

THE DIVINE SPECIALISTS

BY

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ALTHOUGH every type of Christian may derive much profit from the writings of Walter Hilton so that his *Scale* in particular has become a popular work of spirituality, we should not forget that the people for whom he wrote were of a very specialised type. He was addressing a particular person who must have been living the same sort of life as Mother Julian at Norwich, an anchoress shut up in her little house and devoted to the work of contemplation. He does in fact draw a sharp distinction, which many readers have to pass over in puzzlement and try to forget, between the common man and the one who is specially called. The gift of contemplation may be bestowed by God upon any kind of person he may choose, 'learned or lewd, men and women, those occupied in prelacy and to solitary also'.

But it is special, not common, and though a man which all his life is active have the gift of it by a special grace, nevertheless the fulness of it may no man have unless he be solitary and in life contemplative. (*Scale* i, c. 9.)

It might seem that the ordinary folk who keep the commandments and remain only in the lowest degree of charity will be saved, of course, but they will never reach to the fulness of the contemplative joys even in heaven. This is reserved for 'the perfect souls' who

in this life were fulfilled of charity and grace of the Holy Ghost, and sung praisings to God in contemplation of Him. (i, 44).

There are indeed 'many sundry dwellings' in the Father's house, and to be in any one of them is to be in bliss, but there are certain souls chosen by God for perfection, that is, the fulness of charity itself, and these are God's 'darlings'. These are the contemplatives; others who have not the fulness of charity and 'are not disposed to the contemplation of God' have lower reward in heaven and are called God's 'friends' (i, 44).

These latter are the active men and women who may attain to a state of proficiency—'the beginning or profiting souls'—

but they are not the 'perfect', who are restricted to the contemplative (ii. 5). And so Hilton leaves these lesser men and women half-way up his *Scale* of perfection. They can just poke their heads into the contemplative life by attaining to the first degree of affection, but they appear to be condemned to remain there. They have a taste now and again of a quiet form of prayer, but it is not permanent, nor can they have it at will. Their normal prayer is more physical and concerned with active devotions. They achieve virtues mostly by reason and they have to give themselves to a good deal of physical mortifications. These are the 'actives', and Hilton excludes them as well as the worldly folk from his audience.

These words that I write to thee, they belong not at all to a man that hath active life, but to thee or to any other which hath the state of life contemplative (i, 93. comp. i, 71).

How many people have read these concluding words of the first book with something of a jarring sound in their heads? Can it then be addressed to *me*?

Later, in the second book, we find the same distinction between the common and the special in the spiritual life applied to sanctifying grace which is common to every Christian who has not turned away from God by serious sin and the divine touches attributed to the Holy Spirit which, when they come, come only to the perfect lover, but leave him, too, without his choice (ii. 41). A Christian who is 're-formed in faith' has sanctifying grace, and that of course suffices for man's most voracious dreams, for it gives him God himself for his companion. Yet the comparison is constantly made between such men and the others, the 'chosen few' who, like the one and only tribe of Israel, seem to have been selected for even greater and more unimaginable favours. The Son-made-man by wisdom brought all men from the bondage of the devil, and all who will may partake of this work of wisdom. But there is a special work of love attributed to the Holy Spirit which is a 'special gift to chosen souls only' (ii. 34). These latter have to be drawn into the second reformation of character, or 'conversion', in which they are changed also in 'feeling' (ii. 18).

The 'common herd' may justly complain, surely, that they have been treated rather casually. It is surely a frequent complaint that those who isolate themselves from the world by vow

and shut themselves within cloisters to lead the 'chosen and special' life claim a privileged place in God's esteem and tend to confuse charity for their fellow Christians in the world with pity for their poor and ignorant state. The life behind the walls of a monastery or convent has become a great challenge in an age which prides itself, however insecurely, on being democratic. For God to have his favourites seems far worse than for the Sultan. The manichees shocked the orthodox Christians by making an apparently similar distinction between the 'perfects' and what we might call the 'also rans'. Who then is safe from these invidious choices on God's part? Are the contemplatives behind their bars alone secure in the possession of these divine favours?

It is perhaps worth while to restate the fundamental truths which lie at the base of this problem. For although these truths are taught firmly by St Thomas and Hilton alike, the terminology even of Aquinas is not altogether free from ambiguity, and it is from this ambiguity that some unnecessary heart-burnings among the 'common faithful' and some dangerous head-raising among contemplative religious have arisen.

