

ARTICLE II.

EDMUND SPENSER AND THE ENGLISH
REFORMATION.

BY PROFESSOR THEODORE W. HUNT, PH.D.

A TOPIC of this character is a striking example of the relation of literature to history, civil and ecclesiastical. In fact, so closely connected are these different provinces in the sixteenth century, that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate them so as to state just where either of them begins or ends, or just where civil history as distinct from ecclesiastical affects the developing literature. We speak of the historical plays of Shakespeare, and yet they are distinctively literary, just as his literary tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, have a decided historical element. Bacon wrote a "History of Henry the Seventh" as a literary author, as did Raleigh, "A History of the World." So did Hooker, in his "Ecclesiastical Polity," evince the close relations of the history of the English Church to Elizabethan letters; while Spenser and his school illustrated in all their verse the same affinity between the authorship of the time and the public life of the nation. The application of this historico-literary principle as it relates to Spenser and the Reformation is full of interest, alike to the student of letters and of Christian doctrine and polity. The broader question would be, the Relation of Elizabethan Literature as a whole to the English Reformation. The narrower and yet sufficiently comprehensive question, as we have stated it, will enable us to see the religious character and beliefs of Spenser, and also to see those generic and basal principles that controlled

the Reformation, and which have given it a permanent place in English literary history.

It need scarcely be stated, by way of preface, that, personally, Spenser was a Christian man and author. This is seen in all his writings, in their text and spirit, and may be said to form the controlling undertone of them all. From his "Shepherd's Calendar" to "The Faerie Queene" we find him intent on doing good, in his verse and prose. The expressed purpose of his longest poem, "to form a noble and virtuous gentleman," is the implied purpose of every other longer or shorter poem. It is thus that Lowell writes of "The Faerie Queene": "No man can read it and be anything but the better for it. Through that rude age, when maids of honor drank beer before breakfast, and Hamlet could say a gross thing to Ophelia, he passes serenely abstracted and high, the Don Quixote of poets." In speaking of his character, Lowell further writes, "that with a purity like that of thrice-bolted snow, he had none of its coldness, and that, often 'sensuous,' as Milton would say, he was never sensual." It is noticeable, that, in so far as he had access to French and Italian sources, as Chaucer did, as in his "Amoretti" and his "Visions," he modified, even more than Chaucer, the grossness of the original, so as to deprive it of its objectionable features, and make it attractive to every high-minded reader. To speak of an expurgated Spenser, as we do of an expurgated Shakespeare or Byron, would be as strange as to be put on our guard against the full text of Milton or of Mrs. Browning.

In noting Spenser's specific attitude toward the Reformation, we may emphasize three distinct relations:—

1. First of all, *His Attitude toward the Classical Paganism of the Time.*—This paganism was expressed in the form of religious indifference or of opposition to all Christian systems and faiths; sometimes, in the form of pro-

nounced atheism, and always as at war with the leading principles and purposes of the Reformation. Mr. Whipple conveys a wrong impression when he speaks of "The Faerie Queene" as "socially blending Christian and pagan beliefs." These differing beliefs are, indeed, found side by side in the poem, but not "socially blended," as if the one were as tenable and praiseworthy as the other. They are brought together for the author's temporary purpose in the allegory, and rather to show by contrast the true character of each.

In speaking of the English Reformation, it must always be remembered, that it occurred just at the time when there was a decided classical, and, hence, a pagan, revival. We speak of the Revival of Learning, and correctly so; but it was, as we know, a revival of classical learning, of the literature and language of Greece and Rome, and with these, by necessity, a revival of the old pagan theologies and philosophies and ethical standards. The introduction of printing into England, in 1477, made it possible to render into English the pagan authors. Much of the work that Caxton did was naturally in this direction, in that the amount of representative English literature was then comparatively small.

It was at this time, also, that the English universities were aflame with enthusiasm over the new Greek learning, and students gathered at Oxford by thousands to study Plato and kindred authors. So strong was the influence of this classical renaissance, that even English authors, such as Bacon, wrote in Latin, and the English Court became a center of Greek and Roman culture. All this was anti-reformatory, in so far as the English Reformation was concerned. It tended to revive antichristian and unchristian beliefs; to force the language back into the service of the ancient tongues; in a word, to heathenize England.

