THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY: SOME RECENT INTERPRETATIONS.

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HERE is a story that Professor Tout, in one of those moments of pessimism that occasionally afflict the more buoyant natures, declared that the history of the fifteenth century could not be written: it was too hard. Few that work in this period will fail to sympathize with this view. It is significant that in England attempts to survey the age as a whole are extremely rare, for most of the textbooks repeat one another in regarding it, politically, as well as from a religious angle, as a time of decadence, the twilight before the day-star of the Renaissance monarchy. And although economic historians have long been telling us that a steady amplifying of trade and industry was not incompatible with the dynastic struggle, and although Mr. Kingsford, in the most suggestive of all his works, showed how brighter and more promising elements in intellectual life, how the desire for peace with our ancient rival and for urban prosperity co-existed with the old prejudices, there is still a strong tendency to believe that the time had a certain crepuscular character of its own, and to pass over it with an apathy born of misunderstanding. The natural and for many reasons very justifiable habit of thinking in periods has operated strongly in this direction; and in this country, at all events, the absence of first-rate chronicle sources of strongly individual authorship after Elmham and Livio had finished writing would seem to bear out an opinion originally reached a priori by the later humanists. Superfici-

1 Prejudice and Promise in Fifteenth Century England, esp. chapters III, VI.
2 The Chronicles of London, interesting and important as they are, do not fall within this category. Cf. C. L. Kingsford, English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century, pp. 70-75.
ally, there is reason enough. The positive evidence from the Charter Rolls points to a widespread decentralization after the firmer and more concentrated governmental activities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, while, negatively, the present lack of published episcopal records wherewith to test the effect of the multiform Papal activities displayed in the Calendars of letters from the Court of Rome, or to show how efficient episcopal administration was in reality, helps to confirm the existing impression of the "running down" of medieval ecclesiasticism. It is not impossible that we shall discover, through studies in local history, that some of the results of the decentralization were valuable, or find that the activities of the Curia stimulated a vigorous, yet not disloyal, native resistance. But at present we are not in a position to make general statements. Outside the sphere of political narrative, the type of work so adequately represented by the late Dr. Wylie's volumes (the last of which has been excellently completed by Professor Waugh) and by Miss Scofield's detailed monograph on Edward IV, much has yet to be done, both on Mr. Kingsford's foundations and on others which must be laid in the future; and it is most important that we should not start with the antiquated disposition that finds in the period the anticlimax which it subconsciously seeks, but should employ to-day an attitude peculiar to one of the subtle thinkers of that time, the *docta ignorantia* of the historian, before embarking on the problems.

Our continental colleagues are more fortunate, largely because they have never had the date 1485 to fight against. For Flanders, economic research on the industry and town life of the Low Countries has done much to dispel the *fin de siècle* atmosphere, and for Germany a wealth of periodical publication has kept fifteenth century study well to the fore, especially in the treatment of religious and philosophical issues, which have now found their way into one of the best of text-books on the civilisation of the later Middle Ages. In the latter country three

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1. The reference here is to the Provisors Statute of 1390; but the operation of the Premunire Statute of 1353, as analysed recently by Mr. E. B. Graves ("The Legal Significance of the Statute of Premunire of 1353," *Haskins Anniversary Essays*, pp. 57-80) shows that the courts had long been devising machinery to bring infringers of the earlier Statute of Provisors to justice.

types of effort predominate, according to the characteristics of the school engaged. There is the "cultural" synthesis which tries to characterize the period as a whole by noting its dominant forms in art, literature, and contemporary thought in general; there is the group of works devoted to the analysis of humanism, especially the humanism of the non-Latin countries; and there is the great wealth of textual publication and monograph literature dealing with the pietistic movements within the Church, and most of all with the administrative history of the Curia and its relations with the national governments. Of these classes, the first and second alone can strictly be termed "interpretations"; but with the third, which to our thinking is far the most important, we cannot omit very summarily to deal, simply because in Germany it is fully recognized that the Reformation can only be understood in the light of the ecclesiastical system as it worked in the fifteenth century, and because it is the line along which parallel contributions from the English side are waiting to be made. In this field each piece of individual study, if properly and co-operatively conducted, will help us slowly to reply to the great and ultimate problem of the origins of the later and wider reforming movement throughout Christendom. For most of us, progress may have to come through publications of texts and severely restricted monographs rather than by ambitious work of bolder character. No one now, had he the ability, could write the first volume of the History of the Papacy during the Reformation as Creighton wrote it; what would be required to add to, and correct, his magnificent portraiture is the analysis of the administrative organisation of the Papacy, and this, despite the illuminating progress made by scholars like Ottenthal, Baumgarten, Göller and Mollat, may still be a matter of many years. Nor, as things stand, are we yet in a position to test the very suggestive generalizations of Dr. Figgis on the relation of the Conciliar Movement to the Reformation. We can only do so by studying the thinkers in relation to the facts. Yet the search for the concrete need not prevent us from profiting by attempts already made to see the age in perspective and to form some notion of its dominant characteristics.

I.

The impulse towards synthesis has been the legacy of "literary" historians whose main interest lay in the civilization of the Renaissance,
and who attempted to describe the psychology of the "Renaissance man" in contrast with that of his medieval predecessor. For long, under the reaction that set in with the advent of the scientific school of national historians, the work of Jakob Burckhardt was regarded with a good deal of suspicion in Germany, however constant its purely popular appeal; and there are many who still dismiss it as Ideengeschichte, far removed from the scientific category into which history should come. But the revival of interest in Ranke's most remarkable, yet not most orthodox pupil, can be witnessed to-day either in the recent imitations of the method or in the amount of serious and enlightened criticism to which his work has given rise. He, we need hardly say, sought invariably after the type, after individuals or ideas representative of an epoch with marked characteristics of its own. The Renaissance Individuum emerging from his pages was first and foremost a literary and artistic figure who might have stepped out of a Ghirlandaio. He was certainly a product of Italy, and for long he dominated the Teutonic mind, turning it from the study of Renaissance beginning north of the Alps to the maturer and more self-expressive south. Though Burckhardt used both political and religious material in discovering his type, the result in the long run was that he drew an aesthetic boundary-line between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But as he included in his concept of the Renaissance the early humanism of the quattrocento without recognizing its powerful medieval affinities, for him the fifteenth century falls within the period of the "Entdeckung der Welt und des Menschen," and it was left to others to give it a more peculiar character of its own. This,

1 Cf. in G. von Below, Die deutsche Geschichtsschreibung von den Befreiungskrieg bis zu unseren Tagen, 1924, the section on Riehl, Freytag and Burckhardt. Some of Burckhardt's own views about his aims and method occur in his Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen, ed. J. Oeri, 1905, esp. p. 5.


