

A WORD ABOUT MYSTICISM

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*"Arise, make haste, my love,
My dove, my beautiful one, and come.
For winter is now past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers have appeared in our land,
The time of pruning is come:
The voice of the turtle is heard in our land:
The fig tree hath put forth her green figs:
The vines in flower yield their sweet smell.
Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come:
My dove in the clefts of the rock,
In the hollow place of the wall,
Shew me thy face,
Let thy voice sound in my ears:
For thy voice is sweet, and thy face comely."
—Canticle of Canticles, ii, 10-14.*



IN the sixteenth century there was waged a war in Christendom between those who professed to have simple, practical views on dogma and ceremony on one hand, and the old "superstitions" which had accumulated in the Church, on the other. It was bitterly fought, involving entire nations, and we of the present generation are far enough away to fairly evaluate its result. It is not a question of declaring one party victorious, because as in most wars of its kind, no one won very much—but the net result throughout Christendom is seen now in the godless tendencies of modern culture.

It is only assigning part of the reason to assert that greater educational facilities and the advance of science are drawing the world from God. Education in itself means nothing; it is the quality of education that matters and post-Reformation education is but a by-product of the movement. Science is merely weighing and measuring; the philosophy on which its conclusions are built is the determining factor in its advance.

It is the Reformation which slowly, almost imperceptibly, hardened the face of God, and made lesser goods seem preferable to the stern Judge of Calvin, the Jehovah-like ruler of Puritanism, the Being Who sought no sacrifice but only cold belief of Luther. Man by nature turns to that which is his greatest good as infallibly as the

compass needle points to the north, so it is not surprising that when the reward for virtue was hurtled millions of light years away out into the void, man turned to tangible, comprehensible things around him.

The sacramentalism of Catholicism, so necessary to enable a finite mind to commune with the Infinite, was torn from those who needed it most and they were left in vague wonderings. It is not accidental that there was no Protestant Michelangelo or Dante. Such men would have been branded with being artistic—perhaps flippant in their treatment of the Absolute, which to be kept absolute had to be kept far enough away.

The essentially Catholic idea of the Church as the Spouse of Christ, so beautifully expressed in the *Canticle of Canticles*, was repudiated by those more righteous and proper than the disciples of the Master. Then was left an emotionally starved people, which had cast off "superstition," to stage annual revivals, as primitive as the religious festivals of the aborigines.

What is it that was torn out of the Christian world? Not goodness nor justice nor anything of that sort, for the tenets of the new creeds demanded, at least in their origins, a high moral standard. It was the acute consciousness of the presence of a God Who loved and forgave His erring creatures. Mediaeval man might not have been a paragon of virtue, but his world was deocentric. His God was not an entity to be called upon in times of stress, a bulwark of righteousness to be sworn by in law courts, a being who in order to be properly revered for the most part ought to be left austere alone. He was on the contrary the center of all activity, and even those who were rebellious, were professedly rebellious against the same God as their neighbors served.

It is not hard to understand in our day the reasons for the diminution of the numbers of those whose ardent love of God made them impervious to the commonplace things of earth. Our new post-Reformation background has so estranged the Cause of our beings that as a people we no longer know Him intimately enough to love Him spontaneously and without a sense of duty. Our critical scholars are weighing His revelations in their fingers and boiling them down in the cauldron of rationalism, lest God might have offended His creatures' sense of propriety.

So it is that those who loved their Creator with the abandon that earthlings love the clay about them have been looked at with questioning glances in these later years. Psychiatry, with its advances in the fields of delusions, megalomania, and the rest, is boasting that it

would have "cured" many of the great contemplative saints of the Church.

Yet there is need for those who have seen beyond the veil in the scheme of spiritual economy. Nor is the process any more unnatural than is love. If man is not surprised to find a particular woman with very limited perfections assuming such a place of importance in his life that his every act is performed in the light of the pleasure or displeasure it will cause her, he should not be surprised to feel a more powerful attraction on the part of God if once he could penetrate the mists and see. No, mysticism is not a very unnatural thing—but it is a very precious gift.

Then what is mysticism. Dom Cuthbert Butler, in the *Prologue* to his *Western Mysticism* has this to say: "There is probably no more misused word in these days than mysticism. It has come to be applied to many things of many kinds; to theosophy and Christian science; to spiritualism and clairvoyance; to demonology and witchcraft; to occultism and magic; to weird psychical experiences if only they have some religious color; to revelations and visions; to otherworldliness, or even mere dreaminess and impracticability in the affairs of life; to poetry and painting and music of which the motif is unobvious and vague. It has been identified with the attitude of the religious mind which cares not for dogma or doctrine, for church or sacraments; it has been identified also with a certain outlook on the world—a seeing God in nature and recognizing that the material creation in various ways symbolizes spiritual realities; a beautiful and true conception and one that was dear to St. Francis of Assisi, but which is not mysticism according to its historical meaning. And on the other side it has been watered down; it has been said that the love of God is mysticism; or that mysticism is only the Christian life lived on a higher level; or that it is Roman Catholic piety in an extreme form."

