

II

TRIPARTITE ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Saint Paul: Body, Soul, Spirit

The distinction between a moral life and a properly spiritual life is frequently presented in the course of the Christian tradition in the form of a hierarchy. It is apt to be based on a tripartite anthropology, recognizable across the diversity of vocabularies and in very diverse cultural milieux. This tripartition is obviously not to be understood as implying three substances, or even three “faculties”, in man: it is discerned rather as a threefold zone of activity, from the periphery to the center, or, to use a traditional and irreplaceable word, to the “heart”.¹ It is opposed to a more current, bipartite anthropology, which seems to offer many thinkers, many “sages”, whether Christian or not, a sufficient framework or support. It is opposed to that, or rather, as we shall see, it completes it.

In many authors, in many periods, this anthropology is connected explicitly to several texts in Scripture, Old and New Testament, and more particularly to a text from Saint Paul, quoted with predilection. When concluding his First Letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle addressed a wish to them: “May the God of peace make you perfect and holy, and may your entire being, spirit, soul and body, be kept safe and blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th 5:23, Jerusalem Bible translation).² This verse has passed into certain liturgical texts: thus, in the *Liber mozarabicus sacramentorum* (Férotin, no. 18); and also in

the Roman liturgy of today (*Lectio brevis* of Thursday Compline). Yet it seems to have embarrassed a number of modern commentators, who take pains, in various ways, as if it were an obligation for them, to take all significance away from it.

For some, it is only a formula that was current, commonplace, at that time, and there would be no point in seeking a precise meaning for it or in taking it into consideration in the exposition of Pauline doctrine. Such is the case with Ferdinand Prat, Martin Dibelius and George Findlay. Others make the observation that “it is the only place in the Letters where these three elements figure side by side”; such is the position of D. Buzy and Dewailly-Rigaux.³ Still others tell us we would be wrong to believe “that this text implies a tripartite division in the Pauline anthropology”; so it is with W. David Stacey, who takes John A. T. Robinson as support for this observation. With prudence, Robinson only disputed the fact that in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, it is a matter of three “very distinct” elements; Paul’s language, he observed, not without some plausibility, “is much too fluid for that”.⁴ Stacey concludes from this that in the Apostle’s phrase, one need only retain the two words ὅλοτελεῖς (*per omnia*) and ὁλόκληρον (*integer*); these two words alone “indicate the true sense: Paul emphasizes the entirety of this preservation” that he wishes for his correspondents; “It is the whole man who is guarded; and spirit, soul and body simply underline the totality of this conception. . . . Man under each of his aspects, man in his totality, is to be guarded.”⁵ Stacey does not wonder (and it is the only thing that interests us here) why, in view of expressing this totality of man, Paul insists on enumerating three elements, or three “aspects”, or, if you like, three terms, rather than two or four.

The note added to the text by the Jerusalem Bible constitutes a happy exception. Without doubt, it retains, by

uniting them, the last two of the three considerations that we have just pointed out: "This is the only place where a tripartite division of man is mentioned in Paul, who, moreover, has no systematic and perfectly coherent 'anthropology' ";⁶ which, taken literally, is incontestable. Only it does not stop there; it adds rather judiciously: "Besides the body and the soul, we see appear here the spirit, which can be either the divine principle of new life in Christ or, rather, the highest part of man, which is itself open to the Spirit", with a reference to Romans 5:5 and 1:9, where the reader will be able to find a mass of references, Pauline and other, whose eclecticism does not claim to take the place of commentary. Which shows at the very least that the wish of the Apostle for the Thessalonians, in its literal sense, was taken seriously: which constitutes at least a happy, if not the only, exception.

A more recent author, J. W. C. Wand, after having said: "There can be no doubt that Paul speaks from time to time of the body, soul and spirit, as if from his point of view psychology were based on a trichotomy", observes immediately that "at other times, however, he speaks in a more popular way of the soul and the body, in the way we do today."⁷ A curious reflection for more than one reason, about which (taken in its French translation) we will make only two remarks: Paul does not have in mind, as the author seems at least to insinuate, a "psychological" trichotomy; and, on the other hand, contrary to what we read in Prat, Dibelius and others, here we see that it is no longer the trichotomy of the Letter to the Thessalonians but the simple soul-body dichotomy that is declared commonplace and "popular".

Still more recently, E. Schweizer went back to the idea of a popular, and consequently uninteresting, trichotomy: "In the famous passage from 1 Thessalonians 5:23, it is appropriate to understand *pneuma*, alongside *psyche* and

soma, as an element of man above all in the sense of popular anthropology. The benediction formula is traditional, perhaps liturgical, and does not signify anything much about the notion of man in Paul. The combination may be chance, as in Deuteronomy 6:5.”⁸

Different exegeses, which may contradict each other in detail, but which nearly all tend in the same direction.

It is not very difficult to detect the reasons for it. For some interpreters, it is above all, it seems, the desire not to find Saint Paul in opposition to “our classical doctrine”, as D. Buzy (170) said, a doctrine that counts only two elements in man: matter and spirit. Is this doctrine, which is guaranteed by the threefold heritage of Scholasticism, Cartesianism and, for France, the university spiritualism instituted by Victor Cousin, not imposed on every well-made mind? But, for the most part, another reason seems determinative. It is a kind of phobia that is quite widespread today: the phobia of “Platonism”. Yet—and this is something that might seem strange—if the Pauline text makes us think of Plato, it is not always because we read him in the Letter to the Thessalonians: it is, in more than one case, because we find him quoted by Origen. Which accounts for the reflex action of distrust. Does not Scripture in fact have, for Origen, “like the human composite, a body, a soul and a spirit”? And is this distinction not “manifestly inspired by the trichotomy of Plato”?⁹ It is in a similar way that an excellent historian of monastic life, Dom Adalbert de Vogue, on the subject of Origen, evoked “the old Platonic trichotomy at first assumed by Saint Paul”.¹⁰ The Alexandrian, as everyone knows in advance, is a “Platonist”; but Saint Paul himself cannot be one! If, therefore, as Father Ferdinand Prat said, this Origenian trichotomy presupposes “a false psychology, since the soul and spirit of man are not distinct principles”,¹¹ one can very well attribute this “false psychology” to Origen but not “accuse” Saint Paul of it, for

the aforesaid trichotomy truly constitutes an item of indictment: Has not Saint Justin, too, been “accused” of distinguishing three elements in man?¹² It is therefore necessary that the same text, the same words not have at all the same meaning in the Apostle as they have in the Alexandrian, even if their primary source is common, or at least that, under the pen of the first of the two, they be only an ἅπαξ, common and unimportant.

The phobia of “Platonism”, in any case, can be discovered in several of our exegetes.¹³ Hence the veritable acrobatics in the TOB translation [*Traduction Oecumenique de la Bible*] of this Pauline verse and the explanations given in the end to justify it. The translation: “May the God of peace himself make you perfect and holy, and may your spirit, your soul and your body be kept perfectly safe in order to be blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The originality of this translation consists in the fact that the word ὁλόκληρον, which in Paul preceded the tripartite enumeration, is shifted so as to follow it and, in addition, transformed into an adverb, so that the two words that come next: ἀμέμπως. . . τηρηθείη (in the singular, since the subject was ὁλόκληρον ὑμῶν) become (in the plural): “be kept perfectly safe in order to be blameless”. To tell the truth, that does not change much, and cannot change much, in the obvious meaning of the text. The latter could be changed only by the, obviously impossible, suppression of one of the three terms of the enumeration. But this little ingenuity on the part of the translators allows them to introduce in a note a contorted exegesis with an intended goal about which they make no secret:

Some understand: “May your entire being, that is, spirit, soul and body. . . .” This division of the human person into three elements would be that of Greek philosophy. It is not usual in Paul, and this verse, understood in this sense, would be a completely isolated text in the New Testament. In order to avoid this difficulty, others have understood the first term of the enumeration, “Your spirit”, to be the equivalent of “yourself”; they then

translate: “may your whole person, soul and body”, thus recovering the representation that Judaism and Paul had of the human person. We have rendered the sentence in a way that makes a simple enumeration of terms apparent, each of which can designate, for Paul, the entire man, whether it is a matter of *pneuma*, *psychè* or *soma*. There is no need at all, then, for an explanation borrowed from a Greek anthropology in three components, which, moreover, are never expressed with these three terms.¹⁴

One could not better display a stratagem. One could not be more subtle, more sophisticated, more inconsistent, too, but at the same time more honest, in the end more clear and, in the final proposition, more precise.

But here is another strange thing. This unfortunate trichotomy, so suspect because of the “Platonist” Origen, this trichotomy that some would like to be able to forbid in reading Saint Paul for fear of having to admit that the Apostle, at least once, “Platonizes”, this accursed trichotomy that some strive, for want of something better, to exorcise by making it commonplace, which one finds in Paul or in Origen or in anyone else, has nothing Platonic about it.

We can first of all take this on the word of some good exegetes, those at least who are not hypnotized by the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. Do we not recognize, for example, the mark of Hellenic influence, and more precisely of Platonic opinion, on the *Book of Wisdom*, a little before the Christian era, in the fact that certain passages of this book enunciate or presuppose a bipartite division of the human composite, a division “more conformed to Greek customs than to Semitic”?¹⁵ Do they not strive, with reason, moreover, to show that the recognized use of “Platonic doctrines about the distinction of body and soul” and about the immortality of the latter takes nothing away from the biblical foundation of a thought that is not that of a philosopher but that of a wise man of Israel, “nourished by the Old Testament”?¹⁶

If it happens that one has not read much of Plato, one can also go back to some authorities on him: what one finds in his work is totally different from what one finds in Saint Paul. There is a certain psychological trichotomy, in other words, a tripartite division of the soul: reasonable, irascible and concupiscible. So it is in the *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*. According to *Phaedrus*, the θυμός and the ἐπιθυμητικόν are the two horses of the chariot led by the νοῦς. Origen, who is familiar with this division, is very careful not to make it his own; he observes, on the contrary, that it “is not confirmed by the authority of Holy Scripture” and, for this reason, on two occasions, he rejects it.¹⁷ The translators of the TOB were very close to perceiving all that since at the end of their laborious explanations they finally tell us that Paul had undoubtedly borrowed nothing “from a three-part Greek anthropology”, given the fact that the latter is never expressed in Pauline terms. But why then this fear, which has made them shrink from the simplest translation?

It is not correct, moreover, to say that the text of 1 Thessalonians is an isolated text in Scripture and in Paul himself. Undoubtedly it has been unduly compared to a verse from Deuteronomy: “You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength”, to the sole end of insinuating that only the number three was here and there to be retained, as signifying simply a totality;¹⁸ it is enough to read these two texts to see that they are not comparable. But, on the contrary, when the Letter to the Hebrews celebrates the Word of God, who “penetrates to the division of soul and spirit” (Heb 4:12), it is inspired without any doubt by an anthropology similar to that of Paul. And one can hardly maintain that the formula of the latter is a mere pleonasm, “for other passages show clearly that the Apostle, despite all the elasticity or ‘fluidity’ of his terminology, distinguishes

clearly between the phenomena that indicate the body, soul and spirit.”¹⁹ He does so in the First Letter to the Corinthians, when twice he contrasts the unspiritual, or natural [*psychique*], man and the spiritual man.²⁰ W. David Stacey has maintained that these latter texts cannot correspond to that of the Letter to the Thessalonians; of the two conceptions in conflict, it would be necessary on the basis of all evidence to choose the one later in date, as expressing the mature thought of the Apostle:²¹ the antagonism of natural and spiritual would be substituted for the hierarchical union of soul and spirit. But here again, the desire to eliminate or at least to neutralize a text deemed embarrassing seems to us to have led Dr. Stacey astray. It is very evident that the text of 1 Thessalonians is far from having the same significance as that of 1 Corinthians; that does not prevent the thought of Saint Paul from remaining coherent from one letter to another. The soul (the *psyche*) is never for its part the object, in itself, of a pejorative appreciation. If, in another context, he is severe or not very admiring of the man he calls “natural”, it is insofar as the latter is *only* natural, insofar as he closes himself—or remains still provisionally closed²²—to the Spirit of God, who would (or will) make of him a “spiritual” man, conferring on him thus his “fullness”, as the Letter to the Ephesians will express it (5:18). The natural man of 1 Corinthians 2 can have a certain “human wisdom” that is not uniquely “carnal wisdom” (cf. 2 Cor 1:12), which does not lack all value but understands nothing “of the things of the Spirit of God”: for him, they are “folly”. To this “wise man”, to this “cultivated man”, to this “man of reason here below”, the Apostle contrasts the “wisdom of God” manifested in Christ.²³

It would be no more appropriate to bring out here the Pauline opposition, in a still more radical sense, between the flesh and the spirit. The carnal man is not the one who would stop, so to speak, at a first landing, that of the flesh,

which is to say, in such a case, at things of the body, but the one who has fallen into evil. Body and flesh (it is really necessary to repeat this, since people still seem to be mistaken about this at times) are in no way synonymous or even comparable and do not belong to categories of the same order. In the thinking of Saint Paul, the “flesh” has “a close solidarity with sin”; it is this congenital weakness that makes the human soul fall into the slavery of sin. The “spirit”, its antagonist, is “the state of freedom in which it blossoms when it has been faithful to the Spirit of God, who attracts it and comes to dwell within it”. There is no question here of any gradation, but of opposition, pure and simple. Saint Paul does not speak there of any duality whatever in the structure of the human being, he does not correct a tripartite anthropology by another bipartite one. For him, flesh and spirit never designate two components of human nature—like body and soul would be—but always states—contrasted states— of the whole man.^{[24](#)}

If one wants, therefore, to find a certain Greek antecedent of philosophical significance for the Pauline trichotomy, it would not be appropriate to look for it on Plato’s side. It would rather be in Aristotle. The Stagirite in fact acknowledges in man, an animated body, the presence of a superior element, the spirit (νοῦς), the principle of intellectual life, immortal and divine. Nevertheless, the parallel takes a sharp turn: for there would be at least one major difference. While Aristotle spoke of a νοῦς, Paul speaks of a πνεῦμα. Now, as we know, the difference is not merely one of terminology. It is no longer a question of a simple nuance of thought. The substitution of one term for another was, besides, not made by Paul alone: it had already been carried out a little earlier by Philo. Friendly toward Hellenism, Philo “was imbued with the doctrine of the contemplative *nous*”;^{[25](#)} nevertheless, in the passages where he comments on the creation account, he does not

speaking of νοῦς but of πνεῦμα. God, he says, breathes into man a *pneuma*; not content with making him simply alive, composed of soul and body, he gave him part of his spirit; this is what Moses teaches by saying that he made him in his image. This *pneuma*, in man, is the principle of a higher life, the place of communication with God.²⁶ Now such is also one of the meanings of *pneuma* in Saint Paul. It is not in Greece that we must search for its origin but in the Bible.

Father Joseph Huby has said it in a few words, which more recent authors would benefit from rereading: In the Pauline verse, “famous because of the trichotomy spirit, soul, body, of the human composite, some thought to see a borrowing from Plato or Aristotle. Both do acknowledge, in fact, three principles in man; but if the latter two of those coincide with those²⁷ enumerated by Saint Paul, the first is different. In Plato, it is the *nous*, the intellectual soul. . . , considered, moreover, by Aristotle as separable. Instead of νοῦς, Saint Paul puts spirit, or *pneuma*, here; with him as in Philo, this is a Semitic term, suggested by the account in Genesis (2:7), where it is said that God breathed into the nostrils of the man a breath of life. . . .”²⁸ The Pleiade Bible has taken the same explanation, which seems imperative to us. “Spirit, soul, body”, recalls Michel Leturmy in a note to his translation, “such is, with the Semites, the most common division with respect to the human composite.”²⁹ In a note to the translation of Matthew 6:25, the same author explains that the Greek ψυχή translates the Aramaean *nāfshâ*, breath of the throat, animal life (the “soul”), through opposition to πνεῦμα, which translates the Aramaean *roûhâ*, divine respiration, breath of the nostrils (the “spirit”): see Genesis 2:7.³⁰

We do not believe it would be enough, however, to trace the words of the Pauline triad simply to those of the Bible. The Apostle’s anthropology is also based, in part, on his experience acquired from life in the Spirit of God. There are

numerous commentators who, in consequence, consider the Pauline πνεῦμα to designate in reality, not something of man that would be higher than his soul, but the human soul insofar as it is informed by grace, participating, as the Second Letter of Peter (1:4) says, in an effective way in the divine nature, united to the very essence of God by the coming of the divine Spirit into it.³¹ The ψυχή in this case would be not only “sensible life” but also the higher reality of man as man, that is, although Buzy translates it in an overly intellectualist language, “reason without grace”.³² This would be “the state of the specifically living being, which is inherent in man as such”.³³ So too, schematically, Bonnetain: “The three terms come back to the following: grace, soul and body.”³⁴ Father André-Jean Festugière is clearly opposed to this interpretation, which also proceeds in some from the fear of attributing to the Apostle an anthropology judged to be “Platonic”. For him, the anthropology of Saint Paul is undoubtedly trichotomic; the *pneuma* in question in the wish addressed to the Thessalonians, as in the texts mentioned above from the First Letter to the Corinthians—and as, in addition, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of it—is not the Holy Spirit, but actually a part of man: “the movement of the phrase, the two καί, the insistence on saying that we must be completely, in our whole being, under the divine safeguard” are the proof of it.³⁵ Besides, if this *pneuma* is not itself the divine life realized in man, it is indeed in him the center of the higher life: moral, religious, mystical; it is the “center of the Christian life”, which is not a matter of feelings but of faith.³⁶

Some hesitate to choose between these two contradictory interpretations, even if it means apparently contradicting themselves in their explanatory formulas. They are of the feeling that the thought of Paul is profound and complex; they would like to lose nothing of it but do not see well how

to explain it in our language in a coherent fashion. Such is Father Joseph Huby, following the passage we have quoted: "For Paul, the *pneuma* is more precisely the spirit of man insofar as influenced, informed and heightened by divine grace"; it is the "principle of thinking, center of moral and religious life and summit of the soul. The original (biblical) concept of the *pneuma*, the human soul breathes from God, is magnificently deepened; the *pneuma* designates the reason informed by grace, man insofar as he becomes spirit, participating in the nature of God; through the spirit, the *voũç*, becomes capable of conquering the flesh. . . , it is united to the very essence of God through the coming of the divine Spirit."³⁷ In this essay, somewhat awkward in its attempts at reconciliation, in which a fourth term (*voũç*) is introduced, we see to which side the author is leaning. We will say as much of Max Alain Chevallier, who, with respect to 1 Corinthians 14:14-16, after having noted for us "the freely equivocal use of the word *pneuma* by Paul", seems to restrict immediately the significance of his observation by saying that this word "designates without describing it the inner man filled with the presence of God".³⁸ Karl Barth, in his *Dogmatics*, escapes such oscillations only thanks to his general doctrine, which prohibits him from "reifying" in a way, from giving a proper consistency to the human spirit considered in its relation to God. After having justly observed that the *ruah* of the Old Testament does not correspond to the πνεῦμα ἅγιον of the New,³⁹ but, insofar as a "anthropological notion", to the πνεῦμα of the address to the Thessalonians, Barth makes haste to add: "On the other hand, one cannot assert without reservation that the Old Testament and the New refer to a trichotomy of the human being. For both, the human being in himself is body and soul, earthly form and earthly life; but the body possesses a soul, and its earthly form is that of a living being, in the measure in which the human being receives the spirit and

safeguards it." This spirit must, however, be conceived, "not as a property of man, but as a gratuitous gift", which at death must be returned to God and which persists, "which God withdraws from him or grants to him".⁴⁰ What must be maintained above all, according to Barth, is that man "is in no way 'related to God' (Gunkel); he has simply been awakened to his proper existence by the breath that God breathes into him and which allows him to breathe himself. What is he and what does he possess that he has not received and that does not differentiate him from God, since it is God who has created him?"⁴¹

The human *pneuma* of which Paul speaks would thus be both an element so little constitutive of his being that God can take it back from him and a created element that differentiates him from God. Such is the Barthian paradox. Without having to take him literally, perhaps we would have to unite ourselves with the "spirit" of it. Would it in fact be necessary to choose between two contradictory interpretations that confront each other or resign ourselves to a [false] harmonization that itself does not avoid contradiction? An expression used by Saint Paul himself, 1 Corinthians 2:11, could suggest an intermediate solution to us: "Who therefore among men knows the secrets of a man if not the spirit of the man which is in him (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ)?" This *pneuma* is certainly not the Holy Spirit, since Paul adds: "Similarly, no one knows the secrets of God except the Spirit of God." Yet it does not appear completely like a constituent part of man as such, like the body or the soul: after having said "the spirit of the man", Paul corrects himself in a way to say: "the spirit who is in him", which marks a nuance of capital importance. Thus, what par excellence makes a man, what constitutes man in his worth among the beings of this world, much more, what makes him a being superior to the world, would be an element that, rather than being "of man", would be

“in man”. There is, it seems to us, in this Pauline πνεῦμα the same kind of ambiguity, notional because real, as in the divine “image” or divine “breath” of creation, such as Christian tradition interprets them. From one author to another, and sometimes in the same author, the same ambiguity will give place to oscillations, which will not go, however, to the point of compromising, before a rather recent date, the idea of a tripartite anthropology. We conclude, with a recent interpreter, that the Pauline concept of πνεῦμα is a concept “of which our modern anthropologies can absolutely not take account”.[42](#)

2. Patristic Tradition

I. The First Two Centuries: Irenaeus It is a fact that Christian antiquity did not judge insignificant the Pauline verse about body, soul and spirit. Nevertheless, from one author to another, the interpretations differ, without always being in contradictory opposition to each other.

