

SPIRITUAL STUDIES IN ENGLAND*

DAVID L. GREENSTOCK, D.D.

THE circumstances of life in any country, its history and the racial characteristics of its people all influence, to a greater or a lesser degree, that country's literature, including its theology. The last twenty-five years have seen a change in the atmosphere in which English Catholicity in all its branches has to live, work and develop. Religious controversy still exists, but it is less important now than it was, let us say, fifty years ago. Catholic activity is increasing and there is a marked interest in all the problems relating to the spiritual life.

However, since the English character is essentially practical in its outlook, the study of spiritual theology—to include under that term both ascetical and mystical theology—tends to be mainly directed towards the practical problems of everyday life. The study of spirituality in England tends to restrict itself to the translation of the works of the great mystics, both at home and abroad, and to the divulgation or popularization of those doctrines which have most application to the practice of religion. There is little or no effort made to produce profound studies of the doctrines contained in these mystical writings or in dogmatic theology as such. Indeed, it is very difficult to make English theologians realize the importance of such studies. What interests them most is the practical application of dogma to everyday life. This attitude is by no means a new one, because we can discover it in the writings of English mystics of the fourteenth century. We see it in the *Fire of Love* and the *Form of Perfect Living* by Richard Rolle, in the *Cloud of Unknowing* and also in Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*. Critical editions of all these works have appeared recently; a fact which goes to show the increasing interest in the subject and also perhaps in the ideas contained in these writings.¹

There are also excellent translations of the Spanish mystics, especially of the works of St Teresa and St John of the Cross.² Up to the present, however, there has been no serious study of the doctrines of these writers, at least from the pens of English writers. In his *St Teresa of Jesus* Professor Allison Peers has given us a series of essays on the style of St Teresa, on the more recent Spanish works on the subject (for

*Summary of a paper read at the International Theological Congress, Salamanca, 4th May, 1954.

¹ *The English Mystics Series*. Orchard Books (Burns Oates, London).

² *Complete Works of Teresa of Jesus* (Sheed and Ward, 1946); *The Spirit of Flame* (1943); *Studies of the Spanish Mystics* (S.P.C.K. 1950), *The Complete Works of John of the Cross* (Burns Oates, London, 1953); all by Allison Peers.

example, those of Padre Crisogono) and on the mysticism of Luis de Granada.¹ There are also translations of *Philokalia* (Faber, 1950), the complete works of Eckhart (Watkin, 1951), of Mechtilde of Magdeburg (Longmans, 1952), and the *Theologia Germanica* (Gollancz, 1950). Two small works of Henry Suso have also appeared in translations.²

Protestant interest in spiritual theology is also on the increase, although the main lines of Protestant theology are always more scriptural than mystical. Among other publications we may note *Mysticism and Religion* by Dean Inge, *Christian Mysticism and the Natural World* by Joseph Dalby, and *The Venture of Prayer* by Northcott.

Inge's work is too general in terms to merit the name of a profound scientific study of the subject. On the other hand, Dalby's book—a doctorate thesis presented at the University of Oxford—is a serious and conscientious study of a question which has received little attention from theologians and which is not without interest for Catholics. In it the author shows a profound knowledge of the traditions of Catholic mysticism and the chapters on the Dark Night and on Quietism are valuable from many points of view.³ However, his knowledge of the teachings of St Thomas is clearly superficial on many points, and this is a pity because in the writings of Aquinas Dalby would have discovered the dogmatic basis on which to construct a work of lasting value. In spite of its defects, however, the book is of interest to Catholic students of spiritual theology.

Northcott's work on prayer and its forms has as its foundation the theories of Fr Garrigou-Lagrange, among others. However, once more the true dogmatic foundation is missing from this book, and from a Catholic point of view the author has nothing new to say on his subject.⁴

The greater part of the writings on spiritual topics produced by Catholics in England has for its principal end the more perfect practice of the Christian life in all its forms. The works of Fr M. Eugene Boylan, O.C.I.S.T.R., Fr Valentine, O.P., and Fr Gerald Vann, O.P., have had spectacular success in this field, although these authors would be the first to admit that their work is mainly that of divulgation. Some writers have admitted the need for more profound studies of the foundations of the spiritual life. In October 1950 *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* published two articles by Fr Vandembrouke in which he deplores the separation which certainly exists in some countries, between the study of spiritual theology and that of dogma. Another article in the

1 *St Teresa of Jesus*, by Allison Peers (Faber and Faber, London, 1953).

2 *The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom; The Little Book of Truth* (Faber, London, 1953).