4 Burckhardt's habit of taking cross-sections here and there often obscured his sense of continuity or of development. "Burckhardt's geschichtsschreibung ist eine Nebeneinanderordnung von Zuständigkeiten. Sie sucht Querdurchschnitte zu geben statt der zeitlichen Langendurchschnitte." Winners, ibid., p. 41.
after the lapse of many years, Wilhelm Dilthey came nearer to doing, in articles published between 1891 and 1893, later brought together in the stimulating second volume of his collected works. Dilthey's philosophical mind saw the later Middle Ages pervaded by the neo-Platonism which was progressively to introduce doctrines of immanence in place of the characteristically medieval notion of the transcendence of God over nature and the world. To him the fifteenth century is evidently the time when men were ceasing to be occupied with an external principle governing and sustaining the universe. It is the age of renascent Pantheism. What early humanism accomplished was to assist the spread of a "religiösis-universalistischen Theismus," which discovered reality (which is God) within the Universe rather than above it. The new confidence of Renaissance man, his reasonable self-assertiveness, was built upon consciousness of these premisses. This is at bottom a religious interpretation of the Renaissance, which goes well back into the later Middle Ages (to Dilthey the philosophical tree of descent was the Victorines, Cusanus, Giordano Bruno, Shaftesbury) and recognizes that the fifteenth century acted to a large extent as theological midwife to the age of reform. Such views, as Ernst Troeltsch pointed out, brought Renaissance and Reformation into too close approximation, and ignored the strongly secular character of much of the Renaissance; for Troeltsch the movement, taken all in all, meant the entry of Italy once more into general history, the challenge given by Italian civilization to French modes of thought and conduct that dominated the feudal world ("französisch-theologisch-ritterliche Ideenwelt"); but like Dilthey and other later writers on the Renaissance (one might instance especially Wernle and Hermelinck) Troeltsch drew attention to the ambiguity of the term "Renaissance"; for even granted that we set an exclusively theological interpretation upon the movement, on other grounds there are many reasons for putting its first stages back into the early fourteenth and even the thirteenth century; and, though we may not go so far as Heinrich Thode in attributing its origins to St. Francis, at least for tracing, as Konrad

1 Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation (Ges. Schriften, ii), pp. 53, 324 f.
2 Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte und Religionssoziologie (Ges. Schriften, iv), p. 268.
Burdach has done, its inception to the idea of re-birth prominent even in the late trecento—the rebirth, that is, of Rome and the classical imperial culture. Burdach’s elaborate and perhaps rather too philological investigation of the uses of the term *renasci* has certainly shown that by the time of Rienzo the expectation of a sort of Virgilian golden age, brought about by an Emperor who is both Cæsar and Messiah, was familiar;¹ and although he has probably exaggerated the prevalence of this idea, there is little doubt that some of the more cultured spirits of Petrarch’s time took it quite seriously and hoped for its realisation.²

Some therefore have given the fifteenth century to the later Middle Ages,—others have attached it wholly to the Renaissance of the sixteenth century. Of late, however, two studies that concentrate on Burgundy and Northern France have tended to describe the period as one with marked characteristics of its own. The work of Huizinga³ and to a less degree of Cartellieri,⁴ has aimed at a new appreciation of the remarkable admixture of the old and new, which goes to make up the complexity of the period. The essays of these two scholars which we have in mind deal primarily with the literary and artistic aspects of the period, and can therefore only be criticized adequately by experts in the history of those subjects, though a layman may wonder a little whether the former, in his delightful book, does not tend to exaggerate the cult of the corpse in the world he describes, and whether some of the forms analysed by him as peculiar to the age are not found in the thirteenth and even in the twelfth centuries. But a still more recent volume, Rudolf Stadelmann’s *Vom Geist des ausgehenden Mittelalters,*⁵ is a more general treatment, somewhat after Burckhardt’s manner, of the “waning” Middle Ages, with particular reference to religion and philosophy. Stadelmann’s method is that of a “historical psychologist” (as he appears to term himself); he finds in the age four leading characteristics (*Leitbegriffe*): Scepticism, Resignation,

¹ *Reformation, Renaissance, Humanismus,* pp. 77-84.
³ *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1927).
⁴ *Am Hofe der Herzöge von Burgund* (1926); tr. by Malcolm Letts, *The Court of Burgundy* (1929).
⁵ Halle, 1929.
Emancipation and Pessimism. These rather gloomy attributes he discovers through an analysis of contemporary life and thought. He expresses a belief that we must see in decadence certain positive features, rather than a weakening of the stream of culture: "when the historical psychologist speaks of decadence, he does not intend to be purely negative and to suspend his judgment of value; he rather means to imply a spiritual complex of peculiar composition" (Einen seelischen Komplex von besonderer Struktur). Decline does not mean ruin, but dislocation, disturbance of the normal values, over-refinement. The formula of the period can best, he thinks, be summed up in the words of Ackermann, "Willens Ende ist unwillen"; "the end of will is its negation." To illustrate the "motive" of scepticism he rightly does not go to the theories of Occam which, as he remarks, were not influential outside a comparatively small University circle, and—as he might have observed—did not engender that suspicion of the reason which is sometimes attributed to them; he examines instead two anti-intellectualist tendencies of the time: spiritualismus, by which term he means the unregulated, devotional piety found among men of mystical leanings—the men whom Ullmann treated long ago in his essay on pre-reformation reformers and whom modern scholarship is setting forth anew as critics of the hierarchical system and over-grown legalism of the fifteenth-century Church; and the famous theory of the docta ignorantia put forward by the great Rhenish thinker, Nicolas of Cues. Stadelmann realises that the combination of men like Thomas of Kempen, Wessel Gansfort or Agrippa of Netteheim with so formidable a churchman as Cusanus may be found difficult; but in all alike, he considers, there is the same turning away from the syllogistic methods of the older theology to Christian neo-Platonism, to the study of the Pseudo-Denys and his

