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A Contemporary Prodigy - By Fr. Gillis, C.S.P.

I think it was Padraic Colum who said some time ago, "It takes a writer to write." The phrase is pregnant; there is more in it than appears. It suggests a long line of equivalent truisms; it takes a shoemaker to make shoes, a bricklayer to lay bricks. You may continue the catalogue ad lib, beginning with manual labor and rising to intellectual works. It takes a thinker to think it takes a philosopher to philosophize. So far, everyone agrees, unless a few would insist on the right of any boob to philosophize.

But when you take one step more, mounting from philosophy to theology, then suddenly the whole world disagrees. It doesn't take a theologian to "theologize." Any Tom, Dick or Harry can do that little thing. At least that seems to be the opinion in America. If a man invents an incandescent lamp, he becomes ipso facto an authority on the immortality of the soul. If a man professes chemistry or biology or anatomy in a university, he is necessarily empowered to judge the truth or error in the Christian religion. If a man makes a million dollars, at anything, oil, steel, stocks, bonds, chewing gum, chain stores or what-not, he becomes automatically a D.D. He can answer the question, "What think you of Christ?" and get the answer infallibly right. He can tell whether the Catholic Church is a Divinely established organization, a vast political machine, or a universal humbug.....

I have been lured into these platitudinous reflections by reading a little paragraph in the papers about Bruce Barton. "He is," says a columnist, "perhaps the most versatile scribbler in America. Aside from his lectures, he writes a monthly essay for a magazine, a novel or so a year, numerous magazine articles, newspaper syndicate articles, is head of a large advertising agency, speaks at two or three luncheons a week, and finds time to play golf."

The columnist has not mentioned the two chef d'oeuvres of Barton, both theological, "The Man Nobody Knows," and "What Can a Man Believe?" The first is an answer to the question that has demanded the life-long study of the greatest theologians, "Who and What is Jesus Christ?" The second covers even a wider territory, the entire field of faith, Christian, Mohammedan, Jewish, Buddhist, heathen.

How did the advertising man find time to study these profound and vastly important questions? Nonsense, child, don't be silly. He didn't find time. He couldn't. Why then does he rush in where great scholars fear to tread? Why? Wasn't he made a million? Isn't he head of a big business?

Ah, but he must have studied! For all the names he has scattered over the pages of that book on what to believe, Bacterlinet, Golbach, Foucault, Sir Francis Bacon, Sir John Seeley, Aristotle, Pericles, Plato, Henry Ford, St. Augustine, Harry Fosdick, Josh Wendell Holes, St. Paul, Henry Ford, Daley, Spinoza, Galileo, Henry Ford, John Calvin, Michael Servetus, Thales of Miletus, Henry Ford, Abie's Irish Rose, Elmer Gantry, Henry Ford. And these are only the names. You should see the historical facts! May, my, how does he do it? How he lugs the books around with him to banquets? Does he dig into Aristotle and Thales between the courses and the demi-tasse?

Why not? Haven't we explained that a big business man is automatically a theologian? All you have to do is make a million. Then you can write a Life of Christ, or a treatise on faith, or what you will. But what about those names? Tut, tut child, have you never heard of the Century Encyclopedia, or, to mention it again, the Five Foot Shelf? It's a great trick if you can get away with it. And you can get away with it if you have the million, or even if you have fifty thousand and nerve.