

# OBJECTIVE SPIRITUALITY

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



LIKE often the modern type of spirituality is partially condemned as subjective and introverted, as too self-conscious to be fully God-conscious. No doubt some truth lies in this accusation; for the whole renaissance and post-renaissance attitude of mind as exhibited in philosophy, science, theology, has been centred on human experience and the analysis of human life and values. Perhaps this was what Kierkegaard had in mind when he wrote *The Present Age*, saying that it is killing itself with reflection, that even the children who should typify the middle ages in their direct and outgoing lives are often precocious, consuming with the rest of European grown-ups an 'enormous amount of scruple and deliberation'. The accusation of being too self-analytical and reflective has often been made against the great Spanish mystical writers.

Yet the fourteenth century, which had already become self-conscious in its mode of life and in its art, shows little sign of being too spiritually reflective. Certainly the mystical writers were mostly concerned with their own individual experiences, and in conveying the meaning of those experiences to others. Yet they are nearly always concerned with the pursuit of the Good in such a way that the creaturely pursuer may be caught and held by the hunted so as eventually to become unaware of self in the awareness of him. Thus Walter Hilton towards the end of *The Scale* counsels his reader to seek 'unformed love' itself which is God the Holy Spirit rather than to be trying to attain his own creaturely love of God, which is 'formed love'.

Love formed is not cause why a soul cometh to the ghostly sight of Jesus, as some men would think that they would love God so burningly as it were by their own might, that they were worthy to have the ghostly knowing of him. Nay it is not so. . . . Thou shouldest only covet and desire this unformed love that is the Holy Ghost. (2, 34, pp: 317-8.)

It would be a mistake however to draw too strong a contrast between this virile and objective type of spirituality and an over-conscious subjective love of God in the renaissance and post-renaissance world. On the one hand the really great spiritual writers were

considerably aware of themselves and their own personal problems in their search for God. In short, we should beware of any idea of a complete break between medieval and renaissance spirituality and remember that the one was the parent of the other; and Hilton will serve as an excellent example of these two elements, well-balanced, inherent in the spiritual ascent he described.

Self-knowledge comes fully only by seeking Jesus; this is one of the foundation stones of the spiritual edifice. But it would be too facile to suppose that the mere 'good intention' of looking towards God is sufficient or that we need not bother to look into our own consciences so long as we are trying to look into God's. The objective weight of God-centred-ness must be balanced by the prime necessity, vigorously preached from the earliest Christian times, of knowing oneself. Richard of St Victor whose influence on the later writers is so tremendous has left this heritage particularly upon his successors—the cell of self-knowledge: 'If the mind would fain ascend to the height of science, let its first and principal study be to know itself.'<sup>1</sup> We are therefore not surprised to find Hilton requiring for the first step of this ladder that the person should retire into himself and get to know the type of man he is. He writes of the man's own soul 'which it behoveth thee first to know if thou shouldest come to the knowing of God'. (i, 1. p. 25.)

In this respect one of the first steps for the man who wants to know and love God is the making of a retreat. The need to go out into the desert with our Lord in his preparation for his struggle with the devil, the need to retire into oneself and focus one's attention on one's own personal relations with God and personal sins and shortcomings, such introspection is not merely a manifestation of the subjective spirit of the counter-reformation. The term 'retreat' and the organised and intensified 'exercises' are modern, but the essential elements of a retreat are found in the gospel and have been characteristic of a devout christian life ever since. We may compare a passage from Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin Minor* with one from Walter Hilton, both considering, as we should say today, the need for a retreat.

What so thou be that covetest to come to contemplation of God . . . Thou shalt call together thy thoughts and thy desires, and make of them a church, and learn thee therein for to love this good word *Jesu*, so that all thy desires and all thy thoughts are only set for to love *Jesu*, . . . then in this church of thoughts and desires, and in this onehead of studies and of wills, look that

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Gardner in his introduction to *The Cell of Self-knowledge*, p. xvii.

all thy wills be only set in the love and the praising of this Lord Jesu.<sup>2</sup>

