

THE WAY OF PERFECTION IN THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

By

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I. *THE STUDY OF ASCETIC THEOLOGY.*

THE time is ripe for reintroducing readers of English to the growth of the spiritual life according to an English idiom coined from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. This idiom has largely been lost to the English tongue through the deservedly victorious attack of the Spanish and French "spiritualities" which have carried the day since the counter-reformation. St Teresa, St John of the Cross, St Francis de Sales and the vast horde of spiritual writers thrown together by the French controversies, Jansenism and Quietism, these have soaked into English writing on the same topic and the healthy, robust, if a trifle easy-going, spiritual writings of Rolle, Mother Julian, Hilton and the Cloud have been left to the academic scholars of middle English and to the rising tide of dabblers in "mysticism." In view of the multiplicity of men who have become interested in this exotic-sounding subject, it is imperative to publish some form of introduction to the English Mystics if they are to be used as spiritual guides. For many without previous knowledge and training have taken up these writers of an earlier age and presumed to know what they are talking about on the subjects of the life of prayer and penance, of the sacramental life of the Church, of regular recitation of the Breviary, or of regular use of discipline, hair shirt, of fasting.

While Catholics tend to ignore their ancient heritage in these early English writers, many non-Catholics adopt them with an idea that all is contained in the "mystical element" of the writings themselves without regard to the ascetic form and value of the spiritual lives of the medieval Catholic authors. It is to this twofold public that the following articles are addressed. They are intended first of all as an essay in Ascetic Theology in the traditional meaning of that science. Many modern readers of the early English mystics class their study as belonging to Mystical Theology, excluding the ascetic science not only from their reading but also from their spiritual life of prayer. We must, therefore, make quite certain not only of the nature of our approach to the English Mystics but also of the nature of our study itself in relation to the other "sciences" or disciplines of thought.

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"Askesis" in the Greek means simply the exercise, training

or practice of human capacities. But, with a capital A, Asceticism has come to mean a special type of training, the practice of which should be concerned with the active side of the spiritual life, austere, penitential discipline, an exercise in "overcoming the flesh." An ascetic is "one who practises severe self-discipline" (O.E.D.). And this for many has come to stand for the ordinary life of the sincere Christian who takes his religion literally and as his life's work. Over against this normal ascetic life they set the extraordinary life of the saint or holy person who receives special graces in his spiritual life, who enters by the peculiar choice of God into the "Mystical Life" and who deserves to be called a "Mystic" rather than an Ascetic. Certain manuals of Ascetic and Mystical Theology make this abrupt dichotomy⁽¹⁾, so that ascetic theology is made over entirely to the "ordinary" Christian life, where the soul corresponds generously to the normal graces held out to all Christians. A specific difference is made to separate this way of life and that of the mystic who receives extraordinary graces which are characterized by "infused contemplation" and a special sense of the divine presence. This aristocratic way of life is out of reach of the plebeian soul, which may nevertheless reach a less exalted type of unitive way proper to the ascetic. For such authorities as these, therefore, Mystical Theology contributes an altogether distinct science dealing only with what is abnormal in the spiritual life.

We cannot subscribe to this dichotomy, and here we do not study Ascetical Theology as something altogether distinct from a science of abnormal mystical experience. The high reaches of the spiritual life, including "infused contemplation," lie in the normal progress of the Christian in his ascent to God. There is however a distinction between the two theologies. Adopting the derivative meaning of *ascesis* as the practice of self-discipline and austerity, we may regard this part of the study as dealing with the more negative and initial stages of the Christian life. Ascetic theology should set forth the work of detachment, of cutting away sinful or dangerous ties that prevent the soul's taking wing and rising to full union with God. This is a labour of great severity, the special lot of the beginner, but in different ways following the rising soul in its highest ascents to the very threshold of glory where the Cross no longer tortures. Mysticism is only the converse side of the Christian life of asceticism, beginning meagrely in the life of the first conversion, flourishing in full bloom in the unitive way. Accordingly Ascetic Theology should deal more with the early stages of Christian living, whereas Mystical Theology centres mainly on the final stages of the normal progress to sanctity, when