First of all we must reiterate the distinction between 'state' and 'life' when applied to perfection and therefore to contemplation. It is quite obvious that the mere external fulfilment of the contemplative habit of life will not guarantee a perfection of love, and that the veil or the scapular is not a hallmark of God's 'darling'. A man, like the Pharisee, may say that he has forsaken the world, meddles with no business, preserves chastity, and performs with care all the religious exercises of prayer and obedience in the monastery. But Hilton replies that the life may yet be all awry.

Thou art busy upon thy might to stop the rivers without, but the spring within haply thou leavest whole. Thou art like a man which had in his yard a stinking well with many runnings from it. He went and stopped the runnings and left the spring whole, and weened all had been safe. But the water sprang up at the ground of the well and stood still, so much that it corrupted all the fairness of his garden and yet ran there no water out. (i, 55.)

So the contemplative in his retirement is not necessarily a 'darling'.

When St Thomas speaks of a 'state' such as the 'state of perfection' he defines his meaning quite clearly. He means the

binding of a man's life in an exterior manner by the solemnity of vows and the formal adoption of rules so as to achieve a certain fixity or immobility. The word 'state' indicates a standing still, a permanent, stable disposition of the thing which is in this respect static. So, the Saint concludes, 'that alone seems to pertain to a man's state, which regards an obligation binding his person . . . not from any slight or unstable cause but from one that is firmly established' (II-II, 183, 1). But later on he distinguishes between the exterior state of a man which is constituted by the external and solemn obligation he may take on himself, for example, by vow, and the interior state which concerns his inner dispositions. These latter can only be regarded as 'static' in so far as they are referred to the one great standard of all action, the simple unmoved point of the divinity (II-II, 184, 4). In this way it is possible to speak of the three stages of the interior life as states (II-II, 183, 4), although in fact a Christian who is living our Lord's life should always be growing and developing and never standing still. It is a fact, however, that in English the word 'state' is often used in regard to passing circumstances, such as one's condition after falling into a muddy pool, or to emotional conditions—'I was in a frantic state'—which can only be said to be stable or fixed in so far as they are judged from God's point of view.

But it is much easier to identify these *interior* states with the ceaselessly moving and changing thing we call life, in so far as the life of a man, though moving, is referred to some static points. Thus St Thomas seems to have just this idea of an interior state when he talks about the active and contemplative *life*—'In men "the life" of every man would seem to be that wherein he delights most, and on which he is most intent, and that in which especially they wish to pass their time with their friends' (II-II, 179, 1). So we fix our hearts on something as we go to and fro in our daily occupations and in the rising and falling of human relationship and divine service, and that thing—or person—becomes 'our life and soul'; this is a looser, English way of saying what St Thomas has explained above. A religious may be hedged in by all kinds of obligations by rule and vow which make him externally fixed in a contemplative manner of life, or simply in the 'State of Perfection', yet his heart and delight may be in other things, in football

matches or boys' clubs, and so he may not be in an interior state of contemplation, he may not be living the contemplative life. Whereas a simple peasant girl may have made no formal, solemn promises, may have done no more than tend her father's handful of goats and sheep, and yet have reached out into the centre of an interior state of contemplation; for she is intent simply on the love of God, and in that love she longs to pass her time with her friends.

It should be convenient, therefore, to speak of the contemplative life when we mean the real living and moving thing, and the contemplative state when the actual exterior manner of life fixed by rule and obligation is in question. Walter Hilton, at any rate, seems to prefer his readers to consider the life to which they were called and to forget their state. It is true that the special states within the Church—that of the religious or of the priest or the supreme state of bishop and prelate—bring with them a promise of some special reward in heaven. But the reward attaching to these states of life is only an accidental one—as the prophet Daniel is told that he will appear at the last day in his capacity as a prophet and not simply as an unidentified lover of God. But the essential bliss of heaven depends upon the interior perfection of love enjoyed by the individual souls, be they peasants or prelates. And often the peasant will attain the heights of love and will consequently enjoy a high place in the beatific vision, soaring above many who had lived exteriorly in the state of perfection or of contemplation.

It may be that there is many a wife and many a worldly woman shall be nearer to God than thou, and more shall love God and better know him than thou shalt for all thy state. (i, 62.)

Therefore, the prelate and the religious, the anchorite and the priest had better not dwell upon the purely accidental glories due to their state in heaven, lest perchance they find no heaven at all.

If thou wilt do well, therefore, meek thyself and forget thy state as it were right naught, for it is sooth, by itself it is right naught; and let thy desire and thy business be to destroy sins and to get charity and meekness and other ghostly virtues, for therein lieth all. (id.)

