

## THE SOUL AS IMAGE

BY

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**U**NLESS the spiritual life is based on a sound psychology it will never be secure from illusion and mispent energy. Those for example who fancy the soul to be some strange spark burning within the massy flesh, which threatens to extinguish the fire by the melting of excessive fat, will plunge into mortification of the flesh with the ardour and the malpractice of a manichee. Those who think the soul is exclusively mind will turn to education and culture as to infallible ways of salvation. The concentration of interest upon the soul alone leads to the unbalanced self-consciousness which we have already considered. Hilton's skilful balance between the subjective and the objective, the self-knowing and the God-knowing in the spiritual life guarantees that the foundation of his scale is perfectly sound; and if we look more closely into his subjective doctrine we shall find how happily he holds the balance.

Self-knowledge will only be true from the subjective point of view when it grows out of a dual psychology, one that is both experimental and 'rational'. It is possible for a man to know a great deal about the soul in general, rationalising it into its substance and faculties, its potential capacities and its immortality, without having a true understanding of the movements and vagaries of his own soul. Men have been known to study competently the psychology of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas and yet be unable to help anyone suffering from 'visions', severe spiritual dryness or depression. Just as there are men deeply versed in neuroses of all kinds who offer an immediate relief to the mentally oppressed and yet fail lamentably in the end to bring them spiritual stability because of their lack of appreciation of the soul as such. That is why the Catholic world will be forever indebted to men like Père Gardeil and Père Garrigou-Lagrange for having shown how the immensely practical, experimental knowledge of the great Spanish mystics is not divorced from but divinely wedded to the scholastic theologians' view of the same phenomena. The experimental psychology of the one is to be read in the light of the 'rational' psychology of the other. Indeed all the greatest spiritual writers combine these two understandings of the human person.

Hilton has already been introduced to students of modern psychology as conveying many of the same ideas as Professor Jung though

in different language.<sup>1</sup> And it is not surprising that he is so popular with the numerous people who rely so much on experience; for his experimental approach bears the mark of a personal realisation that is authentic. He is not of the type of preacher and spiritual director who looks upon his congregation and his clients as the species 'man' or 'sinful man' to be fitted neatly into his idea of what this name stands for. (Notice how often anyone will do that when in close proximity to a crowd of human beings.) He writes for individuals and approaches everyone as a person. He provides no cut and dried plan of prayer devised mechanically in the laboratory of logic; but he presents the principles of spiritual life to the individual Christian. Thus, for example, the way of prayer and meditation does not follow a preconceived method.

Then by what manner of prayer or meditation or occupation that thou mayest have greatest and cleanest desire to Him and most feeling of Him, by that occupation thou seekest Him best and best findest Him. (*Scale i*, 46; p. 88.)

In other words the Christian has of necessity to learn his doctrine and his theology; but once having gained the right ideas he must refrain as best he may from trying to force his experience into the matrices of those ideas. He must bring his knowledge down to earth to illuminate the concrete experience. He must not push the men he meets into his abstract notion of man, thereby emptying them of soul and personality; he must bring his knowledge of 'man', of 'the human soul' to bear upon this individual man, knowing and loving him in the concrete. And similarly, in the matter of his own soul, he must not turn it into a ghost by bleeding it to death with the knife of abstract thought.

There can be no more fruitful and more secure way of bringing the knowledge of man to bear on the concrete experience of man than by approaching him in the fundamental character of the image of God. God is one, absolutely unique and beyond all categories and abstractions; so that to find the representation of God in the soul is to find its most concrete and individual reality. Of course the mind has to acquire its idea of 'image' and link it with its idea of 'God'. Yet when these preliminaries have been passed, the individual man himself must be taken as outside these categories and as participating to this extent in the uniqueness of God whom he images. The soul is the mirror of the deity, the mirror of the three divine Persons in the uniqueness of a single nature. And when we begin to consider the soul thus our psychology bears fruit by seizing our

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Victor White, O.P., *Walter Hilton: An English Spiritual Guide* (Guild of Pastoral Psychology. Lecture No. 31).