In his letter to the Philadelphians, Saint Ignatius of Antioch simply makes the Apostle's enumeration his own in judging that his correspondents, like the Ephesians and the Smyrnians, "will be honored by the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they hope with flesh, soul and spirit (σάρκι, ψυχῇ, πνεύματι), in faith, charity and concord".¹ Athenagoras also distinguishes between soul and spirit; for him, the soul is placed between "the spirit of matter", which is to say "the flesh and blood", and the "heavenly spirit", which is "pure spirit", and it can, according to its choice, mix with one or become the other:

The soul becomes passive when it receives the spirit of matter and is mixed with it, by looking below toward earthly things and, to speak in a general way, when it becomes only flesh and blood and ceases to be a pure spirit.²

We believe that we will live another life,. . . heavenly and no longer earthly, if at least, close to God and with God, we have steadfast souls, mastering passion, and if we remain, not like bodies, but like a heavenly spirit. . .³

In Tatian, also, the distinction seems clear, when he says: "We have knowledge of two sorts of spirits: one of them is called soul, the other is greater than the soul, it is the image and resemblance of God."⁴ Only, subsequently, it is impossible to discern clearly if the spirit he distinguishes thus from the soul, and which he calls "divine", is not simply the Spirit of God. The soul, he explains, is not immortal in

and of itself; so, “if it remains by itself, it dies with the flesh. . . . But when it is united to the divine spirit (θεῖον), it does not lack for help, and it rises to where the spirit leads it. For the seat of the latter is above, while its origin is below. Now, in the beginning, the spirit was the guide of the soul; it abandoned it when it did not want to follow it. . . . Now the Spirit of God does not reside in all, but in some who live justly. . . . The souls who have obeyed wisdom have drawn the Spirit, who is closely related⁵ to them (συγγενές). . . .”

Saint Irenaeus, then Origen, should make us pause a little longer because of the abundance of texts, their importance and their difficulty.⁶

It is in the fifth book of *Adversus Haereses* that Irenaeus gives us his views about anthropology. But his goal was not to write a clear and didactic exposition for the use of the historians who would pore over his text later on; it was to refute heretics who conceived of salvation for man only in “rejection of the flesh”.⁷ On the other hand, careful always to stick very close to Scripture, he lets himself be guided successively by the different texts he uses, which leads him to change more or less his perspective and his terminology in the course of his text.⁸ Hence the difficulties for interpreters.

The first passage in which the distinction between the soul and the spirit is affirmed is of little interest to us, for it is there a question of an exposition of heretical doctrine.⁹ In response, chapter 6, no. 1, is presented as an orthodox commentary on the Pauline texts:

Through the hands of the Father, which is to say, by the Son and the Spirit, it is man, and not a part of man, who becomes the image and the resemblance of God. Now the soul and the spirit can be a part of man, but in no way man: the perfect man is a mixture and union of the soul who has received the Spirit of the Father and who has been mixed with the flesh modeled according to the image of God. . . .

Under the name of “perfect”, the Apostle designates those who have received the Spirit of God. . . . He also calls them “spiritual”; they are spiritual through a participation of the Spirit, but not through a voiding and

a suppression of the flesh. In fact, if one dismisses the substance of the flesh, that is, of the modeled work, in order to consider only what is properly spirit, such a thing is no longer the spiritual man but the Spirit of the man or the Spirit of God. By contrast, when this Spirit, in mixing with the soul, is united to the modeled work, thanks to this effusion of the Spirit, the spiritual and perfect man is achieved, and it is he himself who has been made in the image and resemblance of God. When, on the contrary, the Spirit is absent in the soul, such a man, remaining in all truth natural and carnal, will be imperfect, possessing indeed the image of God in the modeled work, but not having received the resemblance by means of the Spirit.^{[10](#)}

From all the evidence, Irenaeus counts here three elements in man. But is it simply a matter of man or of the perfect man? Or rather, to speak without ambiguity, is it simply a question of the “perfect” man, which is to say, complete in his nature, or man divinized through the participation of the Spirit of God? Or indeed, does Irenaeus mix the two things? The text that follows will perhaps enlighten us:

Modeled flesh alone is not the perfect man: it is only the body of man, thus one part of man. Neither is the soul alone man: it is only the soul of man, thus one part of man. Nor is the Spirit man: one gives it the name of Spirit, not that of man. It is the mixture and union of all these things that constitute the perfect man. And this is why the Apostle, in explaining himself, has clearly defined the perfect and spiritual man, beneficiary of salvation, when he says in this First Letter to the Thessalonians: “May the God of peace make you perfect and holy, so that you may be fully complete and so that your whole being—to wit, your Spirit, your soul and your body—may be preserved without reproach for the coming of the Lord Jesus.”

What motive did he have in asking that these three things, to wit, the soul, the body and the Spirit, be preserved whole for the coming of the Lord if he had not known that all three were to be restored and reunited and that there is for them but one and the same salvation? This is why he calls “fully complete” those who present these three things without reproach to the Lord. Thus those are perfect who, all at once, possess the Spirit of God, remaining always with them, and maintain themselves without reproach with respect to their souls and their bodies, which is to say, preserving faith toward God and keeping justice toward their neighbor.^{[11](#)}

The hesitation remains. On the one hand, the Spirit constitutes with the soul one part of man; it is called the “Spirit of the man” and seems to be distinguished from the

“Spirit of God”; it, in itself, does not constitute the man any more than the body or the soul does, but it is one of the three elements that constitute him; these three elements are also enumerated according to Saint Paul, who wishes them, all three, to be without reproach—a wish that would be irrelevant, even impertinent, in the case of the Spirit of God; finally, moreover, Irenaeus himself considers that they are all three to be “restored” and to be presented to the Lord. But, on the other hand, the soul receives “the Spirit of the Father”; the man is called “spiritual” insofar as he receives participation of the Spirit, and this participation makes him to be not only in the image but in the resemblance of God; finally, if this man is “perfect”, it is because, in addition to the soul and the body, he “possesses the Spirit of God”.¹² And these two series of affirmations are not found in different contexts, they are closely intermingled.

Yet, a little farther on, several passages come to support the second series:

Those who possess the deposit of the Spirit and who . . . surrender themselves to the Spirit. . . , the Apostle rightly calls “spiritual”, since the Spirit of God dwells in them: For spirits without bodies will never be spiritual men, but it is our substance—that is, the composite of soul and flesh—that, in receiving the Spirit of God, constitutes the spiritual man. . .

,¹³ The weakness of the flesh makes the power of the Spirit shine forth. . . , and it is of these two things that the living man is made: living due to the participation of the Spirit, man through the substance of the flesh. —

Therefore, without the Spirit of God, the flesh is dead. . . .¹⁴

The breath of life, which makes the natural man, is one thing, and the vivifying Spirit, which renders him spiritual, is another. The breath has been given indistinctly to all the people who inhabit the earth, while the Spirit has been given exclusively to those who trample down earthly covetous desires. . . .¹⁵

“For the Spirit will come out around me, and it is I who made all breath” (Is 57:16). He ranks in a way the Spirit in a sphere apart, beside God, who, in the last days, spread it over mankind for adoption; but he situates the breath in the common sphere, among creatures, and he declares it something created. Now what has been created is different from the one who creates it. The breath is thus a temporary thing, while the Spirit is

eternal. . . . After having enveloped man from within and without, he remains always with him and, henceforth, will never abandon him.¹⁶

One will note, however, that in these texts the perspective is no longer that of an anthropological analysis and that they are condemned by other biblical passages than the preceding. Moreover, as Irenaeus' principal objective just now was to claim for the body itself a salvation of which the heretics say it is incapable, his objective here is to show that this salvation, the definitive blossoming of the spiritual life whose seed is in each man, is the work of the Spirit of God in each man. In no passage is Irenaeus concerned to give us what we would call a philosophical anthropology. He does not go deeply into—to tell the truth, he does not even have in mind—the problem of the insertion of the Spirit of God in man. Despite the several expressions we have brought out, and several others as well, we believe that the Spirit of which he speaks is always the Spirit of God, even when he considers it in man. If, for example, it is said in 5, 6, 1 that the soul and the Spirit can be “one part of man”, one can observe, with Dom Adelin Rousseau, that “*pars*” is in the singular. “Thus, although Irenaeus does not hesitate to see in the Spirit of God one of the three constitutive elements of the perfect man, he refuses, and for good reason, to make this Spirit a ‘part’ of the perfect man. . . .” A little farther on, it is said that the Spirit, like the soul and the body, is to be restored and saved, which seems strange if it is indeed a question of the Spirit of God; but, Dom Rousseau again comments, “what is to be saved is not the Spirit as such but the Holy Spirit insofar as communicated to man for his full achievement; in other words, the Spirit is less saved than it saves. . . .” These explanations are ingenious; they can seem a little subtle; they do not, however, in our opinion, falsify the general line of Irenaeian thought. Perhaps it is only necessary to complete them by recognizing that the texts that are to be thus explained give witness to a rather

clear tendency to conceive of man (even if it is a question of the “perfect man”) according to the anthropological scheme suggested by the Apostle.^{[17](#)}

If, therefore, the Spirit indeed designates for Irenaeus the Spirit of God, his very manner of considering this Spirit of God in man, and of seeing in it thus one of the three elements that combine to constitute the perfect man, poses an anthropological problem.^{[18](#)} Just like the text of the First Letter to the Corinthians of which Irenaeus wants to give an account, it invites a resolution of this problem in the direction of a certain “trichotomy”—which Origen, more of a philosopher, will soon do. “The heretics”, we read again in the fifth book of *Adversus Haereses*, “. . . do not understand that three things, as we have shown, constitute the perfect man: the flesh, the soul and the Spirit. One of them saves and forms, to wit, the Spirit; another is saved and formed, to wit, the flesh; another, finally, is between those two, to wit, the soul, which now follows the Spirit and takes its flight thanks to him, now lets itself be persuaded by the flesh and falls into earthly desires.”^{[19](#)}

These explanations seem to us akin to those of Father Jean Meyen-dorff, with respect to man “composed of flesh, soul and Holy Spirit”: “This view,” he observes, “which sounds strangely pantheistic if one judges it according to later theological categories, shows in fact a dynamic concept of man that excludes the notion of ‘pure nature’. Man is created so as to share the existence of God: this is what distinguishes him from the animal and is expressed in the biblical account of the creation of Adam ‘in the image of God’ ”.^{[20](#)} As Pierre Boyer-Maurel also says,^{[21](#)} if, for Irenaeus, a certain dichotomy “accounts for man fashioned in the image of God”, it is nevertheless a trichotomy, “in which the breath only precedes the Spirit”, who “accounts for the becoming of man, of that man who is created, by letting himself be created, throughout the divine Economy”.

II. Origen Irenaeus spoke particularly of the Spirit of God, even when that Spirit, shared, became, by consent of the soul, the spirit of man. Origen will speak more explicitly of the spirit of man, insofar as an opening to the Spirit of God. These are two inverse perspectives much rather than two adverse doctrines.¹

One authority on Origen, Gustave Bardy, has, however, written that the tripartite division, "which is imposed on him, in a way, by several Scripture passages, plays no role in his teaching".² Another historian of ancient Christian doctrines, Francois Bonifas, had expressed a judgment in the contrary direction, but as little conformed to the reality; after having pointed out that "unsteadiness" of the Pauline terminology "makes it doubtful that the Apostle intended [in 1 Thessalonians 5:23] to make a scientific distinction", he went on, thinking essentially of Origen: "Yet the Fathers of the Church saw in the expressions of Saint Paul a rigorous division, in which they found once again that of their old mentor Plato."³ Previously, J. Denis, while not mixing Plato up in the affair, had recognized in Origen the existence of trichotomic texts, but he saw in that only a foreign body in the midst of Origenian doctrine: "Generally speaking," he said, "the soul and the spirit are but one for Origen, and if he had not respected a division that came to him from Saint Paul, and which appears to have been adopted, generally, as much by the orthodox Fathers as by the heretic scholars, he would have suppressed one of the terms of this division and would thereby have been spared numerous contradictions."⁴ The prejudice to which, in each of these three last cases, the historian is unconsciously giving way is not difficult to perceive. To overcome it would require an in-depth study. After the work by G. Verbeke on *L'Evolution de la doctrine du Pneuma du Stoïcisme à saint Augustin* (1945), the works of Henri Crouzel and Jacques Dupuis have brought us all desirable light on this point. "At times", Father Crouzel

tells us, "Origen is a dichotomist, distinguishing the body and the soul following the Platonic custom."⁵ But most of the time, he sees, according to Scripture, three elements in man: spirit, soul and body. He has recourse to this trichotomy when it is a matter of explaining his idea of man, and he states it each time he encounters in the texts an expression that suggests it: and this is so throughout his literary career."⁶ But it is Father Jacques Dupuis who draws the matter into perfect clarity in his important monograph on "*L'Esprit de l'homme*", *étude sur l'anthropologie religieuse d'Origène*. For him, "There can be no doubt that the verse from Saint Paul is the immediate source of his anthropological trichotomy" (65). It is principally he that we will follow here.

"We often find it asserted in Scripture", says Origen, "that man is spirit, body and soul, and we have ourselves developed the subject at length."⁷ In that as in other subjects, it is in fact the sacred text, most especially that of Saint Paul, that truly constitutes the framework for his thought.⁸ And it is with reference to Scripture that he tries to define clearly the notion of the *Pneuma*. For him, the *Pneuma* is first of all the Divine Life in principle, but it is also the shared divine life: the creature itself becomes *pneuma*, in the measure that it possesses this life. Yet, it is a first kind of participation in the divine *Pneuma*, which does not yet allow it to be said that man has become *pneuma*; a participation that, without betraying Origen, we can already call natural, because it consists in an element that is an integral part of the nature of all men and that is precisely his *pneuma*: "The Spirit of God, even when it is present in us, is one thing, and the *pneuma* proper to every man, that which is in him, is something else. . . . The Apostle clearly affirms that this spirit (this *pneuma*) is different from the Spirit of God, even when the Holy Spirit is present in us, over and above the spirit of man that is in him."⁹ The

distinction could not be put more clearly. Origen asks again, in the same passage of the commentary on Saint Matthew: “Is the spirit of Elias the same as the Spirit of God who dwells in Elias? or, indeed, do we have two different things there?” And he replies: “The Apostle shows clearly that the Spirit of God, when he dwells in man, is distinct from the spirit of the man: ‘The Spirit itself testifies to our spirit that we are children of God’ (Rom 8:16), and in another place: ‘No man knows what is in a man if not the spirit of the man who is in him; likewise, no one knows what is in God if not the Spirit of God’ (1 Cor 2:11).”¹⁰

Origen indeed says, like Paul, *pneuma* and not *nous*. It is because they did not sufficiently distinguish between these two concepts that several have identified the *pneuma* of the anthropological trichotomy with the preexisting *nous* and have made it the higher (*intellectus*) part of the soul—unless, in order better to distinguish between *pneuma* and *psyche*, they reduced this latter to its sensible part. They then spoke of Origen’s imprecisions, his unstable terminology, indeed of his inconsistency of thought and of his contradictions. This was from not having read him closely enough.¹¹ He distinguishes the spirit from the soul (and in this case he is not speaking of the *nous*) as clearly as he does the soul from the body, and he repeats at different times that “we are composed of a soul and a spirit”: this is the case, it seems, in the third book of *Peri archôn*,¹² so too in the fourth book, in the famous theoretical parallel that he institutes between man and Scripture.¹³ In the *Entretien avec Héraclite*, for the instruction of his august audience, he insists: “That man is a composite being, we know through Scripture. The Apostle in fact says: ‘May God make you holy, spirit, soul and body’, and so forth. This spirit is not the Holy Spirit, but one part of the human composite (μέρος τῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου συστάσεως), as the same Apostle teaches when he says:

‘The Spirit gives witness to our spirit’. . . .”¹⁴ In the commentary on the Letter to the Romans, he will also quote in support a text from Daniel;¹⁵ here, he invokes as an example what happened at the death of Christ: having wanted to save all men, the Savior had taken body, soul and spirit; now “these three elements, during the Passion, were separated; at the time of the Resurrection they were reunited. During the Passion they were separated: How? The body, in the tomb; the soul, in hell; the spirit, he deposited it in the hands of the Father. . . .”¹⁶

This spirit of man, represented by the eagle in Ezekiel,¹⁷ is placed above the soul.¹⁸ But never, in the texts of the trichotomic series, does Origen call it *voûç*—so that this could be a criterion for discerning the origin of certain passages given as Origenian but which are in reality from Evagrius.¹⁹

But how are we to understand this spirit which is “in us”?²⁰ What is its role? If we follow, again, the indications given by the Apostle, we will compare it to the moral conscience. “Our glory”, says Paul, “is the testimony of our conscience” (2 Cor 1:12). The conscience always rejoices in what good I do; on the other hand, it can never be accused of doing evil, but, on the contrary, it remonstrates, it accuses the soul to which it is bound; this is a sovereign freedom; I therefore think that it is this very spirit that the Apostle tells us is with the soul, being associated with it like a pedagogue and a guide to teach it good, to chastise it and to reprimand it when it sins. It is this spirit of which the Apostle again says that “no one knows what the man is if not the spirit of the man who is in him”; it is the spirit of the conscience, also according to what Paul says: “The spirit himself gives witness to our spirit.”²¹

We should not, however, in exalting the *pneuma*, excessively reduce its reality; if it is not a simple member of the human composite, neither is it the simple voice of the

conscience. Inaccessible to evil,²² placed in a way, as we have said, “above the soul” (ἄνωτέρω) as a “guide to virtue”,²³ it is “much more divine than the soul and the body”;²⁴ “belonging truly to man, it remains entirely in a participation of the Holy Spirit who gives himself to us; it is the point of contact between man and the divine *Pneuma* who inhabits him.”²⁵ This is why it is always holy: it is holy by essence; not, of course, the “Holy Spirit”, but, through participation, a “holy spirit”:²⁶ “the seal of the Holy Spirit makes holy the spirit that is in us”,²⁷ in each of us. Hence the paradox: the *pneuma*, in man, is holy, and it must become so; we must affirm at the same time the holiness of this *pneuma* and “the fortuitous character of a holy life”.²⁸ If we seek to bring out the fundamental idea expressed (let us not say: sought, for Origen seems very much the master of his thought) in these texts and other similar ones, we could, without betraying it, express it thus: the *pneuma* that is “in man”, in every man, assures a certain hidden transcendence of the man over himself, a certain opening, a certain received continuity between man and God. Not that there is the least identity of essence between the one and the other (like Irenaeus, like Clement, Origen is an implacable adversary of this pantheism of the pseudo-Gnostics); but it is, at the heart of man, the privileged place, always intact, of their encounter.