And we do not have far to look for examples: in the Gospel Judas was placed in the exterior state that is one of the most

glorious conceivable—an apostle of Jesus Christ—but it was worse than naught to him. Jesus loved him, was goodly and courteous to him and gave him the power to work miracles. If the religious does not love difficult or evil men in the way our Lord loved Judas, then he will himself be like Judas and fall from all contact with the glory of heaven (i. 70).

With regard to their interior life, therefore, all Christians stand 'even' before God and all are called to the complete perfection of his love. An exterior state may help the individual himself or the members of the Church whom he serves, but interiorly he is called to the same holiness. The outward circumstances, though they are always to be treated with Christian prudence and never merely contemned, are in themselves not of the essence of things. It is no guarantee of perfection that a man abstain from certain meats, or deny himself in all sorts of little physical matters. It is possible that the man 'without the special gift of love' in his interior life undertakes far more rigorous observances in his exterior state than the true lover. All the work that the Christian has to do according to his state, his duties and his responsibilities, whether he be religious or secular, all has to be done interiorly so as to 'savour of Jesus'. Our Lord is the fixed and stable point according to which every condition of a man is to be measured. The Christian must look constantly to Jesus so that his life may be interiorly a Christian state (ii, 39). All kind and manner of men are called to this special Christ-centred life, and that implies the trend towards contemplation, though they may be married or single, lay people or high prelates, popes or vowed religious. The special grace of love is of course not restricted to persons who are already in some sense 'special' people by outward circumstances. The special grace makes special people. If they are 'lewd', i.e. unlettered, men they find the special prayer to match their life in the *Pater noster*; if they are lettered according to their state then they may find that the 'psalter, hymns or other service of the Church' will provide the soul with a vehicle for its special prayer of love. So whether it be an untutored maid saying her beads or the learned cleric at his breviary, our Lord may open the gate to the same special prayer 'in full great stillness of voice and softness of heart' (ii, 42).

A good spiritual director, like Hilton, would never make the

mistake of looking only for contemplatives in contemplative orders where the externals of the 'daily round' are organised for contemplation. There is not a son or daughter of Adam who has not been bought by Christ's blood and who ought not to be looking towards the one point of the sweet presence of Jesus. Even those whose life is necessarily bound up with worldly business and preoccupations should be looking upwards to that horizon. There was one such man, evidently a householder of means and many responsibilities, who craved for the peaceful embrace of Christ's presence and who was tempted to hand his responsibilities to others and to give himself simply to prayer. Hilton wrote one of his smaller works, *The Mixed Life*, in order to restrain him from abandoning his *state* in the world and to urge him to continue to work towards the goal of the contemplative life, wherein according to St Thomas's phrase he should place his intent and take his delight. It is the combination of this active *state* with the contemplative life which Hilton with many others calls the mixed life, for the man to whom he writes will have to spend a good deal of time as Martha governing her household, but at other times

thou shalt with Maria leave business of the world and sit down at the foot of our Lord by meekness in prayers and in holy thoughts, and in contemplation of him as he giveth thee grace. (Minor Works, p. 11.)

But St Thomas as a rule is not happy about the term 'mixed life', though St Augustine does refer in this context to a *compositum*. And if we hold firmly to the distinction between the exterior state and the interior life it becomes clear that, however mixed in external matters a man's state may be, organised partly for good works and partly for quiet prayer, his interior life will be either active or contemplative. He may change his intent and delight at periods from the active preoccupation of life in the world to the quieter solace of union with God, or the other way about. But one of these will certainly predominate in his life during these periods—and this will reveal what his life really is. (Compare II-II, 179, 2 ad 2.)

When we are reminded that all the active business and concern, if it be Christian, should of itself be leading to contemplation, it clearly establishes the fact that the Christian life in its essence is simple and never mixed, that it should always

be tending to identify itself with the contemplative ideal of Mary. At first a Christian will be intent upon overcoming his own sins by dint of hard penance and a generally ascetic life; he will be intent also upon thinking and speaking justly of his neighbour, of going out of his way to be generous to the people among whom he lives. These things he does because he loves God and God's people, or perhaps because he wants to love God. His delight lies in doing things on this level, and it is often in the company of others all intent upon the same good works that he finds the happiest periods of his life. In one way they may be quite the happiest because such periods of activity do not carry with them the full burden of the intense love of God for himself; they lack the utter responsibility of the child of God who finds himself before the Father. 'Simon, son of John, lovest thou me?' 'Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.' 'Feed my lambs.' In the active life the burden of responsibility for the 'whole Christ' cannot be fully appreciated.

But love is growing. It is needful to be engaged in these bodily works of penance and mercy to give true love its seed-bed.

