

JOHN TAULER

JOHN TAULER, a contemporary of Suso, is perhaps the best known of the three great German Dominican mystics. For he is the most characteristic representative of his Order, being first and foremost a preacher and shepherd of souls. Like St. John the Baptist, he was a voice crying in the wilderness of the world: 'Repent ye, abandon the creatures and turn to the Creator.' This was his battle cry, and his life work was to show man how to fulfil its demand. Whereas Suso made his own life a mirror, as it were, of the mystic way, reflecting in it both its glories and its agonies, Tauler took man by the hand and led him step by step to the Sanctuary of Mystic Union.

He was eminently fitted for his work, for he had that deep insight into human nature which is indispensable in the preacher and teacher. 'Man, he said, hangs between heaven and earth. With his highest faculties he is exalted above himself and above all things, and dwells in God, but with his lowest faculties he is subjected under all things into the very ground of humility.' He calls the higher faculties the 'inner man,' whilst the lower faculties form the 'outer man.' The inner man is subject to God alone, but the outer man to all creatures in true humility. The task of the inner man is of a double nature: he directs the outer man by the light of his superior knowledge, whilst in himself he remains unruffled by the changes of earthly existence, 'sunk and united' in his communion with God. The outer man, on the other hand, must await the orders of the inner man. 'We must force the outer man,' says Tauler, 'as far as we can, and draw him into the other man of inwardness. This is the rational man, and it means that the outer man is to work and walk according to the order of the rational man, and not according to his own animal desires.'

In this psychology Tauler's mystic doctrine is firmly rooted, and we have not far to go to discover its origin. It is the teaching of his master St. Thomas, who saw man as a rational being whose faculties are well ordered. Reason, which knows God to be the absolute Good, imparting the right direction to the will which in its turn rules the affections. This is the ground from which all else springs; without this Thomist psychology the mystic way which Tauler does not weary to describe would be unintelligible.

It is the more important to keep this in mind, as few thinkers have been so consistently misrepresented as the fourteenth century German mystics. Quite apart from the ridiculous statements of writers such as Alfred Rosenberg, who transforms Meister Eckhart, for

example, into something like a Storm Trooper in a religious habit, it has been the misfortune of these mystics to have been re-discovered by Protestant professors of literature in the nineteenth century. Misled by Luther's early admiration for Tauler and Meister Eckhart, these scholars who had no knowledge of Thomistic Theology regarded those Dominicans as virtual predecessors of the Reformation, thinking that they proclaimed a peculiarly 'German' and 'interior' piety as opposed to the 'outward ceremonial' of 'Roman' Catholicism. Even the painstaking researches of Catholic scholars like Denifle and Karrer (though taken into account by some Protestant theologians such as Harnack) cannot be said to have succeeded in rectifying the ideas of more than a few experts.

Yet German fourteenth century mysticism is Thomist in its essence. Their mystic system is built upon the similitude between Creator and creature, which is, indeed, marred by sin, but, by the grace of God, can be recovered by purgation and illumination. This conception is diametrically opposed to the Lutheran dogma of the total depravity of human nature and 'Justification by Faith.' It is, on the contrary, built on the Angelic Doctor's teaching that grace does not destroy, but restores and perfects nature, since the image of God in which man is made was never altogether annihilated. This image of God that is to be restored in man is called by Tauler the 'third man'; for when the rational man has completely subdued the 'outer man' the inner man can 'turn into his origin where he has been from all eternity.'

The indispensable condition of becoming a wholly spiritual man is humility, a virtue that plays so important a part in Tauler's teaching that it is sometimes called the 'mysticism of humility.' 'We must all humble ourselves. This is the foundation on which all man's life and work is to be built—or else all will break down. For God seeks and wants a humble man.' Spiritual pride is in Tauler's view the worst of all vices, and it may well have been that he saw its disastrous consequences in some of the convents where he used to preach; for he frequently warns his congregations that their habit will not save them if their inner man be not in the right state of meekness.

The humble man, however, who is setting out on the way of mystic perfection, is still confined in five 'prisons' from which he must strive to be freed. Love of creatures and love of self prevent him from loving his Creator. Reason, which tries to solve all problems by its own power, bars the entrance of faith. Here again we have not the forerunner of Luther's theology of faith, but the follower of St. Thomas, who was so anxious to define and keep intact the border line between faith and reason. The third prison, especially dan-

gerous in communities of women, is undue reliance on sensible devotion and visionary experiences. Tauler is never tired of denouncing them as an end in themselves, though he admits their relative value as stages on the way to Mystic Union. In this he finds himself in line with all great mystics, especially with ascetics like St. John of the Cross, and for the same reason; for man may easily be deceived, and more often than not feelings of devotion and visions may be caused by his own imagination rather than by the agency of Almighty God.

Yet when the soul has been delivered from all these prisons there is still one left, the most subtle of all. It is the will; for even when a man has turned wholly to God there will still be a vestige of self-will that desires God's grace from self-interest. This, too, must go. Should it be God's will to refuse grace man must conform to it and resign himself without despairing to a state outside his grace, thus fulfilling the divine will. This sounds like an anticipation of Quietism; but viewed in connection with the whole of Tauler's teaching it ought not to be condemned as heretical. The stress he lays on definite acts of love, praise and charity, as will be shown later, excludes this. We have here the phenomenon of quasi-heretical statements *prout sonant* which is so often found in mystic teaching, and which must be interpreted psychologically, as meaning no more than that the mystic abandons himself entirely to God's adorable Will, letting God do with him whatever he pleases.

