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Edited by A. R. Vidler

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*Man hath but a shallow sound,
and a short reach, and dealeth
onely by probabilities and
likely-hoods.*

MILES SMITH
BISHOP OF GLOUCESTER
1612-24

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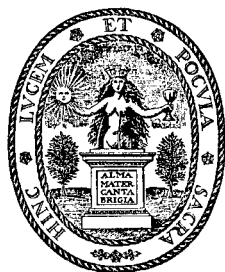
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SOUNDINGS

Essays Concerning Christian Understanding

EDITED BY

A. R. VIDLER



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QVAESTIONVM
INTER AMICOS IACTATARVM
HOS QVANTVVICVMQVE SVNT FRVCTVS
IN PIAM MEMORIAM
JOSEPHI SANDERS
COLLOQVIORVM PARTICIPIIS
SEMPER ACVTI SEMPER IVCVNDI
COMITIS DESIDERATI COMITES
DEDICAEVRVNT

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INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHORS of this volume of essays cannot persuade themselves that the time is ripe for major works of theological construction or reconstruction. It is a time for ploughing, not reaping; or, to use the metaphor we have chosen for our title, it is a time for making soundings, not charts or maps. If this be so, we do not have to apologize for our inability to do what we hope will be possible in a future generation. We can best serve the cause of truth and of the Church by candidly confessing where our perplexities lie, and not by making claims which, so far as we can see, theologians are not at present in a position to justify.

Volumes of essays by different authors can vary widely in the nature of their origin and in the manner of their composition as well as in the value of their contents. There are those that owe their publication to the initiative of an enterprising editor or publisher who has conceived the idea that it would be profitable to assemble a collection of views on a subject of topical interest. He therefore invites a miscellaneous group of persons, who may be unknown to one another and might not wish to know one another, to produce essays on some aspect of the subject. The contributors do not collaborate, they need never meet, and they may not see any other essay than their own before the whole volume appears in print. The essays will be related in subject-matter, but the essayists themselves do not have to be connected in any other respect.

There is, however, another kind of volume which to the casual reader or browser in a bookshop may look much the same but in fact has a different origin and purpose. In this case, a group of friends or colleagues or associates decides that it wants to produce a concerted work, maybe to serve some cause or to bear some testimony or to promote a shared interest. Either they will have met, perhaps often and at length, to plan and discuss their project,

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or they will be already known to one another and have adequate reasons for appearing, as it were, on the same platform. Not indeed that the contributors to a volume of this kind need see eye to eye. They may of course have arrived together at a common mind, but on the other hand their kinship may move them to desire that incongruous approaches to, or opinions about, one general subject shall be published within the covers of one book. In other words, they may desire to stir thought rather than to enforce a party line or a rule of orthodoxy.

Anglican theologians appear to have developed a penchant for this kind of enterprise. Quite a long list of such volumes could be made. It will suffice to mention four that acquired some fame: *Essays and Reviews* (1860), *Lux Mundi* (1889), *Foundations* (1912), and *Essays Catholic and Critical* (1926). These volumes were not all prepared in the same way. *Lux Mundi* was the achievement of a group of friends who for many years had been discussing the matters concerning which at length they felt they had a common mind to express. The collaboration behind *Essays and Reviews* was nothing like so close, but the contributors were kindred spirits who wanted to bear a conjoint testimony at a time when they considered that a dangerous theological complacency was prevalent. *Foundations* was the work of a more compact group of young divines at Oxford, who were however less intimately associated with one another than the members of the *Lux Mundi* group. The contributors to *Essays Catholic and Critical* were more heterogeneous, but they were all imbued with an ethos that was signified by the two epithets in the title of their volume.

We do not claim that the present volume is worthy to be placed in that high succession, but it has a similar character. The contributors, or most of them, started meeting regularly several years ago with a view to learning from one another. Only gradually and after much hesitation did we decide to collaborate in producing these essays. Our hesitation arose not only from diffidence, but from

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doubt whether we ought not to wait until we could be as positive, coherent and constructive as we should naturally like to be. But we came to the conclusion that it is not only obtuseness or incompetence that prevents us from adumbrating a re-interpretation of the Christian faith comparable with that so courageously and confidently essayed by the authors of *Lux Mundi*. We consider our situation to be more analogous to that which prompted the publication of *Essays and Reviews*.

That is to say, we believe that there are very important questions which theologians are now being called upon to face, and which are not yet being faced with the necessary seriousness and determination. We do not profess yet to see our way through them: and we do not want to have to reproach ourselves with looking for a way round them. Our task is to try to see what the questions are that we ought to be facing in the nineteen-sixties. It goes without saying that they are different from what they were in the eighteen-sixties, even if there is an analogy between the two periods. At an early stage in the Roman Catholic modernist movement, Maurice Blondel told Alfred Loisy that his work would surely not be in vain but that it might not be possible to reach a sound judgment about its value till towards the twenty-fifth century!¹ We do not wish to evade the assessment of our work by our contemporaries—we shall welcome it; but we believe we are handling questions that are not likely to receive definitive answers for a long time to come.

We share this appraisal of the present state of Christian theology but beyond that, as will be evident, we are not altogether of one mind. Upon some of us one range of questions presses hardest, upon others another range of questions. Some of us are moved to pursue novel investigations, others to re-examine old themes. The subjects handled in the essays have been determined with regard to the special interests of the writers, not by an attempt to cover the whole area of theological inquiry. There are plenty of other subjects

¹ René Maréchal, *Au cœur de la crise moderniste* (1960), p. 87.

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that might have been included and that another group of essayists might have taken up.

It will appear that, in so far as we point to a way ahead for Christian theology, we do not all point in the same direction. We are all sure that there is a way ahead, else we should not have taken up our pens. We have been less disconcerted by our differences than surprised by our concurrences. We have found that there is exhilaration as well as severe testing and a need for much patience in the conditions in which we are set to do our work.

Metaphors can be treacherous if they are pressed too hard, but we can say in the terms of our title that we are thankful all to be in the same ship; whatever we do not know, we know that the ship is afloat; and the fact that we make these soundings is evidence of our conviction that there is a bottom to the sea. 'O depth of wealth, wisdom, and knowledge in God! How unsearchable his judgements, how untraceable his ways! Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counsellor? Who has ever made a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is—to him be glory for ever! Amen' (Rom. xi. 33–6, *N.E.B.*).

A. R. V.