2 Stadelmann, op. cit., p. 28.  
3 Ibid., p. 33.  
4 As, for example, by Father Connolly, John Gerson, Reformer and Mystic, pp. 43-44.  
5 E.g. Dr. Gerhard Ritter in his Studien zur Spätscholastik, 1921-1927, especially vol. III (on Johann von Wesel), and his "Romantische und revolutionäre Elemente in der deutschen Theologie am Vorabend der Reformation," Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift, V (1927).  
commentators who gave to the Middle Ages the doctrines of Proclus and Plotinus. But Stadelmann's indictment of the *docta ignorantia* as leading to a negative attitude towards the intellect is less startling and comes with greater force.  

Let us briefly analyse one or two of the leading ideas of Cusanus in the treatise of that name, which has recently been the subject of much discussion and commentary: for if the work be taken in the spirit in which it was written and the true meaning of its remarkable paradoxes understood, we believe that Stadelmann's deductions about "scepticism" will need some modification.

Much depends on our understanding the meaning of the term "right. In his *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus must not be thought to advocate suspension of judgment. The "learned ignorance" which he commends is in itself a kind of knowledge, such knowledge as is attainable of the Infinite or Absolute, and its relation to the Universe. In his dedication of the work Cusanus finely speaks of "wonder" as the beginning of philosophy. A sane and free intellect desires and believes at first that it can comprehend the truth; but as we go on searching, the difficulties become greater, especially in mathematics. For all knowledge is by a kind of analogy or proportion; and the infinite, because it escapes all proportion, is unknown. Now there can be no proportion without number, the conception which Pythagoras extended from mathematics to all knowledge. Attempting to get beyond number to the infinite, "Socrates, Solomon and a certain other man of divine spirit" (probably, as Paolo Rotta suggests, Hermes Trismegistus) have discovered that the ultimate knowledge is concealed from sight; yet to know that we do not know is in itself an attainment that can satisfy our desires. This is the meaning of "learned ignor-


3 The title is probably borrowed from St. Augustine, Ep. CXXX: "Est ergo in nobis quaedam, ut ita dicam, docta ignorantia, sed docta spiritu dei qui adjuvat infirmitatem nostram."
ance.” But, as Mr. Whitaker shrewdly remarks, “as with all who speak of the unknowable, we soon find that much concerning it is held to be known.” Cusanus applies to it the term of “the maximum”—that than which there can be nothing greater. It is absolutely one because it is all, and all things are in it because it is the greatest. Nothing is opposite to it, and therefore the minimum coincides with it. And here Cusanus warns us that we must not quibble over the literal interpretation of his words; in philosophical discussion we must try to understand the meaning rather than the grammar; and we shall need the advice when confronted with the quasi-mathematical paradoxes that follow. It is impossible, he says, to find two or more objects so similar that there shall not be other possible ones more similar up to infinity. Thus measure and measured will always be different: and hence the finite intellect cannot grasp the precise truth of things by similitude, since there is nothing exactly like the indivisible truth to measure that in which it consists. “We can only approach the truth by discovering that in its complete and absolute need for being identical with itself it is incomprehensible to us.” What then becomes of our theories of knowledge? Cusanus holds that we can only attain the “maximum” in an incomprehensible manner—not through reasoning stage by stage. Along these lines knowledge is like a polygon inscribed within a circle: make as many angles as you please, the polygon can never approximate to the circle (the truth) except by identification with it, in which case to the ordinary reason it loses its polygonal character. But yet the coincidence of the maximum and the minimum, if we understand it aright, does demand as the condition of its fulfilment a superlative that is beyond all opposition, all affirmation and negation. This is not attainable by the ordinary processes of reasoning, which cannot combine contradictions. The identification of this maximum with the Absolute, with God, completes the dialectic of transcendence.

We may judge how contemporaries received this almost Hegelian theory of the “coincidentia oppositorum.” John Wenck, the fiercest opponent of Cusanus, wrote a vigorous treatise against it, satirically

1 De docta ignorantia, ed P. Rotta (Bari, 1913), i, 1, 4. This ignorance can be the object of desire: “desideramus scire nos ignorare. . . . Nihil enim homini, etiam studiosissimo, in doctrina perfectius adveniet quam in ipsa ignorantia . . . doctissimum reperiri.”


3 De docta ignorantia, ch. ii-iv.
entitled *De ignota litteratura.* “Hic homo parum curat de dictis Aristotelicis,” he bitterly remarked. “If the ‘quidditas rerum’ (the essence of things) cannot be understood, then their intellectual motion would be without a goal, and consequently no motion, and so infinite and useless, which would be to destroy the proper functions of the intellect.”¹ We could never arrive at any scientific process, any theory of causation this way. Herr Stadelmann understands the Cusan thesis better than Wenck; yet he still condemns it as a sort of nihilism, not realising that to Cusanus the Absolute was not a barren formula; it made its way into the mind of Giordano Bruno, who along with “the divine Cusanus,” as he termed Nicolas, came to hold the position that the universe is in some sense infinite; but whereas Bruno applied the concept of infinity to the spacial universe, Cusanus more cautiously envisaged only the universe of mind. And here we touch the point which Mr. Whitaker, in his recent analysis of the *De docta ignorantia,* has treated so well. “The paradoxes of Cusanus,” he observes, “have a real basis in psychological thought. The insight out of which they spring is that mind at once contains infinite space as perceived or conceived, and itself does not occupy the minutest portion of space.” We must not take the Absolute or the Infinite as spacial, but as metaphysical terms, referring to something of the nature of mind.² But Cusanus, like a mathematician, tries to give them geometrical or arithmetical form, and falls immediately into paradoxes. Yet if we look beyond the paradoxes, taking his advice, as Wenck did not do, about regarding the spirit rather than the letter, can this theory be regarded as sceptical, even within the strictest meaning of the term? And there is another point worthy of consideration. In the *De docta ignorantia,* as Paolo Rotta has pointed out, Cusanus shows his close affinities with Bonaventura.³ He has tried to combine the mystic and the rational in the same manner as the Seraphic Doctor. Like Bonaventura he found that the highest truths were not attainable “per reductionem et resolutionem,” but only, to use Bonaventura’s expression in the Hexaëmeron, through “contitus” which is a spiritual process. Bonaventura speaks of an “ascensus in caligine nocturna et deliciosa

