

Reviews

WAYS OF IMPERFECTION: AN EXPLORATION OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY by Simon Tugwell OP., D.L.T., London, 1984. pp. ix + 238. £5.95.

The enemy is twofold: the Christian trying to understand 'spirituality' is liable to seduction from two apparently opposite but in fact rather closely linked sources. There is 'devotionalism'—a definition of the life of the spirit as the manufacture of interesting and gratifying special effects in emotions and imagination; and there is the elitism of 'contemplatives'—those attempting to map out a normative pilgrimage for the soul which culminates in a state directly induced by God, superior to anything that can be done by the creature as such. The trouble with both of these is that they are likely to result in crippling self-consciousness, because they both operate with a notion of ultimate *success*—even (or especially) when this is ascribed to God. In contrast, we need the healthy scepticism of an older and saner tradition that is not ashamed of acknowledging the untidiness and absurdity of pretty well everything we try to do in our discipleship, and is consequently ready to sit light to any claims for this or that set of practices as a means of securing a 'good' spiritual life. All we can do is to trace 'ways of imperfection', fragmentary but ultimately consistent at the level that matters, clusters of sound advice and example from those who have no illusions that they are making a proper, let alone a normative, job of it.

So we are pointed towards the desert tradition in its more anarchic phases, to Barsanuphius, the friars, the *Cloud*, de Caussade, Thérèse of Lisieux, and kindred spirits: to a 'little way' accessible to all, far removed from the alarming religious professionalism of both meditation experts and silent solitaries. The balance of Christian understanding is always precarious, and we can mark out some points of significant misapprehension and misdirection—the ever-increasing concern with written rules in Western monasticism, the unequivocal assertion of the superiority of the contemplative life as a 'state', the late mediaeval trend towards engaging human emotions in a quite 'unreconstructed' and self-indulgent way in meditation; and—an almost unspoken indictment, yet all-pervasive—the enthronement of the Spanish Carmelites on the summit of achievement and analysis. Some passages suggest a certain lukewarmness towards the Ignatian tradition also, but this is not elaborated.

As one would expect, this is a marvellously erudite book; the notes and bibliographies are extensive and generally well up-to-date. And—again no surprise where Fr Tugwell is concerned—the writing is clear and lively throughout. As an introduction to certain features in the tradition, it could hardly be bettered: the chapters on the desert, on pseudo-Macarius, Francis, the *Cloud* and Thérèse are quite splendid, though this is not to say that the exposition is ever weak or dull anywhere else. But, since it is confessedly arguing a case, I want to record some of my uneasiness as well.

(i) I am still not convinced about Evagrius (a subject on which I know Fr Tugwell and I differ): the chapter on him here is a 'benign' interpretation which I think makes him too inoffensively like the Cappadocians. He is more original and more ambiguous than this. Fr Tugwell's discussion is mostly restricted to the works concerned with the 'practical' life, and this can give a more conventional tone to Evagrius than is really proper. I think, for instance, that, although the 'passions' naturally continue to have a role in the life of active virtue, Evagrius *does* look forward to their eventual disappearance. The more we are purified to our initial state of being pure *nous*, the more the passions dwindle; happily we can train them to 'police' each other to some extent, but the real subject of prayer is the

detached spirit, separate from all passion. Again, while there are passages (very few and textually problematic) about 'ignorance of God', it is misleading to suggest that these are characteristic: Evagrius implies that this is an expression *some* people use, but that it is not his own natural idiom.

(ii) The chapter on Humbert is intriguing, and some of its points will be familiar to readers of *The Way of the Preacher*. One contention is that the friar must not waste time worrying whether he is ripe for preaching or worthy to preach, but should go ahead anyway in humility. Well, yes; but, without wanting to endorse the preciosity Fr Tugwell rightly deplores, or any anti-evangelical fastidiousness, this is surely not all there is to be said. To stop with this is to adopt a disturbingly activist and word-dominated view of preaching or evangelizing. Humbert echoes ahead of time the wonderful advice of Böhler the Moravian to Wesley, 'Preach faith till you have it'; yet such preaching is only possible within the context of a life which *speaks* of the yearning for faith in its own qualities (of struggle or penitence and honesty): what could it mean otherwise? I can't think Humbert or Fr Simon would disagree; but the way this is put can sound simply faux-naïf as to the motivation *and* (more importantly) the 'audibility' of preaching. There is false and destructive talk about God, and we need to know something of how to stop ourselves being just fluent.

(iii) The chapters on the Middle Ages occasionally seem to imply (though I know this is not what is meant) that the separation of meditation and contemplation *could* be seen as a hiving-off of feeling from the intellect. Partly true, but only partly: Thomas Gallus, one of the first to make the distinction in such sharp terms, still takes it for granted (as do so many late mediaeval and 16th-century writers) that the love of God 'subsumes' *intellectus* of some sort. As Bernard McGinn of Chicago points out, in an unpublished paper on this topic, we must be very wary of neat antitheses here. I don't think this is brought out as clearly as it might be (in chapter 11, for instance).

(iv) What exactly *is* wrong with the Carmelites? I think they have a distinctly raw deal by being left as rather sinister voices off; and n. 57 on p. 124 is surely unjust. Fr Simon himself, in what he has to say about the *Cloud* (p. 176) rightly makes a point of the way our radical openness to God is God's own work in us; why then is there so much objection to the Juanist view that contemplation is 'supernatural' only when infused by God? I don't like the terminology any more than Fr Simon does, but what is the difference between this and the *Cloud*? As for saying (p. 228) that Thérèse experiences a 'descent from Mount Carmel', as if she were describing something utterly alien to John of the Cross, I can only record total bafflement. All kinds of things have been wrong with the way the Carmelite tradition has been handled, and it may be right to speak of a 'tyrannical' influence. But a good many people, reading John and even Teresa of Avila without benefit of novice guardians of a certain generation, have found them to be saying eloquently what Fr Simon so much wants to hear said about liberation from 'expertise' in the life of the spirit. The answer to tyranny may not necessarily be to abandon the whole notion of what might be called a classical outline of the 'story' of Christian growth; such an outline can even be more significantly liberating than an undialectical rejection of the very idea of normative elements or normative practices. And the existence of the book under review presumably shows that Fr Simon thinks so too. Is it impossible to grant that the Carmelites have been badly served by their disciples, and to recover them for this project?

A book to be very grateful for, a tool for the scholar as well as the general reader, and a timely corrective to a lot of nonsense about spirituality; not, I think, perfectly balanced—but what book of this kind ever is? Overviews of Christian spirituality are perhaps the better as they share in the 'imperfection' of the human explorations they describe.

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