Add to this those distinctively atheistic and degrading

influences that came in from the Continent, and we are able to see what a tide of pagan teaching was flowing, against which any forces in sympathy with the Reformation must stoutly set themselves. It was this that Spenser did, as a man and an author, and as in thorough sympathy with the great religious movement of the era. No clearer proof of this can be found than the decided contrast visible between the sentiments of such paganized writers as Nash and Greene and Beaumont and Fletcher, and the positive Christian utterances of Spenser. In his "Complaints," such as "The Ruines of Time" and "The Ruines of Rome," this solemn protest against paganism is always clear. In "The Tears of the Muses," when lamenting the fall of Comedy, he bitterly grieves over the presence of this heathenish morality among the minor dramatists of the day, as, also, against those debasing methods that had been foisted on English scholarship by the encroachments of the antichristian literature of the Continent.

2. *Spenser's Attitude toward Romanism* may also be noted. This is one of the most important questions in determining his relation to the Reformation, inasmuch as the Reformation meant, primarily, the rebuke of Romish doctrine.[?]

It is by no means as difficult to ascertain Spenser's attitude here, as Chaucer's attitude to Wiclif and the great reforming influences of the time. It was, in fact, a movement that was just taking form and direction when Chaucer was writing, and to which he could not commit himself as readily as did Spenser in the more advanced religious thought and tendencies of the sixteenth century. Not a few critics, as Lowell, have gone so far as to call Spenser the John Bunyan of the Elizabethan Era, as in the pages of "The Faerie Queene" he does something of that work against Romanism which Bunyan did in the days of the Commonwealth. The proofs of this opposition to Romanism are not far to find.

His life, from boyhood on, is proof in point. His ancestry was anti-Romish. His education, at the Merchant Taylors, London, was in the same direction. At Cambridge, under Whitgift, Master of Pembroke, his training was, of course, Protestant; while the fierce doctrinal disputes then waging at the university but intensified this protest against all that was papal. The wide knowledge of biblical truth that he evinces, and the keen personal interest which he took in all the religious discussions of the time, go to show that his training was Protestant, and that, quite apart from outside influences, he would have been on the side of the best thinking and public policy in church and state.

The best proof of his Protestantism, however, is seen in his Works, some of which may be examined. Turning to "The Shepherd's Calendar," there are three of the twelve Eclogues that are distinctly anti-Romish,—those entitled "May," "July," and "September." In "May," in the character of the two shepherds, Piers and Palinode, he represents two kinds of pastors, the Protestant and the Romish, respectively, his satirical allusions to the wantonness and gross neglect of their flocks on the part of the papal pastors clearly showing what views he held. Thus Piers says to Palinode, who had been praising the jollity and gayety of the shepherds:—

" The like bene shepheardes, for the devils stedde,
That playen while their flockes be unfedde:
Well is it seene theyr sheepe bene not their owne,
That letten them runne at randon alone:
But they bene hyred for little pay
Of other, that caren as little as they,
What fallen the flocke, so they han the fleece,
And get all the gayne. . . . "

It is in this Eclogue that he directly charges upon the Pope and prelates tyranny over the bodies and souls of men, and under the name of religion; also, the neglect of

their duty and the opening of the gates for the incoming of worldliness and lust.

In "July," the theme is practically the same—the praise of good shepherds, in the person of Thomalin, and the blame of evil shepherds, in the person of Morrell. Thus sings Thomalin:—

"O blessed Sheepe! O Shepheard great!
That bought his flocke so deare,
And them did save with bloody sweat
From wolves that would them teare. . . .
But shepheard mought be meeke and mylde,
Well-eyed, as Argus was,
With fleshly follyes undefyled,
And stoute as steede of brasse."

As he goes on to speak of the base shepherds, no one can doubt the plainness of the reference:—

"They bene yclad in purple and pall,
So hath theyr God them blist;
They reigne and rulen over all,
And lord it as they list. . . .
For Palinode (if thou him ken)
Yode [went] late on pilgrimage
To Rome (if such be Rome), and then
He sawe the like misusage;
For shepheardes (sayd he) there doén leade,
As lordés done other where;
Theyr sheepe han crusts, and they the bread,
The chippes, and they the chere [favor]."

In "September," he continues the strain, calling special attention to the loose character and living of the prelates. In this Eclogue, both characters, Diggon Davie and Hobbinoll, deplore the sins of the shepherds:—

"Then, playnely to speak of shepheardes most white,
Badde is the best (this English is flatt)."

In these and similar outbursts of mingled satire and pleasantry, we have the Langlande of the sixteenth century, protesting with might and main against the corruptions of

the time, and especially against the sins of the Romish priests.

In one of the nine poems called "Complaints," he presents the same line of satire, in the character of the Priest, as he says:—

"All his caire was, his service well to say,
And to read Homelies upon Holidayes;
When that was done, he might attend his playes."

