

PREFACE

The first impulse to undertake the study of which this book is the outcome came to me quite suddenly in September 1933 when I was in Rome in connexion with my work on the medieval papacy. I happened to visit the catacomb of St. Sebastian and when examining the well-known *graffiti* there, was struck by the number which place the name of St. Paul before that of St. Peter. This seemed to me to be very significant, and I determined to investigate the relative importance of the two apostles in the development of the Roman supremacy, for obviously at this epoch it did not depend solely on what are called the Petrine claims. My inquiry gradually extended to the whole subject of early inscriptions and the light which they throw on the origins of the Western Church. I could not but feel that their possibilities as a means of supplementing and modifying what was known from literary sources had not been adequately realized.¹ In classical studies the results of archaeological discoveries had been utilized to the full; but this was hardly the case, at least to the same extent, with ecclesiastical studies, in which hitherto such material had chiefly been a happy hunting-ground for Roman Catholic and other scholars anxious to find traces of later practices and beliefs. But their handling of the evidence, and again I only express my own opinion, seemed to be lacking in critical judgment. It was, moreover, largely confined to the contents of the catacombs of Rome. Quite considerable discoveries, of one kind and another, had recently been made in Rome itself, and there was, in addition, the immense store of archaeological material in North Africa and Gaul made available in the excellent official publications of the French Government.

Another source of information which had not been exhausted was the apocryphal literature. To its further possibilities I was awakened by my membership for some years before his lamented death of the *seminar* conducted by Professor Burkitt. At last I found myself involved in a study of the whole matter of the origins of the Western Church. This was really ground with which I had long been familiar, for it was not for nothing that I had been the pupil of such great teachers as H. M. Gwatkin, H. B. Swete, and J. F. Bethune-Baker.

Bishop Westcott once complained that early Christian

¹ They had, of course, been used in the *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* published in 1893.

inscriptions were devoid of interest (*Life of B. F. Westcott*, I, p. 289). I certainly have not found them so; for if the information which they afford is but meagre, it has about it a naturalness and intimacy which is usually lacking in the literary sources. Moreover the inscriptions, since they were contemporary, constitute something stable in the queer shifting world which formed the first three centuries of the Christian era.

The amount of material provided for study was so vast that some delimitation of area as regards both time and space was obviously necessary, so I have taken as the *terminus ad quem* the adoption of Christianity by Constantine, though I have examined much later material in the hope, not entirely unjustified, of finding matter which would throw back light on the earlier period. As to space, my inquiry was naturally limited to the West—by which I mean roughly the present division between the Roman and Orthodox obediences. It was, of course, not until the end of our period that there was a division of the Empire into East and West, whilst the ecclesiastical division came much later.

As the general outline of the story of the Beginnings of Western Christendom is readily available in textbooks on Early Church History, I have not related it in full detail, in order to give more space to what is less well known and less readily available. Much of the archaeological material, for example, is only to be found in the various journals devoted to that subject. The attention given to the political and religious backgrounds may appear to be excessive; but this is justified by their importance in the development of the Christian Church, and is, indeed, necessary in order to give a complete picture of the times in which it arose.

I have found it exceedingly difficult to obtain a clear and complete idea of the development. The mass of detail is overwhelming, and there are sad gaps in our knowledge. The simplifications of the textbooks are often deceptive, for what might at first seem clear and of a single texture proves on closer examination to be very diverse; just as a mountain seen against the light of the sun may appear to be of a uniform colour, but is not really so.¹ Much therefore must remain vague and uncertain. It would have been comparatively easy to have filled in the gaps by the use of the imagination, but I have deliberately refrained from this process; and so the narrative may be lacking in completeness and richness. But poverty, as in the economic sphere, is not always the result of sloth and indolence. It may equally well be the result of honesty. The object of my study has been to discover truth so far as it is ascertainable, not to promulgate

¹ cf. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Pt. II, sect. ii, chap. II, sect. 15.

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novel theories. Too avid a quest of novelties may easily become the bane of sound scholarship.

Perhaps some into whose hands this book may come will question the usefulness, in an age like the present, of expending on such a subject the vast amount of time and labour which have been involved in its preparation. My own chief object was to clear my mind as to the origins of the medieval papacy, a subject upon which I have been working for something like a quarter of a century. There is, of course, a real danger, as Frederick Denison Maurice has pointed out, of regarding the primitive Church as a kind of pattern on the mount (cf. Exodus 25 : 40), the only true model of a Catholic Church; but it was from the primitive Church that the great structure of the Church medieval had its origin. The problem is to account for its vastly different outlook and teaching. A mere theory of development will not do so; for, as someone has said, if you begin with a hen's egg and end up with a rabbit, something more must be postulated. Obviously new elements have entered in, derived from non-Christian sources. In this matter the inscriptions with their strange fondness for pagan survivals are of immense value, as well as the whole course of early Christian art. But this pagan element, which admittedly made its way into the Church, must not be condemned out of hand; it was not without its value in broadening the Christian Gospel and its appeal. Here again I have sought merely to get at the facts, and not to pass judgment on them.

Such is my own justification for this study. But surely it can be justified on much wider grounds. We can never understand the present without an adequate knowledge of the past, and in this material age to go back to the spiritual springs of our civilization is a wholesome process. It should at least teach us the folly of confining ourselves to the world of sense and matter in trying to understand it; truly insight only comes to those whose faith allows them to reach out "beyond the flaming bulwarks of the universe" in search of a higher cause and a more perfect will. For those who have the task of guiding the life of the Church universal too much attention can never be paid to the record of the struggles of the early Christian communities, for those experiences are being lived out afresh in the younger Churches which are everywhere springing up. The failures and weaknesses of such Churches as those of North Africa and of Spain may help us to be patient with their modern counterparts in China or India, whilst their triumphs and achievements may fill us with the spirit of hope and confidence.

The comparison of the present and the past will help us to understand our own day more readily. But such a process, like

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Lend-Lease, can also work in reverse, and the experiences of twentieth-century Christians may also provide new insight into the meaning of the earlier centuries. A generation has arisen in Europe which has had to learn afresh the meaning of dying for its beliefs, as well as for its country. Such a generation will have quickened sympathies with its forefathers in the faith. Nor is this reverse process confined to the sphere of religion; for as John Buchan has written, "the convulsions of our time may give an insight into the problems of the early Roman Empire which was perhaps unattainable by scholars who lived in easier days" (*Augustus*, p. 9).

It was originally intended that this volume should have been published in 1939, but the outbreak of the war made delay advisable. During the war years, in spite of other literary activities and a temporary resumption of parish work, I was able to read through once again practically the whole of the Western Fathers and the apocryphal literature, and to revise and in large measure to rewrite my thesis. A return to the neighbourhood of Cambridge has enabled me to take note of recent contributions to the subject and so to carry out further revision and supplementing.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the Rev. G. H. Gordon Hewitt, the Theological Secretary of the Lutterworth Press, and to their reader, for many useful criticisms and suggestions.

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BUCKDEN

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