Would man, therefore, be after all impeccable? No. But the center of moral freedom and choice is not the *pneuma*. That is why we can say that for Origen the *pneuma*, “divine gift”, is not, properly speaking, part of the personality.²⁹ The center of choice is the soul, in its higher part (νοῦς). The latter can be inclined, as Saint Paul says, on the side of the spirit or on the side of the “flesh” (which does not mean the body); which is to say that it is “capable of virtue and of vice”.³⁰ When it is said that the flesh desires against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, without any doubt the

soul is posed between the two, as being able to acquiesce to the desires of the spirit (*si eum sequi velit*),³¹ or let itself be led to carnal desires; in this latter case, it becomes with the flesh a single body of covetousness and of carnal appetite; in the former case, on the contrary, being associated with the spirit, it becomes a single spirit with it.”³² The spiritual man is the one in whom the spirit prevails;³³ the carnal man, he in whom the flesh prevails. The spirit itself, the *pneuma*, always remains holy; but, in each one, it can have vitality or torpor, flight or fall, flame or sluggishness.³⁴ This is why, paradoxically, Origen can affirm both, as we have said, that the *pneuma* is holy and that it must become so.³⁵

Still following Paul, Origen also speaks of the “natural man”, who is again neither carnal nor spiritual, and the explanation he gives in his respect manifests once again a paradoxical character, distinguished only with difficulty from that spirit (*pneuma*) that is in man without being uniquely of man and that becomes fully himself and fully completes man only in his participation in the Spirit of God: “The natural man does not understand what the law of God is, it is madness to him, but the spiritual judges all things” (1 Cor 2:14). We think that there is a reason why Paul omits the word “man” after “spiritual”. For “the spiritual” is more than a man, he is superior to that humanity defined by the soul, the body or by the two together, and not by the spirit, which is more divine than these two elements and whose supernatural participation, once achieved, defines the spiritual. When the soul rises, follows the spirit and separates itself from the body, when it no longer even contents itself with following the spirit but remains in it (as this passage shows: “Toward you have I raised my soul”, Ps 25:1), how would it not lose, so to speak, its own nature and not itself become spirit?³⁶

Toward the end of this text, a trace of the speculations of *Peri archôn* on the subject of the soul will be noted; but toned down by “so to speak”. It is necessary to acknowledge, however, that from one work to the other, across the succession of dates and the varieties of subjects treated and literary genres, the points of view are so diverse that, in the words if not in the thought, the reader has some difficulty finding a perfect coherence among all the Origenian texts on the *pneuma*.

At death, all *pneuma* returns to God: this is what Ecclesiastes says. “Thus the *pneuma* of the just and that of the sinner have an identical destiny: both end at the Father.”³⁷ But “it does not follow that saint and sinner share the same destiny. With the saint, the whole man enters into God; with the sinner, the *pneuma* returns to the Lord, the soul and body perish in Gehenna: hence the intrinsic tearing of the human being.”³⁸ Like the remark by Father Crouzel, Origen is akin here to the thought of Saint Irenaeus, who said: “All those who are destined to life will be raised up with their bodies, their souls and their spirits. . . , those who have merited punishment will surrender their souls and their bodies to it, for, with them, they have strayed from divine grace.”³⁹

Later Christian tradition will not be as unfaithful to this conception of the *pneuma* as one might believe. It is found again in a series of intuitions, ideas and opinions of varied expression. This is, for example, the idea, dear to Ruysbroek, of a certain “deiformity” of the human being, of his higher, “superessential” life in God.⁴⁰ It is the obscure feeling that there exists in each of us, even the greatest sinner, a hidden room where no one but God can enter in, “that sacred point in us that says *Pater no iter*”, as Paul Claudel says magnificently in the famous “Cantique de Palmyre”, and that cannot hide from love.⁴¹ It is the intuition of a Georges Bernanos at the threshold of death, noting in

his diary that “sin makes us live on the surface of ourselves” and that even when we offend God, “we never cease entirely to desire what He desires in the depths of the sanctuary of our soul”.⁴² There are similar traits in the work of Dostoyevsky; although they too can be rather equivocal (a novelist does not express himself like a theologian), they do not prevent him from glorifying personal freedom and proclaiming the necessity of uprooting evil in receiving “new birth”. The Origenian doctrine of the *pneuma* also reverberates throughout the Bonaventurian tradition. In a totally different climate and without any need to search for a precise influence from one to the other, the very doctrine of Saint Thomas Aquinas would not be completely foreign to him. It questions neither the singularity of each human being nor the drama of existence nor the divine transcendence.⁴³

NOTE

In his commentary on John 4:23-24, Origen defines “true adorers”, first by the spirit, then in relation to the truth. He thus breaks down the dual Johannine formula and explains it term by term, drawing his inspiration again from Paul, who opposes spirit and flesh (Rom 8:9; Gal 5:6; 2 Cor 10:3). It is interesting to note that, in evoking Romans 8:9, Origen adds a μήκετι: those who are *no longer* in the flesh but in the “spirit”. He thereby stresses the impact of the coming of Christ and of the gift of the Spirit—already evoked by Paul—which divide history into a before and an after. Origen does not work, therefore, only on words (flesh and spirit), but he is inspired by the Pauline thought in which these terms are not only anthropological but in which they evoke the impact that the history of salvation, the Incarnation and the gift of the Spirit have on man. It is the same with Galatians 5:16f. In verse 18, Paul in fact opposes the condition of man under the Spirit to that of this same man under the Law. As for the third evocation, it is a little different, Paul speaks there of his conduct, because some accuse him of acting according to the flesh, that is, of allowing himself to be guided by motives that are too human. (Jean-Michel Poffet, O.P., “Le Méthode exégétique d’Héracléon et d’Origène, commentateurs de Jean 4”, *Jésus, la Samaritaine et les Samaritains* [Fribourg, Switzerland: Éditions Universitaires, 1985], 191.) *III. From Origen to Augustine* A few examples should be enough to show the continuity of this tripartite anthropology across the patristic age.

Cyril of Jerusalem addresses to the newly baptized the same wish that Paul did to the Thessalonians.¹ Gregory of Nyssa, in his treatise on the *Creation of Man*, practices a certain eclecticism. Following the perspective that is naturally his own, since he compares the nature of man to

that of the beings that surround him, and particularly of other living beings, he begins by distinguishing a threefold activity: merely vital (that of plants), sentient (that of beasts), rational: these are like three souls, or three substances, all three of which are found in man alone. The vocabulary is that of the philosophical κοινή of that period: the higher life of man is λογική, it is directed by the νοῦς, his nature is a νοερά φύσις. But this can also be understood, says Gregory, according to the words that the Apostle addressed to the Ephesians (*sic*). First of all, through a bold concordism, he places the body in an equivalence with the nutritive life, the soul with the sensate life, the spirit (πνεῦμα) with the intellectual life (νοερόν); then without further hesitation, and without seeming to perceive that he is changing the perspective, he finds once again the true Pauline thought, or at least comes close to it, by distinguishing life according to the flesh (σαρκική) from life according to the spirit (πνευματική), and by showing the soul in an intermediary situation, having to choose between vice and virtue.² Farther on, he will explain that only the soul endowed with reason, such as it is in man, fully merits this name of soul, in such a way that he would have rejected, it seems, any attempt at concordism between the νοῦς and the πνεῦμα.³

It is not Hellenism but, indeed, the Bible, that inspires the trichotomy of the Syrian tradition, such as we see it in this hymn of Saint Ephraim of Nisibis: For the soul is still more precious than the body.

And the spirit is still more precious than the soul,

And the Divinity
more hidden than the spirit.
The body will be clothed with the beauty of the soul when
the end arrives.

The soul will put on
the beauty of the spirit.
The spirit will put on in its very image, the (divine) Majesty.
The body, on equal footing with the soul, will see itself
elevated; The soul, on equal footing with the spirit;
The spirit, at the height where the Majesty is. . . .⁴

In another, later Syrian text, the awkwardness of an attempt at harmonization between the three elements of man and the three Persons of the divine Trinity will be noted. Jacques d'Édesse (d. 708) writes in his *Explanation of the Mass*: "Sacred things are holy! The soul, the body and the reason are sanctified by three sacred things: by water, blood and spirit; and besides by the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and truly man does resemble God in virtue of this trinity of composition: the soul corresponds to the Father, the body to the corporeality of the Son, and the reason to the Holy Spirit. Thereby, man thus resembles God."⁵ One can nevertheless wonder if the word translated by "reason" is not here the equivalent of *nous*, rather than of *pneuma*, and if the soul is not merely the sensate soul. The same doubt can be expressed with respect to a passage from the *Testament in Galilee of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, of which we have the text in Ethiopian: "Should the body be judged with the soul and the spirit? Will the body of every man be revived with his living soul and his spirit?"⁶ We will find a similar hesitation in examining the Latin tradition, and perhaps one must say, in certain cases at least, it cannot be resolved.

Saint Ambrose writes, on the one hand: "Homo ex anima rationali constat et corpore",⁷ but also, on the other hand: "Primum unusquisque homo est corporalis, secundo animalis, tertio spiritualis", and the parallel he institutes between these three elements and the three heavens to which Saint Paul alludes in the Second Letter to the

Corinthians does not enlighten us much about the meaning of this trichotomy.⁸ Ambrose is not alone, in any case, in acknowledging it. We read in Gregory of Elvira: “Manifestum est enim tribus perfectum constare semimortalem hominem; id est, corpore et anima et spiritu.”⁹ And Augustine expresses himself in a similar way on several occasions.¹⁰

In reality, Augustine’s vocabulary is rather evasive. The term *mens*, as we know, holds a privileged place in his work. In *De Trinitate*, he develops a distinction destined subsequently to become more rigid: that between *ratio inferior* and *ratio superior*. In commenting on Psalm 3, verse 4, “*et exaltans caput meum*”, he explains that this “*caput animae*” is the “*spiritus*”, or the “*mens*”, and so on.¹¹ Certain texts, which have the appearance of explicit definitions, speak of two single elements as constitutive of man: “Homo enim constat ex corpore et spiritu.”¹² “Nihil est in homine, quod ad ejus substantiam pertineat atque naturam, praeter corpus et animam; totus homo, hoc est, spiritus et caro.”¹³ Yet Augustine does not consider the two words *anima* and *spiritus* to be simply synonyms, although for brevity’s sake he includes in only one of the two the complex meaning of both: “Nomen animae spiritus est, ab eo, quod spiritalis est; animae nomen est ab eo, quod corpus animet, hoc est vivificet.”¹⁴ From which we have a certain number of explicitly trichotomic texts, which are of great importance for a correct understanding of Augustinian anthropology, for it is on this trichotomy that Augustine bases his doctrine of the *memoria*,¹⁵ and he gives it as essential to the Catholic Faith: “Si quis tenuerit catholicam fidem, ut totum hominem credat a Verbo Dei esse susceptum, id est, corpus, animam, spiritum. . . .”¹⁶

In the same *De fide et symbolo*, Augustine explains himself at somewhat greater length: “Et quoniam tria sunt quibus homo constat: spiritus, anima et corpus,—quae

rursus duo sunt, quia saepe anima simul cum spiritu nominatur; pars enim quaedam ejusdem rationalis, qua carent bestiae, spiritus dicitur,—principale nostrum spiritus est; deinde vita qua conjungimur corpori, anima dicitur; postremo ipsum corpus, quoniam visibile est, ultimum nostrum est. . . . Anima vero, cum carnalia bona appetit caro nominatur. . . .”¹⁷ we also quote several similar texts: “Ut totus homo sit spiritus et anima et corpus; sed aliquando duo ista simul nomine animae nuncupari. . . .”¹⁸ “Propter spiritum et animam et corpus. . . .”¹⁹ “Ad creaturae integritatem, id est, spiritum et animam et corpus: et illud quo intelligimus, et illud quo vivimus, et illud quo visibiles et contrectabiles sumus.”²⁰

In *De fide et symbolo*, at the same time as he distinguishes *anima* from *spiritus*, Augustine identifies *spiritus* and *mens*.²¹ Likewise, too, he distinguishes the “*pars rationalis*” of the soul (which is thus no longer only the animator of the body as in animals) from the “*pars quae excellit, id est, ipsa mens*”²² It is practically the last distinction expressed in *De Trinitate* by the seemingly equivalent words *ratio inferior* and *ratio superior*.²³

In brief, the anthropological analyses of Saint Augustine are varied. H. I. Marrou has set up a table, which does not intend to be exhaustive,²⁴ and it must be noted besides that under the same word, under the same verbal distinction, it happens that Augustine places different realities. On the whole, less dependent on a literal interpretation of Scripture, and more particularly of Saint Paul, than Origen wished to be,²⁵ more inclined to express himself in a vocabulary borrowed in part from Neoplatonism, Augustine places under the word *spiritus* a reality that sometimes more closely resembles the *nous*. . . of Greek philosophy than the *pneuma* of the sacred text. Yet, through the duality he recognizes within this *spiritus* (or this *ratio*, or this *mens*), he remains a faithful witness of the Christian tradition.

3. From Saint Augustine to Our Day

I. Medieval Spiritual Masters In Augustine as in Origen (and as in the whole patristic tradition), the notions are fluid; the historian must strive to grasp the movement of their thought rather than to classify their concepts. Augustinian explanations, moreover, do not correspond point by point with Origenian analyses. The Christian spiritual masters of the Middle Ages will rather often be in this regard closer to Origen than to Augustine. In order not to interpret them in a simplistic way, it is necessary constantly to bring analogy into play. Perhaps even the undertaking to reunite them in a kind of continuous chain, extending to our time, is a little too reminiscent of concordism. Let us say, finally, that *spiritus* is not only designated or understood in various ways: with some, it splits, so that one has to deal rather with a quadripartite anthropology; one of the causes for this is the desire to make a place for the Platonian tradition of the intelligence, a tradition that is amalgamated somehow or other to the Pauline tradition. It is having made these remarks that we gather together the examples that follow.

For John Scotus, man is composed of three elements, but the third element, called in turn *animus*, *intellectus* or *mens*, resembles the νοῦς, more than the πνεῦμα. We read in book 5 of *De divisione naturae*: “Totam humanam naturam, corpus videlicet et animam et intellectum” (PL 122, 910-11). But another text, in book 2, chapter 5, expresses a conception closer to the biblical conception: “Aciem mentis, qua ilium [Deum] intelligimus et in qua maxime imago creatoris condita est” (PL 122, 531 c).¹

The traditional trichotomy dominates the structure of Bernard's *Brevis Commentatio* on the Song of Songs (n. 1). In William of Saint Thierry, the third term, the "spirit", splits: either in order to grant a certain place to the *nous*, to the *intellectus*, to rational understanding, or rather in order to detail the principal stages of the spiritual life. The *Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu*, that important text, distinguishes a *triplex status, animalis—rationalis—spiritualis*, which is to say, "those beginning", "those on the way" and "the perfect". The opposition between the flesh and the spirit is not denied, William will be able to remind those who, having begun to taste the sweetness of contemplation, might be tempted to neglect the permanent necessity of spiritual combat.² But rather than this dialectical opposition, the object of the *Letter* is to set forth a pedagogical ladder, which is, moreover, nonetheless Pauline in its inspiration. The beginners are still guided by an *animalis sensus* (this is the natural man of Saint Paul, which is not the carnal man); those on the way acquire a *rationalis scientia* (we observe here the care to integrate into the formation of the monk the whole cycle of human knowledge); and the perfect enjoy *spiritualis sapientia*.³ In addition, these are not three, airtight categories or perfectly distinct and successive stages: just as there is passage from one to the other, there is immanence from one to the other. William remains faithful to the same schema in *Miroir de la foi*,⁴ as well as in his commentaries on the Song of Songs: "tres status esse orantium vel orationum: animale, rationale, spirituale".⁵ In *De contemplando Deo*, a subdivision intervenes, between the *ratio*, the discursive faculty, and the *intellectus*, which does not seem to be at this point the equivalent of the *spiritus* (1. 4).

Isaac of Stella speaks in nearly the same way, in a language, however, that has more of an intellectualist ring to it, in distinguishing the understanding from the reason,

which abstracts the forms of the sensate, *vis animae qua immediate supponitur Deo*.⁶ We have the feeling that this second-generation Cistercian was familiar with Scholasticism.

Hugh of Saint Victor is closer than Isaac to Bernard and William of Saint Thierry. According to him, the eye of the *flesh* (which is to say, here, the body) sees the world and what it contains; the eye of the *reason* sees the soul and what it contains; but the eye of *contemplation* penetrates to the innermost depths of man and above man. This eye of contemplation belongs to those who possess the spirit of God.⁷ In Achard of Saint-Victor, the order of the last two elements, or of the last two stages, seems reversed; he treats *de discretione animae, spiritus et mentis, mens* was, as another author of the twelfth century says, *quasi quoddam divinitatis insigne*.⁸ (But this is hardly a question of vocabulary alone.) Whatever might be the distinctions and subdistinctions, orientations, inflections and differences in vocabulary, it can be said of all these spiritual masters of the Middle Ages, as well as of many of those who will follow, that they took up the essential chorus of the Pauline and patristic trichotomy and that most even attribute extreme importance to it, as Sandaeus, a seventeenth-century authority, was to remark:

Magni aestimant Mystici nonnulli, et putant maxime necessariam ad suam Theologiam ac perfectionem, divisionem inter spiritum et animam.⁹

This is also true of Bonaventure: “Habet enim anima tres potentias: animalem, intellectualem, divinam, secundum triplicem oculum, carnis, rationis, contemplationis”.¹⁰ We recognize the schema of William of Saint Thierry and Hugh of Saint Victor.¹¹ For Thomas Gallus, closer in this regard to Isaac of Stella, “reason feels, the intelligence sees.”¹² Johannes Tauler, in several of his sermons, teaches that “man is, so to speak, composed of three men” and that one

must distinguish in him first of all an “external man” or “animal man”, then a “reasonable man”, finally a “higher man, wholly inner and hidden”, that “noble and deiform” man, “made in the image of God”.¹³ The mystical theology of Harphius (Henry Herp) also says that “the soul is, according to Scripture, divided into three parts. . .”,¹⁴ and the appeal to Scripture, despite the appearance, is justified. For our authors, in fact, the adding of a supplementary term to the Pauline enumeration does not derive from the fact that they would abandon Paul in favor of Plato, but from the fact that they are concerned besides about a theory of knowledge, which Paul did not at all have in view in his address to the Thessalonians. Yet *La Perle évangélique* leads us to a tripartite schema, the body being understood, as in Paul; but at base, the difference from the medieval authors we have just enumerated is hardly perceptible:

Each man seems almost to represent three men: according to the body, he is bestial; according to the soul, he is reasonable and intellectual; and according to the spirit, or the naked essence of the soul where God dwells, he is deiform. . . .¹⁵

This very noble portion of the soul. . . , some call *mens*, insofar as it continually breathes after God and is, as it were, a largely deiform or divine thing and the image of God in man. It is something divine in being, as it were, flooded with God and united to him. It is also called the point and the summit of the spirit, because God, without intermission, shines in the latter like a mirror. It is also, according to what the good Father Ruysbroek says, the highest part of the soul. . . . It is also called the sparkle of the soul, because it is in God what the sparkle is in fire. . . .