3 *Christian Mysticism and the Natural World*, by Joseph Dalby (J. Clarke, 1950).

4 *The Venture of Prayer*, by Northcott, C.R. (S.P.C.K., 1950).

same review pleads for more exact definitions of the terms used in spiritual theology, such as mystic, contemplation, prayer, etc., but in spite of these efforts one must admit that few English writers seem to realize the need for this precision in the use of terms.

One possible explanation for this lack of attention to definition may be found in the influence of what is called the 'new theology'—at least in that part of it which concerns scholasticism and the use of scholastic terminology. It cannot be denied that some of the ideas and the tendencies of this error were well received at first both in England and America and that even now traces of them can be found in some of the works of English writers. These ideas seemed to some people especially adapted to an easier understanding of the dogmas of faith and to their popular exposition in terms of modern philosophy. Undoubtedly, the history of the study of ascetical and mystical theology in England also helped to form this attitude towards precision in terms, together with the practical English character.

This does not mean to imply that there are no profound studies of spirituality to be found among the works of English writers. As exceptions to the general rule we may note Dom Aelred Graham's *The Love of God, Medieval Mystical Tradition and St John of the Cross* by a Benedictine of Stanbrook Abbey, and E. I. Watkin's *Poets and Mystics*.¹ The latter serves as an excellent complement to Abbot Butler's *Western Mysticism*. Abbot Butler studies the writings of St Augustine, St Gregory and St Bernard. From them he deduces what we may call the main current of the mystical thought of western Europe. Watkin's book studies the great English mystics, Juliana of Norwich, Margery Kemp, Richard Crashaw, Augustine Baker, Elizabeth of the Trinity and others. The author has succeeded in capturing and conveying the main doctrines and the spirit of these writers in a book which is both interesting and well written.

The English translation of Fr Arintero's work on mystical evolution and the development and life of the Church has aroused interest in England, principally because it applies the general principles of the unity of the spiritual life and of the universal vocation to perfection to the life of the Mystical Body, i.e. to the everyday life of the Christian within the framework of the Church and its liturgy.² In this book the speculative principles of spiritual theology as they have been formulated by such masters as Fr Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., are reduced to terms of actual practice. The book is also important because a close study of it

¹ *The Love of God*, by Aelred Graham (Catholic Book Club, London, 1939); *Medieval Mystical Tradition and St John of the Cross* (Burns Oates, 1954); *Poets and Mystics*, by E. I. Watkin (Sheed and Ward, London, 1953).

² *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, by J. G. Arintero, O.P., translated by J. Aumann, O.P. (Herder, 1952).

may easily lead to a radical reform in the methods used to teach ascetical and mystical theology in our seminaries—a need which will be readily admitted by all those who have to explain this subject to students for the priesthood. One advantage of such a reform would be to give priests more confidence in dealing with various types of penitents they meet with in the course of their duties as confessors and directors.

The translations of Fr Garrigou-Lagrange's works have also been carefully studied in England, especially those which deal with perfection and contemplation.¹ In fact, it may be said that his theories with regard to the nature of perfection, the universal call to it in its higher grades and also the unity of the spiritual life are generally accepted in England. This is natural in view of the fact that the English Dominicans have been most active in the field of spiritual studies and in the popularization of its basic doctrines. Their review *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* is the most important in this field.

The tendency to study spiritual theology with special reference to the daily life of the Catholic within the fold of the Church is day to day more obvious and is responsible for the increasing interest in questions pertaining to the liturgy as the main source of that life and the chief instrument in its perfection. There is a recent work by Fr Clifford Howell, S.J., which illustrates this perfectly.² As he himself says: 'The liturgical movement and all that it stands for is but a development in action of this basic doctrine of the "Mystical Body of Christ".'

Another field of study which has claimed special attention in England is the psychological element in mystical experience. Here the writings of Fr Victor White, O.P., demand special mention, not merely because of their author's perfect grasp of modern psychology in all its branches, but also because of his clear application of the most difficult psychological principles to religious and mystical experience. His book *God and the Unconscious* is the most important study which has yet appeared in English of the relationship between psychology and religion.³ There is also an interesting article by Professor Armstrong on the *World of the Senses in Pagan and Religious Thought* in which the author studies the relationship between the world of sense experience and the world of the spirit.⁴

The same degree of praise cannot, however, be extended to a book

1 *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* (Herder, 1949); *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life*, two vols. (Herder, 1951).

2 *The Work of our Redemption*, by Clifford Howell, S.J. (The Catholic Social Guild, Oxford, 1954).