He encourages two of the personages, under the guise of the Fox and the Ape, to aspire to the priesthood or some similar office in the church, in that they could live therein by their wits, as he says to them, by way of showing how light the service was:—

"Now once a weeke, upon the Sabbath day,
It is enough to doo our small devotion,
And then to follow any merrie notion.
Nor are we byde to fast, but when we list,
Nor to were garments base, of wollen twist,
But with the finest silkes us to aray,
That before God we may appeare more gay.
We be not tyde to wilful chastitie,
But have the gospel of free libertie."

Hence, we read, very naturally,

"By that he ended had his ghostly sermon,
The Fox was well induced to be a Parson;
And of the Priest eftsoones began to inquire
How to a Benefice he might aspire."

In answer to this, he is initiated into the crafty devices of office-seeking in the church. In those of "The Complaints" entitled, "The Visions of Bellay and Petrarch," it is quite noteworthy that the Flemish author, Van der Nordt, to whom Spenser was partially indebted in these "Visions," writes, that he was a religious refugee from Brabant to England, "as well," he says, "for that I would not beholde the abominations of the Romysche Antichrist as to escape the handes of the bludthirsty." This is one of those incidental and yet forcible testimonies to the

Protestantism of Spenser which the careful reader will find throughout his verse, no good opportunity being lost by the poet to express his indignation against the Romish abuses of the time, and especially to satirize those priests who made a mock of their duties.

In "The Faerie Queene," the evidence is equally clear. This may best be shown by citing, in order, passages from the poem. An examination of Book First may be said to fairly represent the entire romance. We notice, at the outset, the meaning of the personal symbolism used—the characters of the epic.

In Canto I., in the Red Cross Knight, the reference is to Saint George, the patron saint of England, as distinct from Rome. The Dragon referred to, while primarily designating Satan, as mentioned in Rev. xii. 9, also designates Rome and Spain as two great papal powers in Southern Europe. The "aged sire" refers to Archimago, the synonym of Hypocrisy or the Romish Church, it being probable that personal allusion is made to one of the popes who had issued edicts against Elizabeth as a Protestant queen, possibly to Sixtus the Fifth, chosen in 1585 to the papal throne. Possibly the allusion may be to Philip the Second, of Spain, the sworn foe of the reformed movement. In this same canto, Spenser makes ironical reference to the apparently sinless life of the Romish hermits, only to teach us, that, beneath this fair exterior, there lurked the evil principles of jesuitical deceit and diplomacy. Una, the true church, is contrasted with Duessa, the apostate church, representing Falsehood, the name Una, oneness, possibly suggesting Duessa or duplicity. *Just as the name Una is contrasted with Duessa*

In Canto II., Archimago, in the disguise of Saint George, symbolizes the claims made by the papacy that the Pope was England's patron saint, and that England was in spiritual subjection to Rome. No one can doubt the reference to Duessa in the lines:—

"A goodly Lady clad in scarlet red,
 Profiled with gold and pearls of rich assay."

Here the poet identifies Duessa or the Romish Church with the Woman of Babylon (Rev. xiii. 4), a more specific allusion identifying her with Mary, Queen of Scots. The gold and pearls and "tinsel trappings" refer to the offerings made by the devotees of the Pope to the church by way of penance and service, the poet also teaching that popery and paganism are not essentially distinct. In this same canto, a close distinction is drawn between the true church or Holy Catholic Church and the Church of Rome, as the property of the Pope. He shows the peril to which the Reformed Church would have been exposed had Mary, Queen of Scots, gained the throne.

Passing to Canto III., we note a reference to Corceca, "the mother blynd," or religious superstition, in which we recall the current Romish statement, "Ignorance is the mother of devotion." There is also allusion to the manner in which Henry the Eighth in 1535 sent out a commission to inspect the abbeys and monasteries, and a reference to the unintelligent worship of the dupes of Rome.

"Nine hundred *Pater nosters* every day,
 And thrice nine hundred *Aves*, she was wont to say."

At this point, it is of interest to note that this vain and ignorant worship is dwelt upon at length and with unmixed severity in Spenser's only prose work, his "View of the Present State of Ireland," in which we read: "Therefore," says Eudexus, one of the two speakers, "the fault which I find in Religion is but one . . . that they are all Papists by their profession, but in the same so blindly and brutishly enformed as that you would rather think them atheists or infidels, for not one amongst a hundred knoweth any ground of religion or any article of his faith, but can perhaps say his *Pater Noster* or his *Ave Maria* without any knowledge or understanding what one word there-

of meaneth." Referring to Popes Celestius and Patrick, he continues: "In which Popes' time, and long before, it is certain that religion was generally corrupted with their popish trumpery, therefore what other could the priests learn than such trash as was taught them and drink of that cup of fornication with which the purple harlot had then made all nations drunken."

