The prophet who was thrown down a well, the powerful and rugged old counselor of four kings of Judah, the man who paved the way for the whole Christian religion by observing that although Jerusalem would be destroyed, and with it the great and only temple to the worship of God, man could still act as an individual and worship God directly, has been

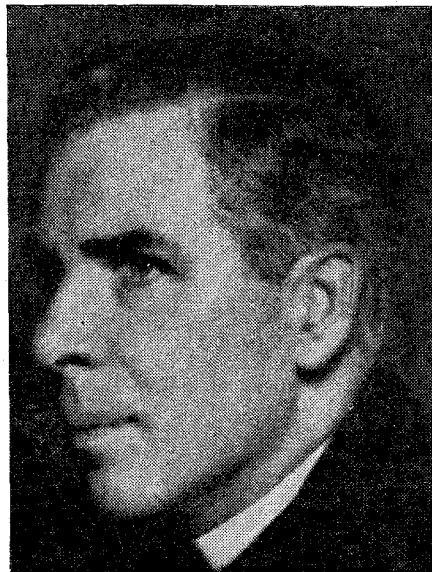
lost to us as an historical figure, a human product of a series of events in history. It was no quiet contemplation in the calm beauty of his almond grove in Anathoth that led Jeremiah to realize that God would make a new covenant with mankind to replace the covenant which had been broken. It was in the physical terror and spiritual agony of the hour that saw Nebuchadnezzar's troops raze the Judean countryside and stand unopposed before the walls of Jerusalem that Jeremiah came to realize that the God of his fathers, who for generations had been looked upon as the unseen resident of the no-longer-in-violate temple, was not, after all, a God who could rule mankind only from a stone and cedar edifice, but was even in the events of that hour revealing the fact that the human heart was and had always been the only proper temple for that worship.

With vast respect to the army of excellent writers who have left no stone unturned to make the American heritage real and dramatic to modern readers, the saga of Jeremiah and his times is more dramatic, more significant, and more downright important to our knowledge of the way of the world than a thousand stories of Paul Revere, John Paul Jones, and the other prophets of America. America, and the culture that has blossomed from the historical fact that is America, do not stand apart from the stream of history; they stem from the faith held by certain revolution-minded colonists that man enjoys a God-guaranteed dignity. That faith in man's dignity has its roots inevitably in Jeremiah's discovery of the importance of the individual in God's sight.

THERE appear to be two causes for the sad state of religious letters in these days. The first, to repeat a generalization that has already been made, is that the modern reader and writer are confusing religion with faith, and blithely continuing the danger-laden project of divorcing that faith from the roster of historic events which made it possible. The second is that we have given our religion into the charge of a hierarchy of professionally trained religionists who are almost pharisaic in their solicitude for the minutiae of faithfulness and their unconcern with God's persistence in taking a hand in human history. Their greater interest is man's contemporary spiritual comfort rather than a constant renewal of the exhilaration of his spiritual discoveries. An entirely comparable and absolutely improbable situation would be the consignment of every American's inalienable



N. V. Peale—"... not merely an idea."



F. J. Sheen—"an historical religion."



Catharine Marshall—"the drama that blazed."

political and economic privileges to a priesthood of professional "Americans," who would gather us together in small groups on one morning of each week to admonish us in the ways of worthy citizenship, and who would then offer to mediate for us with the legislators whom they alone would elect to their high offices. Americans simply don't take their Americanism for granted, and, given the proper literary fare, it would seem likely that they would stop taking their Christianity for granted.

What has receded into the background over the past few decades is the general awareness that the Christian religion is not merely an idea, like Buddhism, but the record of the history of a long dynasty of troubled men and women who have sought to work out their spiritual and moral certainties in particular and dramatic circumstances. Christianity, like democracy, is the result of a set of historical events which have not stopped happening. It is the most powerful drama that has ever entangled man in its plottings. The pathetic illiteracy which marks our time has not come about through any apostasy on the part of the twentieth-century Christian, but simply because he has lost his sense of history. The minister in the church of his particular branch of faith can see to the needs of that faith; the call is now to the historian, the novelist, and the biographer to renew his sense of history in the service of his religion.

CHRISTIANITY is an historical religion. Except for Old Testament Judaism, which gave birth to Christianity, that relationship to history-in-motion cannot be found in any other of the world's great religions. Obviously they have all undergone change and metamorphosis as the culture which they seek to reflect has passed through historical changes, but the unfolding of their essential revelations was not in a series of historical events.

That series of historical incidents which summed and totaled, comprise the Christian religion, and from which springs the Christian faith, is the drama that lacks its dramatists and wants for a theatre today. The drama that has blazed through history for 4,000 years to make that faith possible has been usurped by the seminarians and taken out of the common ken. It is the great illiteracy of this enlightened age.