3 *God and the Unconscious*, by Victor White, O.P. (The Harvill Press, 1953). Cf. *The Frontiers of Theology and Philosophy* (Guild of Pastoral Psychology, No. 19, 1942).

4 *Downside Review*, Summer, 1950. p. 305.

by a Protestant author on this subject, *The Uncurtained Throne*. This work has as its foundation neo-platonic philosophical principles, and therefore tends to reduce mystical experience to the purely natural and poetical mysticism of the Greeks. Furthermore, the author pretends to discover a religious mysticism which is divorced both from the limitations of dogmatic theology and from the heights of sanctity.

Interesting from this same point of view, namely the relationship between the psychological and the spiritual, is Fr Vann's book *The Water and the Fire* (Collins, 1953). As the author himself admits, his work owes much to such writers as Max Picard, Gustave Thibon and Fr Victor White. The central theme of the book is the renovation of the sense of religious symbolism. Like Jung, Fr Vann believes that symbolism has a very important part to play in religious experience, since by means of it those ineffable mysteries, so difficult to describe in words, can be given their perfect expression. In the light of this view of symbolism it is easy to see the futility of religious positivism and the psychological value of the symbolism of the Mass and the Sacraments. This book has been well received because of the clear and yet profound exposition of a most difficult subject.

This question of religious symbolism in all its forms has also been the subject of many articles in reviews which deal with spiritual theology,¹ and the interest in this subject is increasing. Another interesting book from this point of view is *Neurosis and the Sacraments* by Fr Keenan, O.F.M. (Sheed and Ward, 1950). In it the author explains the many advantages of the Sacraments as spiritual instruments which have an intimate connection with the psychological states of those who receive them. There are also several translations from the French of works dealing with the connection between asceticism, psychology and the practice of religion.²

A study has appeared recently in English on the controverted subject of the nature of christian perfection and on the ascetical and mystical ways which has aroused interest both in England and America. In this work, which is an elaboration of a doctorate thesis presented in the University of Salamanca, the author proposes a solution for the reconciliation of the various opinions concerning the nature of perfection, the universal vocation to perfection in its higher grades and the ways to it.³ This theory has as its foundation two distinctions, one concerning the spiritual life and the other regarding its perfection.

According to the author, the spiritual life can be studied either in

¹ For example, the articles in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, Aug.-Sept., 1951: among others, 'Aspects of the Chalice', by Dominic Baldwin and 'Symbolism in the Byzantine Rite', by Irene Marinoff.

² Cf. *New Problems and Medical Ethics* (Cahiers Lacinnec, Paris, 1953).

³ *Be Ye Perfect*, by David Greenstock (Herder, St Louis, 1951).

itself, absolutely, or in the individual soul. In the first case its nature and development will be governed only by the general ontological laws which apply to all natures, while in the second case it also comes under the special laws of divine providence and predestination for the individual. The grade of glory which God has assigned from all eternity for the individual soul will bear a distinct relationship to the grade of grace which God grants to that individual—to which also corresponds a distinct grade of the spiritual life in him.

From this follows logically a further distinction with regard to the perfection of the spiritual life. Considered in itself, absolutely, it undoubtedly contains everything which, in one way or another, contributes to its growth—all the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in their highest grades. In this sense there can be no question of a multiplicity of ways or of lives—there is only one spiritual life, which includes, in germ at least, all ways and all grades.

If this same life as it is found in the individual were not subject to the special laws of providence and predestination the same would also be true in the case of the individual soul. Since, however, this is not so, we must also distinguish between what is essential to the spiritual life and what is individual. The existence of grace and charity is indispensable for that life; while the individual grade of grace and charity which God has predestined for the individual will constitute the individual perfection.

From these basic principles the author draws further conclusions concerning the other elements of the spiritual life, especially with regard to the question of the universality of the vocation to the higher grades of perfection and the purification necessary in purgatory.

This theory has been criticized by some theologians on the grounds that it implies a retreat from well established positions; while other have accepted it as providing a solution for the difficulties contained in the opinions put forward up to now on these points. The author claims that his theory follows logically from the principles laid down by St Thomas.

The study of any science is undoubtedly helped by free and profound discussion of it from various points of view. Therefore the reunions held each year under the auspices of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* are worth noting, as also is the Congress of Ecclesiastical Studies held at Strawberry Hill in 1953.