neat thought-forms and schemes and dragging them to the heavenly altar; there they are sacrificed in praise of the Blessed Trinity and immediately impregnated with the grace of the divine presence. This process may be seen at work in the practice of any profoundly Catholic psychologist who, while refusing to allow himself to be carried away from the arduous labour of learning the intricacies of his science by neat doctrinal phrases, nevertheless discovers that in the secret depths of everyone who comes to him God is to be discovered. Each soul is a divine revelation. And this is also the weft of Hilton's writing. Although he calls his book *The Scale of Perfection* the chief metaphor in it is not that of ladders and steps but of the image of God, the image of Christ, the various reformations of these images. He presents the metaphor in the very first sentence of the book; he contrasts the true concrete reality of the perfect Christian life with the idea and scheme of that life with which we begin. This is not the true image of Christ in the soul, but rather the image or likeness of the idea of Christ in the mind of the beginner. The first image that we discover in our analysis of the spiritual life, therefore, is the image of the good intention, 'the state which thou hast taken in likeness and in seeming'. (p. 1.)

Thou, therefore, that art so boisterous, so lewd, so fleshly, so blind in ghostly things, and namely of thine own soul (which it behoveth thee first to know if thou shouldest come to the knowing of God), how then shouldst thou feel thyself able or worthy to have state or likeness of contemplative life, which life lieth principally in ghostly knowing and feeling of God? (i, 16; p. 25.)

This first state or likeness, which we have in our intention when we begin the true following of Christ, is distinguished from the reality accomplished through living as intended. The spiritual life is in fact a constant attempt to make the inner life conformable with the outer showing of the idea, the constant attempt not to live a lie. The external life of the Church, of virtue, prayer, worship, sacrifice, outlines the pattern which has to be worked with the needle and thread of grace and love.

There is many a man that hath virtue of lowness, patience and charity to his even-christian and such other, only in his reason and will, and hath no ghostly delight nor love in them. (i, 14; pp. 21-2.)

A Christian will do these things because he knows that he has to do them—he has the right intention—but he does them with 'grouching' and heaviness until reason is turned into light and will into love 'by grace of Jesus'. All his prayers and desires and actions

must be cast into this external mould of likeness to Christ outlined by the Church in her Christian way.

Bring it all within the troth and the rules of Holy Church, and cast all into the mortar of meekness, and break it small with the pestle of the dread of God, and throw the powder of all this into the fire of desire and offer it so to God. (i, 23; p. 24.)

In this way the image of Christ begins to appear in the soul itself and not simply in the external organisation of life.

Later this rather active preliminary for discovering the divine image within the soul itself gives place to the more contemplative action of God upon the soul, gradually revealing this likeness more clearly. At first a man will be considering our Lord in his mind, discovering as much as he can about him, in order to find the true model of the human soul and of human living. All this is summed up in the holy name of 'Jesus'.

I shall tell the one word for all in the which thou shalt seek, desire and find it; for in that one word is all that thou hast lost. This word is Jesus. I mean not this word Jesus painted upon the wall, or written with letters in the book, or formed with lips in sound of the mouth, or feigned in thy heart by travail of thy mind. . . . But I mean Jesus Christ the blessed Person, whom this name betokeneth. (i, 46; p. 87.)

First of all, then, Christ appears as the model, as something other than the self, the ideal towards which a Christian must labour with all his powers. But then as the Christian retires more deeply within himself God reveals to him not simply 'the naked mind of His name, but Jesus Christ in conscience readily teacheth thee' (i, 53; p. 100). In this way the personal ideal is purged of its false abstraction, of its purely personal character as the imaginative creation of a particular individual, and is brought down to the concrete reality of God's way. The soul on examination becomes *this* soul; further scrutiny reveals it as enshrining the 'name' of Jesus, which then shows the image of Jesus himself and finally the image of the blessed Trinity culminating in the soul's fulfilment in heaven where image and original are made one. Thus the subject becomes the object.

All this of course is Catholic doctrine based on the word of God in the Scriptures. On the first page of the Old Testament we are told that man is made in God's image. St Paul elaborates this ground plan of human nature in terms of the redeemed nature of man in Christ. And Hilton quotes St Paul frequently:

As we have herebefore borne the image of the earthly man, that

is the first Adam, right so that we might now bear the image of the heavenly man. (I Cor. 15, 49; quoted p. 102.)