However exalted his teaching on abandonment, Tauler was eminently practical in his advice as to its achievement. His restraint in this matter is probably due to the balance of the Thomist system in which he was reared. For Thomism, in contrast to all Manichean heresies, treats man as the intermediate being he is, respecting his body no less than his soul. At a time, therefore, when religious excitement was apt to result in wild excesses of asceticism on the one hand and libertinism on the other, as in the case of the 'Brethren of the Free Spirit' for example, the Dominican mystics exercised a beneficent restraint. With a Thomistic respect for the differences among men, each of whom is a person in his own right, an individual substance rational by nature, Tauler pointed out that the way to God cannot be the same for each one of us. The peace of Christ is, indeed, achieved only by suffering and self-denial; but every man must take account of his own personal needs. Fasting and vigils will help some to prepare themselves for God, whilst others may only find their health undermined without having drawn any nearer to Christ. Thus man has to find out for himself what will best lead him to 'Abandonment,' and, once this state of the soul is reached,

will set out on the *Via Mystica* which leads to the ultimate aim, the Union itself.

The beginning of the way will again be different for different temperaments. 'Take for yourself what you think will draw you nearest to God: the Life of Christ, or the Passion, or the Wounds of Love, or the Divine Nature, or the Blessed Trinity—whatever may draw you most, and with that sink into the ground and await God with gratitude.' At this initial stage affections play a great part in Tauler's teaching; they create, as it were, a favourable atmosphere for the Union between Creator and creature. In accordance with the popular devotion of the time he considered the contemplation of the Five Wounds as particularly helpful, following, like Suso, the sound mystic principle: *Per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum*. 'The wounds of our Lord are all salvation; let the holy five wounds remain open until the Last Day . . . these five doors shall be our inheritance here, through which we shall enter into the eternal inheritance of our Father's Kingdom. Through these wounds of love let us learn five lessons: how to abandon and how to suffer, how to be silent and how to despise the world, and lastly how to deny ourselves in true detachment.'

After this preparation begins the threefold mystic way, which is always the same. Tauler here describes the stages of mystic experience with an insight into the progress of the soul which places him in the ranks of the great masters of the spiritual life. The first stage, after man has entirely turned to God, is one of unspeakable joy. The soul 'drinks in God with all her might, so that she becomes inebriated with him and completely forgets herself. Then she would gladly go through fire and water and a thousand swords.' This exultant state Tauler calls *jubilacio*, and in it the soul is lifted up to the contemplation of God in all his glory. It is, however, not yet the purely intellectual vision, but rather a feeling of being filled with the knowledge of God; it is subjective rather than objective, and therefore this state cannot last.

When the joy of the soul has reached this climax it is not yet strong enough to soar higher, but presently falls into deep despondency. This is the second stage of the way, compared to the state of Job when 'the spirit went from him.' Man must now pass through what St. John of the Cross calls the 'dark night of the soul,' tossed about like a ball between knowledge and ignorance, certainty and uncertainty, tranquillity and unrest, confidence and fear. Through all these shall he pass in faith, hope and humility, and not despair, for 'those who must suffer in this dark misery will become the most loveable and noble of men. But Nature must die many a death.'

In this school of suffering the last stain of self-will is purged, and the soul that has gone through it is now ready for the last stage of the Mystic Way, where man becomes passive since the act of Union itself is the work of God alone, and man's activity would be worse than useless: 'There the human spirit is drawn high above its powers into a wild desert of which no man can speak, into the hidden darkness of God.' In this Union is born the kindling of the fire of love, 'then there is a mist, a darkness, in which your spirit is stolen away for about half an *Ave Maria*, so that you are beside your senses and your natural reason. And in this darkness God speaks to you in truth.' Here, at last, the mystic has reached the summit of contemplation, the intellectual vision, which he describes in much the same way as St. Teresa three hundred years later. And so, like the Carmelite, the Dominican friar preached the Mystic Life in season and out of season. One almost hears the voice of the preacher, promising, enticing, even cajoling his hearers to leave the pleasures of the 'Lady World' for a higher and more lasting pleasure: 'Then there is a feast, and the kitchen smells so sweetly of all the good dishes prepared therein. Then May is in its full bloom; for a single drop of the delights which the Holy Spirit prepares exceeds and extinguishes all the taste and sweetness that all creatures can produce.'

Yet it is not for this momentary sweetness that the Mystic Union should be desired, but for its effects on the soul. Its most precious fruit is the right ordering of all the faculties of man. After the exultation of the moment of actual Union has passed 'man shall do much more than he did before; he shall love more, thank more, praise more, and live more deeply than before.' For though the soul be perfectly passive in the state of Union, God's activity is such that she is filled with Divine energy which manifests itself in the increase of virtue throughout man's ordinary life. To the Christian mystic the *Unio Mystica* is not to be desired as a permanent state to which all else is to be subjected; rather is it a well from which the soul renews her strength for the battle of life. Therefore Christian contemplatives seem to be the most active of men, whether we think of St. Paul or St. Teresa, of St. Bernard or St. Catharine of Siena. Tauler was no exception. The indefatigable preacher of the true life of the soul in an age of discord and lukewarmness had a right to hold in his hand the Book of Life, as his tombstone shows him; having engraved on his breast the Holy Name IHS and underneath the T, which stands both for his initial and for the burden of his preaching, the Cross.