

The Roots of Our Culture

The Puritan Mind, by Herbert Wallace Schneider. New York: Henry Holt and Company. \$3.00.

The Religious Background of American Culture, by Thomas Cuming Hall. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. \$3.00.

-the first of two pages-

IT WOULD be a profitable thing if books like these two could be included in a program of winter reading and discussion by Catholic study clubs. They would throw much light on complexities which puzzle and disturb Protestants and Catholics alike, who are finding it more difficult than ever before to live together in this new society of ours, without knowing why. Both are appallingly ignorant of everything relating to American origins, growth and culture. These books read together would make an excellent start for such a study.

In "The Puritan Mind" American eccentricities are charged by the author to that temperament and outlook on life developed in New England in the struggle to set up in America a "Civitas Dei" impossible of achievement in England. The author describes this attempt to develop Baxter's "Commonwealth of God," a democracy of self-governing congregations, in a community brought out by a trading company for the purpose of producing wealth. He shows these independent congregations upon which the commonwealth was to be based yielding gradually to the inroads of a "holy anarchy" through the denial by some citizens therein of any rule but Christ's rule of the individual, in protest against increasingly close union of clerical and civil government; and the fading of Hooker's vision of "the little kingdoms of God," hardening into an ecclesiastical autocracy, a sort of centralized "holy republic" in reaction against this anarchy. He then shows the "holy republic" yielding in turn, not only to this disintegrating force of dissent against which it was supposed to act as a bulwark, and to a "tolerance" which Cotton Mather characterized as mere indifference, but also, and in particular, to that force we all overlook in this connection: the rights of the trading companies which founded the New England colonies.

It may come as a revelation to some readers that early immigration was not free; that it was controlled by these trad-

ing companies, just as later immigration was contracted for and regulated in some degree by the industrials of New England looking in Europe for cheap and docile labor. Not every man who settled in New England was a free man and he could not be, for only members of the company that brought him had any say in its affairs. It was only with party differences that the change came, and party differences grew out of this church struggle till toward 1743 the conflict between intolerant clerical autocrats and the "separated churches was shifted back to the contemporary philosophies of England and the wars of the Lord made way for the political struggles of Whig and Tory." That was the reason why "God's elect were gradually forced into the position of being only the socially elect," and that is why there began here a slow domestic revolution, social and political, a full century before the central government in England became involved; and that revolution was not ended by our separation from the mother country, which might be considered as only an incident in it.

In "The Religious Background of American Culture" Professor Hall probably has a truer interpretation than Professor Schneider of those forces which produced us, as flowing from the "Lollard mind" at least equally with the "Puritan mind." Going further back and into wider fields than Schneider, he traces the antecedents of that very dissent which evolved the Puritan mind, and he lays its roots far back in the racial

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antagonisms of early England. He makes of it an Anglo-Saxon attribute, the sullen obstructive resentment of a conquered people, intensified by Wyclif's revolt against the Norman-English prelates, and finally hardening into that fierce anti-papal, anti-ecclesiastical and proletarian form of Protestantism peculiar to England, which found its most clear-cut expression in the Lollards. He traces the tenacious life of Lollardy and its transplanting to America through "the humble people"—the skilled workers imported by the aristocratic colonists.

One may pass over his air of treating the growth of Christianity in England, and Catholicism generally, as if he were writing of recent excavations at Ur, from hearsay; for what he is stating is mainly the "pre-Reformation" existence of the Lollard spirit, and he is not taking Catholicism as strictly necessary to make his point. When he comes to Catholicism in America, however, he falls into a very usual trap for the unwary. Most of us have not yet recognized and taken into account the broken tradition caused by great mass immigrations into a community already formed, which have made a new and different thing of us within the same outer hull. In quoting from American church historians he misses the point that many of them are not writing about "ourselves" (i.e., Catholics) but about "themselves" (i.e., some special group within Catholicism in America) since they are of different race and origins from those who planted Catholicism on the Atlantic coast. He fails (as they also do) to observe a very necessary distinction: that we have had two kinds of immigration, at different periods within the same racial groups.

In commenting on the "lack of influence of Catholic culture" here he points to the almost insuperable difficulties under which the American Church assimilated these great new groups, salvaged them for the Church and initiated them to

a more prosperous economic life, without however introducing them to American culture already formed, or passing on to America through them the mellow cultural tradition of Catholicism which the immigrant himself may never have wholly possessed, or had lost through centuries of oppression. That is true and we suffer from it in our Catholic life, but he is, as usual, giving emphasis only to the second immigrations, the mass immigrations.

He gives no value, for example, to the influential number of the upper gentry and nobility of Ireland, who came here after the defeat of the Stuart cause. Their cultural value was real, however, and it was Catholic. Many of first colonists were cultured Catholic gentlemen: some broken by the Tudors, some Stuart partizans. They were, equally with the Church of England men, "Cavaliers," though the Catholics had been fined till many were poor men. One does not therefore quite follow Dr. Hall in his statement that "Cavalier Virginia is a myth." It is true that in both Virginia and Maryland, to go no further, the aristocracy that owned, ruled and influenced others was a minority, as in all places and at all times. The plebs is always a majority and is always plebian. The "Cavalier" owned, ruled and gave the tone, and he raised the people to his standards. Today the plebs owns, rules and gives the tone and draws men down to it. There is no myth there: it is, on the contrary, what he is trying to prove by the influence of the "Lollard mind."

This comment on minor parts of Dr. Hall's book is not meant to be unfriendly. It is a valuable and important work, and since no Catholic in our generation has yet produced anything at all in this field, it is all the more important on the program of Catholic study clubs this winter.

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