(1) For example, *Asceticae et Mysticae Summa*, by R. P. Chrysogono de Jesu Sacramentato. Turin, 1936.

the soul is disciplined by God and finally united to him. Asceticism should be concerned with the active side of the spiritual life, mysticism with the more passive.⁽²⁾

For our purpose it will be useful to emphasize the more general meaning of the Greek "*askēsis*" as the pactice of the spiritual life, for in this way we shall not be debarred from continuing our study into the higher spheres of Mystical Theology. We shall review the whole progress of the soul from its first conversion until its union with God is completed, or rather until its union with God is about to be fulfilled in heaven. The path thus traced is that from the first steps of Asceticism, when the mystic life of love is only implicit in the stirrings of grace and in the soul's intentions, right up to the last peak of Mysticism where the ascetic life has become utterly subordinate and transformed as in the tortures of a St Lawrence or the dark nights of a St John of the Cross.

A science dealing with the Christian life of grace is necessarily theological, and will find all its major principles in the *Summa* of St Thomas. Yet the study of Ascetico-Mystical Theology was only born at the Renaissance; it is a post-reformation occupation and has found its way into the curricula of theological *studia* only within living memory. In consequence it seems to be stamped with the baroque individualism which has degenerated in our day into an embarrassed and complex subjectivism. It concerns itself in mapping out the stages of the spiritual ascent not as a Dantesque work of art but as an almost prurient curiosity about self. St Thomas himself offers little or nothing towards this psychologico-analytical approach to the spiritual life. If he is to help us in this study we must understand something of the spiritual life in the centuries before the Renaissance.

If we may be permitted a wide, and therefore inaccurate, generalization, the main characteristics of pre-reformation spirituality could be summed up in objective beatitudē, and those of

(2) It is useful to turn to the admirable classification of the theological and cognate sciences given by George Rabeau in his *Introduction à l'Etude de la Théologie* (cf. pp. 301 sqq.). In this he places Ascetic and Mystical Theology under the general heading of Religious Psychology in a similar category with Psychology, History of Religions, Comparative Religion, etc. Ascetics follows the development of faith illumining the soul according as sanctifying grace transforms the Christian life. It is the science of the common Christian life in its less common aspects, the facts being supplied by those who have passed through the various stages of the ascent. It is fundamentally a psychological study—"a psychology that follows the mystics, desiring to understand the men themselves and accepting their descriptions and interpretations even when apparently contrary to the data of common psychology." From the point of view of pure speculation, though, ascetics forms but one science with mystical theology, which with ascetic is only a branch of moral theology. The method is more descriptive than deductive, but it necessarily leads to a study of the nature of the experiences, though this is strictly moral theology—this separate study being justified by pedagogical and specialist reasons. These speculations are applied to things of experience, facts furnished by observation.

succeeding ages in subjective beatitude. "God is all that matters" gives place to "My possession of God is all that matters to me." In the spirituality of St Augustine two themes are distinguishable. Just as Eucharistic theology finds in this pre-eminent doctor the seeds both of realism and symbolism, so we may find in his attitude to God at once a subjective concentration on his own soul in relation to God, and an objective, almost a collective, view of the spiritual life, in regarding all mankind in terms of the Mystical Body led to God by the divine Head. The close relation between St Augustine and Descartes in his "Cogito" is well known, and that alone suggests a strongly objective element. True knowledge and love of God come only by withdrawing into self—*Noli foras ire, in te redi; in interiori homine habitat veritas*. At the same time the ultimate ground of man's knowledge and love was the Absolute Truth and Absolute Goodness; his gaze never left that object. The moral life is based on God—the soul seeking its goal. Yet "a remarkable trait of St Augustine's doctrine is that it always considers the moral life as implicated in a social life. In his eyes the individual is never separate from the city."⁽³⁾ Each is intent on the object. In a theatre, he tells us, the audience forms a society through the secret sympathy among all those who look at and enjoy the same entertainment. He who loves God is by that very fact related to the society of all who also love him.⁽⁴⁾ The Mystical Body is a doctrine characteristic of St Augustine.