In the first [unity or union], we are superessential and deiform, and in the second, spiritual and internal, and in the third, active and moral. . . .¹⁶

The foregoing is the text of a compiler, from which one must not ask too great a coherence in terminology or too great a unity in point of view. If we now appeal to a theologian who was the adversary of the mystical school represented by Tauler, Harphius and *La Perle évangélique*, and who refers to more reliable authors, such as Augustine, “Bernard” and Hugh, he will give us the same essential distinctions:

Tres cognoscendi modi sunt, quorum unus animalis dicitur, utens maxime oculo carnis; alius rationalis, utens plus oculo rationis; tertius spiritualis, utens oculo contemplationis, sicut distinxerunt divini homines tres oculos et tres vivendi modos.^{[17](#)}

Louis de Blois, finally, in the *Institution spirituelle*, perseveres in bringing out this “depth of the soul” that, under different names, always corresponds to the “Pauline *pneuma*” and that will not find a place in the late Scholastic anthropologies or in most modern anthropologies:

God who, to tell the truth, is everywhere, dwells in the spirit of man and in the simple depth or inner sanctuary of the soul in a particular manner. He dwells there in his own image and never absents himself.^{[18](#)}

This depth, naked and stripped of any image, is raised above all creatures. . . , it transcends time and place, and through a kind of perpetual adhesion, remains united to God in his principle. It is, however, in us by essence, for the abyss and depth of the soul are essence. . . .

The soul . . . possesses a certain supernatural unity of spirit, in which it dwells as in its own habitation, and it is carried away into the divine essence even to this supreme unity in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in the simplicity of the divine essence itself. . . .^{[19](#)}

Assuredly, these speculations about the divine essence—even if they maintain a trinitarian affirmation—and about the essence of man presuppose a long evolution of thought that, in one sense, distances us greatly from Saint Paul. But, across languages, theories and, as one never stops saying today, cultural contexts that differ greatly, to be sure, it is possible to discern a fundamental continuity.

This continuity will not be broken by the period called the Renaissance.

II. Saint Thomas Aquinas in Tradition¹

I

In the spiritual history of mankind, the three domains constituted by what one can designate under the three denominations of religion, morality and mysticism are often presented as independent or even opposed to each other. The alliance or the mutual penetration between mysticism and morality does not appear achieved in and of itself any more than that between morality and religion. Yet one could not conclude that such an alliance, or such a mutual penetration, is an artificial and wholly contingent phenomenon. In opposition to an empiricism that disintegrates everything without explaining anything, we will say, rather, that it responds, if not to the demands, at least to the profound wish of nature. But nature itself has taken time in finding itself.

In fact, we note that it has not fully found itself outside the Christian revelation. The union of the three aforementioned elements, religion,² morality and mysticism, does not reach its fullness, it does not become harmonious and indissoluble in principle, except in the tradition coming from the Gospel. There, and most specifically in the Catholic form of this tradition, it does not appear as a secondary fact, obtained by convergence subsequent to various gropings, but as an original and essential fact. Religion, morality and mysticism manifest themselves there “in a reciprocal envelopment”. Between these three, both an attraction and a tension exist that could be the source of many vital problems, but there is objectively neither separation, exclusion nor conflict: for “the Deity, while transcending being, the true and the good, contains them formally.”³

This is why, in particular, in the Catholic tradition—lived and reflected—“reasonable” life and “spiritual” life, or life “according to the spirit”, penetrate each other without being identified with each other,⁴ and *morality penetrates the mystical life to the end*. Pseudo-Gnosticism relegated the rewarding of good and punishing of evil, those pillars of the “Demiurge”, to the lower level of “exoteric” faith; the great tradition, on the contrary, maintains this moral aspect “at the heart of the revelation of the Father through the unique Son”.⁵ “It is not”, says Saint Justin, for example, “because of his [natural] affinity with God or because he is spirit like him that man sees God: it is because he is virtuous and just.”⁶ In his *Psychologie des mystiques*, Joseph Marechal noted this essential characteristic: Mystical ascent, he explains, does not erase “any specific trait of the common Christian life”.⁷ In other words, the Christian virtues, proposed for the practice of all, are not simply means of freeing oneself; their exercise is not simply something transitory: in their substance, they are already something of the end itself. This is what Saint Ambrose was able to explain wonderfully in a brief sentence in his commentary on Saint Luke, with respect to the Beatitudes: “Sicut enim spei nostrae octava perfectio est, ita octava summa virtutum est.”⁸ And this is what Saint Augustine repeated in similar terms, speaking of adhesion to God, the blessed life and eternal wisdom: “Una ibi virtus erit, et idipsum erit virtus praemiumque virtutis.”⁹

In a remarkable thesis, Pierre Nemeshegyi has posed the same problem with respect to Origen: “To place Being and moral Goodness in equation; to place this moral Goodness in God formally, and as characterizing the final ground of his Being—is this not to be condemned to enclosing all spiritual life in an anti-mystical moralism? The Good is a transcendental. But is it, formally, what we understand by “moral Good”? Or is there not a deepening of this moral Goodness, which would reestablish the possibility of an

innermost mystical depth?" And Nemeshegyi concludes: "In fact, in Origen's conception, moralism and mysticism are one and the same thing."¹⁰ Saint Gregory the Great, often so close to Origen, will unite good sense to spiritual fervor in order to remind contemplatives that if they want to be faithful to the Gospels and to advance on the true way, they must take care to scorn the humble precepts of morality and to seek to understand them in a more sublime sense.¹¹

The medieval spiritual masters will take up again these thoughts of Origen, Ambrose, Augustine and Gregory. Expressing ourselves in the customary categories of their exegesis, which the Middle Ages systematized, we will say that for them "anagogy" achieves the final perfection both of "allegory" and of "tropology" (of dogma and of morality).¹² Of all authentically Catholic mysticism, one could declare what one historian said of Saint Bernard, by allusion to the traditional interpretation of the "Books of Solomon": for each of them as for him, "the moral school of Ecclesiasticus and Proverbs, the necessary preliminary for the mystical school of the *Song of Songs*, is a school whose doors are never closed behind us."¹³

This "spiritual" equilibrium has at times seemed threatened, in one direction or another. Some spiritual scholars have seemed to want to transcend purely and simply the sphere of morality and reason. This is what causes Evagrius, not without reason, to be judged severely at times; it is what Ruysbroek reproaches in the false mystics of his time; it is one of the points that the bull *In agro* of John XXII criticizes in Meister Eckhart. Whatever may have been true in each of these cases, the thing that interests us here is the norm that inspired such criticisms. While following Saint Paul in distinguishing the "soul" from the "spirit" (not, moreover, as two substances nor even as two "faculties"), one always refuses to separate them, as if the penetration into the higher zone of the "spirit" must

make us reject as no longer valid the operations of the inferior zone of the “soul”. But the hierarchical distinction is maintained, which is to say that the mystical life is not for all that reduced to the plane of simple morality. A text from Saint Teresa is very enlightening here: the saint observes that the “center of the soul”, or the “spirit of the soul”, is a “difficult thing to express, and even to believe”:

Certain interior effects give the certitude that there is, in certain respects, a very real difference between the soul and the spirit. Although in reality they are but one, we sometimes perceive a division between them that is so delicate that it seems the one functions in one way, and the other in another. . . . There are so many things in our innermost depths, and things so subtle, that it would be boldness on my part to undertake to explain them. We will understand all that in the other life, if God . . . deigns to admit us to the dwelling where we will have understanding of all these secrets.¹⁴

Yet the equilibrium can be upset in the opposite direction from that for which Evagrius and Meister Eckhart were reproached. This has been true periodically for anti-mystical scholars or simply anti-mystics, against whom, periodically, too, protests are raised. With them, it is not the “soul” that is forgotten or scorned, in the name of the superior “spirit”; it is the “spirit” that is ignored, misunderstood, in the name of a truncated moral wisdom. But with any of the great scholars of the Catholic tradition, we do not have to register any such misunderstanding. This is what we would wish to demonstrate here, with respect to Saint Thomas Aquinas, and more particularly with respect to the *Summa theologiae*.

II

From first appearances, one might be brought to believe that Saint Thomas, in the *Summa*, is one of those scholars who upset the equilibrium in the second direction. But in

reality he did nothing of the sort. His doctrine, in the *Summa theologica*, contains in fact the equivalent of what others have expressed through the distinction of soul and spirit, understood as the distinction of a moral region and a mystical region. If one does not observe this right at the beginning, it is because Saint Thomas expresses himself in different words.

It could be written that in his doctrine “all the problems that the spiritual life and its evolution pose return in this *consideratio moralis*, which has but one object: man in progress toward his blessed destiny.”¹⁵ The thing is incontestable. Still, it might be useful to specify how. No more in Saint Thomas than in others is the union of the two moral and spiritual (or “mystical”) elements a confusion or a reduction pure and simple from the mystical to the moral. The synthesis is not a unification in the exclusive favor of one of the two. Of course, one could judge that the Thomist anthropology, by its Aristotelian roots, favors the originality of the mystical life less than others. And like the virtue of “religion”, the theological virtues seem at first glance mixed in a long list of “virtues” within the second part of the *Summa*. It is appropriate, nevertheless, to remark, before seeing things at closer range, that only a later usage gives this second part the name “moral”. After having, in the first part, considered God as the universal cause, Saint Thomas considers him now as end; after the divine model, he clings to his image; after the departure of God from all things, he envisages the return of all things to God. Now—this is the important point for our subject—this itinerary of return comprises several stages.

It is true that the prologue to the *Secunda secundae* speaks of *scientia moralis*, of *materia moralis*, and that all seems, right at first, to be reduced to the *consideratio virtutum*. But let us look a little closer. In this same prologue, as in the articles that follow, Saint Thomas

nonetheless distinguishes, from the *virtutes morales* not only the *virtutes theologicae* but also the *virtutes intellectuales*, which are, along with prudence, wisdom, understanding and knowledge, closely connected to the gifts of the Holy Spirit of the same name. Moreover, after having exhausted the plan he had outlined for “omitting nothing of moral things” by studying successively the virtues and the vices that are opposed to them, he considers, in a kind of extension, a series of new questions, related first of all to “prophecy”, to “rapture” and other gratuitous gifts, then to the “contemplative life”; a series he attaches, a little artificially, one must admit, to the section on the different states of life.

This artifice has sometimes embarrassed commentators, who do not always understand the articulations that the plan of the *Summa* comprises here. Thus we have Father M. D. Chenu, who has the “treatise on the states of life” begin at question 183, starting from where “the spiritual life is linked to social functions”.¹⁶ The thing seems in fact rather logical. Yet, Saint Thomas himself said, in his little introduction to question 171, “*De prophetia*”:

Postquam dictum est de singulis virtutibus et vitiis, quae pertinent ad omnium hominum condiciones et status, nunc considerandum est de his quae specialiter ad aliquos homines pertinent.

So Father Antoine Lemonnyer had adopted a different solution from that of Father Chenu. He saw in questions 171 to 198, concerning the gratuitous gifts, a kind of parenthesis and made the final treatise of the *Secunda secundae* begin from question 179, which is to say, from the “contemplative life”: he gave a certain unity to this final treatise thanks to this single yet twofold title: “Human Life, Its Forms and Its States”.¹⁷

The divisions adopted respectively by Father Chenu and Father Lemonnyer both have their probability, and both can

be supported. In fact, however, as Father Chenu remarked, Saint Thomas treats the states of life properly only beginning with question 183, entitled: “De officiis et statibus hominum in generali”. But already before that, questions 171 to 182 form a whole, very distinct from the preceding questions, in which we have the equivalent of a little treatise on mysticism.

Even if he did not treat explicitly at that time the relations between active life and contemplative life,¹⁸ the place accorded by Saint Thomas to this latter in his general plan would thus authorize us to distinguish it from the domain of morality. He himself, besides, tells us so in proper terms: “The moral virtues are not a constitutive element of the contemplative life”;¹⁹ in fact, “they are ordained to action.”²⁰ Now, action is inferior to contemplation. The latter is “*simpliciter melior*”.²¹ Action prepares for contemplation by winning the soul, through the external exercise of the virtues, the necessary “preliminary dispositions”, by disciplining the passions and by submitting them to the reason.²² Contemplation is the act of the “higher reason”, which is to the inferior reason, following an old biblical and Philonic symbolism revived and slightly transformed,²³ as the man is to the woman.²⁴ It is ordained to “perfect love”, and, as Saint Gregory taught, while the active life is synonymous with service, the contemplative life is synonymous with freedom.²⁵ As Aristotle had already affirmed—but we know with what freedom Saint Thomas changed and transformed the thought of the philosopher even while he invoked him as an authority²⁶—it is a life above the human condition²⁷ and is made to last always.²⁸

No more than any other of the great witnesses of the Christian tradition did Saint Thomas reduce the spiritual life to the exercise of morality or spiritual understanding to rationality. Father Pierre Rousselot, too neglected today (at least in France), demonstrated this well by placing in

evidence the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*, a fundamental distinction with numerous consequences.²⁹— But neither does he separate them: on the one hand, as an authentic heir of the Fathers, he integrates the virtuous life into eternal life, by saying: “Uniuscujusque perfectio, nihil aliud est quam participatio divinae similitudinis.”³⁰ And, on the other hand, he knows that, in the earthly condition, external action, which is first of all the virtuous life, must itself proceed from contemplation.

The comparison with the Plotinian philosophy, or with the “agnostics”, can in this regard be very enlightening because of the apparent proximity of the doctrines:

In a parallel way, one would find in Christianity [says Jean Trouillard on this subject] a going beyond ethics by the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life consists in divinization, not in asceticism. Yet the role of the will seems much more considerable in Christians than in the Plotinians, not only in charity but also in faith, which is itself presented as a duty. Theologians do not ordinarily situate the theological virtues on the other side of the decisions of the faculties or on this side of the constituted values. This is what must not be forgotten when faced with the use of the Neoplatonic doctrine of virtues attempted by Christian authors, in particular by Saint Thomas (1a, 2ae, q. 61, a. 5).³¹

And again, Maurice de Gandillac:

Plotinus . . . harshly criticizes the Gnostics who believe that by “raising oneself near to God on wings of a dream” (2, 9, 9), one escapes the human condition. According to the fragments of Heracles (Legrand, 315), Moses, the author of the Law, . . . belongs to the “natural” world. Superior to pure matter, however, he ignores the spirit. By proscribing, by judging, by punishing, he fulfills an inferior ministry, and the “perfect” are in no way subject to his commandments. Pure at the beginning, they are saved without exercise, as without repentance and without pardon. This presumption will be the common gospel for all the sectarians who. . . across the Middle Ages will preach a “going beyond the ethical”.³²

We should not let the differences in emphasis from one author to another or from one school to another hide from us, therefore, the consistent thought of the Christian tradition. Already, in someone like Origen, the union is

achieved between “a resolutely contemplative religious ideal and a passionately active life”.³³ For Saint Gregory the Great, to whom Thomas Aquinas refers, the whole spiritual life is subject to a rhythm, and “true perfection begins to mature only in the difficulties and obstacles of the active life”.³⁴ Medieval monasticism did not scorn Martha in the name of Mary, it maintained that action must be joined to contemplation, or the “practice” to the “theory”, a little like love of neighbor to the love of God.³⁵ The two inseparable aspects of the Christian doctrine on this subject will once again be expressed very well in the reflections of John Henry Newman, still an Anglican, preaching on “evangelical sanctity the completion of natural virtue”. Newman in fact shows in this sermon that there is “an essential resemblance between the spiritual man and the virtuous man”, following the words of Saint Paul: “The fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth”—while drawing the attention of his listeners to “the point of difference between them; viz. that the Christian graces are far superior in rank and dignity to the moral virtues”.³⁶ Moral perfection and holiness, virtuous life and mystical life are distinct, they are hierarchical: but at the same time they are united in charity, *forma virtutum, vinculum perfectionis*.

III. Renaissance and Reformation Nicholas of Cusa takes up the Pauline trichotomy again, in the same terms as the Apostle. He places it in correspondence with, on the one hand, a cosmic trichotomy and, on the other hand, what is perhaps unexpected, the three Persons of the Trinity. He uses Saint Augustine as his authority for both these correspondences.

We read in fact in one of his Sermons: “In homine sunt spiritus, anima et corpus, sicut in mundo elementalia, vitalia et intellectualia”;¹ and in his opuscule the *Beryl*, he

distinguishes “three modes of knowledge: the sensate, the intellectual and the intelligential”, which, he says, correspond, according to Saint Augustine, to the three “heavens”.² That was the cosmic analogy. And for the trinitarian analogy, set forth in the work *De Concordantia catholica*:

Unde homo, secundum Augustinum Super symbolo (40, 193-94), ad instar Trinitatis imaginem gerens, ex spiritu et anima et corpore constitutus existit. Spiritus autem est superior, nobilior et altior intellectualis personae Patris figuram repraesentans, et corpus personam Filii, et anima quasi utriusque naturam participans, ab utroque procedens personam Spiritus sancti.³

Taking up his position, like Nicholas of Cusa, from the point of view of knowledge, Marsilio Ficino distinguishes the *sensus*, the *ratio* and the *intellectus*. We recognize in that the heritage of the great Scholasticism. In a similar manner, in the prologue of his *Heptaplus*, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola distinguishes the vital instinct, discursive and practical knowledge and the contemplative faculty.⁴ More important is the twofold witness, here in agreement, of Erasmus and Luther.

In his famous *Enchiridion militis christiani*, Erasmus, who takes his inspiration directly from Saint Paul, “ends finally in a tripartite anthropology, which finds its completion in the gift of the Spirit”.⁵ After having, in chapters 4 and 5, spoken of man such as Plato describes him, first according to the *Timaeus*, then according to the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, and recalled his distinction of the soul as reasonable, irascible and concupiscible, Erasmus describes in chapter 6 the Pauline opposition between the flesh and the spirit; then he comes, in chapter 7, to the trichotomy of 1 Thessalonians, which he comments on with reference to Origen. “He does not hide”, observes Charles Béné, “his pleasure in setting forth this theory: ‘Libet et Origenicam hominis sectionem breviter referre.’ ” He sees it based as

well on Isaiah (29:9) and on Daniel (3:86), so he adopts it in order to make it intervene “as a definitive stage after the analyses of pagan philosophers”, to serve “as an introduction to the great rules of Christianity”.⁶ With Origen, he sees in the soul this “median part” of the human being, which can swing either to the side of the flesh or to the side of the spirit.⁷ In the *Methodus* or *Ratio verae theologiae*, a similar text recalls our trichotomy indirectly: “Nec omnis affectus hominis est caro, sed est qui dicitur anima et qui dicitur spiritus, quo nitimur ad honesta.”⁸ But it is particularly in the controversy with Luther about free will that Erasmus opposes to the exclusivism of his adversary, hypnotized by the sole dialectic of the flesh and the spirit, the divine pedagogy explained by Origen according to the Pauline schema.