This was written in the middle of the twelfth century and reveals the vigorous Christ-centred attitude which should mark every retreat but which is often so lacking in the modern self-conscious 'spiritual exercises'. Two centuries later the increase in self-consciousness is already manifest, though there is a fruitful balance between the emphasis on self-knowing and that of God-knowing—Hilton writes:

Now shall I tell thee feebly as I can how thou shalt be able to enter into thyself to see the ground of sin, and to destroy it as much as thou mayest, and so shalt thou be able to recover a part of thy dignity. Thou shalt cease for a time from all bodily works, from all outward business as thou mayest well. Then shalt thou draw into thyself thy thought from thy bodily wits, that thou take no heed what thou hearest or seest or feelest; so that the point of thy heart be not fixed on them. And after this draw in nearer thy thought from all manner of imaginings . . . And set thine intent and thy full purpose upon it, as if thou wouldst not seek, nor feel, nor find aught but only the grace and the ghostly presence of Jesus. (i, 52, pp. 97-8.)

Another two centuries and we find the fountain head of all retreats, St Ignatius, beginning with a 'preparatory exercise' in which the retreatant is urged to ask himself what and who he is:

Who are you who this day begin these holy exercises? *Who are you?* A soul established in virtue? You need renewing. . . . *Who are you?* A soul divided in the service of God? a soul embarrassed by a multitude of human affections? . . . *Who are you?* A soul given to worldly pleasures? . . . A soul struggling with long and violent temptations? . . . Lastly, are you a guilty soul? Perhaps a soul grown old in sin, perhaps an impenitent soul? . . .<sup>3</sup>

It may be significant that after this preparation the retreatant is told to begin by considering God the Creator and the soul's relation to its maker. St Ignatius was clearly basing his exercises on the earlier and traditional spiritual literature and to a certain extent he must presuppose the simple seeking for Jesus before anyone begins to consider the more remote and impersonal reality of the Creator. And for this reason it is of vital importance for the modern retreatant, retiring into himself and discovering what manner of man he is, to go back further and further into the tradition of the Church in order to plant his ladder securely on the sure ground of

<sup>2</sup> *Benjamin Minor* (conclusion) by Richard of St Victor. 16th century translation edited by Gardner: *The Cell of Self-knowledge*, pp. xvi and 32.

<sup>3</sup> Page 15 of the translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* published by Burns Oates 'for general use', without date, without *imprimatur* and without name of Editor or translator.

Gospel teaching before beginning to climb. Otherwise he may find the ladder twisting half-round and threatening to throw him, as ladders do that are resting on one foot only. The two feet of the ladder of perfection are self-knowing and God-knowing.

When a man, therefore, begins to examine his conscience he does so with a certain objective criterion of what man should be, for he looks to Jesus; he knows too the origin and purpose of man as seen in the Creator. With that standard before him he can begin to understand wherein he falls short; he can begin to see his sins as sins and not merely as facts or deeds.

In this inward beholding thou shalt see the worship and dignity which it should have by kind of the first making, and thou shalt see the wretchedness and the mischief which thou art fallen into for sin. (*Scale i*, 42, p. 74.)

It is in fact the desire for God which tells the conscience what is sin. People sometimes spend a great deal of time scanning their past lives, perhaps the past week or so since their last confession, to see what they have done or omitted to do. They review all the circumstances and conditions of their actions; they go further and scan the intimate motives of their deeds both good and bad. And yet even while thinking of motives, of which the Godward nature should be uppermost, they do not in fact refer any of the things they examine to the standard who is Christ Jesus nor to the end and purpose who is God. These two alone, the standard and the goal, are the only revealers of the sinfulness, the guilt, of a human action.

When these objective guarantees of a good deed are lost sight of, the penitent who is trying to lead a good life will begin to worry about the gravity of the offence. What I did, was it a mortal sin? How can I tell whether I really consented, whether it was deliberate, or was it explicable apart from my will and mind? And so the heart is open to tortures, self-inflicted, macerating the soul. The fear of offending God because he is so lovable and good becomes the fear of falling into sin and the fear of punishment. All this mental anguish was known as vividly to Walter Hilton as it is to the most accomplished spiritual director of our own times. It would be a mistake to claim the disease of scruples as a modern invention as some have done. Hilton describes the bitterness which comes from worrying as to whether one has eaten too much (i, 76, pp. 147-8), or consented to a temptation, or particularly whether he has confessed it properly in previous confessions (ii, 11, pp. 207-9), or again there are worries as to precisely how far one can go in spiritual exercises and deeds of penance without impairing

one's health or becoming too intense (ii, 22, pp. 251-2). Hilton is as explicit as any writer about scrupulous worries regarding confessions and hallucinations.