An objective attitude to the spiritual life was predominant until the end of the Middle Ages; but another current of a more personal, or perhaps more individualistic, trend was developing the subjective element in the Augustinian tradition. This appears most notably in St Bernard and carries on through the Victorines to St Bonaventure and Franciscan devotions. From the Victorines and Franciscans, St Thomas was also acquainted with it, but it appears little in his speculative work. It does appear in full bloom, and in the glory which precedes the falling of the flower, in the 14th century. It is exaggerated out of recognition by the individualism of the "Reformers." Then, during the counter-reformation, subjectivism gradually saturated the whole atmosphere of Europe and was breathed in by Catholics as much as by others. To the Catholics, therefore, it fell to combine and synthesise this subjectivism with the objective doctrines of faith and morals set forth by the living voice of the Church. The most completely successful attempt at such a combination was carried out by the great Spanish Mystics who with their tabulation of the Mansions, the Dark Nights, Purgations and Illuminations, studied minutely the structure of the individual's spiritual life. The least successful developed into self-conscious piety, either over-

(3) Etienne Gilson: *Introduction à l'étude de St Augustin*, p. 220.

(4) *De Doctrina Christiana*, i, 29.

emotional in some of the rising "modern devotions," or under-emotional in the bleak prayer of the Jansenist. But criticism of the spirituality of the period as a whole cannot be applied to essentials; it is not a false spirituality that has produced the great figures who have added largely to the list of saints since the 16th century. Ground for criticism lies more in the lack of respect, or at least a neglect, shown by this "modern" spirituality, for the former tradition of objective and corporate religious life.⁽⁵⁾ The neglect easily led to abuse and eventually to a certain atrophy in our own day.

We must not forget, however, that St Thomas himself laid down the basic division of the spiritual life into its three stages and that he himself derived the division from far earlier sources. In the *Secunda Secunda* he refers to St Augustine first and then to St Gregory for his division of Christian life into "Beginners, Proficients and Perfects."⁽⁶⁾ St Gregory speaks of the three conversions which inaugurate in turn these three stages in the spiritual growth as comparable to the growth of the physical man—infancy, youth, maturity.⁽⁷⁾ In an increase of this sort no one can indicate any precise point where one stage began and the former ceased, for there is no actual point; still less can he make a hard and fast rule for everyone as to the moment of transition. We cannot say that all pass from youth to maturity on their twenty-first birthday—except in the eyes of the law. St Thomas does not attempt to be more analytical than his predecessors. It was the birth of the experimental sciences that gave rise to Ascetic and Mystical Theology. Experimental, concrete and practical knowledge tends paradoxically to become subjective.

Thus we are brought back to our original purpose. Apart from the general speculative principles which belong to the study of moral theology we cannot depend in this modern half-experimental science of Ascetic Theology on the detailed work of St Thomas. Masters of this science, such as Père Garrigou-Lagrange, have expounded the scheme of the spiritual life as set forth by the great Spanish Mystics, bringing their teaching into contact with the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor. In the direction of souls

(5) The objectivity of the older type of spirituality is contrasted with the new subjective attitude, in terms of the Liturgical sources of the former, in *La Trappe in England*, by a Religious of Holy Cross Abbey. London, 1937. pp. 186-189.

(6) II-II, 24 9; 183 4. It is suggested that the division comes originally from the Pseudo-Denis, *Celestial Hierarchies* iii, 2. cf. also St Augustine, *De Ordine*, i, 2; *Confessions*, i, 13. St Gregory, *Moralia*, 124, 7; St Bernard on the *Canticles*. Sermon 3 and 4; Hugh of St Victor, *De Gradibus Caritatis*; Pseudo-Bonaventure, *Pharetra*, i, 1.

(7) Just as von Hügel, in discussing the three elements of religion, divides them according to (i) the Child—Sense and Memory, (ii) the Youth—Question and Argument, (iii) Adult—Intuition, Feeling and Volitional requirements and evidences. cf. *Mystical Elements of Religion*, I, pp. 50 sqq.

aspiring to holiness such work is essential; those who are placed in this deep responsibility for others' spiritual welfare may neglect neither the works of the Spaniards themselves, nor their commentators. They wrote, or at least St John of the Cross wrote, principally for directors whose duty it is to analyse the state of soul of other people; and they wrote before subjective self-analysis had become such a passion. Today we need to emphasise at the same time the traditional objectivity of holiness.