Luther himself, paradoxically, had provided a commentary in his own manner, with respect to the first words of the *Magnificat* (1520), on the text of 1 Thessalonians, and his manner did not differ perceptibly from so many of the others we have seen:

“My soul glorifies the Lord”. . . . Scripture divides man into three parts, when Paul says, at the end of 1 Thessalonians: “May God . . . make you holy through and through, in such a way that all your spirit and your soul and your body. . . .” And each of these parts—like the entire man —is equally divided in another way concerning, not nature, but quality. In other words, nature has three parts: spirit, soul and body, all three of which can be good or bad. . . . The first part, the spirit, is the highest, the most profound, the most noble part of man; it is what makes him capable of grasping imperceptible, invisible and eternal things. In brief, it is the house where faith and the word of God dwell. . . . The second part, the soul, is exactly the same spirit according to nature, but accomplishes a different function. It is the spirit insofar as it animates the body and acts through it. . . . Its proper role consists in grasping. . . the things that reason can know and probe. . . .⁹

As for the third term, the body, its function is to “act” and to “put into practice the knowledge of the soul and the faith of

the spirit". As Maurice de Gandillac observes, here, the body has nothing to do with "mire". And by adopting such a tripartition of the human being (which is not at all to be understood, we repeat, as a division of three "faculties"), Luther envisages the human subject, as Saint Paul and, after him, the whole of Christian tradition have done, "in a perspective that is more biblical than Greek".¹⁰ The relative assimilation that he works between the soul and the spirit is the echo of a common Scholasticism and the fruit of an inflection toward the point of view of knowledge, which was not that of Saint Paul in his address to the Thessalonians but in no way contradicts it. Of these two characteristics, the preceding centuries have already brought us many an example.¹¹

Like his predecessors, Luther thus maintains the threefold gradation, which he also develops through a traditional image:

We will give a simile for that, drawn from Scripture. Moses made a tabernacle with three different edifices. The first edifice was called *sanctum sanctorum*: it was the dwelling of God, and there was no light from within. The other, *sanctum*, contained a chandelier with seven branches and lights. The third was called *atrium*, the parvis; it was located in the open air, in the light of the sun. This figure depicts the Christian. His spirit is *sanctum sanctorum*, the dwelling of God in the night (stripped of light) of faith, for he believes what he neither sees nor senses nor understands. His soul is the *sanctum*: there are found the seven lights, to wit, all kinds of understanding, discernment, science and knowledge of corporal and visible things. His body is *atrium*: it is manifest for all, in such a way that one can see what he does and how he lives.¹²

It is necessary, however, to recognize that this trichotomy did not have for Luther an importance comparable to his dialectical opposition between the flesh and the spirit. In Saint Paul, from before the commentary on the *Magnificat*, he had been selective; the lessons on the Letter to the Romans (1515-1516) were already setting up an opposition between the flesh and the spirit without anthropological

reference to any subject whatever,¹³ and later, in his controversy with Erasmus, he was to prove all the more hostile to the anthropology drawn from 1 Thessalonians 5 by his adversary, whom the latter, guided by Origen, used to weaken his dialectic. He writes in *De servo arbitrio*:

I am well aware of Origen's fable about the threefold affection of man: of flesh, soul, and spirit,¹⁴ the soul holding the middle between the flesh and the spirit and able to turn either toward the one or toward the other. But this is dreaming; he says them but does not prove them at all. Saint Paul calls flesh everything that is without spirit, as we have demonstrated.¹⁵

Luther does not formally contradict here what he had said in the commentary on the *Magnificat*. What he reproaches in Origen, as in Erasmus, is believing in free will. But this preoccupation leads him to falsify their anthropology and thereby to forget or to misunderstand the Pauline verse that he had first interpreted correctly. To which, in his enormous second *Hyperaspistes*, Erasmus will reply several times over that the tripartition of 1 Thessalonians 5, even if counterparts are found in the philosophers, is proper to Saint Paul. The philosophers, in fact, do not usually call the highest part of the human being *spiritus* (*pneuma*), but *mens* or *ratio*; and what Paul understands by *spiritus* is not any *ratio* whatever, but the *ratio* already inspired by grace. That, he concludes, is what Luther does not want to recognize. As often happens, the discussion in which Erasmus finds himself involved leads him himself to a partially inaccurate interpretation of Saint Paul's text by making him attribute to the "spirit" what Paul says of "the spiritual man". Yet it remains true that he had first analyzed perfectly the address of the Apostle to the Thessalonians, and Luther had at first done the same.¹⁶

Lutheran mysticism, at least in the rather unorthodox Sebastien Frank (1499-1542), nonetheless recognizes the three elements of which man is composed: body, soul and spirit. Frank sees in the soul the personal and free being

capable of orienting himself in one direction or in the other; he sees in the spirit the inner Word, or God present at the heart of every man, enlightening him through his Word and inclining his will through his Spirit.¹⁷

The same traditional distinctions, originating in Saint Paul, are found in the humanists of the sixteenth century of mystical tendency. For a Paracelsus (1493-1541), since man is a microcosm, he must unite within himself the three constitutive parts or elements corresponding to the three stages of the universe: material world, astral world, Divinity¹⁸ (an idea of Nicholas of Cusa, although distorted, is recognizable in this). Cornelius Agrippa, in his *De occulta philosophia*, tried to unite the Platonic traditions to Moses and to Saint Paul:

Plotinus itaque et Platonici omnes post Trismegistum similiter tria ponunt in homine, quae vocant supremum, infimum et medium. Supremum est illud divinum, quam mentem, sive portionem superiorem, sive intellectum illustratum vocant. Moses in Genesi vocat ipsum spiraculum vitarum, a Deo vid., vel a Spiritu ejus in nos spiratum. Infimum est sensitiva anima, quam etiam idolum dicunt, Paulus Apostolus animalem hominem nuncupat. Medium est spiritus rationalis utraque connectens extrema atque ligans, vid. animam animalem cum mente, et utriusque sapiens naturam extremorum. . . .¹⁹

Guillaume Postel, as original as ever, at least in expression, distinguishes in man the *anima*, the *animus* and the *mens*.²⁰ It was undoubtedly following him, four years later, that Charles Toutain wrote, in his tragedy *Agamemnon*: Three natures in us, which all talk with each other Excite our life and keep it alive: The Spirit, the Soul, and Animus. And one being taken away, Suddenly all life together would depart.²¹

The Anglican Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626) expresses himself in a similar way in his devotions: Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend myself, my spirit, soul, and body. . . .²²

IV. *The Modern Period* Saint Francis de Sales will open this period for us. His *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* [*Treatise on the Love of God*] reproduces the Pauline doctrine to perfection. After having explained that “we have three kinds of loving actions: spiritual, reasonable and sensual”, Francis de Sales observes that “the powers of the sensory part, which are or must be the servants of the spirit, ask, seek and take what has been rejected by the reason,. . . dishonoring . . . the purity of the intention of their master who is the spirit; and in the measure that the soul is converted to such gross and sensate unions, it is diverted from the delicate, intellectual and cordial union.” Thus, by the same movement as we find in Saint Paul, the way is sketched to the opposition of the flesh to the spirit. Like many in the Middle Ages, Francis de Sales, following Saint Augustine, also distinguishes “two portions of the soul, the inferior and the superior”, the inferior being that which discourses on the basis of the experience of the senses, while the superior, founded “on the discernment and judgment of the spirit,. . . is commonly called the spirit and mental part of the soul”; in this “superior portion” he also distinguishes “two kinds of light”, a natural one and a supernatural one, and so forth. This whole apparatus of precisions, which aims at integrating, as we have already seen in others, the “degrees of knowing” within the spiritual movement, is not without interest; but it is in some ways only a flowering from the basic trichotomy.¹

It is this same trichotomy that we find again, as might be expected, in a philosopher attentive to the spiritual life, such as Maine de Biran. We know the place that the doctrine of the “three lives” holds in Biran: animal life, human life and divine life, particularly in the reflections of his *Journal intime*.² Jules Lachelier also adopts it, but perhaps by diminishing it, in his desire to work a kind of synthesis between Maine de Biran and Kant, when he explains the three components of existence: sensibility, understanding

and reason.³ We detect also an indication of the very strong mystical tendencies in Joseph de Maistre in this affirmation from the *Éclaircissements sur les sacrifices*: “The animal has received only a soul; to us were given a soul and a spirit.”⁴

One might be tempted to seek a distant analogy with Saint Paul in the Kierkegaardian theory of the three spheres (rather than stages) of existence: aesthetic, ethical, religious. If that analogy is an illusion, other thoughts of Kierkegaard are right in finding their place here: “It is impossible to treat of sin in any of the sciences that ordinarily speak of it, because all are occupied with what is psychological in our nature, while sin is a determination of the spirit”; and again: “The spirit intervening, psychology is impotent. So good, as its name indicates, is occupied with the soul. It sees everything from outside; the spirit itself is lived only from within. . . . Seen from outside, an act is always determined, and for all that the object of psychology. But. . . .”⁵

One might also be tempted to evoke here the Blondelian distinction between “noetic” and “pneumatic”. This would not be completely wrong. But Blondel places these two kinds of thought in correlation rather than inviting us to rise from one to the other. He does not thereby have in mind a relation of the *psyche* to the *pneuma*, but rather a division of the function within the spirit. Despite the word “noetic”, this is not the *nous* but rather the *logos*, which would be, according to him, the partner of the *pneuma*;⁶ and the dialectic of the noetic and the pneumatic is in play at every step, so to speak, of the development of thought and life in this conception: the first, the concrete principle of universality, being the factor of objectivization and unifying force, while, conversely, the second, the concrete principle of singularity, is the diversifying element and subjective function.⁷ Both, at the same level, are thus essentially complementary. Blondel held to his distinction; he often took

up the study of it. He wrote in 1907 in one of his personal notebooks: "Think out the discovery of the two thoughts."⁸ Now, in 1909, he wrote again: "The two thoughts. Ah! how they are always in me, tending to supplant each other, while it is necessary to reconcile them, hierarchize them, make them differently but equally serve the divine work of final and total reintegration."⁹ This word "hierarchize" must be understood as demanding a reciprocal hierarchization.¹⁰ It does not necessarily follow, however, that any analogy with the Pauline trichotomy, any echo of the "three lives" of Biran are absent from the Blondelian work. Blondel was too penetrated with the thought of Saint Paul and Saint Bernard, he was too closely interested in mysticism, he was too familiar with the spiritual authors of the Christian tradition to let us believe in such an absence without a fuller examination. But the fact that his dialectic of the noetic and the pneumatic, which is fundamental in his philosophy, does not turn explicitly into a hierarchy of the soul and spirit or of the discursive reason and mystical intuition (although he obviously knew of this distinction as well as that between the understanding and higher intelligence),¹¹ is not a negligible indication. Blondel maintained a prudent attitude in the face of natural mysticism, just as, on the other hand, he remained prudent in the face of facile personalisms.

In the Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov, the Pauline distinction between the soul and the spirit is placed in powerful relief. It assumes a mystical aspect that is more emphasized than in the Apostle, or at least it proceeds from a base of natural mysticism that, despite the reference to the famous discourse at Athens, does not seem to correspond perfectly to its more complex notion of the spirit:

Although it is a creature, a certain eternity of creation, a certain non-creation, are proper to the spirit. . . . Spiritual existence is rooted in the

eternity of God, the created spirit itself is similarly eternal and uncreated. Cf. Acts 17:28.

It is true that Bulgakov can also invoke the authority of the Greek Fathers: Had Saint Cyril of Alexandria not written that “the image of the divine nature was imprinted in man by the infusion of the Holy Spirit”?¹² The importance of his anthropological theory derives in any case from the fact that it is from this that he explains the mystery of the Incarnation:

The postulate of the divine Incarnation is a certain original identity between the divine I and the I of man, an identity that does not abrogate their essential distinction. . . . The human hypostatic spirit . . . draws its divine and uncreated origin from the “breath of God”. . . . Through his spirit, man communicates with the divine substance and he is fit to be “divinized”. . . . Man is. . . god-man by predestination, potentially, through his formal structure. At the same time he is flesh,. . . through an “animated” body, he sums up the entire world. . . . Man is made of an uncreated divine spirit, hypostasized by the I of the *creature*, and of a soul and of a body created from the psycho-somatic being.¹³

Bulgakov insists. The very idea of divinity by predestination seems too weak to him. He corrects himself almost immediately: “Not only is man theanthropic by predestination but also the Logos is the eternal God-Man, insofar as the first Image of the created man. . . . This is why the hypostasis of the Logos, the heavenly Man, could itself become the hypostasis of created man and make of the latter the authentic God-man, by achieving its eternal theanthropy.” The conclusion is nonetheless fundamentally in keeping with the spirit of Christian faith: “Man is already the form, ready for the authentic theanthropy that he is not capable of achieving himself, but in view of which he was created and called. The divine Incarnation is not at all a catastrophe for the human essence or some violation; on the contrary, it is an accomplishment.”¹⁴

This leads us far from the narrow anthropological dualism that triumphed in modern Scholasticism as well as in the

university philosophy springing from Cartesianism. "Saint Paul", noted R. M. Albarès,¹⁵ "had distinguished three orders: the carnal, the intellectual and the spiritual."¹⁶ The Cartesian dualism had fused together the intellectual and the spiritual, and rationalism had gradually reduced the spirit thus created to being only an intellect without transcendence, without dynamism or immortality, destined only to understand and to organize the world." On the other hand, for all sorts of reasons that we do not at all have to seek here, but in particular because of a certain poverty in its common philosophy, Christian thought did not seem able to fill the void thus created in man. It must not, therefore, be surprising that the inevitable reaction was produced in para-Christian forms. "If a scholar", André Préaux recently wrote,¹⁷ "encounters the old doctrine that man is composed of a body, a soul and a spirit, he has scruples about considering it, for what do 'soul' and 'spirit' mean. . . . Unfortunately, in a society where science is the supreme authority, this silence is equivalent to a negation. What dissolves the errors and complexes, what protects against neuroses and fantasies, is precisely that which is silently and discreetly dismissed."

The same year as André Préaux, and reacting like him, Gabriel Germain took support from Saint Teresa to remind us of the unrecognized depths of the life of the spirit:

Above the understanding, below the ordinary conscience and what fills it, *exists* a sheet of peace and light. . . . Whoever approaches it can have no more doubt of it. Anyone who has not sought it has no right to judge it. Saint Teresa expresses the same reality in very different terms. Now no one had taught her this, nor had anyone prepared her for such an experience. This agreement over the centuries and doctrines reassures me more than anything. She writes in the book of the *Mansions* (seventh Mansion, chapter 1): "Interior things are seen that show in a sure way that there is, beneath a certain relationship, an obvious difference between the soul and the spirit, although they are but a single thing. . . ."¹⁸

Likewise, again, situating his own thought in relation to the “noosphere” of Teilhard de Chardin and in relation to the “collective unconscious” of Jung:

The noosphere, in the philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin, appears to be like a mental view, a conclusion. This is because its very name evokes an intellectual activity, the subtlest but, whether exploratory or constructive, directed according to logical norms.¹⁹ What I could call (but I will keep myself from doing so) pneumatosphere, let us say: the spiritual ocean, is the object of experience. By other paths, to other ends, it is the same reality, I suppose, that Jung attained and which he called the collective unconscious. But these two terms restrict the origin and meaning of it. . .
²⁰

With Jung, in fact, we penetrate but we remain within what is psychological. The life of the spirit, in the Spirit, is wholly different. A certain Calvinist dryness, a phobia about mysticism and all “interiority” conspire at times, along with rationalism and contemporary positivism of all forms, to brush this life in the Spirit aside. But in a quite natural way, the Lutheran Paul Tillich, who was interested in ontology, in the history of religions, in mysticism as well as in biblical history, brings the Pauline tripartition up to date again:

There is no religious statement on man and his destiny without a judgment on the relation between different elements that are combined and opposed in the life of man. These elements have been variously described as being his body, his soul and his spirit. . . .²¹

The exegetes in contemporary Catholicism seem no more disposed than most of the theologians to return the Pauline verse to a place of honor and draw its consequences. It is toward the writers that we must turn to perceive an echo of it, in free expression. Although this expression is truly, we believe, faithful to the doctrine of the *Pneuma* and to its authentic development, it is not certain that Saint Paul would have recognized his thought at first glance. “I have good news to announce to you”, says Paul Claudel in the “Cantique de Palmyre”, “—it is another within the depths of

you who has the word. . . . I have good news to announce to you. . . . You need only close your eyes to find your treasure in the night. . . . There are many souls, but there is not one of them with whom I am not in communion through this sacred point in us that says *Pater noster*.”²² And Georges Bernanos, in his diary: “His will is ours, and when we revolt against it, it is only at the price of an uprooting of our whole inner being. . . . Our will has been united to his since the beginning of the world. . . . What sweetness to think that even while offending him, we never cease completely to desire what he desires at the depths of the Sanctuary of the soul!”²³ A wonderful conjunction of Claudel and Bernanos!

The reader will have noted, in Claudel’s text, the word “soul”. An inversion of vocabulary is in fact produced. The “spirit” having become, in the modern leveling dichotomy, the immediate correlative of the body, it is the “soul” that has taken its place, in those who have not taken part in this leveling. We are familiar, again in Claudel, with the parabola of *animus* and *anima*. The word “soul”, in the same sense, compels recognition with greater strength in order to escape the scientistic totalitarianism that reigns abusively in the name of the “human sciences”. “In the measure in which they are scientific,” wrote Henri Gouhier in 1973, “the sciences of man can consider man only by selecting points of view under which it is possible to treat him objectively. It is obviously not a question for the philosopher to ignore the various forms of sociology, psychology, ethnology, neurology, and so forth: he must simply wonder if the sciences of man, added up, constitute a science of man.”²⁴ And man, simply as such, man who cannot renounce the call he hears in the depths of himself, refuses to let himself suffocate. He rehabilitates the word “soul” as the most fitting to express what philosophers and men of science are too often skilled at eliminating through preterition or through negation. The soul then becomes almost the

synonym for the *pneuma* of Saint Paul and Origen. The passage from Henri Gouhier that we have just quoted figures in a preface to *L'Avènement de l'âme* by Aime [Andre] Forest, a work, he says, that "finds its timeliness in its apparent obsolescence". The author of the work and that of its preface both evoke on this subject the "three lives" of Maine de Biran. Andre Forest also recalls these words of Henri Bergson: "By calling a certain assurance of facile intelligibility an idea and a certain uneasiness of life the soul, an invincible current brings modern philosophy to elevate the soul above the idea." Modern philosophy, as a whole, has not followed the path on which Bergson thought he saw it engaged. Gabriel Marcel, however, among others, wanted to preserve this word "soul" and to keep "the fullness of its meaning". Charles du Bos, in search of traces of God in us, asked: "Who will leave us a journal of the dilation of the soul?" What Andre Forest wants is to help us discover or to rediscover a certain "inner unity", a certain "pure source", and each of the chapters of his work traces an avenue toward an encounter with this. "The discovery of the soul", he tells us, "is the development of a spiritual philosophy. . . . The soul is the advent of presence and grace raised above the world of nature and objectivity."²⁵

The same fundamental reaction, the same sudden start, or, if you wish, the same awakening, five years later in a much younger author, whose nostalgia, if this is what it is, cannot be that for the past but that which springs from a new reflection, this time against the oppression of a thought reduced to its politico-social components, the final end of scientistic intelligence. In his essay on *Job, ou l'excès du mal*, Philippe Nemo insists on this same word "soul" in order to recall man to himself and to his essential problem. . . ,²⁶

Across the numerous changes in vocabulary, the complications introduced by theoreticians eager for analysis, across, too, the unceasing variations in points of

view, the tripartite anthropology, whose expression is found in Saint Paul, has consistently furnished, in the tradition of the Church, a basis for spiritual doctrine and life.

4. The Spirit

I. The Place of Mysticism As we have already been able to perceive, these various distinctions are far from always being covered perfectly either from one author to another or even, as in the case of Augustine, in the work of the same author. C. R. Doddau's remark on the subject of the ancient Greeks applies here: "One must undoubtedly agree that the average man of the fifth century (and this is true in all periods) possessed a very complicated psychological vocabulary."¹

The Pauline tripartition has nonetheless remained the constant basis serving to support the spiritual doctrines of the Christian tradition.

Commenting on Pseudo-Dionysius, Saint Maximus the Confessor defined man by this threefold pair of epithets: "Supermundialis et spiritualis—circummundialis, animalis—mundialis, carnalis."² The author of the celebrated *Philokalia*, Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain (748-809) will explain that the "Jesus Prayer" brings into operation the three powers of the soul: the intellect (*nous*), the discursive reason (*logos*), the will or spirit (*thélēsis, pneuma*), in the action of the soul alone, by which, uniting in itself, the soul is made fit to be united to God.³ But perhaps that is a matter, rather, of a "horizontal" trichotomy, of three functions or three activities proper to the higher part of the spirit.