The 1952 Congress of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* dealt with the common life of the christian under various headings; and the papers were subsequently published in the January, 1953, issue of the review. During the Ecclesiastical Studies Congress in 1953 the Abbot of Downside gave an interesting paper on the subject of mystical prayer. This

conference, published in *Clergy Review*, August, 1953, revealed very clearly the need for careful and exact definition of the basic notions and terms of spiritual theology. While each individual author continues to use such terms as he pleases it will be difficult, not to say impossible, to reach agreement or to forge ahead in this science. This exactness in definition is lacking in many English writers on spiritual problems.

Also interesting from the point of view of the study of spirituality are three conferences of the London Aquinas Society, one by Professor Armstrong on the Greek philosophical basis in the psychology of St Thomas; another by Fr Vann, O.P., on wisdom in Boethius, and a stimulating paper by Fr Conrad Pepler, O.P., on St Thomas as the philosopher of contemplation and the mystic knowledge of God.¹ There is also a small work on the relationship between the natural and supernatural from the aesthetic point of view which has been read with interest in England.² In an article in the *Clergy Review*, February, 1950, on the value of controversy in theological matters Canon Cartmel has many things to say which have a direct relationship to the study of ascetico-mystical problems. He stresses once again the need to reach agreement on the definitions of the basic terms used in these sciences.

Fr Van Zeller, O.S.B., is an author whose works on spirituality are widely read in England, though they are difficult to classify. At times he penetrates deeply into certain elements of the spiritual life while at others he seems to be quite content with a merely superficial glance at a problem. However, we may say that he has the art of presenting in an extremely popular fashion the whole treatise on the virtues and of applying it to everyday life in a manner which is easy to understand.³

Lastly we can note a number of books—many of them translated from the French—on the religious life in general and on the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in particular.⁴ From the layman's point of view there is also an increasing interest in the very delicate problem of the possibility of a contemplative life in the world and the means to achieve it. This has been discussed in many articles in theological reviews but so far there is no complete work on it in English.

We may sum up the present state of spiritual studies in England in the following general conclusions:

1. Undoubtedly, interest in the special problems of ascetical and mystical theology is on the increase, although the trends of the English contributions to the study of these sciences are practical rather than speculative, as can be seen not only from the works already quoted but

¹ *Aquinas Society Papers*, Nos. 19, 20 and 21 (Blackfriars Publications).

² *De Pulchritudine*, by Fr J. Aumann, O.P. Editorial F.E.D.A. Valencia.

³ For example, *We Live with our Eyes Open* (Catholic Book Club, 1950).

⁴ Cf. *The Religious Life Series* (Blackfriars Publications).

also from the interest shown in books on the liturgy in everyday life and in the question of the prayer and life of the Church.¹

2. There are two branches of spiritual theology which have been widely studied in England and which have produced valuable contributions from our writers. One of these is the question of religious symbolism and the other is the more general problem of the relationship between psychology and mystical or religious experience.

3. The task which English writers consider to be most important at present is that of divulgation. Every effort is being made to bring to the knowledge of the layman in an attractive form the basic spiritual doctrines. This explains the popularity of lives of the saints, books on prayer, the liturgy, the Mass and the sacraments as means of our sanctification. The movement for a more active participation of the laity in the liturgy is very vital in England at the moment and the bishops are considering the question of a new ritual in which many of the prayers used in the administration of the sacraments will be in the vernacular.

Thanks to the efforts of the Dominicans we now have a Review, *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, in which questions pertaining to spiritual theology can be discussed. Many interesting articles have already appeared in it of real value to students of this science. Other reviews, such as *Blackfriars*, *The Clergy Review* and the *Downside Review*, also have articles on spirituality from time to time. Typical of the modern approach to such questions is the recent series on *Modern Dilemmas* in *Blackfriars*.

4. In spite of the many excellent translations of the works of the mystics, there is little or no attempt made to discuss more deeply the doctrines contained in their writings. Also, with few exceptions, there are no works on the speculative questions which are frequent topics for discussion and writing in other countries. However, some authors have seen and stressed the need for clearer definitions of the basic terms used in ascetical and mystical literature. There is perhaps a danger that the study of symbolism may be carried to excessive lengths—usually a sign of decadence. One would also like to see a more active part played by English theologians in International Congresses to discuss the basic themes of spiritual theology and the problems which are common to all countries. Up to the present the part played by England in such reunions has been mainly passive.

English College, Valladolid.

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1 Cf. *The Splendour of the Liturgy*, by Zundel; *Christ in the Liturgy*, by Illtyd Trethowan (Sheed and Ward, 1951); *The Work of Our Redemption*, by Clifford Howell, S.J. (Catholic Social Guild, 1954).