At the present time in secular, political spheres there has been a general return to corporatism of one sort or another, where the individual becomes self-forgetful in his common struggle for the ideal. The tendency should be sanctified, recreated in a Christian movement, for the true Ideal can be nothing less than God himself.

At the present time, again, the Catholic faith in this country has not recovered from its long sojourn as an exiled stranger. Consequently the Roman Catholic religion in England is largely foreign in its external appearance—not only in some aspects of its liturgy or the tinsel-gilt decorations and flamboyant Italian altars, but also in the very prayers, devotions and methods of spirituality. There has been little traditionally English spirituality since the English Church severed the artery which made it a single living organism in the one Church. Catholicism has been fed, and well fed, by spiritual teaching from other lands, particularly from France. This food has been good, but it lacks the local ingredients which long experience has taught the inhabitants they need. We do not recommend the French to eat the Englishman's roast beef and yorkshire pudding as his staple diet, nor should we expect the English to thrive spiritually on an exclusive diet of Francis de Sales, the Little Flower and Garrigou-Lagrange. Something more native to the country is required, something that will find a cheerful echo in English hearts, expressed in true English without a host of latinisms and the French idiom.

We must avoid the evil corporatism which is objective at the expense of religion, the evil nationalism which makes each individual selfishly conscious of his own birth and parentage. We need to sanctify both these modern tendencies, the godless collectivism and the anti-god nationalism. Both these tendencies may be redeemed by an indigenous spiritual life growing up from the soil of England these several centuries and thrusting out into the universal spirituality of the Church of God. In general, of course, the way of the spirit is the same for all men—"I am the Way"; the Mystical Body is to embrace all nationalities, the sacraments are to supply the life-giving blood to all races, the Mass draws all things daily to the lifted Christ. But in realization, in application, variety will be found among nations as among individuals.

The English Mystics, then, provide us with the best material for an Ascetico-Mystical study in the English tongue. They flourished in the main in the 14th century before experimental

subjectivism had its strangle-hold on European civilisation. They are analytical without losing the objective attitude of the Middle Ages. They are English to the core; they express themselves in the English idiom, and though their sources are Latin, patristic and scholastic from all over Europe, they do not present us with translations. As a rule they write in the vernacular, the vernacular of Chaucer when the English tongue was unsophisticated and direct. For this reason, though a study of this nature obviously cries out to include St Thomas More and Father Baker among its sources and models, we feel compelled to limit ourselves to these earlier writers of ours. A subsequent study should be made of the Renaissance and counter-Reformation spirituality of English Catholics; but it is too richly blended to be included in these studies.

We may conclude this first part of the Introduction with a quotation from a paper read by Mr William Pantin to the C.T.S. congress in Brighton in the summer of 1938:—

"The thing that strikes me most about the Catholic England of the Middle Ages is that it contrived to be so intensely English and so intensely Catholic at the same time. That is a very important point; it is, in the first place, an antidote or answer to that exaggerated, exclusive nationalism and racialism that the Holy Father so strongly condemns every day. We may not, here in England, be in much danger of adopting those extreme forms of this doctrine But I think there are a good many people who are, consciously or unconsciously, prejudiced against the Church by the idea that to be a Catholic is not quite compatible with being a real Englishman. They seem to think that because a man is in communion with the Apostolic See, he becomes a kind of spiritual alien. And they imply that everything that is best in the English character and civilisation and constitution dates from the break with Rome. The answer to that is to look at medieval England. England—for there really was an England then, not just a portion of Great Britain—England was most English when she was most Catholic, when she was most part of an international religion and culture. Grace does not destroy nature; it makes the most of it. *Non eripit mortalia, qui regna dat caelestia*. And in spite of centuries of schism and growing unbelief, I believe that English civilisation is still based in its Catholic past Remember that to be Catholic is to be normal, the natural condition of civilised man in general and of Englishmen in particular." We aim here to rediscover this intensely English and intensely Catholic spiritual life in the works of the fourteenth century English mystics.

(To be continued)