In Canto IV., the reference to Lucifer^{or} Pride and the "six wizards" is to the Seven Deadly Sins of the Romish Calendar. In Canto VII., in depicting the Beast or Dragon, that is, the Papacy, his "yron brest" symbolizes the cruelty of the church; his "back of scaly brass," her insensibility to counsel, and his eyes "imbrewed with blood," the horrors of the Inquisition and Saint Bartholomew. A similar reference to Saint Bartholomew's Day is found in Canto VIII.:—

" And after him the proud Duessa came,
High mounted on her many-headed Beast;
And every head with fiery tongue did flame,
And every head was crownèd in his crest,
And bloody mouthèd with late cruel feast."

He shows that the Romish system is based on temporal and spiritual tyranny, which, once removed, the whole system totters and falls.

In Canto X., reference is made to the papal tenets of Confession and Absolution and Penance and Indulgences against which Luther had fought.

In the last canto, allusion is made to the various attempts to Romanize the English Church, especially by Pius the Fourth, who invited Elizabeth to send delegates to the Council of Trent; to Pius the Fifth, who sought to reconcile Elizabeth before excommunicating her; and to Philip the Second, who, with the same intent, sought the queen in marriage. Thus, from first to last, in this opening book, Spenser's decided anti-papal character appears; so

much so, that he may be said, indeed, to have been in his own way one of the Elizabethan Reformers.

In this respect, Book First is but a sample of the other five books, in each of which the poet keeps his eye on the papacy, and has nothing to say on her behalf, save that she did an important work in the Middle Ages, and, later on, in the province of the fine arts. Percival and other critics have spoken of Spenser's "intolerant point of view" whenever he discussed the relation of Romanism to the Reformed Faith and Church; while the fact is that he could have taken no other point of view in an age such as that in which he lived. He was, indeed, intolerant, if by that is meant that he had no sympathy with Rome, and left unimproved no occasion to evince it. If by "intolerant" is meant that his opposition was expressed in a bitter and bigoted spirit, then objection must be taken, his so-called "intolerance" being nothing more than that uncompromising spirit which Luther evinced in Germany, Knox in Scotland, and Latimer in England. Reference has been made to possible resemblances between Spenser and Bunyan. One of them is just here, in the unyielding abhorrence which each of them had of the papacy, and their conception of it as the child of the devil.

3. A further question of interest arises in determining Spenser's relation to the Reformation. It pertains to his *attitude*, inside the sphere of Protestantism, *toward the Calvinism and Puritanism* of the time *as distinct from Anglicanism*. It must not be forgotten that we are now dealing with a period marked by the revival not only of classical learning, but, more especially, of that of the Schoolmen, made up, as it was, of theologies and philosophies, whose chief aim was to discuss and settle the perplexing doctrinal questions of the time. This scholastic method of theologizing and passionate love for it was a good part of the legacy which the Schoolmen bequeathed to the

England of Elizabeth. Hence, it is clear that Spenser's middle life and best literary work was contemporaneous with this great historic and controversial movement, so that it would have been difficult for him not to have taken a part, and defined his position on all pending questions. In no one sphere did this doctrinal dispute take on a more determined form than as to the relation of Anglicanism to the other Protestant theologies and ecclesiastical systems of the age, Calvinistic and Puritan. The battle now was not between Christianity and Paganism, nor between Protestantism and the Papacy, but between the Church of England and the Dissenters, between Canterbury and Geneva. Richard Hooker, the first and ablest Anglican polemic writer of the day, made it the aim of his "Polity" to show that the teachings and order of the Established Church were of divine authority, and, hence, binding on all the loyal citizens of England, in opposition to that faith and polity which was defended fully as strenuously by Travers, and Cartwright and the Calvinistic school. The fact is, that Hooker, as a man and an author, stood at the very head of this movement, and it is through the study of his life and work that we obtain the best results as to what the movement was and did. In the Temple of which he had been appointed the Master, Hooker defended Anglicanism in the morning; and Travers, Calvinistic Puritanism in the afternoon, while around one or the other as a leader, the Protestants of England gathered. Toward this increased agitation in the Protestant Church, Spenser assumed a rational and moderate position, midway between the extremes of a bigoted Puritanism and an equally bigoted Anglicanism. Thus Lowell ventures the assertion, that, in "The Shepherd's Calender," the poet was a Puritan, and so by conviction. While quoting the passage from "The Faerie Queene," supposed to satirize the Puritan narrowness—"Like that ungracious crew which feigns

demurest grace" he insists, "that with the more generous side of Puritanism he sympathized to the last."