³ Il Cardinale Nicolò di Cusa, pp. 285-289.
illuminatio, ubi non intrat intellectus, sed solum affectus.” The “caligo nocturna,” we may surmise, is to Cusanus learned ignorance. Such phrases may be the commonplaces of the mystical experience; but Cusanus has the merit of being able to state intelligibly why it is that our intellectual faculties are in themselves unequal to the task of attaining to reality along the ordinary lines of approach; and perhaps to some his explanation may recall a similar darkness on the part of the Divine Poet:—

Perchê, appressando sè al suo disire,
Nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,
Che retro la memoria non pù ire.1

The attitude of Cusanus is extremely significant. It illustrates the fact that the leaders of the devotio moderna, the new, reforming tendencies in the religious life of Northern Europe, strove to escape the formulæ of the schools, and to resort, not to the application of normal dialectical methods to the problem of religion, but, without any underrating of the intellect, to the practice of a deep intellectual humility which has in it something of Eckhart’s advice to those who could not understand his sermons:—

“He said: to understand my sermons a man requires three things. He must have conquered strife, and be in contemplation of the highest good, and be satisfied to do God’s bidding, and to be a beginner with beginners and naught himself, and be so master of himself as to be incapable of anger.”2

It is doubtful whether Stadelmann’s analysis would have taken its present form, had he attempted to understand more carefully the moral significance of the grounds on which docta ignorantia is advocated. It is an essential point in Cusanus’ coincidentia oppositorum that the finite can only be thought of in reference to, and in its participation in, the Absolute. Between the finite (spacially conceived) and the infinite (conceived as idea) there is no logical divorce; there is, on the other hand, relationship. The same holds true in the practical sphere of morals. Erring man can participate in perfect being, and the effort towards participation, which to Cusanus is the moral ideal—an effort made by means of hard work, learning and study—is one that fills men with happiness. Here we can see how Cusanus is linked with

1 Paradiso, i, ll. 7-9.
2 Meister Eckhart (Pfeiffer, 1857), tr. C. de B. Evans, p. 2.
the Brothers of the Common Life, and when his sermons are fully printed, we shall understand all the more how his inspired diffidence could lead to activity, not resignation.

II.

The humanism of the fifteenth century has been the subject of much recent investigation. The general tendency has been to show that the average humanist had far more points of contact with his medieval heritage than has commonly been supposed. An important article of Dr. Gerhard Ritter, written some seven years ago, shows that in Germany, in contrast with Italy, the stronger manifestations of humanism took place within conservative scholastic circles. "There was no common front of the humanist enlightened against the scholastic men of darkness." The study of the reception of the new style in the German Universities (Vienna, Ingolstadt, Erfurt and Leipzig) leaves no doubt that the two kinds of teacher existed pretty amicably side by side, and that philosophers and theologians profited by the lectures on the ancient poets and orators. The difficulties, when they occurred, were not moral or intellectual, but administrative. The professors

1 Ernst Hoffmann, Das Universum des Nikolaus von Cues (Sitzungsb. der Heidelb. Ak. der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. kl., 1929-30), pp. 11-12. "Alles Endliche steht zum Unendlichen unmittelbar. Aber wie das Lehrstück (the Coincidentia oppositorum) theoretisch nicht zur Skepsis führt, sondern wie der methodisch vom Absoluten genommene Abstand die relative Erkenntnis vielmehr als solche festigt und rechtfertigt, so führt der praktische Betracht des Lehrstücks keineswegs zu Quietismus oder Pessimismus, sondern Cusanus folgert in seinen Predigten das Gegenteil: weil sittlich die Teilhabe immer Aufgabe ist, so liegt in ihr das Motiv der Freiheit und Arbeit; und weil die arbeitende Erkenntnis Richtung erhält durch den Hinblick auf das Absolute, den alleinigen Massstab für alles Relative, so liegt in der Arbeit das Motiv der Freude.

2 "Die geschichtliche Bedeutung der deutschen Humanismus," Historische Zeitschrift, 127 (1923), 393 f. Ritter's summing up of Burckhardt's influence (p. 396) is both clever and just; and his estimate of the effect upon Renaissance studies of the present attitude towards the Middle Ages is noteworthy. "In der Tat hat sich unser innerer Verhältnis zum Mittelalter, wie man weiss, innerhalb der letzten Generation völlig verschoben. Die gotische Kunst steht uns in gewissen Sinne heute viel näher als die klassizistischen Werke der Hochrenaissance. Dieser wechsel der geistigen Geschmacksrichtung—dessen tiefliegenden Ursachen hier nicht nachzugehen ist—hatte für das wissenschaftliche Verständnis der Renaissance sehr weitgehende Folgen." His early pages, which are also very valuable bibliographically, are devoted to these "results."
drew their income mostly from prebends, and the establishment of humanist "poets" or teachers of composition in the Universities was a luxury which might involve sharing these often meagre emoluments with the new teachers or at least making some contribution out of them. This naturally led to some resistance; but the problem was not infrequently solved through the action of local Landesherrren who put up the money, and, in some cases, by the students themselves doing what they could to contribute. Without disturbing the ordinary curriculum, the humanist teachers gave their lectures at times which the students could conveniently manage. It would be rather like modern "extra-mural" work done within the University itself; and the University, needless to say, took steps to assure itself of the quality of the teachers. Thus in spite of financial obstacles there grew up in Germany what Dr. Ritter calls "a sort of scholastic-academic humanism," different from the purely rhetorical instruction of the Italian humanists.  