With more than one spiritual writer of the Latin Middle Ages, one should speak of four elements rather than of three in their analysis of man—even without considering other complications, many subtle subdivisions, an echo of Scholasticism, dear to a certain number, subdivisions

destined either to establish agreement between authors or to detail the stages of spiritual itineraries. As, for example, this schema traced by Isaac of Stella in his *Epistola de anima*: “*Animae in mundo sui corporis peregrinanti quinque sunt ad sapientiam progressus: sensus—imaginatio—ratio—intellectus—intelligentia.*”⁴ Two different modes will be noted, both inspired by Saint Augustine, in the expression of tripartism: for some, it is: *corpus, anima, spiritus*;⁵ for others: *corpus, ratio, mens*. Hence, to accord these two modes, the quadripartite division: *corpus—anima—ratio inferior—ratio superior sive mens*. We know the ground gained in the Middle Ages by that Augustinian subdivision of the *ratio inferior* and the *ratio superior*.⁶ What will correspond to this in Saint Thomas Aquinas will be particularly the distinction between the *ratio* and the *intellectus* recently brought out by Pierre Rousselot.⁷ This would also be the place to mention the Franciscan doctrine of the two faces of the soul, which is of Neoplatonic origin, coming through the twofold channel of Augustine and the Arabs⁸—but that, like, moreover, the Thomist distinction of the *intellectus* and the *ratio*, is an essentially “scientific” (philosophical) theory, having little relation to the spiritual life. The explanation of the latter is founded rather on the doctrine of the twofold *ratio*, lower and higher, which corresponds to action and contemplation. But then a new subdivision is introduced: the *ratio superior*, the place of contemplation, assimilated to the *intellectus*, becomes the higher part or function of the *mens* and receives names such as *acies mentis, oculus cordis*, and so forth.

Whatever might be the various complications and the varieties in the names, “all the great Christian mystics are in agreement in considering the human soul as a complex reality, presenting regions and stages. . . . All are also in agreement in admitting that, among these various regions, there is a privileged one, that where God dwells in a

particular manner. . . .”⁹ “There is a spiritual life when a relationship with God exists”,¹⁰ and there is a secret point in man that is the permanent place of that relationship, of that possible encounter, because it is already, and always has been, the place of the divine presence: that *pneuma* of Paul, commented on by Origen, that “sacred point in us that says *Pater noster*” of the “Cantique de Palmyre”.¹¹

So we see that the philosophers and theologians, more concerned about rationality than mysticism, tend to reduce (even in their historical studies) the trichotomy to a dichotomy—while, on the contrary, the spiritual masters tend to bring out the trichotomy. They readily glorify the *spiritus*, not only above the *anima* but above the *ratio*, whether theoretical or practical. It is instructive to compare in this regard the Abélardian writing *Ysagoge in theologiam* with the commentary on the Song of Songs by William of Saint Thierry. For the first: “Duo haec nomina, sc. spiritus et anima, non magnam habent in significatione discrepantiam”.¹² The second, on the contrary, strongly emphasizes the hierarchical distinction of three orders: “animal”, “rational” and “spiritual”.¹³

To keep to the general schema that results from the text of Saint Paul—a schema that itself in fact includes many nuances and, as we have seen, many interpretations—morality will therefore be the act of the soul, mysticism the act of the spirit. “The body”, says Evagrius Ponticus, “has bread for nourishment, the soul has virtue, the understanding has spiritual prayer.”¹⁴ Morality, whose object is virtue, is the *πρᾶξις*, and the life of the spirit is contemplation, the *θεωρία*. The first is ordained to the second, as the soul is ordained to the spirit: “Strive”, says Cassian, reporting the statements of Abbot Nesteros, “to acquire in the first place a complete possession of moral discipline (*πρακτική*), for without that you cannot obtain contemplative purity (*θεωρητική*).”¹⁵ For Gregory of Nyssa,

virtue is “the forecourt of the Temple”.¹⁶ Origen had said before them: “According to the doctrine of the very wise Solomon, he who wishes to acquire wisdom must begin by studying morality”; it is in fact “good conduct” that prepares one to receive the visits of the Logos, and when one is solidly exercised in it, then one will be able “to pass from moral things to mystical understanding”.¹⁷ In his treatise addressed “To the Brethren at Mont Dieu”, which remains one of the fundamental texts of Christian spirituality, William of Saint Thierry traces a similar route for those who want to give themselves over to the perfect life, and, for the final stage, his program is even one of a boldness that some could misunderstand (it is true that it is addressed to a Carthusian monastery): “It is for others”, he tells them, “to serve God; it is for you to cling to him. It is for others to believe in God, to know that he exists, to love him and revere him; it is for you to taste him, to understand him, to know him, to enjoy him.”¹⁸ The same doctrine is set forth, as it had been earlier with Origen, in parallel with the doctrine of the threefold biblical sense, by another writer of the twelfth century, Godefroi d’Admont:

Sicut triplex est visio, corporis, spiritus et mentis, ita triplex etiam sensus est in scripturis Sanctis: litteralis, spiritalis, intellectualis. Litteralem atque spiritalem sensus egregius ipse Doctor gentium tunc transcenderat, et usque ad tertium coelum, intellectualem scilicet sensum, gloriose conscenderat, quando toto cordis intellectu ita coelestibus est conjunctus, quod utrum in corpore, an extra corpus esset, se nescire asseruit.¹⁹

The same fundamental schema is found again in the great representatives of what one often calls, with a term that can lend to confusion, “intellectualist mysticism”, which is to say, with the Rheno-Flemish mystics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The same schema, although with differences in terminology and in a sometimes different climate of thought, particularly in Meister Eckhart.

Ruysbroek “assigns to the spirit a threefold role. First of all a vital role, in which it animates the body; then an intellectual role that is manifested by thought; finally a role of higher spiritual activity, in which it becomes the principle of unification of the whole inner life and in which it is mixed with the very essence of the soul.”²⁰ Hence, for example, in the *Livre des sept clotures*, the definition of the seventh enclosure, “which surpasses all the others”: “simple beatitude beyond all holy life and practice of the virtues”.²¹ Likewise, in the *Miroir du salut éternel*, in which the higher degree is only divided: after “the virtuous life, which dies to sin and grows in virtues”, comes the state where “all ownership of the will dies”: then the spirit is made fully free through its union to the Spirit of God, even to the point of the “living life” (*levende leven*) that blossoms, which is all “hidden in God and in the substance of our soul”.²² Ruysbroek takes up again here an expression long since current, which he could have read in Saint Bernard (*vivida vita et vitalis*)²³ William of Saint Thierry (*vita vivens*)²⁴ or Thomas de Froidmont (*vita vitalis*).²⁵

The same gradation is found in Tauler, based on the same traditional “ternary schema”. Tauler distinguishes in man “three things: one clings to nature in flesh and blood; the other is the reason; the third is an essence of the pure soul and without mixture”. This is what he expresses again “in the symbolism of the three men, which correspond to the sensate life, the intellectual life and the spiritual life in the sense of union with God”.²⁶ This “third man”, this “essence of the pure soul”, is what Tauler often calls the *gemuete*, a word that Father Etienne Hugueny translates as “deep-seated will” and Louis Cognet prefers to call “deep instinct”; it is the “depths” of being to which, says Tauler, the “divine ground” alone corresponds: *abyssus abyssum invocat*; it imprints on our nature “an eternal and deep-seated tendency to return to its origin”, a tendency that “persists

even in the damned, because it is linked to the very essence of the soul".²⁷ Tauler's preaching rests on this structure. The abnegation to which he invites his listeners is not only the liberation from sensible appetites; it goes beyond simple morality: it is a profound attitude that "flows from the growing experience of God"; mystical passivity, succeeding the activity of the virtuous life; "inner recollection", above the exercise of the virtues and reason as well as that of the senses.²⁸ "It is necessary that, after having overcome the senses, the reason be freed from itself, renounce itself, so as to be transformed into pure and simple spirit."²⁹ Then the Kingdom of God is established. And Tauler repeats, so as to make himself well understood: "This Kingdom is established in its own manner, in the innermost part of the spirit, as soon as man, through all his exercise, has absorbed the exterior man in the inner and reasonable man and as soon as the man of sense and of reasonable power are entirely absorbed into the more interior man, in the hidden ground of the spirit, where the true image of God dwells, and as soon as he flees into this divine ground, into which man, from all eternity, is found in his uncreated state."³⁰

The relationship of Tauler to Eckhart is obvious. In one as in the other, the distinction of the soul and the spirit (of the psyche and the πνεῦμα), colored by Platonic exemplarism, is affirmed everywhere. Eckhart enunciates it with reference to Saint Augustine. "According to Augustine," he says "our intellectual element divides itself into two parts: through the one, we are oriented intellectually toward an intellectual grasp of knowledge that our cognitive faculty receives from outside; the other, to use the very words of Augustine, manifests itself at the deepest center of our spirit (*'abditum mentis'*)."³¹ It is this center that particularly interested, that fascinated Eckhart, this place "where no image enters or leaves, but where there is only God himself". "The soul", he also said, "has two eyes: the inner one and the other, outer

one; the inner eye of the soul is that by which it contemplates being and receives it directly from God.”³² What differentiates him from Origen and Augustine, Bernard and William of Saint Thierry, is the “uncreated” character that he attributes to this “inner eye”, or to this “*abditum mentis*”. The disquieting feature of his mysticism consists in this, a feature that will be less emphasized in Tauler and even in Henry Suso, although the latter speaks also of the ground of the spirit as “eternal”.³³

Follower and compiler, Harphius (Henry Herp) will symbolize the “three kinds of life” emanating from the three parts of man in the three biblical figures of Leah, Rachel and Mary Magdalen;³⁴ and he works at length to describe the *mens*, or the *apex mentis*, the *spiritus*, or the *interior sinus mentis*, which is to say, still that *pneuma* by which the zone of rational and moral activity is transcended:

Dicitur etiam [anima] quandoque mens, quae sc. ipsis viribus interior est et supereminet; quia vires in mente sicut in origine sua sunt cunctae; ex qua sc. effluunt ut radii ex solari rota, et in quam refluunt. Et est illud centrum in anima, in quo vera Trinitatis imago relucet: et tam nobile, quod nullum ibi nomen proprie convenit, licet in multis nominibus circumlocutive manifestatur. Haec est igitur mens, vel apex mentis, aut centrum ipsius animae; ut feliciter renovetur, ipsae vires quae dicuntur spiritus ad interiorem sinum mentis sunt reflectendae, et mens ipsa ad intimum suum regerenda, sc. in Deum ibidem suaviter recubantem. . . .³⁵

Warning us that this higher part of man cannot be appropriately designated by any name, and multiplying the formulas himself by which one must indeed try even to speak of it, Harphius invites us not to stress, whatever the interest of the other part might be, the variations in vocabulary from one author to another or from one period to another, which could hide from us the continuity of a tradition that, in essentials, is very firm.

Saint Catherine of Genoa offers us a similar schema; very classically, she distinguishes body, soul and spirit, the latter being designated in itself by the word *mente* and, when it is

animated by infused love, by the word *spirito*; in this latter case, the *spirito* is finally identified with infused Love, which is God. Since the Saint is less concerned to give us a theoretical course in anthropology, even spiritual, than to describe the spiritual life itself, we can understand that from her pen *mente* is rare and *spirito* frequent.³⁶ On the other hand, following the example of many other mystics, she loves to detail the stages of ascent: “When God”, she says, “addresses his first call to us, he gives us at first the instinct for virtues; later, he urges us to perfection; then, through infused grace, he leads us to the annihilation of ourselves; finally, to true transformation.”³⁷ Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross likewise know that there exists a life higher than the exercise of the virtues, when they celebrate “freedom of spirit”,³⁸ “holy freedom of spirit”,³⁹ and Saint Teresa observes in her *Interior Castle* that “certain interior effects give certitude that there is in us, in certain relations, a very real difference between the soul and the spirit”.⁴⁰ We also quote as an example Fenelon, who, in commenting on Cassian, finds himself, at the same time, summing up the whole mystical tradition: “Although we judge the other virtues to be necessary and useful, we believe, however, we should place them only at the second degree, because one seeks them all only in view of this one thing of which Jesus Christ says: ‘Martha, Martha, you trouble yourself about many things, there is only one thing necessary.’ He placed the sovereign good, not in work, although laudable and abundant in fruit, but in contemplation that is truly simple and one. He declares that little is necessary for this perfect beatitude that contemplation is.”⁴¹ And a little farther on, in the same writing: “There is thus a state where this appropriation of virtues is no longer opportune.”⁴²

The great Protestant spiritual master Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1769) professes the same doctrine: “There must necessarily be in us a capacity to recognize God and

spiritual things in an essential and present way. And that exists in the pure Reason [*Vernunft*], which has been given us closed and unused until God gives us the understanding by which we know the very Truth so intimately and essentially that we are ourselves drawn into the true God.”⁴³

If a certain number of authors, in the course of this long tradition that we have just examined, seem also to distinguish, as it were, two elements above the *psyche*, while Saint Paul saw only the *pneuma* above it, this is usually, as we could ascertain from some of the examples cited, because they mean by *psyche* only the animal soul, animator of the body and seat of sensation, or rather because they want to assure a seat for “objective” knowledge and profane culture. For Paul, on the contrary, and more explicitly for Origen, the soul is the very seat of the personality, the reasoning and self-willed being, which judges and freely determines itself. It is the place of decision. According to the orientation taken by the soul, the human being will become “carnal” or “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*). As opposed as he might be to free will, Luther himself saw very clearly that the Pauline *psyche* of 1 Thessalonians 5 was much more than the principle “that animates the body and acts through it”. In an article in the *Revue thomiste* (1971), Father P. R. Régamey, O.P., is perfectly in keeping with the traditional line when he distinguishes (497) these three degrees: psychosomatic complex—rational function of abstraction and discourse—primacy of spirit in its greatest purity. And what, in the theoretical order, is the “rational function” corresponds, in the practical order, to what we could call, in a rather restrictive sense, the “moral function”. Saint Paul also invites us not to confuse this moral function with the properly spiritual life, which raises man above himself, when he places above the exercise of active benevolence and of

all virtue this reality of another order, a gift of God, which is Charity (1 Cor 13:3). Dietrich Bonhoeffer was also faithful to the tradition that originated in the Apostle when he exhorted the Christians over whom he had responsibility not to confuse, in their assemblies, “spiritual community with mystical overheating” (cf. A. Dumas, 64). “The great theme of community life is the revival of the very Pauline distinction between the natural, eager, equivocal, nostalgic, desiring, in a word: idealistic, and the spiritual, respectful, enlightened, serving, knowing, in a word: realist” (ibid., 145). “The one”, Bonhoeffer also says, “who does not let Christ be a path toward the other falls into natural chattering, which kills the spiritual word. . . . Prayer is the salutary limit to desires of immediate effusiveness. . . . Community life is communion through spiritual mediation and non-confusion in the natural immediacy” (146-47).

II. Morality Integrated into Mysticism In Christianity itself, it is characteristic of the Catholic Church to assure the equilibrium between the three components (religion, morality and mysticism), an equilibrium necessary to the integrity of the human being. Faithful in everything to her spirit of synthesis, she maintains all three in solidarity, without ever letting any one of the three be lacking or eclipse the others or be devalued, in the humblest forms of spiritual life any more than in the highest. To take a very simple example, when Fenelon exclaims, in his *Traité de l'existence et des attributs de Dieu*: “My length of life is but a perpetual extinction”,¹ these words, to be well understood, must be taken at once morally, religiously and mystically.

The various Protestant confessions place more emphasis on contrasts and clashes, as has often been remarked. J. A. Moehler wrote in the last century, in his *Symbolique*, with respect to morality and religion: “In the eyes of Catholics,

religiosity and morality, if we may be permitted to use these two terms, are united by their essence and are both eternal. According to the Protestants, on the other hand, there is no relationship between these two things, for one is of an eternal price and the other is of only passing value. Luther insists in many places on this difference. . . .”² There would be many nuances besides to note here, but in this essay on typology we must keep to the most general characteristics.³ In Calvinism, mysticism is the object of mistrust, or even reprobation.⁴ We also know the abyss, in Luther, that separates ethics and faith. As a result of this, there is a tendency with Lutheran mystics—to say nothing of Luther himself and of Lutheranism in general—to depreciate all moral activity, as constituting on man’s part an affirmation of self that, far from bringing him closer to God, distances him, and to recognize a value in religious life only in an abandonment close to quietism;⁵ a depreciation of morality that goes hand in hand with that of reason and that of freedom—we recently read from a Protestant pen an article on morality considered solely as “cultural reality”. Such an attitude, to take it simply as such, could also facilitate invaluable analyses in many regards, such as the analysis of the “levels of life” in Kierkegaard or that of the “sacred” in Rudolf Otto. But these analyses do not always stop at posing formal distinctions. Thus, in order to bring out more clearly the specificity of the category of the sacred or of the religious, Otto cuts the latter off from morality; he is not content with showing that, on the level of history or psychology, these two orders are often separated in fact; he is well on his way to a separation by right.⁶ As a repercussion, when morality reclaims its place, in other authors of Protestant inspiration, it sometimes absorbs religion and dries up mysticism by incarcerating all spiritual life “within the limits of reason”.