And therefore some fall into doubt and dwere whether they sinned in time of temptation or no. (ii, 11, p. 207.)  
 But the balance of the earlier treatment of the spiritual life is to be found especially in the remedy for scruples proposed by Hilton. In modern times directors are wont to insist on obedience and at the same time forbid the penitent to return on his past confessions, requiring him to confess regularly and not too frequently—and so on. But often such treatment is ineffective because it produces only one more worry: Have I been obedient or not?, did Father Director mean to include this or exclude that . . .? Such interior and subjective remedies are in part absolutely necessary, but the complete remedy as Hilton shows clearly over and over again lies in the Godward, objective approach to the source of the spiritual life.

To anyone who is seriously looking for God and wishing to reach him in holiness and with integrity the distinction between mortal and venial sins fades into insignificance. In his eyes any offence against the love and purity of God, however slight it may be, any minute refusal to follow our Lord as the model and standard, these defects are so utterly regrettable that it might almost be said that such a man regards every attack on God's goodness as mortal or rather as infinitely serious.

For he that will soothfastly love God, he asketh not commonly whether this or that is the greater sin. For he shall think that anything which letteth him from the love of God is great sin, and he shall think nothing sin but that thing which is not good and letteth him from the love of God. (i, 81, p. 154.)  
 Instead of fussing about whether or no a temptation has in fact hindered the love of God it is better to forget the temptation and renew the love. When you begin to worry as to whether you have eaten too much or consented to an evil thought this Master of the love of God advises you:

Lift up the desire of thy heart to thy good Lord Jesus and know thyself for a wretch and a beast and ask of him forgiveness . . . (i, 76, p. 148) . . . A ghostly desire to God, to please him, to know him, to see him, and to have him by grace—this desire if thou keep it shall well tell thee which is sin and which is not, and which is good and which is better good. (i, 91, pp. 169-70.)

This healthy advice contains perhaps the greatest contribution that medieval spirituality can offer us today. Anyone who sets out to climb the Scale of perfection and begins by retiring to the desert

of a retreat should keep this thought constantly before his mind. Scruples and worry are a sign of self-love and self-centredness; they are counteracted only by the love of God consciously and continuously presented to the mind and will.

But the balance must always be preserved. Hilton is aware of the danger of a complacent regarding of the end to the ignoring of the means. The grace which is given us is for the here and now of the moment, not the grace of vision or of immunity from sin.

We may ever desire the best, but we may not ever work the best, for we have not yet received that grace. . . . And therefore desire of God as much as thou mayest, without measure or discretion of all that belongeth to his love or to heavenly bliss. . . . But work as thou mayest, and cry God mercy for that thou mayest not. (i, 41, pp. 72-3.)

And in the second book Hilton repeats this advice with the help of a simile from true suns and false that shine in the sky. People who are not ready to enter into themselves, but after making some gesture towards God think immediately that they are holy, are misled by a false sun. They are carried away with emotion, thinking they understand the things of God without much study, feeling themselves in love with God, and fancying that God vouchsafes special lights and leadings to them. They are drawn away by the midday fiend. (ii, 26, pp. 269-71.) Hilton's description of the wiles of pride and self-deceit is vigorous and pungent. But it is of great value to those today who seek an easy way out of the present difficulties in some mystic yearnings for God. Those who will not retreat into the desert in some manner or other and who seek simply to know and love God in a falsely objective spirit are more numerous than might be supposed. It is therefore of the greatest moment that they should seek the true light of God by restoring the balance.

It is only after establishing this equilibrium between self-knowing and God-knowing that the devout lover can begin to forget about himself altogether and so to think only of God.

For then is love master and worketh in the soul and maketh it forget itself and see and behold only how love doth. (ii, 35, p. 325.)