We may not suddenly start out of this murky pit of the fleshly corruption into that ghostly light; for we may not suffer it nor bear it for sickness of ourselves. . . . And therefore we must abide and work by process of time, first by bodily works busily until we be discharged of this heavy burden of sin, the which hindereth us from ghostly working. . . . (*Mixed Life* 1. Minor Works, p. 5.)

The spiritual work of love can be undertaken perhaps only after a long period of schooling in the active works. But under God's providence, if the Christian continues to live and grow, the time eventually comes when he discovers that his intent is no longer fixed upon these somewhat negative labours of overcoming 'the world, the flesh and the devil', and his delight is no longer principally in doing good to others. His external state will probably be just the same as it had ever been, fixed by obligations, circumstances or vow to a special mode of acting. But interiorly he has already begun to enter into the gateway of the contemplative life. His labours have built him a cloister, they have set up an altar in the midst, whose walls protect him from the racket of the world, and these works of his have carried him to the altar, a sacrifice to be contributed to *the*

Sacrifice. Do his external activities cease? Has he forgotten how to be generous or gentle? 'Lord, thou knowest that I love thee'—'Feed my sheep . . . feed my lambs' . . . Once within that cloister, the burden of love is far heavier. Around him within these same walls are gathered his friends with whom it is his delight to share the joys of heavenly converse with God. But the whole world is still to be drawn within the garth that the Lord has planned and laid out within the Christian's heart. . . .

Where then is the mixed life? Not in this kingdom of love which is recognised by the landmarks of 'intents' and 'delights'. For there is only a threshold to be traversed in a second of time, to be crossed by one pace. During the last period of construction when the cloister is being roofed and decorated it may be that the Christian will cross this threshold, pass in and out of this gate, many times—but that will not be a mixed life; rather will it be now contemplative, now active, and finally contemplative once more. The mixture or *compositum* remains in the external structure of the man's life.

Following, therefore, the principles laid down by St Thomas and reiterated by Walter Hilton, it will be convenient to distinguish the state or 'station' of a man's life from the life itself. And having done so, we can say that there are three exterior states for a Christian to follow—the active, the mixed, and the contemplative—and these remain permanently according to his obligations. But within the interiority of his mind and heart he lives a simple Christian life which begins by being active in desire and by preference but concludes by being firmly fixed in contemplative love. It will not be out of place to schematise this division:

CHRISTIAN WAYS OF LIVING	{	According to STATE	{	ACTIVE (e.g. Religious Orders)
		(Exterior State— St Thomas)		MIXED CONTEMPLATIVE
	}	According to 'LIFE'	}	ACTIVE
		(Interior State— St Thomas)		CONTEMPLATIVE

The latter half of the distinction can hardly be considered as an exclusive distinction, since the active way of interior life leads on towards the contemplative.¹

¹ We have omitted the question of the place of the Apostolic Life for the sake of simplicity. It belongs properly to the contemplative 'Life'.

The problem raised by Hilton's exclusive attitude towards the contemplative life should now be more easily resolved. For the exterior states of Christian life are many and each has its own speciality. There are those who receive a special call to the married state, and for them the world of bachelors, old maids and religious is a world of the commonalty to which they do not belong. Others are specially called by circumstance to live alone in the secular state, and they too in their own way are special. But there is a hierarchy of 'estates' just as there is a hierarchy among the lords and ladies of the land. To one only can the first place be given, not because he is the more gifted man, but because he is the first lord of the realm. And so as a general rule the honours have been granted to the contemplative 'estate'; and those who dedicate themselves by vow to a contemplative order are thus entitled to be called the most 'special' of them all.

But who shall say whether they are God's 'darlings' in the kingdom of his love? This is altogether a different subject of distinction, and one almost unknown except to the Christian himself, and sometimes to his director or superior, too. When he has entered into the contemplative life, then it is for the angels to praise the Lord on account of his special friends, his chosen ones. It would be sacrilege to try to make the interior life an exterior state by our judgments of men and women. But it is the most real and essential factor at the heart of each Christian's life. It is the essential path to heaven. All are called to heaven; all are called to be God's 'darlings' then; all should thus be specialists in love. But who they are and why at the end it is not all of them is a mystery which cannot be solved by human distinctions. We are brought back to the Mystery of Providence: many are called but few are chosen. (cf. *Scale*, ii, 32.)

But the mixed life led by so many Christians 'in the world' or in religious orders devoted half to prayer and half to 'works' is a noble estate of the Christian realm in which the angels will find many a cherished darling of God, a true contemplative who has built a cloister about his soul and therein puts all his intent and finds his deepest delights in converse with God and in God with his friends.