Ye shall shape you and clothe you in a new man, which is the image of God by holiness and righteousness and fulness of virtues. (Eph. 4, 24; quoted p. 164.)

Those souls that are reformed to the image of God in faith through the sacrament of baptism and penance. (Rom. 8, 1; quoted p. 197). And the text full of glorious finality from St John's epistle shows where this image must lead the soul:

Know well that when our Lord shall show Him at the last day, then shall we appear with Him like unto Him in endless joy. (1 John 3, 2; quoted p. 199.)

It was this New Testament inspiration of the Apostles rather than that of Genesis which influenced the early fathers of the Church so that they were concerned more specifically with the image of Christ in the soul rather than the image of the blessed Trinity. This at least was characteristic of Tertullian, Irenaeus and Victorinus.<sup>2</sup> The new Adam is opposed to the old Adam as the sum total of all human perfections and at the same time as the bond between God and man. Again all things are made 'in Verbo' so that the Word-made-flesh in a very special way is mirrored in the souls of all created men.

St Augustine pushed the analysis of the image of God beyond the Incarnation and the Word to the Trinity itself. And this became one of the most fruitful sources of mystical theology for many centuries. An outstanding example of this influence is to be found in St Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum* in which the saint speaks of the soul's ascent to God in terms of this gradual unfolding of the image of God first in external things and then in the centre of the soul itself. Indeed it may well be that Hilton the Augustinian was directed to his interpretation of St Augustine by the Franciscan saint. A quotation from the latter may help us to understand the process of penetrating into the depth of human psychology in order to reveal the fulness of the Godhead: 'Looking at creation, the soul beheld God's footprints upon the world's surface: the material world became a mirror in which it beheld its God. Next, turning its attention inward to itself, the soul began to reach God from a consideration of itself as God's created image, and then a further step was made when it began to behold God in the mirror of its renovated being. Whereupon the soul was led to raise its gaze above and beyond itself, seeking as it were, the light of God's countenance and rejoicing

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ian Hislop, O.P., *Victorinus and the Imago Dei* (Blackfriars, November 1944; Vol. 25, pp. 429 sqq.).

in its own progress. But no rest was possible until it found God in his own reflected light. . . .<sup>3</sup> This gives a clear sketch of the ascent from subjectivity to objectivity. And the progress might be summarised in this way: at first the image or trace of God can only be deduced from the goodness of creation; then looking into the individual creature the mind can begin to see how it is created *in Verbo* and so the image of the Word is found therein; next the self becomes the object of analysis revealing at first a creature made by God opposed to the evil image of sin, then three faculties appear growing from a single nature to show a trinity, then the object of those faculties which are turned outwards towards God so as to bear the direct impress of his presence known and loved; the Gift of the Holy Spirit comes to perfect those elements of the image and draw them into one representation of the Trinity; last of all, it seems—since all this would have been true without the Incarnation—the image of Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, completes and consummates the image of the Trinity.

We have already seen something of these ideas worked out by Mother Julian, and it is likely that she had it all from some theologian steeped in the same study and devotion as Hilton if not from Hilton himself. It will be remembered that she saw the soul as a kingdom with the Lord Jesus sitting in the midst of the kingdom. This is the vision for our self-conscious age, when instead of seeing merely one's own personal qualities, instead of analysing one's own motives and troubling oneself about the degree of merit or demerit that attaches to one's action, the soul appears as the microcosm mirroring in its depth all creation, the blessed Trinity itself and Jesus the centre point of all this reflection.

A man's soul—which may be called a made trinity—was fulfilled in mind, sight, and love of the unmade blessed Trinity which is our Lord. (*Scale i*, 43; p. 77.)

As the good Christian gazing into this reflection sees more clearly the Being who is imaged therein he becomes more closely assimilated to that Being, more formed or trans-formed by the original model. He forgets himself in this contemplation of the Original.

When Jesu Christ and a soul are so perfectly, so unpartably, and so accordably oned and bounden together, that Christ is in the soul and the soul is in him so fully as if they both were but one spirit. (Op. 2, c. 7. *Minor Works*, pp. 103-4.)

<sup>3</sup> *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*, c. 7. Translated by Fr James, O.F.M.Cap., under the title *The Franciscan Vision*, p. 69-70 (Burns Oates; 1937).