This illiteracy is not so much a shameful reflection upon either our home life, our educational system, or the modern church, as it is upon the profession of letters. No age of Amer-

ican writing has been peopled by so many effective narrative stylists, competent biographers, lively historians, and able reporters of the past as our own, and yet never has the general reader been less able to lay his hands upon a popular, well-written, non-technical, but adequately researched account of, for example, Elijah's struggle with Queen Jezebel, and the significance of that struggle in the evolution of monotheism as a fundamental aspect of our religious heritage.

But where are the accounts of that story on the best-seller lists? Where is the story of even one of the men who made the history that made possible the faith that made the plot for "The Robe"?

Is it that readers are uninterested in the dramas of the men who made their faith? Not any more than Americans are uninterested in the historical events that created America.

Is it that writers are unequipped to delve into so distant and so complex a past? Not any more than writers are unequipped to report the daily comings and goings of Chaucer, of Charlemagne, of Genghis Khan, or of George Washington.

It is simply that we are today the children of a disastrous divorce. At some period in the last few decades, faith began to assume psychological and sociological appearances, and was divorced from religion.

And today the most literate and educated nation in the world is suffering from a tragic and pathetic illiteracy—an ignorance of the historical foundations of its own religion.

Champion of Chaplains

By WHITNEY BALLIETT

WHEN Peter Marshall, the Scotch-born chaplain of the Senate and pastor of the "Presidents' Church," in Washington, D.C., the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, died suddenly of a heart attack in January 1949, at the age of forty-six, there were many people in this country who might have agreed that what Ben Jonson once wrote modestly about himself would also have been applicable to Dr. Marshall: "A creature of a most perfect and divine temper: one in whom the humors and elements [were] peaceably met, without emulation of precedence. He [was] so composed and ordered as it is clear nature went about some full work, she did more than make a man when she made him. His discourse [was] like his behavior, uncommon, but not unpleasing; he [was] prodigal of neither . . . In sum, he [had] a most ingenious and sweet spirit, a sharp and seasoned wit, a straight judgment, and a strong mind."

Shortly after Dr. Marshall's death, in the fall of 1949, a venerable religious publishing house in New Jersey, the Fleming H. Revell Co., published some of this uncommon discourse in the form of twelve sermons, together with a few prayers, under the title of "Mr. Jones, Meet the Master." It

was edited by his widow, Catherine Marshall, and was a book which, a few years before, Dr. Marshall had refused to put together, because, as he had then told his eventual publisher, he was "not yet ready." Ready or not, within six weeks it was on the non-fiction best-seller lists, where it stayed for a year; to date, 361,000 copies have been sold, and the publishers have been unabashedly informed that many of its readers keep "Mr. Jones, Meet the Master" beneath their pillows at night. Two years later McGraw-Hill released Mrs. Marshall's biography of her husband, "A Man Called Peter." With the help of several book clubs, and on its own, the book has sold over a million copies, and is currently pouring out of bookstores at the rate of four thousand a week. It is now in its one hundred and twenty-ninth week on the best-seller lists. In March 1953, an average Marshall month, in which 16,000 copies of "A Man Called Peter" were bought, "God Loves You," a children's book edited by Mrs. Marshall from some of the stories, sermons, and prayers which Dr. Marshall had been fond of telling his son, Peter John, was published. No sooner had 100,000 copies of this melted away than a Christmas sermon of Dr. Marshall's, "Let's Keep Christmas," which had run up *Look* magazine's readership precipitously at Christmas time, 1952, appeared in book form, in December of last year. And, as if there were no other course possible, 100,000 copies of *that* were gotten rid of in a few weeks. Now Twentieth Century-Fox has purchased the rights to "A Man Called Peter"—a business venture which is regarded, in some circles, as being as safe as the Aga Khan.

"A MAN Called Peter" has been described as luminous, glowing, and inspiring, as well as a rather superficial book, written in a kind of Palmer-method English. It has also been categorized, variously, as a biography, an autobiography-biography, a fairy story with a sad ending, a Horatio Alger novel, a how-to book on successful marriage, and a straight-from-the-shoulder devotional on God. In it, of course, is the story of a man born near Glasgow of a poor family, who worked there as a manual laborer until he was twenty-four, when he sailed for this country. Six months after he had arrived here he went south to join two boyhood friends. One thing led to another,

This Gentle April

By Florence Ripley Mastin

WHEN this gentle April has passed away
And the snows begin, I shall be bold
To wear my faith like a leafy spray,
Oblivious of cold.

No terror that walks in the winter dark,
No icy fingers on ashen bough
Shall break the rhythm of my heart
That lives with April now.

I have seen crocus climb through snow,
Forsythia's golden lamp of faith
On a bitter day—and I know
That life is stronger than death,

That love in the valley's shadow
Becomes an immortal thing.
Blessed are they who fearless go
Into the dark—to find the spring.