This, as Paul Joachimsen has shown, had a marked influence on the writing of history; but we can see it preeminently in treatises on classical philology, e.g. Rudolf Agricola's Inuentio dialectica, where the old theological aims persist. The new style is not to be pursued for its own sake, but on account of the help that it affords the mistress of the sciences; and its dependence upon authority and the inflexible way in which it models itself upon set examples show that in spirit, at all events, it belongs to the Middle Ages. For neither in Germany nor, in the main, south of the Alps do we yet find the general widening of horizons associated with the Renaissance in its full flower.

This fact, familiar to many, yet perhaps worth repeating, has been newly emphasized along other lines by Dr. Lynn Thorndike in his interesting, if a trifle over-emphatic, Science and Thought in the Fifteenth Century. Following in the path of Father Duhem, who in his Système du Monde and his Études sur Léonard de Vinci traced the continuity of scientific studies from the early Middle Ages to Copernicus, Dr. Thorndike is inclined to mistrust the use of the term Renaissance in the fifteenth century altogether. The humanist for him is the classical scholar who is occupied with his

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1 Ritter, op. cit., pp. 406-408.
2 Geschichtsauffassung und Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland unter dem Einfluss der Humanismus, i (1910).
3 Ritter, op. cit., p. 415.
elegantiae, and has little contact with the improvements in the medicine, surgery and the scientific studies of the time. He brings this out in his examination of manuscript treatises on the controversy of Medicine versus Law in Florence, couched in dialogue form. The Tractatus de nobilitate legum et medicinae composed by the humanist Coluccio Salutati in 1399 is in the nature of a reply to a work by Master Bernard, a physician of Florence, who had urged the superiority of medicine. Salutati complains that Bernard is so devoted to study that he regards all other human activities of no account, whereas he (Salutati) denies that speculation is the ultimate end of man; on the other hand, he refuses to accept Bernard’s opinion that science deals with particulars, asserting that all science, properly conceived, is concerned with incorruptible and eternal matters. The trouble with medicine is its empirical and experimental character, originating, he supposes, in its connection with magic and the empirical use of remedies centuries before Hippocrates developed its logical side. The law came direct from God amid thunders upon Sinai and on other occasions. The law has never departed from reason (here we catch an echo of St. Thomas’s Secunda secundae—law as a rational norm); but the medical art is always changing; it keeps growing “by magic inventions of remedies and daily experiments.” Can medicine then be called a science at all? Bernard is wrong in saying that law is not a science “since it proceeds by definitions and divisions, and since it has its universals which cannot be otherwise.” Here then is one of the founders of Italian humanism taking up the a priori and theoretical conception of science generally charged to the account of medieval scholasticism. Now it is easy to see why the early humanists tended to lump genuine medical studies together with quackery—there was indeed a good deal of intermingling. An anonymous surgical treatise of the early sixteenth century, examples of which, analysed by Dr. Thorndike, are preserved at Munich and Vienna, gives a most entertaining account of the practice of the contemporary barbers-surgeon. In the closing chapter on growths the treatise tells of a baker who had on his right arm a growth of melancholic complexion, hard and large and hairy, in which he felt no pain when it was struck with a stone. The author of the treatise was unwilling to accept the case, “but a certain barber

1 Science and Thought in the Fifteenth Century (Columbia Univ. Press, 1929), pp. 24-58.
undertook to cure it and killed him.” Yet, as Dr. Thorndike points out, the enlightened author himself is not above recommending the blood of a goat—which was supposed to break even a diamond—for the cure of stone and prescribing that the animal be killed in August when the moon begins to be full, the goat to be three or four years old and to have eaten nothing but diuretic and aperitive herbs for fifteen days before its death.¹

Dr. Thorndike does not confine himself to the scientific treatises; he advances to a discussion of some of the sources underlying fifteenth-century Platonism. He analyses two Florentine treatises on Ideas, one by Niccolò da Foligno, the humanist friend of Lorenzo de’ Medici, the other by an anonymous writer whom he is inclined to identify with Niccolò himself. A close examination of these shows that neither, among its many citations, includes a single specific reference to any work by Plato: and that with the exception of Porphyry and Macrobius, no Platonists or neo-Platonists are cited directly. The anonymous writer betrays the fact that he approaches the subject via the commentary of Averroes on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics.* “Plato’s fundamental propositions for the Ideas are these, according to Averroes’ thirtieth and thirty-first comments on the seventh book of the *Metaphysics.* . . .” The author has read Aristotle and his commentators, especially Alexander of Hales, Albert and Aquinas, and medical authorities like Galen, Hippocrates, and Avicenna; but not Plato directly—or so it seems. Yet, as Dr. Thorndike remarks, if we identify him, as probability indicates, with Niccolò da Foligno, it certainly does seem rather remarkable that this humanist “should have no hesitation about addressing the patron of the Platonic Academy at Florence and the friend of Ficino on the subject.”² The point is interesting: but Dr. Thorndike surely goes too far in adding: “this suggests what a shallow pretense most of the so-called Platonism of fifteenth-century Italians and the Mediceans must have been.”³ This both assumes that it is not possible to learn much of what Plato thought from Aristotle (whereas, on the contrary, it certainly is, even granted that the *Metaphysics* contain a good many unworthy criticisms of Plato), and furthermore underestimates the Platonism of Ficino, which is not

² Thorndike, *op. cit.*, p. 177.  
open to these objections. Yet there is much truth in the author’s main contention that what is changing in the fifteenth-century humanism is the style rather than the matter. The humanist’s library is not barren of the Fathers. It will contain the theology of the Middle Ages as well as the exempla from the classics. Both the collection of books that Cusanus left to his native town¹ as well as those given by Walter de Grey to Balliol² help to illustrate this. Stylistically, the transformation has been going on for as much as two hundred years. Recent research, like that of Dr. Haskins, on the Ars dictaminis shows how constant was the quest for more refined and elaborate methods of expression. At the outset it was the ear rather than the heart that was listening to new things. But in Northern Europe there were signs of a deeper movement that claims our attention.

III.

