

The most disastrous experiment in television teenage Christianity was the *Sunday Break*, where a group of Ordinary Teenagers showed that Christianity was really quite a cheerful, hep affair by jiving whenever the moral discussion threatened to get too stuffy and grown up. What was most depressing about the programme was the bourgeois respectability of the teenagers involved, the clean, bouncy youthfulness of a pop-drinking, fairisle-sweater culture. *A Man Dies* manages to avoid this kind of respectability, but it fails on the other hand to exploit fully the significance of Christianity as a cult of rebellion which cannot be respectable, which sides with the intense, uncompromising, rebellious rockers against the uncommitted, affluent, liberal mods. The play has been performed twice on television and once in the Albert Hall, and the fact that such a basic, preliminary clearing of ground should have won such popularity seems ominous for the state of Christianity and the Christian drama. What has to be said is that, given the necessity of showing the relevance of Christianity and telling its story in this simple way, the future of the Christian drama lies with plays about Christians, not about Christ. The dramatic techniques which will be needed are not those of the stylised, patterned movement of this play, acted on television with a devout but somehow depressed correctness, but those of social realism, the sweat of making Christian belief live in strikes and sit-downs. The danger is that the Christian drama, having already missed the tide of the '50's drama of protest, will remain fixed in a preliminary stage, telling the story of Christ in different ways and mistaking modern techniques for modern meanings.

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## Reviews

NICHOLAS OF CUSA AND MEDIEVAL POLITICAL THOUGHT, by Paul E. Sigmund; Harvard University Press and O.U.P.; 56s.

Although the Great Schism had been finally brought to an end by the Council of Constance, the aftermath, in ideological respects, was almost worse than the troublous years of the Schism itself. Virtually every one of the basic premisses relative to the principles of public government was, if not openly disputed, at all events doubted and queried. The period witnesses the impact of the fashionable theses of government, such as original location of public power in the people, representation, consent, accountability of the Ruler, and so forth, upon the hitherto unquestionably accepted tenets, such as the descending thesis of government, monarchy, the acceptance of law given by superior authority to (and not made by) the subjects, the theoretical impossibility of

removing a tyrant, etc. Indeed, to a contemporary in the fifteenth century the issues which were occasioned by the Schism, though by no means created by it, presented an excruciatingly severe dilemma, the solution of which would have required a mind of unusual calibre as well as quite extraordinary courage. Moreover, however much the radical conciliarists had propagated the ascending theme of government within the Church, they quite apparently did nothing to translate their own theories into practice. However much they postulated—in direct opposition to the centuries-old doctrine (and practice) of supreme ecclesiastical power being located in the pope as successor of St Peter and vicar of Christ—that it was the *congregatio fidelium*, that is, the Church, which embodied supreme power, no effort was made to operate with the very concept of the Church as the starting point for constitutional measures: neither at Constance nor at Basle was the laity *qua* laity (nor for that matter, the lower clergy) given any constitutional standing, and yet the conciliarists were adamant in declaring that the Church was not to be equated with the *sacerdotium*, but with the whole body of believers.

Nicholas of Cusa fully recognised these defects of the conciliarists, and in his *De Concordantia Catholica* he tried to reconcile the two contradicting viewpoints, but his could be no more than an attempt at the impossible. In his doctoral dissertation Mr Sigmund, professor of government at Princeton, has carefully analysed both the development antecedent to Nicholas, and the Cardinal's thought itself. Whilst the earlier part of his book shows a great deal of immaturity, uncertainty of touch and lack of conceptual clarity,<sup>1</sup> the second and main part contains a competent and valuable exposition of the proposals set forth by the Cusan. Although the author—in common with most

<sup>1</sup>Mr Sigmund is not always clear in his conceptual terminology. For instance, the notion of 'political' would have required some definition, since it was still a fairly recent acquisition of men's thought and vocabulary. Cf. also p. 119. Further, he does not say what within his framework the concept of State means, especially in juxtaposition to the Church. More attention should have been paid to Aristotelian and Thomist influences. His views on the College of Cardinals and its powers of limiting the pope's monarchy, would have necessitated at least some discussion of the papal electoral pacts (cf., e.g., pp. 78-9; also *Studi Gregoriani*, iv (1952), pp. 111-28; vi (1962), pp. 229-63; further *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici*, xii (1956), pp. 246-73). The essence of conciliarism is not as clearly stated as one might wish. The essential point is that in the antecedent period the pope *qua* pope (as *gubernator*) was no member of the Church, stood outside and above the Church which was entrusted to him (hence the latter was on the level of a minor) and which received all its powers from him, but never conferred any on him, whilst in conciliarist thought the pope was incorporated in the Church, became its member (however much he was a *praecipuum membrum*) and was therefore subjected to all the corporation laws: the pope had become an officer. In other words, the pope, formerly the master, because *superior* (= sovereign), became the servant of the Church, because it was the *congregatio fidelium* which was *superior*. A greater penetration into these admittedly difficult topics would have rendered the book still more valuable. Gratian's work was not a *concordantia*, but a *concordia*, nor did St Thomas Aquinas write a 'Summa Theologica', but a *Summa Theologiae*.

doctorands—is at times a little timid and shy of driving his points fully home, his book nevertheless does show quite clearly the irreconcilability of the main elements in Cusa's structure as well as the air of unreality that pervades his works. Cusa's arguments concerning the empire or his view on the emperor's position as head of the European kings or his thesis that he is to be chosen by those who were subjected to the empire at the time of Henry II—well over four hundred years earlier— or his organic thesis (which reads like an inflated paraphrase of John of Salisbury's) and so on, show that this sort of argument was little more than theorizing in a *lufileeren Raum* without any bearing upon contemporary reality.