In reality, however—that is to say, by right, in the nature of things—on the one hand, “the sacred is not reabsorbed into moral value, the religious transcends the ethical”, but, on the other hand, it does not merely accommodate morality and mysticism: it remolds them, so to speak, by installing them in its heart. Religion, morality and mysticism “appear in a reciprocal envelopment”; there exists between the three both an attraction and a tension, which will be the source of many vital problems, but there is objectively neither separation nor exclusion nor conflict: for “the Deity, while transcending being, truth and the good, contains them formally.”⁷ This is why, in particular, in Catholicism, just as the reasonable life and life according to the spirit penetrate each other,⁸ *morality impregnates the mystical life to the end*. “Through it, the good rewarded and the bad punished, these pillars of the revelation of the Demiurge, degraded by Gnosticism to a lower level than exoteric faith, regain their place at the heart of the revelation of the Father through the only Son.”⁹ Hence, Saint Justin, in his *Dialogue*: “It is not because of his affinity with God, or because he is spirit like him, that man sees God: it is because he is virtuous and just.”¹⁰ And Father Jean Rigoleuc on spiritual persons: “All their reason, and the lights they receive by it, are given to them only so that they might be perfected in these virtues.”¹¹ “The mystical ascent” does not efface “from common Christian life any specific trait”.¹² The Christian virtues are not merely means of freeing oneself from the world: in their substance, they are the end itself; the promised beatitude is not made of different material. This is what Saint Ambrose expresses admirably in a brief sentence from his commentary on Saint Luke, with respect to the beatitudes: “Sicut enim sperī nostrae octava perfectio est, ita octava summa virtutum est.”¹³

Pierre Nemeshegyi poses the same problem with respect to Origen: “To place Being and moral Goodness in equation;

to place this moral Goodness in God formally, and as characterizing the final ground of his Being—is this not to be condemned to enclosing all spiritual life in an anti-mystical moralism? The Good is a transcendental. But is it, formally, what we understand by ‘moral Good’? Or is there not a deepening of this moral Goodness, which would reestablish the possibility of an innermost mystical depth?”¹⁴ Again with respect to Origen, W. Völker remarks: “We observe . . . a hesitation very characteristic of Origen’s turn of spirit . . . and which one finds again in a nearly identical way in Philo: side by side, and sometimes even the mutual penetration, of moralism and mysticism.”¹⁵ And Nemeshegyi concludes: “ ‘Moralism’ and ‘mysticism’ are in fact one and the same thing in Origen’s conception.”¹⁶ Origen himself specifies, in his argument against Celsus: “God is not merely ‘the Good’, as all the Platonists say, he is ‘the Righteous’.”¹⁷ Saint Gregory the Great also reminds us, with his usual good sense, always linked with spiritual fervor:

Solent quidam, scripta sacri eloquii legentes, cum sublimiores sententias ejus penetrant, minora mandata quae infirmioribus data sunt, tumentis sensu despicere, et ea velle in alium intellectum permutare. Qui, si recte in eo alta intelligerent, mandata quoque minima despectui non haberent, qui divina praecepta sic in quibusdam loquuntur magnis, ut tamen in quibusdam congruant parvulis, qui per incrementa intelligentiae quasi quibusdam passibus mentis crescant, atque ad majora intelligenda perveniant.¹⁸

Saint Augustine had said the same, in a very Origenian shortcut, in speaking of eternal life: “Una ibi virtus erit, et idipsum erit virtus praemiumque virtutis.”¹⁹ Picking up again Saint Ambrose’s turn of phrase, Alexander Neckham, cosmologist of the twelfth century, explains that the octave of the beatitude brings the perfection of its consonance to the septenary of the virtues, as in our material universe the eighth sphere, including the whole universe, brings its conclusion to the harmony of the heavens.²⁰ Let us say, in

the categories of medieval exegesis, that anagogy achieves perfection both of allegory and of tropology. Thus one should say of all Catholic mysticism what one historian says of Saint Bernard, through allusion to the traditional interpretation of the “Books of Solomon” and of their progressive sequence; for each of them, as for him, “the moral school of Ecclesiasticus and Proverbs, a necessary preliminary for the mystical school of the *Song of Songs*, is a school whose doors are never closed behind us.”²¹ And, reciprocally, in fulfilling the precept of the Lord, one merits not only the eternal dwelling, one does not merely prepare for it: one is already building, Saint Hildegarde tells us, the tower of the heavenly Jerusalem.²²

It would be good to return to the celebrated *Golden Epistle*, in which William of Saint Thierry, the friend of Saint Bernard, condenses for the brothers of the Carthusian monastery of Mont Dieu the essence of Christian anthropology and spirituality, such as the most common Catholic tradition understands them. William puts, first of all, the sublime ideal of the contemplative in abrupt terms and with an appearance of separation, of complete transcendence from one degree to another, which could be surprising:

You have not only pledged complete holiness, but the perfection of all holiness and the height of all perfection. It is not your business to languish in the practice of ordinary precepts, or to devote yourself only to that which God commands, but to aim at what he wishes, in the search for his good, agreeable and perfect will. It is for others to serve God, it is for you to cling to him. Faith in God, knowledge, love and reverence are for others. For you, taste, understanding, knowledge, enjoyment. A high vocation, an arduous task. . . ,²³

Farther on, William takes up again the distinction of the three states, or three degrees, which is reminiscent of the free fashion of the Pauline trichotomy:

The state of beginners can be called “animal”; that of progressers, “rational”; that of the perfect, “spiritual”. . . . The first state attends to the body; the second is busy with the reasoning soul; the third finds its rest only in God. . . ,²⁴

These kinds of schemas are several times accompanied by appeals to humility, which should form the common and unalterable basis for all disciples of Christ, at whatever degree they find themselves in their spiritual ascent.²⁵ Several points of resemblance to Saint Paul are still to be noted: the distinction between *anima* and *animus*, which corresponds closely to that between the *psyche* and the *pneuma*;²⁶ the reference to the discourse at Athens²⁷ (Acts 17:27-28); the definition of the spiritual man as the one whose spirit is informed by the Spirit of love;²⁸ the indication of the end as being “the unity of spirit” with God:

There is also another resemblance to God . . . so particular that it is no longer given the name of resemblance but that of unity of spirit. It is when man becomes a single thing, a single spirit with God, not only through the unity of a single will but also through some truer expression of a virtue that is no longer capable . . . of willing anything else. . . .

Once conformed to wisdom, the reason [= reasoning soul] puts [everything] to profit . . . and hastens to spring toward freedom of spirit, toward unity, so well that the faithful man becomes, as has often been stated, one single spirit with God.²⁹

Freedom of spirit, unity with God: we know the abuses that such formulas have frequently covered throughout twenty centuries of history.³⁰ We know, too, how the fear of these abuses have made a number of timorous souls avoid them; how, still more, the bourgeois, individualist incomprehension of the last century banished them, and how they seemed suspect to many who thought they were judging in the name of pure Catholic orthodoxy.³¹ Within the context of that spiritual masterpiece, the *Letter to the Brothers of Mont Dieu*, these expressions can be accepted in all their power, in the same sense that they have in Scripture. And the keeping of a moral life integrated into a mystical life is also

explicitly recognized here: besides the word “virtue”, which figures in the same text we have just quoted on “the unity of spirit” with God, other texts recall it with insistence. They speak “in praise of virtue, the daughter of reason, but even more of grace”,³² they show it, not surpassed by, but assumed into spiritual perfection; the latter is achieved “when the soul encompasses all the virtues in itself, not as elements borrowed from somewhere else but as quasi-natural products of its being, according to that resemblance to God by which it is the whole of what is”. Mystical unity with God is wholly impregnated with morality because it is the perfect adherence to Him who is not only the Righteous but, in the most concrete and singular sense, the Good.³³

This Catholic equilibrium was undoubtedly already jeopardized in a great spiritual master who is not at all to be confused with the false spirituals to whom we have alluded. Evagrius was considered a disciple of Origen; but, in this, an unfaithful disciple. Despite the appearances of several expressions, the same criticism could not be made of a Tauler or a Ruysbroek: they condemn without equivocation the mystical claims that think to hold themselves above morality and reason, beyond affirmations of the faith. The case of Meister Eckhart is perhaps more disputable, but it is right to dissociate the profound intention of this great thinker and this great mystic from some paradoxical expressions held to be condemnable by the bull *In agro. La Perle évangélique*, following Eckhart and several others, seems to place “the spirit” in contact with the divine Unity “above the multiplicity of the Persons”:³⁴ a grave problem, which we will not take up here but which, for a Christian, governs the judgment to be passed on mysticism in its relation to the primary mystery of his faith.³⁵ To stay with the relation between mysticism and morality, let us say that one is happy to find a fine example of equilibrium in an author carried in other respects to many unilateral

excesses. This refers to George Tyrrell, who wrote in a fine passage from *Christianity at the Cross-roads*:

[The apocalyptic Kingdom of heaven] is the fruit and reward of the moral life, but is a supermoral life—the continuation of that divine and spiritual life which, under present contingencies, manifests itself principally by morality . . . and, above all, in religion and conscious union with God. But [in the Kingdom] the contingencies, that now call for the moral struggle with all its pain and suffering, shall be done away.^{[36](#)}

We will end by quoting a more authoritative witness, the great Saint Teresa, who unites the soul and spirit of which Saint Paul spoke as much as she distinguishes them with him, by observing that “the center of the soul”, or the “spirit of the soul”, is a difficult thing to express and even to believe:

Certain interior effects give the certitude that there is, under certain relations, a very real difference between the soul and the spirit. Although in reality they are but one, we sometimes perceive a division between them that is so delicate that it seems that the one functions in one way and the other in another. . . . There are so many things in our innermost depths, and things so subtle, that it would be boldness on my part to undertake to explain them. We will understand all that in the other life, if God . . . deigns to admit us to the dwelling where we will have understanding of all these secrets.^{[37](#)}

III. Conclusions Optimi corruption, pessima. One should not at all conclude from this, as some authors, particularly in Protestantism, have done, that mysticism should be condemned.^{[1](#)} Nevertheless, even without considering the case of the aberrations we have just seen, certain precautions should be taken in order not to jeopardize the spiritual equilibrium. Just as it is necessary to reject an anthropology that, refusing man any higher faculty, stifles the spirit in him—which is what all positivisms, all rationalisms and all psychologisms do—so it is necessary to guard against reducing theoretical or practical reason in it by failing to recognize its transcendence in relation to the

sensible order and its participation in the absolute. “The mind”, writes Hans Urs von Balthasar,² “destroys itself and crumbles if it splits into an inferior and a superior mind, an autonomously functioning reason (*Verstand*) and a *ratio* (*Vernunft*) that is reserved for special philosophical and religious purposes.” Then the risk of a short-circuit appears, from “infantile naturalism” to high spirituality; from alienating exteriority to “divine” magnetization; from the “caves of the unconscious” to the “birth” from above; from the “possessive I” that is “radical servitude” to “disinterested” love.

Charles du Bos was not lacking in clear-sightedness the day he noted in his *Journal* “the necessity from an ethical point of view of guarding oneself against mysticism”.³ In the same sense, he wrote one day to Father Auguste Valensin:

Since the end of July 1927, God, in his goodness, has recalled me to Himself, I have happened to suffer in the face of a certain unformulated—and at times even formulated—disdain that believers, who are advanced, moreover, in spiritual ways and even mystics, witness or at least seem to witness toward the moral order as such. If one admits (and I admit it very strongly) that ethics are only the narthex of religious truth, nevertheless there exist natures (to the number of which I belong) who venerate the narthex all the more as it helps to introduce them into the sanctuary, and the more their religious life deepens, the more faithful their gratitude becomes. . . .⁴

Du Bos had noted in his *Journal*, on January 11, 1925, “the necessity of guarding against mysticism”, and, on January 18, 1929, analyzing himself:

Basically, it is always a question with me of an offensive directed by the *moral* against the *religious*: because, as my *Journal* often notes, the moral being is primary with me; in the period when the plane of temperament is transcended, the form that temptation then takes is a moral form, summed up in the question of my right to religious life. Yes, that is indeed it; and my effort now must be, not only to adhere to God, but to consider that from the instant I do what I must on the plane of living, I adhere to him de facto. . . .⁵

Du Bos' reflection, as we see, was not unilateral, although he emphasizes the moral, which he judges to be dangerously disregarded (what would he not say thirty or forty years later!). In return, Emmanuel Mounier was no less right to bring out the complementary truth in recalling that "morality has no other end but the spirituality of which it keeps house"; when one isolates it and clings to it, he explains, one kills it; it is replaced by moralism,⁶ the enemy of mysticism as well as of religion. History in fact shows that the abandonment of mysticism in the name of any form whatever of moralism has never been, at best, anything but a stage in spiritual development, in view of a less confused mysticism. "As it is nearly inevitable, in philosophy, to pass through a phase of idealism, so it is inevitable to pass through a phase of intellectualism in morality; inevitable and good." But on condition that one does not cling to it. A deeper understanding knows that it is not knowledge that saves man from sin, and it will always ask: "Who, for example, is the one more free of appearances—a Spinoza, who, in observing actions or sentiments that the common men call sin, explains them through a defect in knowledge—or a Surin, who proclaims that to the degree that one does not see sins even in one's inadvertencies and first movements, to that degree one will not weep over one's vanities as sacrileges, one will 'never get to the root'?"⁷ Both have cut through appearances (not always the same ones); both, in their order, are right. But, basically, how much more is this true of Surin! And if the intellectual criticism worked by a Spinozist is not coupled with a spiritual deepening, how his clearsightedness ends in blaming it! The world, Bergson said very justly, has much to learn from the great mystics.⁸

Likewise one is right not to consent to letting the understanding be classed among the provisional values, to be reduced to the rank of "naturalism", that is, close to

animality. Perhaps the word “soul”, so far from being univocal,⁹ used in the tripartite division of man, is not without some danger in this regard. But this is not a sufficient motive for rejecting the very idea of this tripartite division, such as some, as we have seen above, were led to do. Even Sandaeus himself, an apologist and theoretician of mysticism, while noting that a number of mystics judge recourse to this division indispensable, declared that there could be room to debate this.¹⁰ Sandaeus was thereby echoing a fear or a mistrust frequently shown in the most brutal fashion by Schoolmen in the face of all mystical thought; we know how sharp the dispute was, even within the Catholic Church, throughout the seventeenth century.¹¹ Since then, through their efforts to minimize the text of Saint Paul on which the distinction is based, others witness a discomfort if not a similar hostility. The mystical tradition of the great Church, however, offers them desirable assurances: thus with Tauler, transforming the way one views the classical terms of the division. He is thereby going parallel to the doctrinal tradition such as it is expressed in a Saint Augustine, for example, or a Saint Thomas. The rather pusillanimous minds to which we are alluding do not give enough consideration to the fact that, in wanting to save the absolute of morality and reason, they risk failing to recognize the gifts of the Spirit and lowering the mystical life. Stifled, unrecognized in its authentic forms, the latter, in despair, is then in danger of developing on the margins of all rational and moral norms. A certain intellectualism—very poorly named—is a worthy counterpart of moralism, and as pernicious.

To return to this latter, we can think that the general use, in the ecclesiastical vocabulary of the modern Christian West, of the term “director of conscience”, to the detriment of the traditional terms “spiritual father” or *spiritus moderator*,¹² is the sign of an inflation of pure morality,

tending to casuistry, or lends itself to falling into psychologism (while waiting for psychiatry), to the detriment of the attention paid to things of the spirit, which is to say, to the relation to God. "Have we not seen people", wrote René Guénon, "who, when it is a question of 'spiritual master', go so far as to translate it 'director of conscience'?"¹³ It is possible to agree with his remark without sharing the least part of his own notion of "spiritual master", or, more precisely, his doctrine of the spirit. Still another sign of the small esteem given to things of the spirit, and first of all of an inadequate understanding of them, is manifested in the designation "intellectualism", which is too easily attributed today to the whole doctrine of contemplation. There is, of course, a philosophical contemplation. There is a Greek intellectualism that is expressed in an ideal of contemplation. We discern some traces of it in the history of Christian thought and life; but these are only traces—and all are not, moreover, blameworthy.¹⁴ As it has done for many other concepts, Christianity has modified this; at the same time as it took on its permanent values, it profoundly transformed it. How is it that even Christian historians have perceived so little of this? One can, indeed, if one wishes, reject the word, in seeking another that lends less to equivocation; but it should not be necessary at the same time to reject the doctrine that the Christian centuries had included within it; it should not be necessary to depreciate what is the very basis of the best spiritual tradition at the heart of Christianity. This would be at the same stroke to depreciate the order of the theological virtues, in direct contradiction to Scripture itself. The supremely active Father Teilhard de Chardin did not fall into such contempt; he forcefully maintained the primacy of contemplation, in which he could recognize the superior form of action, that which an activist will never achieve.¹⁵ The transformations and progress

achieved in the course of history, the entrance into an age dominated by the technical, the development of the “human sciences” that tend to assimilate man to the object of the sciences of nature, will change nothing: not only the high mystical life but already the whole spiritual life, while taking the greatest consideration of morality and including morality (as well as of rational activity), comprises, along with varied nuances according to the case, something beyond morality taken in the human sense of the word, something beyond all that we commonly call action, because it always comprises something beyond man.

That is what signifies the great traditional theme of Martha and Mary, based on the Gospel. It will always remain true. “In his duabus mulieribus duas istas esse figuratas, praesentem et futuram, latoriosam et quietam, temporalem et aeternam.”¹⁶ And of these two realities, the second is already present, as an active anticipation, at the heart of the man en route toward his divine destiny.

Finally, the maintenance of the distinction between the zone of the natural [*psychisme*] and that of the spiritual is of a major importance for maintaining in their just place, within the limits of their competence, all the kinds of psychology. It opposes “the dissolving psychoanalytical confusion of natural and spiritual”.¹⁷ If stopping one’s aim at the “rational” and the “moral” was often the great temptation, and if this temptation remains, what is to be even more greatly feared today is stopping at the “natural [*psychique*]”. One of Teilhard’s weaknesses, which was benign, to tell the truth, because he thought above all to dissipate the illusion of a materialistic monism, was a certain confusion of vocabulary between spiritual and natural: in the *Phénomène humain* (which does not claim to be a treatise on spirituality), he happens to speak at will of “spiritual energy” or of “natural energy”. —But, “the spirit intervening, psychology is powerless. It sees everything

from outside, although the spirit is lived only from within"; it sees uniquely "that part of the natural life that the spirit has not touched and which, consequently, unfolds in the unconscious".¹⁸

Without doubt it is only through our participation in the mystery of the trinitarian Life that we are to become fully capable of going beyond this psychological vision that can indeed scrutinize certain "depths" but to which this other depth is not accessible, this depth which is human transcendence, this otherwise mysterious zone where the impulse toward God is situated, the encounter with God.

There is in us a certain root that plunges into the depths of the Trinity. We are these complex beings who exist on successive levels, on an animal and biological level, on an intellectual and human level and on an ultimate level in those very abysses that are those of the life of God and those of the Trinity. This is why we have the right to say that Christianity is an integral humanism, which is to say, which develops man on all the levels of his experience. We must always be in defiance of all the attempts to reduce the space in which our existence moves. We breathe fully in the measure to which we do not let ourselves be enclosed in the prison of the rational and psychological world but to which a part of us emerges into these great spaces that are those of the Trinity. And this is what creates the incomparable joy of existence in Christianity.¹⁹

Pertinent remarks of great importance in ecclesiology as well as in the liturgy, more timely today than ever. The distinctions recalled by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and by Father P. R. Régamey, based, like those of so many others, on the Pauline anthropology of the First Letter to the Thessalonians, are at once, for every member of the Church, an appeal to the highest spiritual life and a warning against its counterfeits.

EPILOGUE

TO PART ONE*

The Light of Christ “If you believe”, we are told, “in the divinity of the Christian religion, it is because you are ignorant about all the conditions that marked its beginning and growth. The comparative history of religions has made enough progress so that henceforth it is no longer possible to speak of a ‘Christian miracle’ coming to break the thread of human religious acts. There is nothing in it that is not explained in the way everything is explained. Of course some points still remain obscure, certain influences remain unperceived. The task of historians has not yet been accomplished. One can also recognize that several of them have been a little too quick in thinking to detect, here or there, analogies or relationships, and their intemperance was capable of provoking a prudent reaction in some scholars anxious for a more rigorous method. But the general orientation of science is nonetheless certain, and its result is nonetheless assured. Every day leads to a new light, uncovering some new connection, and here and now we see clearly enough to be able to affirm that Christianity is a human phenomenon, very human, deeply rooted in the earth of history, where it has drawn all the essence from which its marvelous vigor is nourished.”

An objection that insinuates itself under a thousand forms, with respect to a thousand problems. A stronger objection, in many eyes, than all those of dialectics, because, without fighting, it claims to explain. Believers are upset by it. Men of good will, whom Christianity attracts and who already believe they see God’s work in it, find themselves stopped in their tracks by it: they fear to commit themselves

thoroughly to what is perhaps only the work of man. If it were a question only of a milieu providentially prepared to favor the birth and rise of the religion of Christ—Jewish Messianism, Stoic universalism, the organization of the Diaspora, the Roman peace. . .—this ensemble of fortuitous conditions could indeed account for its concrete possibility, but it would definitely not for all that cancel out the miracle of its existence. A favorable atmosphere has never sufficed to explain the fact of a birth. One would have to be completely incapable of perceiving religious values to be tempted to explain the apparition and success of Christianity solely by a series of external circumstances, as important and as favorable as one supposes them to be. Better known, the information that history brings in this order can therefore only add to the admiration that already seized the Fathers, such as Saint Leo exclaiming before his Roman listeners: “Numerous States have been united into a single Empire, so that the ways necessary for the preaching of the Gospel might be ready!”¹ Admiration that was also Pascal’s: “How beautiful it is to see through the eyes of faith Darius and Cyrus, Alexander, the Romans, Pompey, Herod act, without knowing it, for the triumph of the Gospel!” and who a short time earlier had had this sung to Péguy: “The steps of the legions had marched for Him. . . .”²

But history seems to show us much more today. Much more even than a subjective preparation of souls, suffocating in paganism, thirsty for salvation. One by one, all the elements of which Christianity is made: the conceptions it presupposes, the notions it sets in motion, its worship practices, the forms of its institutions, the prescriptions of its morality: all are identified, classified, ranked in their place along continuous series. Not a dogma, not a feature of discipline or of liturgy that does not have its history—a history that always includes a first, pre-Christian period. All that had been amalgamated in it is returned to its

origin, and soon it seems that nothing of its own remains. How dare we still, in the face of these facts, a great number of which at least are solidly established, speak of a religion given from heaven, of divine revelation? How, consequently, dare we speak of “transcendence”, of supernatural, absolute, definitive truth? Everything that is born and grows according to the common law is transformed and also perishes according to the common law. As imposing as it seems, Christianity will not escape it. Even more, perhaps, than the defeats to which it has submitted in the course of these recent centuries, the history of its origins warns us of its inevitable decline. It is no longer for us the unique exception, the extraordinary thing that it seemed to be for so long a time. It can no longer be loyally preserved from universal evolution. Whether the brilliant flash projected by religion ever since humanity existed is a false flash or an authentic light is of little importance here: in the case of Christianity, one thought to see a unique star appear abruptly in the heaven of religions and miraculously hang there; but a more experienced look discerns that it, too, was only for a moment, welded to the others, passing like the others, in this long, luminous trail. . . .