The literature of the mystical and reforming movements during the early fifteenth century is large,³ but still mainly in the stage of monographs. It has not been fully recognized how far-reaching was the change of spirit to which the efforts of devout laity were directed. Concentration on individual mystics like Tauler and Suso has tended to shut out the activities of the Brothers of the Common Life from view, and in spite of the work of Albert Hyma much more study of texts and treatises will have to be done, before the main lines of this extremely important subject are drawn. In this country, if Miss Deanesley and Dr. Workman be excepted, students of language and literature have done more to enlighten us here than the professional historians; for the devotional movement which had as its early

¹ Excellently catalogued by Dr. J. Marx, Verzeichnis der Handschriften-Sammlung des Hospitals zu Cues (Trier, 1905). Cf. Rotta, op cit., c. x, “La biblioteca del Cusano.”
² This is, of course, on the assumption that the inscriptions of the “second librarian” are correct (e.g. in Coll. Ball. MS. CLXIV, a volume of sermons preached at Constance, “Liber domus de Balliolio in Oxon’ ex dono Willemi Gray Eliensis Episcopi’”). Mr. R. A. B. Mynors tells me that he is not certain of all these attributions.
³ See the recent bibliographies in A. Hyma, The Christian Renaissance (1925), A. C. Flick, The Decline of the Medieval Church (1930), and the selected list in Schnürer, op. cit., iii, 435-446.
prophet Richard Rolle¹ and could bear even Wyclif, the unorthodox child of religious renaissance, in its current, led to an outpouring of native verse and prose that scarcely ended with the magnificent writing of Sir Thomas More, but ran well on into the later sixteenth century; while in art it was matched by a small figure sculpture, mainly in alabaster, which was prized throughout Europe for its tenderness and beauty. England had its “Christian Renaissance” too. But on one phase of the practical reforming movement that grew out of the Great Schism there is as yet practically no work at all. Apart from one scholar’s studies on a very interesting branch of the subject, the study of Anglo-Papal relations in the first part of the fifteenth century has been neglected,² and that despite the stimulating and suggestive questions asked nearly thirty years ago by Johannes Haller in his remarkable *Papsttum und Kirchenreform*. These queries might well have provoked replies from England in the same measure as they succeeded in doing from France and Germany. Is it really the case, Haller asked, that the Papal administration in the fourteenth and fifteenth century was so radically bad? Where lay the weak points? Was the Curia in fact corrupt through and through? Are not the reproaches of its opponents guilty of exaggeration? Did the state of affairs in the Curia have so great an effect upon the Church as a whole, that men were right in holding the Papacy primarily responsible for the decline of ecclesiastical institutions? “Only the documents can give us the answer,” Haller replied.³ He wrote his book (the first volume alone appeared) before Mollat’s researches into the system employed by the Papacy in the collation of

¹ The considerable extent and wide distribution of the literature on Rolle can be studied in Chapter II (pp. 22-50) of, and the Index of MSS. (p. 563 f.) in, Miss Hope Allen’s *Writings ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole* (1927).

² The branch referred to is the English attitude towards the Papacy in the matter of the alien priories, on which see Dr. Rose Graham, *English Ecclesiastical Studies*, chapters iv, v, and ix. Since this was written news has arrived that Professor W. E. Lunt and his colleagues are contemplating a series of publications on Anglo-Papal relations. Apart from Dr. Lunt’s works on Papal taxation in England, his well-known paper “The Financial System of the Medieval Papacy in the light of recent literature” (*Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Feb., 1909, pp. 251-295) showed, more than twenty years ago, how great a field lies before American, as well as English scholars, in this direction.

benefices had laid bare the ill effects of the practice of Papal reservations upon the Church as a whole; and along these lines his work surely needs supplementing and testing from the English side. In one particular respect Haller's suggestions have been fruitful and interesting—his investigation of the compromises made by England and France with the Papacy in the matter of collation. He drew attention to the need of seeking the origin of the system of Concordats or agreements arrived at between the national states and the Papacy in the positive enactments of the two countries during the period of the Schism; in the case of France, in the ordinance of 18 February 1407, just after the declaration of neutrality, in that of England, in the carrying out and defence of the re-enacted Statute of Provisors (1390). The latter he examined in a striking paper with the aid of Martin V's briefs written during the pontificate of Archbishop Chichele. The general effect of these researches has been to show the importance of the English attitude towards the Curia as a factor in the European situation. It is doubtful whether Haller can be followed in his main contention, namely that Gallicanism was in effect an English product by origin. But there can be no overpraising the book for its suggestive and stimulating treatment of the problems.

Haller, however, became too busy with Quellen to follow up his important work—the first modern book to attempt a scientific conspectus of the religious position. He may have found, like others, that there was too much to be done in analysing and publishing the acts of the Councils. This has been, for Constance, the majestic work of Heinrich Finke and his school, who have been largely occupied

1 La Collation des benefices ecclésiastiques à l'époque des Papes d'Avignon, 1921; "L'application du droit de régale spirituelle en France du xii au xiv siècle," Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique, t. xxv (1929), nos. 3 and 4; cf. Ch. Samaran and G. Mollat, La fiscalité pontificale en France au 14e siècle (1905).


3 Haller, op. cit., 278-308, 443-446.


5 As expressed in his op. cit., 465-479.
with the chronology of, and the constitutional questions that occupied, that Council, while Haller on his side busied himself with the notaries manuals of the Basel assembly, which enable us to see from day to day the work of the deputations and to appreciate how much the participants were attempting in the way of administration. Publications of the *Acta*, together with French and Italian manuscript sources, served as the back-bone of Noel Valois' history of the relations of the Pope and the Council. But neither here nor in the biographies nor separate monographs on curial administration as it emerged from the Conciliar Movement can we find fully satisfactory answers to the questions which Haller originally raised. It is pretty certain that none will be given until episcopal and archiepiscopal administration in its various aspects has been studied more closely, with the same care that Dr. Coulton is giving to monastic,¹ and the evidence of the bishops' Registers—especially the record of visitations, on the excellent model of Professor Hamilton Thompson's volumes in the Lincolnshire Record Society—adduced to supplement that of the letters from the Lateran and Vatican *Regesta*. The analysis of the valuable Calendars of Papal documents alone is not the clue to the whole position. For the history of royal patronage, we need the record of pleas in the King's Bench—and here, it may be remarked, the ground has already been partly prepared by Sir Robert Cotton himself in the Cleopatra volumes which he appears personally to have compiled by collecting and inserting contemporary copies of original material and by setting his transcribers to excerpt and arrange under their respective years cases from the *coram rege* rolls.² We need as full as possible a list of manuscript treatises on reform written, or sermons on that subject preached, by Englishmen, of whom men like Walter Dysse and the Oxford

¹ Miss Irene Churchill has recently completed a doctoral thesis on the administration of the Province of Canterbury; and some of the material on which her conclusions have been based should be more generally available when the Register of Archbishop Chichele (1414-43) is published, as it is hoped, at the Quincentenary of All Souls College.

