

THE ORTHODOXY OF SUSO AND TAULER

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BLESSED Henry Suso and John Tauler are two of the outstanding figures of orthodox mysticism, two of the most penetrating spiritual lights of their time. Both were Germans, born towards the end of the thirteenth century; Henry Suso at Constance, a city situated on the charming shores of Lake Constance; John Tauler in Strassburg, an ancient episcopal town nestled on the green slopes of Alsace. They were fellow-citizens of the Holy Roman Empire and brethren in the Order of Saint Dominic. Besides, Suso and Tauler were united in their chivalrous devotion to a lofty, self-sacrificing ideal. They aspired to climb to the celestial heights where reason bows down to simple, holy faith; thither they strove to lead their fellow men, too. Through their labors thus to beautify and uplift the souls of men Suso and Tauler left an indelible imprint on the pages of the Church's history.

However, they were destined to be misunderstood. Contemporaries, depending solely on experience and reason, incapable of understanding Suso's and Tauler's vision of spiritual reality, badly misinterpreted their teaching on the fulness of Truth. Then, a century later, Protestant mystics purported to base their doctrines upon Suso and Tauler without ever having grasped the fundamentals of the mysticism which the Dominicans had expounded.

Protestant mysticism of the Renaissance period as represented by Sebastian Franck (1500-1545), Valentine Weigel (1533-1588), and Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) dared to build upon the premises elaborated by Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, and John Tauler. Some of Eckhart's teachings may have been accountable for errors.¹ But the Protestant mystics, if they had proceeded logically, certainly could not have deduced their conclusions from what Suso and Tauler taught. Franck, for instance, presented the vision of an invisible spiritual Church, universal in its scope. He denied a visible teaching magisterium by advocating uncontrolled freedom to all kinds of opinions. A pure spiritualist and subjectivist, he defied any form of external worship legislated by authority. To Franck "the historical

¹ A critical edition, *Opera Omnia Latina de Maître Eckhart*, is now in progress.

Christ merely impressed upon the world that which the individual conscience already dictated. He who follows this inner voice belongs to the true Church, be he a Papist, Lutheran, member of some other sect, Mohammedan, Jew, etc.”² But the truth is that Suso and Tauler never protested against the Holy See, although the Papal Interdict by Pope John XXII against Louis of Bavaria hampered their activity extensively for twenty-six years.

According to Weigel the universe could be explained only in a purely idealistic way. Therefore, the world was to him not a complex of divinely governed material forces but was itself the expression of the supreme spiritual principle. Suso and Tauler never taught Pantheism. Suso, for example, stands on sound Scholastic ground when he says: “The essence of the stone is its own being, and its being is not God’s being, for the stone is not God, nor is God the stone, although the stone, as well as all creatures, has from God what it is.”³

The third principal Protestant mystic was Jakob Böhme. He insisted that his speculative power sprang from a direct inward illumination alone, by which he saw to the bottom of all mysteries.⁴ He also claimed that he beheld the very being of God, and that all nature lay unveiled before him. “Behind the visible, material, temporal universe there is an invisible, immaterial, eternal universe which is the Mother of the one that we see. This unoriginated matrix, ground, or abyss eternally evolves or differentiates into Divine personality within, and differentiates outwardly into visible and invisible worlds of matter and life and consciousness, through which the principles of darkness and light are revealed in temporal forms. Both root principles—a no and a yes—are present in every person, and the destiny of every soul is settled by its choice of principle. The light or love principle—the heart of God—has been perfectly revealed in the Incarnation of Christ. To be ‘saved’ is to be united with his life, to live in his love, to die to the isolated self, and to rise by a new birth into his spirit and power and become a branch of Christ’s life-tree. Salvation is not the result of opinions, or belief in creeds, or of the performance of outward sacraments, or of membership in an outward Church, but rather it is the result of an inward union of heart with the revealed life of God, of an Abba-crying spirit in the soul; in short, salvation is the life of God brought to a personal, conscious expression in the life of a man, so that ‘the Lily Twig’ blos-

² Von Hefele, in *Kirchenlexicon*, Freiburg i. Br., 1886, IV.

³ A. Baumgartner, S.J., in *Kirchenlexicon*, Freiburg i. Br., 1886, V.