To the same effect, Church contends, "that he certainly had the Puritan hatred of Rome," and adds, that he exhibited a form of faith that might well be called "a mitigated Puritanism." This is not, to say, however, that Spenser was a Puritan—as Milton and Baxter were Puritans. He never classed himself among the Dissenters from the Established Church. He never saw his way clear to leave its enclosure and openly oppose it. This, however, is to be noted, that he favored a modified Anglicanism. He objected to the papal tendencies of the prelacy, insisting that an unduly elaborate ceremonial would in the end react on the usefulness and very existence of the organization.

In a similar manner, he objected to that form of doctrine current under the name of Calvinism, because of its supposed bigotry and intolerance. When a student at Pembroke College, he was a witness of the fierce disputes between Calvinist and churchman. Whitgift was contending for the Established Order, while Cartwright was actually teaching at Cambridge the theology of Geneva.

To these discussions, Spenser as a student was accustomed and, as a result, must thus early have taken sides against the exclusive teachings of Cartwright. Thus we read from Church: "For the stern austerities of Calvinism, its isolation from human history and all the manifold play and variety of human character, there could not be much sympathy in a man like Spenser," as we know there was not with any system that interfered, as he thought, with the full development of human life and personality. In fine, if he must choose, as he did, between an intolerant Anglicanism and an intolerant Puritanism and Calvinism, he preferred the former, and, with that preference, used his utmost efforts to soften its asperities and widen its separation from the Church of Rome. It is thus that Spenser was

true to the best traditions of the English Church, and yet viewed with a generous eye all other forms of Protestantism that existed. In this respect, he was a true reformer, working for the highest interests of truth as truth. To this extent, at least, Spenser the poet was the superior of Hooker the controversialist, in that he more liberally admitted the claims of opposing systems as well as the faults of his own, and sought by a proper measure of succession to emphasize the best that there was in each. Spenser's attitude, then, toward the Reformation is clear. Out and out opposed to the pagan teachings that were so current as the result of the classical revival, and even more bitterly opposed to the faith of the Romish Church, he was a loyal Anglican, with the independence of his own convictions, ready always to acknowledge every wholesome element in different Protestant systems, but never willing to lend his name or pen to any kind of bigotry, whether that took the form of Papacy, Prelacy, Presbyterianism, or Puritanism. He was, in fact, a prominent example of the tolerant Christian and churchman, and that in an age when Christian tolerance was a special grace.

It would be an interesting study to run through the list of Elizabethan authors to note just what their attitude was toward the Reformation—in what respect indifferent or hostile, as in the case of the minor playwrights; in what respect reserved, as in the case of Shakespeare and Bacon; and when pronounced and aggressive, as with Hooker and Spenser; there being no one who did more efficient work than Spenser along the lines of the Reformation.

Nor is it to be forgotten, that whatever were the differences of belief and worship among the Protestant orders of the time, all were united in the one great effort to uproot the power of Rome. To this extent, Spenser and the best authors were reformers, as much so as were Fox and Knox. The Reformation was English as against Romish; a re-

volt in the sixteenth century against the traditional dogmas of the Middle Ages, and, as such, claimed the sympathies of every loyal Englishman. It is one of the anomalies of literary history that so pronounced a Protestant as Spenser should have been obliged to spend some of the best years of his life in a Roman Catholic country, and to have written his greatest poem on Romish soil, as an English exile on Irish ground.

The very names of his children, Sylvanus and Peregrine, intimate that he felt himself to be a kind of alien. In all this, however, the heroic figure of the Red Cross Knight was kept in view, as was that of Una, the true church, the Holy Catholic Church of the apostles and the faithful of all time. If, in this respect, a comparison be made between Chaucer and Spenser, the result is largely in favor of the later poet. The "Canterbury Tales" held no such relation to the earlier Reformation of the fourteenth century as does the "Faerie Queene" to the later.

One of the interesting reflections that arise in connection with the six lost or unfinished books of "The Faerie Queene" is found in the question as to just how the poet would have further indicated in them his personal position as to the great religious movements and topics of the time, whether he would have revealed weaker or stronger preferences for Puritanism, and just how he would have represented this reformation of the church as involving that of the state and of English authorship.

Be this as it may, as Wiclif and Caxton were reformers before the Reformation, Spenser was a reformer at the Reformation, and, next to the clergy and religious writers of the time, did a work second to no other toward the advancement of English Protestantism and Christian truth. In all this, we have decided proof still of the substantial sympathy of our best English authors with the best interests of evangelical religion.