But it is as a 'moderate' conciliarist that Cusa reveals all the weaknesses of the conciliarist thought. On the one hand, there is the *congregatio fidelium* as the body which possesses original power, and yet when this thesis is put to the test in the General Council, the theoretical basis is virtually abandoned: the laity as a constituent part of the Church is not given a standing in the Council, they are excluded from voting and remain merely passive spectators: this is nothing else but the attempt to revive the old episcopal theme with new trappings. Cusa was, as befitted his 'progressive' attitude, emphatic on the operation of the element of consent, thereby no doubt making a notable contribution to the doctrine of government, but again, when it is put to the test, his thesis of consent is diluted beyond recognition, his statements being no more than a refurbishing of old themes which had nothing to do with any genuine idea of consent or representation. When Mr Sigmund states (p. 115), 'Consent is to be given to a fixed political and ecclesiastical order . . . the people have no right to choose their form of government, although they may choose between individuals to occupy the ruling positions', one is tempted to ask, what sort of consent this is and also to say that this is quite an adequate formulation of the properly medieval standpoint concerning 'elections' which were in reality designations to a particular office, and with the office, its scope, extent, etc. the 'electors' had nothing to do, since it was not in their gift and they could not therefore confer it and consequently not take it away. It is not in the least surprising that what Mr Sigmund calls the 'right of revolution' does not exist in Cusa's intellectual framework: of course not, a right of resistance (not revolution) could not come about, because the management of the social order and the office of government were not in the hands of the people. Cusa may well be taken as a classic example of trying to harmonise what by definition cannot be harmonised, to create a *concordantia* out of elements which were discordant, precisely because they rested on irreconcilable premisses. In parenthesis it may be noted that the conflict between theory and practice was personified in Cusa himself: despite his severe castigations of pluralism and the accumulation of benefices, he himself accumulated no less than fifteen benefices, and he was given a special subsidy to enable him to live in the accustomed style of a cardinal. And yet, to the end of his life he denounced corruption, ambition and avarice in the Roman curia.

Were the matter merely academic, one could well say in charity that his works were an exercise in intellectual gymnastics. But considerably more was at stake: the foundations of an old established order were severely shaken, as a result partly of legitimate doubts concerning some basic tenets, partly of the Aristotelian-Thomist advance, partly of the increased lay education, partly of the growth of national constitutionalism and institutionalism—and to operate with Pseudo-Isidorian views, to take the empire—in the fifteenth century—as the *mensura omnium secularium rerum*, a characteristically German standpoint, and to argue with theses, however time-honoured they were, shows a wilful disregard of the exigencies of the time. It is not so much eclecticism that produces the artifact of Cusa's theories—and he is only one example of the 'progressives' at the time—but an inability to free himself from the incubus of tradition and conservatism. The conciliarists had not the courage of their convictions to transplant their own theoretical views onto the plane of reality: they themselves were frightened of the consequences of their own theses and therefore either adopted a *via media* which in the circumstances could be nothing else but tight-rope walking—and assuredly the time called for constructive and positive and realistic proposals, and not for theories which on the surface manipulated the new themes, but hedged them so much in by exceptions, qualifications and conditions that their irrelevance to the agonising contemporary problems became exposed as soon as they were made public—or having admitted that this was a fruitless exercise returned like repentant sheep to the old monarchic papal standpoint. And for both Cusa serves as an illustration. The responsibility of the conciliarists for the subsequent cataclysm is indeed great: had they had the intellectual stamina and the necessary *magnitudo mentis* the world would have been spared, so shortly afterwards, the 'reformers' who did destructively what the conciliarists failed to do constructively.<sup>2</sup>

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EUROPEAN UNITY IN THOUGHT AND ACTION, by Geoffrey Barraclough; Basil Blackwell; 7s. 6d.

Geoffrey Barraclough gives to the problem of European Unity a new historical dimension in this extended version of a lecture delivered in Holland last year. He enables us to see it as a focal concern of the civilisation which emerged

<sup>2</sup>The share of the secular governments in this development is equally grave: the fifteenth century shows a singular harmony between the papacy and the pronouncedly theocratic kings, as is evidenced by the conclusion of concordats. The explanation is, not that there was no longer possible any friction between the two, but that they saw themselves threatened by the same elements and therefore combined against the rising forces of the educated laity and lower clergy—hence the royal aversion from implementing representative proposals and constitutionalism, in fact exactly the same picture which the ecclesiastical party presented.