⁴ Cfr. Deussen, *J. Böhme über sein Leben und seine Philosophie*, Kiel, 1897.

soms in a new individual form.”⁵ Such doctrine was foreign to Suso and Tauler. They emphatically stated that no man, despite the most perfect adherence to God, could be transported into the subsistence of God and could discard, as it were, his own essence.

There is, in short, absolutely no substantial affinity between the mysticism of Suso and Tauler, and that of the Protestants. Protestant mysticism, as we have seen, was logically an outcome of pantheistic primary conceptions. It negated all ecclesiastical authority; it minimized and often denied the efficacy of the sacraments; it practically did away with the Messiahship of Christ. A direct union of the soul with God, without the mediation of Church or priesthood or external worship, was the doctrine advocated by Protestant mysticism.

On the other hand, the Catholic mysticism of Suso and Tauler had for its object not the annihilation or absorption of the creature into God, but the contemplation of God, Who, by extraordinary grace and special illumination, becomes present to the created mind. “Mystical contemplation,” said Tauler in one of his sermons, “is not a consequence of natural personality, but the ‘clothing upon’ which the Spirit of God gives of His free bounty to the created spirit.”⁶

Henry Suso and John Tauler were reformers inasmuch as they protested against the sterile dialecticism that was disgracing the seats of learning in the 14th Century; inasmuch as they protested against the folly of men who were humanizing God. In their campaign against such perversity the “Fratres Docti,” as Suso and Tauler were called, traversed Swabia, Alsace, and Switzerland preaching a return to God through love. They practiced what they preached. In their methods they did not discard Scholasticism; their sermons were Thomistic in principle always. The movement they started and guided was intellectual; its terminus was the contemplation of Truth.⁷

The sermons left us by these two men are rich in thought, rich in lyricism. They are also recognized as classics in German literature. Suso and Tauler were appreciated by the great men of the Church who followed them. Saint Robert Bellarmine called Blessed Henry Suso *Vir piissimus et devotissimus*; and Gorres, the Catholic leader of modern Germany, spoke of him as *the Minnesinger of the Eternal Wisdom*. Saint Peter Canisius referred to John Tauler as *Doctor Illuminatus*.

⁵ Rufus M. Jones, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, New York, 1917. IX.

⁶ John Tauler, O.P., *Sermons and Conferences*. Translated and edited by W. Elliott, C.S.P., Washington, D.C., 1910.

⁷ Cfr. *Christian Spirituality*, by P. Pourrat. (New York, 1924). II.

The heritage left us by Blessed Henry Suso is more extensive than that bequeathed by John Tauler. The latter's works consist mostly of sermons, which have not as yet appeared in a complete critical edition.⁸ Suso's writings have been placed under seven titles.⁹ In his first book, unnamed but similar to an autobiography, he offered a practical ascetical direction to perfection. With his second, *Little Book of the Eternal Wisdom*, he attempted to resuscitate the spiritual devotions and meditations which were, in his time, much neglected by the people. This was the best known German devotional work for the next two centuries and enjoyed a greater demand than Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. In the *Little Book of Truth*, Suso attacked the errors carried into mysticism by the Beghards and the Brothers of the Free Spirit.¹⁰ The fourth book, an epistolary collection, contains eleven of Suso's letters which treat of asceticism. The fifth, likewise, is a collection of his correspondence with Elsbeth Stegel, a famous Dominican nun and a pupil of Blessed Henry. His sermons have been grouped under the sixth heading. The seventh work is known as the *Horologium Sapientiae*. It is a free Latin translation of the *Little Book of the Eternal Wisdom*, rendered by Suso himself for his Master General, Hugh of Vancemain.

Suso's earthly remains rest in Ulm, a venerable city on the blue Danube. Strassbourg treasures the bones of John Tauler. Since their deaths much has changed in the homeland of these two apostles. Today Swabia still suffers from the effects of the coercive policy which was developed by the Reformation, *cujus regio, ejus religio*. The country of Alsace is now French territory; hence the classic sermons of Tauler have lost some of their prestige. The mission of Blessed Henry Suso and John Tauler will not be forgotten, however, in the furor of political change; and, since they were true apostles of the One True God, their influence will never die.

⁸ *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Attributed to John Tauler, Dominican Friar. Translated by A. P. J. Cruikshank (New York, 1925).

⁹ Edited by H. Denifle, O.P., München, 1880.

¹⁰ The Beghards and the Brothers of the Free Spirit were communities of lay people who, disregarding ecclesiastical control, were guilty of heretical tendencies and misled many by their outward piety.