² MSS. Cotton Cleopatra E. II, E. III, headed by Cotton, the "State of the Church." The chronology of the documents inserted or transcribed is often very faulty. Sir Robert Cotton, as Valois has shown (*La France et le grand Schisme*, iv, 517-520), was not above ascribing to the reign of Henry V, petitions to the Papacy and instructions thereupon to English ambassadors, which date from the reign of Richard II (Cleop. E. II, fols. 111, 112).
doctor Ullerston, Robert Hallam's friend, deserve special study; we need work on the reforming activities of the English Carmelites; a comprehensive survey of the Conciliar material in our various repositories; investigations of contemporary formularies and letter-books containing details of Church policy; lists of the English proctors, and, when possible, studies of English papal officials resident at the Court of Rome, some of whose letters have fortunately come down to us; and from the Vatican archives we need adequate calendaring of the English Petitions to Rome after the ending of the Council of Constance, of English payments to the Camera Apostolica contained in the Obligationes et solutiones of that body, of English cases in the records of the Rota (after 1464), to add to the material already gleaned in the Roman Transcripts preserved at the Public Record Office. These are a few desiderata: they are all practicable subjects, given the patience and that knowledge of the background which no worker in this field can forego.

It may perhaps be useful to give some examples from one of these sources that illustrates not only the relations of Church and State in

1 C.C.C. Oxon, MS. CLXXXIII, fols. 122 f., cf. Coxe, Catalogus, ii, 73; Trin. Coll. Camb. MS. 359, fols. 2-16 (M. R. James, Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Trinity College, Cambridge, i, 487), cf. Cave, Scriptorum ecclesiasticorum historia literaria (1743), ii, 110. For the sermons preached by Englishmen, cf. especially Royal MS. Appendix no. 7, fols. 6, 19-26; Coll. Ball. MSS. CLXIV, CLXV A.; Finke, Acta Concilii Constanciensis, ii. How much light can be thrown on individual preachers is shown in the case of Scotsmen by Professor J. H. Baxter in his edition of the Copiale Prioratus Sancti-Andree, Appendix nos. 29, 30 and pp. 478-9 (for Thomas Livingstone); App. no. 27 (William Croyser); App. no. 26 (Quintin Folkherd, cf. p. 444).

2 E.g. Royal MS. 10 B. IX; Cotton, Cleopatra, C. IV; Harleian MS. 431.

3 Miss D. Wolff is attempting this in the case of William Swan; for his letters cf. p. 406 below.

4 These are often of considerable interest, for the light they throw on the Institutions in English Episcopal Registers. On the petition generally, cf. Gisbert Brom, Guide aux Archives du Vatican; and Father Bruno Kattenbach, Specimina Supplicationum ex Registris Vaticanis (1927), Pars I, Prolegomena et Tabulæ.

5 I am greatly indebted to Miss Annie Cameron for showing me the transcripts of Scottish entries of this class which she has been compiling during the last two years. The bulk relate to the payment of the servitia minuta and communia. When will work of this kind be undertaken by English students for England?
England but also the attitude of this country to the Papacy. They come from the letter-book of William Swan, Papal notary, a Rochester man provided with a canonry at Chichester, who was permanently resident at the Curia from about 1406 for more than thirty years. Through Swan’s hands went a great quantity of English business at the Curia, and his book, preserved in the Bodleian, is the record of his correspondence and of various legal memoranda which he made at the time on points arising out of the cases. He seems to have given quite plain and practical advice to his correspondents. It was not always to their advantage to sue in the Roman Curia; realities had to be taken into account. Quite early in his sojourn there he had occasion to give advice to one Thomas de Toueton (Towton) who was appointed by the Crown to the prebend of Stillington and was having his position threatened by an opponent, John Fraunceys, collated to the same prebend by the Dean and chapter of York. He advises Thomas that a speedy prosecution of the case in the king’s court before the royal justices or by the patria would best meet the case, “and so, if you gain your end, you will secure sufficient remedy and that by royal law against John Fraunceys.” If, he says, you try to bring this suit in the Roman Curia, that court will not recognize the royal title, as being contrary to Papal constitutions, because it is founded on *jus temporale*; and you will be incurring great expense which otherwise you might avoid. Bring the case into the *Curia regis*, and your adversary will not continue his suit in the Court of Rome; for if it is continued you will be able to get the king’s writ directed to Fraunceys bidding him to return home under pain of life and property, to answer such great contempt of the king’s regalia; “and this,” he adds, “I have seen happen frequently.”

Fraunceys persisted (Thomas evidently took Swan’s advice) and was served with a writ of *Prenunire*; no doubt he was summoned home, after the manner of the bishops who were carrying to Rome the protest of their colleagues against the Provisors Statute of 1390.

The second case is even more illuminating. The Abbot of St.

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1 Bodleian Library, MS. Arch. Seld. B. 23, fol. 23d: “adversarius vesternullatenuscontinuabit processum suum in Romana Curia et si continuetur aliqualter processum suum [sic], poteritis habere breve regium sibi dirigendum ut ad partes [sc. suas] sub pena forisfacture vite et bonorum veniat responsurus super tanto contemptu facto contra regaliam regis, et hec fieri vidi sepus.”