Then if all these things be excluded, what is Mysticism? It is the state of one who is in the Unitive Way. There is a certain inadequacy about a metaphysical definition of the subject in question unless the respective terms used be in turn defined, but these striking words of Augustine may serve as a satisfactory descriptive one: "My mind in the flash of a trembling glance came to Absolute Being—That Which Is."¹ It has also been called "a direct conscious contact of the soul with Transcendental reality,"² and again, "the soul's possible union in this life with Absolute Reality."³

¹ Conf. vii, 23.

² A. B. Sharpe, *Mysticism*, p. 74.

³ Rufus Jones, in *Hasting's Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* ix, 83.

Granting that this state exists, is it accessible to all? In other words in what degree is it a free gift of God and in what degree can it be merited. The answer to this question depends on the importance of the passive element, and here we find a long-standing dispute among theologians. It is impossible to develop either thesis here, but we might clear the ground by saying that the term mysticism is one of recent origin and that the literature of the subject concerns itself with 'contemplation.' Now contemplation in its widest sense is the prayer of simple regard or of simplicity. It is also called acquired Contemplation and stands above Affective Prayer, Mental Prayer, and Vocal Prayer in the order named. However, Farges in his *Mystical Phenomena*⁴ brings out at length the impossibility of reducing contemplation in the *strict sense*—the phenomena to which Augustine referred—to any of these four forms or to a higher degree of any of them, so by inference we must place it elsewhere—among the graces freely given of God.⁵

St. Augustine's "In a flash," St. Theresa's repeated testimony, and, in fact, the accounts of the experience of all the mystics make it necessary to stress the passive aspect of the soul, yet, by another definition, it is the state of the soul in the Unitive Way and that implies that the soul has made the progress in sanctity of clearing the ground in the Purgative Way, and of building solidly in hope and good works in the Illuminative Way. So the active phase or the part which concerns itself with merit, seems to be essential but restricted to a preparation. We have to reconcile such occurrences as the sudden conversion and vision of St. Paul, but that seems to have been granted to him for the sake of others at the beginning, and his subsequent cooperation brought him into the foremost rank of mystics.

Another feature not to be overlooked is the consciousness of the experience. Otherwise all actions performed under the influence of grace might be confused with mystical experience which is manifestly not the case.

Then, is the presence of God perceived by the senses as a white light in the darkness or a warm breath in the cold? Not at all. St. Thomas says, "Contemplation is a simple intellectual intuition of truth . . . ending in an affective movement of the heart."⁶ From an analysis of this text aided by light from others of the Angelic Doctor we understand the intuition to be purely intellectual excluding

⁴ New York, 1926, Chapter 1 and 2.

⁵ Gratia gratum faciens est per quam homo Deo conjungitur.—S. Thomas Aquinas; *Summa Theologica*; I-II, q. cxi; a. 1. *

⁶ *Summa Theol.* II-II q. clxxx, a. 3; ad 1; ad 3.

all effort at discursive reasoning, the object of which is attained directly, which is real, which is transcendent, which is divine. It is very difficult to express by analogy that which has no fitting analogue in this life, but the theory of the theologians is not builded on an individual case but upon the experience of hundreds of men and women all drilled in the same school of humility and reticence. The effects in all are much the same; there is an acute consciousness in the soul of the mystic of the presence of his God, Whom he loves the more ardently and in Whose pervading presence all his actions are performed.

Is the state perpetual or transient? Not only is it transient but the period of contemplation is relatively short. St. Thomas holds that there is no intrinsic repugnance in a perpetual state of contemplation but it seems to oppose the laws which govern the relation of soul and body.⁷ Nor can we believe it to be irreconcilable with a very active life if we consider the activity of St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, St. Catherine of Siena. Contemplation is not a running away from the things of life, but rather a living in the realm of fundamentals—seeing causes as well as effects.

One more question remains to be asked and it is asked with hesitation. Is the day of the mystic past? With the advance of education, those who are "reasoning" God out of existence are becoming more numerous. With the spread of post-Reformation culture, which constitutes our American background, even Catholics, whose heritage is for the most part unimpaired, cannot fail to observe a spirit of scepticism seeping in. With the accumulation of scientific half-truths, even the "elect" are less inclined to regard the mysterious ways of God as fitting into the great scheme of things.

Still as long as God in His infinite goodness makes man to His likeness and puts in his heart a yearning for that which is good, He Who is Infinite Good will never be without those who find the sum of their happiness in Him. And it is to these, who are so unsophisticated as to find more happiness in "That Which Is" than in food and raiment that the world must eventually turn for its real reformation and final salvation.

⁷ II-II, q. clxxx, a 8.