Anthony of Vienne has collated one Adam de Olton to the governorship and custody of St. Anthony’s hospital in Threadneedle Street. But the commandery, which as an alien property had been granted in 1382 by Richard II to Michael de la Pole, was at the time occupied by John Macclesfield the elder, who held it by royal appointment, although in 1393 he had received the grant of it in commendam. Olton had evidently failed to get possession, and now in 1417 brought a suit against Macclesfield in the Curia, in reality, it appears, on behalf of the abbot of Vienne, on the ground that the London house belonged to the abbot’s collation. The facts were, of course, that the commandery had been regarded as an alien priory.


2 On the two Macclesfields, cf. T. F. Tout, Chapters in Medieval Administrative History, IV, 386 n. 1. The younger, a clerk in the diocese of Lichfield, was one of Richard’s secretaries.

3 Graham, op. cit., p. 359.

4 Cal. Papal Letters, V, 549. This was probably to get round the fact that he was only a secular clerk.

5 Vatican Archives, Reg. Suppl. 105, fol. 102 d. “Beatissime pater: Dudum preceptoria generali domus sancti Antonii Londoniensis ordinis sancti Augustini, a monasterio Sancti Antonii Vienensis diocesis dicti ordinis dependentis tunc per obitum quondam Richardi Bugonis canonici dicti monasterii et ipsius domus preceptoris extra Romanam Curiam defuncti vacante, Hugo Abbas monasterii predicati praefatam praecessoriam deuto uestro Ade de Olton canonico expresso professo dicti monasterii auctoritate ordinaria contulit et de illa Ecclesia prouidit. Timet tamen dictus Adam collationem et prouisionem predicat ex certis causis viribus non subsistere. Quapropter suppliant sanctitati vestra humiliter dictus Adam quatenus sibi de preceptoria predicata, que curata est, cius fructus etc., deductis oneribus, Quadranginta marcharum sterlingorum communi extimatione valorem annuum non excedunt, siue premisso et alio quovis modo aut ex alterius cuiuscumque persona etiam seu per constitutionem Execrabilis vacet aut specialiter vel generaliter dispositio apostolice reseruata uel ad eadem sedem devoluta existat, et super ea inter eundem H. Abbatem, et quendam Johannem Macclesfeld, qui secularis merus existit, Lichfeldensis diocesis eiusdem preceptoris occupatorem et detentorem lis in vestro palacio causarum apostolico pendeat indecisa, cuius statum habere placeat pro expresso, dignemini de nouo misericorditer prouidere. Alioquin collationem et prouisionem predicat et quecumque inde secuta rata habentes et grata, ea dignemini ex certa scientia confirmare, suppleentes omnes defectus si qui forsan intraverint in eisdem.”
confiscated and treated as a free hospital under Crown gift. Macclesfield, threatened in his possession, sends Swan (at Constance) a memorandum upon the legal position of the House. The hospital of St. Anthony, he says (without strict regard to the truth), was never founded “by religious of St. Anthony but by the citizens of London and was and is in the king’s patronage, and belonged and belongs to his collation.” On the strength of Macclesfield’s notes Swan seems to have drawn up a historical memorandum on the house and to have submitted it for confirmation to Macclesfield, who returned it, saying that all the articuli in it were correct, save one in which it was stated that the son of Michael de la Pole who formerly held the house was a domicellus laicus: he was a clerk at Cambridge and therefore the article was erroneous. So far so good. But in the Roman Curia nothing could be done without money; moreover, Macclesfield was evidently too slow in returning the memorandum, for his next letter to Swan shows that the notary had complained bitterly of his delay in this regard. “You have said that I am greatly to blame, and that if my case, nay rather the king’s, falls to the ground, it will be my fault and mine alone, because to sustain my defence in the said cause you had neither gold nor silver nor muniments nor necessary information to support the case; and [you say that] the fact that the information was so long delayed was due to my negligence and slowness.” Then, with a rising mixture of dudgeon and alarm: “You tell me that the case will probably fail. Kindly take note that in this event I am entirely innocent, and by God’s grace I shall be excused before my lord the king and his Council, if the crown suffers damage. My house of St. Anthony belongs to the Crown, not because it is an alien priory, but by royal right; and it is against the laws and statutes of the kingdom of England and derogatory not only to the king’s dignity but to all the other princes and magnates of his kingdom that the right of patronage over any ecclesiastical benefice belonging to them should be discussed outside the king’s court and in the Court of Rome. But supposing that the king’s enemies do, to my eternal confusion and shame, win their case, great strife will within a short space arise between our lord Pope and our lord king (the repeated nostrum is interesting): and know for certain that all the greater prelates, noblemen and more powerful lords of the King’s Council are perfectly well aware that I am thus wrongfully vexed at the instance of Adam of
Olton on behalf of the Abbot and Convent of the monastery of St. Anthony at Vienne to the prejudice and disherison of the King's crown; they know that a remedy will be provided by our said lord king and by themselves; for all the prelates, noblemen and lords have written to our lord king and have received from him a reply to the effect that although my adversaries prevail against me, to my perpetual confusion, they yet will gain no execution of judgment against me in this country nor a fortiori against the king, nor will they bear any gold nor silver out of the country.”

The tone of the letter may have amused Swan; but he was probably used to the situation. Macclesfield held the administration till 1423 when, on his death, it passed to his adversary Adam de Olton; but the right of the Abbot of Vienne to collate was at an end.

These remarks have, I fear, been largely in the nature of bibliography rather than of criticism: but before we can work in any field, we must know something about the nature of the soil. I hope later to be allowed to deal more in detail with certain classes of material that have been treated all too cursorily here.

1 MS. Arch. Seld. B. 23, fols. 92-93. “Scientes pro certo quod omnes maiores prelati ac principes et potentiores domini de consilio regis bene sunt informati quomodo ad excitationem et procurationem Ade de Elton (sic) pro Abbate et conventu Monasterii Sancti Antonii in Vienna iniuste vexatus sum in preiudicium et exheredacionem corone regis, et ut per dictum dominum nostrum Regem ac per eos prouideatur de remedis in hac parte, scripserunt ita omnes prelati principes et domini eidem domino nostro Regi, et ab eo exinde responsum habuerunt, quod licet adversarii mei contra me habere valeant victoriam ad perpetuam confusionem meam, quod absit, executionem tamen nullam contra me hic in regno isto nec a multo fortiori contra Regem habere possunt. . . .”