Yet the illusion, if such it be, has existed. It still persists with many, who are not at all ignorant people. This, too, is a fact that must be taken into consideration. One should not reply without further examination that the same is true for all religion. Contrary to almost all the others, without excepting even Judaism, Christianity appeared in the middle of a historic period. Its legend, if there is a legend, is contemporaneous with its existence. What a difference there is, in this regard, for example, with its great rival Buddhism!³ Why, then, contrary to so many human phenomena, is it presented in so tenacious a way as being absolutely exceptional? Is ignorance about its true origins enough to explain this illusion in its regard, or might it not

be, rather, the very true perception of its transcendence that veiled by its brilliant flash certain features of its human history? The hypothesis at least deserves consideration. It is not without analogies. Many men think themselves free in actions where without doubt they are not at all, or with a freedom that is not at all real. Is this illusion completely explained by a myopia that prevents them from perceiving the bonds of determinism, or does it too not come from an obscure but truthful perception? Rather than a total illusion, is it not a simple error of localization? An error attesting to an awkwardness in analysis, a scientific inferiority, but without any damage to the essential truth.

Now it happens, too, that one badly localizes the transcendence that one recognizes in Christianity, setting it up in positions from which the experienced historian will have no trouble dislodging it. This is why, in a more or less explicit way, one conceives of it then above all as a solution of continuity. To suppose such a transcendence possible, a transcendence whose true name would be “exteriority”, is not the act of Christianity. What would remain, for example, of the thought of Saint Paul—who nevertheless so dominated the thoughts of his century—if one cut it from the thousand roots that, in fact, attached it to the earth of Tarsus and Jerusalem? How can a single one of its essential points be analyzed without constant reference not only to the history of the Hebrew people but also to Greek civilization, to Eastern mysticism, to the Roman Empire? This would be an imaginary transcendence, pure chimera, linked to a no less chimerical ideal of revelation. The reality that it would effect, if this were possible, would not be superhuman but inhuman. Far from being sublimated by it, it would only be impoverished, dried up.

It would find the path neither of our spirit nor of our heart. Artificial, superficial, and not at all supernatural. Such as those devout people of whom Péguy speaks, who, because they do not have the strength to be of nature imagine that

they are of grace: in reality, dried fruits. But there is another transcendence, a true transcendence, of which the first was only, at best, the naïve transcription. An intrinsic transcendence, in virtue of which a given reality, considered as synthesis, in what comprises its own being, surpasses essentially the realities of the same kind that surround it, whatever might be the community of elements that it informs along with theirs; whatever might be, too, the ties of origin that render these different elements solidary. Any true synthesis is always more than synthesis. A certain recasting that is much more than a new combination, a certain “revival from within” transforms everything. It is, in a phenomenal continuity, the passage to a new, higher, incomparable order.⁴

Now, for anyone who can see—but which of us can natter himself that he always can, once and for all?—the intrinsic transcendence of Christianity is obvious. It alone counts, and a direct look, well aimed, is enough to establish it. The unbeliever does not have to overcome historical continuities, nor does the believer have to refuse to see them. A priori, they must be. Scholars dedicated to discovering these continuities are not at all devoting themselves to a vain task. They can indeed often be mistaken (certainly, they do not fail to be so!) or give in to the temptation of confused conjectures: the hypothesis that guides them is nonetheless sound. The fragility of certain constructions does not at all prevent the firmness of their foundations. Besides, in research that some would hold to be sacrilege, science is after all only exploiting the Pauline idea of the “fullness of time”. It is uniting in a way with the thought of the Fathers of the Church, so anxious to bring out the “evangelical preparations” in order to spare Christianity the appearance of a “sudden improvisation”: “Nihil putem a Deo subitum, quia nihil a Deo non dispositum.”⁵ It agrees with the reflection of the philosopher who, considering the

Christian event, refuses, by very reason of its unparalleled proportions, to attribute an accidental character to it.⁶

But, in what touches the very basis of religion, these continuities are only appearance. Yes, in one sense, Christianity is human, *completely human*. We can, we must speak of its birth. If the words it uses are necessarily borrowed, then it is unavoidable that the concepts are too. And how would man tell himself the truth, even divinely revealed truth, except by using concepts? There is no revelation except supernatural “in the pure state”. How would God give himself to man if he remained a stranger to him? And how would his Word penetrate him if it were not also to become a human word? The messages of Saint Paul or Saint John are already “theologies”, and the very consciousness of Christ is the consciousness of the Word *made flesh*. But a less rudimentary psychology has shown us that the concepts themselves are, in their multiplicity, far from expressing the whole of a doctrine: for they are, within the spirit, the part closest to matter. With how much greater reason, if it is a question of an object that is not only doctrine but first of all reality! By what makes it itself, by its original essence, which consists neither in words nor in concepts and which the whole *sum* of words and concepts is never capable of translating adequately, Christianity is divine, *completely divine*. Through the close texture of relationships of ideas and beliefs, without break, without tear, a new spirit—the Spirit himself—has passed. He has stolen in with gentleness, and he has burst in with power. He has penetrated human history, and all has been transformed. The face of the earth has been renewed by it. This was a new *Fiat*, a true creation: “Emitte Spiritum tuum et creabuntur, et renovabis faciem terrae.”⁷ The Spirit of Christ has founded a wholly new thing, the religion of Christ, and this religion of Christ, for which all human history had prepared, for which all human thought had slowly woven the

fabric, suddenly rises up, in the midst of men, “sine patre, sine matre, sine genealogia”. Pure creation, pure miracle. There we have this “new” idea, which, Jules Lachelier said, “is born from nothing, like a world”.

What new ideas, though, that do not come from us ourselves! The inventions of man enrich humanity, discovering in the soul some nuance unperceived until then, but always leaving it to its essential finitude—to its incurable decay. Once past the first amazement, the ironic and despairing refrain of Ecclesiastes is heard again. The circle, enlarged or shifted, closes again. On the contrary, with a leap, the Christian Idea transports us beyond our limits. It breaks this circle within which all our progress had been condemned in advance to fit. Such was the thought, at its appearance, breaking the circle of animal transformations. It is born in its own time, it has its marked place within the progress of life, and nevertheless what it brings is much more than progress. From the time it emerges, a new kingdom has begun: the human kingdom. So the preaching of Jesus marks the advent of the Kingdom of God.⁸ For how many of the sentences of the Sermon on the Mount would we not find analogies in the Jewish Bible or in the teaching of the rabbis? The One who pronounces it speaks nonetheless as man had never spoken—as man would never speak.⁹ The Gospel inaugurates the time of grace. It is a wholly new order that begins, “a new order of love in the universe”.¹⁰ A dike has been broken, which lets the flow of Love pass through. Now, it would be as vain to dream of a reality more divine than Love than to imagine a reality more spiritual than Thought. The transcendence of Christianity is thus not only relative to such and such an earlier achievement. It is not only something original, something superior, a provisional novelty, clearing the way for some ulterior invention destined to go beyond it. It is an absolute transcendence. “Omnem novitatem attulit.”¹¹

Péguy has also sung it: He was going to inherit a world already made, And yet he was going to remake it entirely. . .

Of course, the order of charity is not revealed, any more than is the order of the spirit, in all its fullness or in all its depth, to that observation from outside that constitutes the work of the pure historian. But if their inner essence still escapes observation, would the simple sight of their effect not already arouse the sense of their incomparable greatness? We know the repercussions, observable to the naturalist not blinded by an overly narrow concept of science, produced in the universe by the apparition of thought: the paradoxical properties of the “human phenomenon”, its extraordinary power for expansion and concentration, out of proportion with the weak morphological originality of man, presuppose a presence of which the naturalist can only catch a glimpse, but they set him on the way that must normally lead him to go beyond his science to discover in truth the human kingdom.¹² The repercussions produced in humanity by the advent of Christianity are no less prodigious: the human spirit immeasurably increased, an unparalleled moral fruitfulness, a society tirelessly at work for an ideal of justice and unity, and so forth. These features are accessible to the historian who knows how to step back a pace. Nevertheless, let us recognize, just as reflection alone, properly speaking, can reveal thought to itself, so too only a process of a religious order can disclose the absolute superiority—which is to say properly, the transcendence—of Christianity. Like the divinity of Christ itself, the *definitive* newness of the Christian principle can be perceived only by the eyes of faith. It is here that the advantage of the simple believer over the man of science and of life over technique shines forth. For the anthropologist who systematically denies himself any inner reflection on the lived thought, as well as

the historian of religions who does not consent to regard Christianity from within and to begin to live it at least through a basic attitude of real sympathy, will never understand anything about the true object of their learned studies. If their science itself does not lead them to the final affirmations, it must at least set them on the path. But if they wish to trust solely in it to the end, surrendering their conscience as men into the hands of their intelligence as specialists, the greater the latter will be and the more it will risk misleading them.

“The history of the formation of ideas”, said Amiel, “is what makes the spirit free.”¹³ Beneath the ideas that it organizes and transforms, let us know how to discern the Christian Idea. This Idea has no history: this is what must make the spirit submit to it.

A great Deed was done for the world twenty centuries ago: the Deed of Charity.¹⁴ Right at first, men’s habits of thought were not any more overturned by it than were empires. Was an obscure variety of Jewish “Messianists” worth even a glance? The grain of wheat sown by Christ remained buried in little upper rooms that counted for nothing in the history of the world. Christianity itself would wait five hundred years to found retrospectively the “Christian era”, and it would take another five hundred years for full Christian practice to become widespread.¹⁵ The first disciples of Jesus still dreamed of the Kingdom of David their father; they went up to the Temple, as was their custom, with a fervor that was only increased. Having contemplated the Deed that had been done before them, they must nevertheless have had the feeling of an unparalleled newness. The testimony of it appears everywhere in their rare writings: “New teaching, new covenant, new commandment, new name, new song, new man, new life, second genesis of the world.”¹⁶ Such a feeling did not mislead them. They were not in danger,

those who had seen, who had heard, those who had touched, of taking the Christian Mystery to be a more or less spontaneous mixture of the Jewish Messianism exalted by Jesus and cult forms then in vogue in the Hellenized East—any more than Christian dogma was in danger of appearing to their successors of the great patristic period as a learned product of the Bible and Greek philosophy. This chemistry of impotent historians could not have been created by them. They knew, from an immediate source, that they were dealing with something very different. They sensed the unity of what myopic analysts think to understand by decomposing it. This is because the principle of synthesis was in them, living and active. It is because, living this dogma themselves before drawing up the inventory of it, adoring this mystery before translating it, they penetrated its spiritual meaning.

In addition, their testimony is for us more than a guarantee. It constitutes a call. If that call is at first necessary for us, we do not have to hold to it. “Now”, said the inhabitants of Sichar to the woman who had led them to Christ, “it is no longer because of what you have said to us that we believe, for we have heard him himself and we know that he is truly the Savior of the world.”¹⁷ For twenty centuries, the witness of the first generation of believers is preserved intact, because it always remains a living witness: *abyssus abyssum invocat* [deep calls to deep]. Why should we be riveted to history? The Spirit still gives witness to our spirit.¹⁸ The Kingdom of God is still in the midst of us. “The Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God”, which was heard for the first time in Galilee, under Herod, during the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, at the time of the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas, still resounds today, and if the forms of its preaching are different, it is the same Voice that proclaims it. Like the creative Deed, which does not cease to maintain being and life everywhere, the Deed of Charity is pursued

over the world. The second Genesis, henceforth as permanent as the first and, like it, infinitely fruitful. The Church, Bride of Christ, continues the work of her Bridegroom. We have only to contemplate her—not from outside, in her sole visible organization, with its human characteristics, which are often too human, perhaps with its defects, not even in the works of its scholars, always unequal to their task and whose insufficiency can be so painful¹⁹—especially when they themselves do not seem to feel it—but in her inner life, in her ideal, in her belief, in her secret fidelity, in the purity of her zeal, in the marvelous fruits of holy joy that she makes ripen in the depths of human hearts. In all that the “world” does not perceive. Then the light shines, then the Truth bears witness to itself: *veritas index sui*. No need for laborious comparisons or of an erudite return to the past. The clearsightedness of a limpid look is preferable here to all the sharp perspicacities of criticism. This is because the miracle is endlessly produced before our eyes. Today as formerly, by virtue of Christianity, “all things are becoming new.” Even—Saint Augustine had already noted it—the more time advances, the more privileged is our situation as witness. The mystical Christ, in the measure he increases, better reveals his power. To the signs of it that already multiply, still others will be added when his message has truly reached the most distant peoples. Today we only begin to see all the fullness of the Deed that renewed the world. The sudden clarity of the first days has become a great, luminous path, which grows with the centuries.

. . . This great Deed of Love, Jesus, it is You, Yourself. Perceptible to man, humble, dying in a corner of Judea, oh!, yes, You are man! Flower of Jesse, You are indeed the fruit of our earth. Born of a woman, truly formed from her substance. You are not some sort of phantom come down from the clouds of heaven. You are deeply rooted in our earth.²⁰ But in You, Jesus, as in no other child of our race, God showed himself. You were not merely His messenger, You are His living and substantial appearance. Through You, He

has not only spoken. Or rather His language is an action, His word is a deed: it is You Yourself. *Splendor, Verbum et imago Patris*. You, Jesus, on your Cross, the act uniting earth to heaven.²¹

In You, God still shows Himself, and in your holy Church. In your best disciples, He still shines, so well that one cannot mistake it. For it is You who live in them. Have we not all known someone in whom a divine flame burned, which they had lit at your hearth alone? Their silent testimony is all the more persuasive. *Non eloquimur magna, sed vivimus.*²² “As for me,” said Gerbet, “I lend an ear to the sounds that holy souls make with greater respect than to the voice of genius.”²³ What a great wise man concludes after long studies and profound meditations in favor of your divinity: that encourages me, but scarcely moves me forward. But that a Francis of Assisi, that being so obviously predestined to make a ray of eternity shine over our earth, makes himself your absolute disciple; that he loves You, adores You, annihilating himself before You; that he is ambitious only to place his steps in your steps and to live from You by reproducing each of your features, that he wants always to be only your humble *repetitor*;²⁴ that not for a moment does he entertain the idea of engaging in a personal way, of trying another experience, of adding at least something to your message: this humble and total will to imitate—*Christo totus concrucifixus et configuratus*—in the face of your sovereign independence: such literalness in such an effusion of the Spirit; such contrast in a similar holiness. . . . The more I reflect on it, the stronger the argument seems to me.²⁵

After that, what do the difficulties matter in which my reason gets tangled? Or rather, how could it be that so lofty an object would not put it to flight? If You have come to unveil a new kingdom and a new existence to me, how should I not consent to letting myself be removed from my usual surroundings? Is it not normal that I have to abandon

my usual modes of thought?²⁶ Your word upsets my instinctive logic, it overturns all my arrangements of ideas; it shatters my concepts. This is the price for the liberation of my understanding. Yet, little by little, in mystery, a new equilibrium is established. Under the secret action of your Spirit, faith is able to find its exact expressions, which protect it against the ever-reborn assaults of a reason too little converted. This was not without a long and arduous work. To define your twofold nature, as for all that is worth the effort of our understanding, it takes time, reflection, groping, disputes, materials from all sources. A long and perilous journey! A complicated, winding history, strewn with a thousand contingencies. An often tragic history—a wonderful history!²⁷ It was through the adventurous concepts of thinkers that Catholic Christology ended in rejoining the first intuition of faith.

More than any other, because it is at the center of all, the definition in which the result of this labor is found today is imperfect. An inevitable and blessed imperfection! Not accidental but essential, necessary so that humble astonishment before the mystery may subsist in the precision of belief and in the firmness of adherence. . . . But already, Jesus, your very first disciples, when they loved You above all and when they left all to follow You, when they gave You all without thinking thereby to take anything from God, when they contemplated You seated at the right hand of the Father, when they called You the one Lord, proclaiming that all had been renewed by You and that all knees must bend before You, your disciples believed in You. Extraordinary, impossible faith—and yet authenticated beyond doubt. A scandal as grave for the historian as the dogma itself for the thinker. For, though not being absolutely the same as ours, the difficulties for a Saint Peter or a Saint Paul in believing were no less strong. Nor were those of their successors, the Origenes and the Cyrils, the

Ambroses and the Augustines. Modern man flatters himself when he judges that the Copernican revolution or the Kantian revolution dug out a new hiatus between his thought and the thought of the Ancients. It was as hard to believe then as it is today! It was hard, for a Jewish monotheist—"Listen, Israel! Your God is one!"—to believe in the divinity of a man.²⁸ It was hard to believe in the crucifixion of the Son of God.²⁹ It was hard for a reasonable man, who had been able to see up close the Son of Man in his humiliation, to believe in the resurrected Christ, and in all these histories "that do not allow themselves to be allegorized. . . ."³⁰

"A scandal for the Greeks and folly for the Jews!" Our Fathers passed beyond; their faith conquered all the obstacles. What they were capable of, we ourselves will be capable of, and if we do not make ourselves unworthy of them, the reasons that quickened them will not be less strong for us. Their attitude will thus be ours. We could not transcend it, but neither could we restrict it without denying your message at the same stroke, Jesus. For it is no more possible to abstract You from this message than it is possible to abstract God from Yourself. On what would we base the demands of your Law if we began by failing to recognize the Demand of your Person? Who would guarantee us the hope of the Kingdom if we were not to recognize the King of it? Does everything in You not tell us that You are Yourself the Kingdom, as You are the Truth and the Life?³¹ So, from the beginning, the *religion of Jesus*, which is the ideal of love, was indivisibly the *religion of Christ*, that is, the cult of incarnate Love. It is folly to want to dissociate them, and to believe that the first would survive the ruin of the second. The religion of which Jesus is the subject and norm is gradually achieved in us only through the religion of which Christ is the object. Moreover, it is blindness not to recognize their identity: it is to tear the

seamless robe that the Gospel presents to us, and it is not to see the metaphysical significance of Love.

Evangelium Christi—Evangelium de Christo: a modern, scarcely more subtle form of the old antithesis between practice and dogma.³² But in maintaining, contrary to those who set them in opposition, that there is an essential relation between them, we do not mean simply that one must observe dogma as a means for assuring practice. Their ties are intrinsic,³³ and the necessity of their agreement is only one consequence. On the one hand, “practice” can be correctly defined only by dogma, from it alone does it receive its meaning and spirit; and, on the other hand, in one sense, it already contains everything in itself, for it is summed up in charity, which is the spiritual being in act.

God is Love, and in a great feat of Love he came to take up man, sinner and miserable. Man and God embraced each other in Christ. The unique intellectual fecundity of this Deed: it is specifically pregnant with all Christian dogmatics, so that the latter must be called, strictly, revealed. No more, in fact, than one could dissociate the revealed truths from the very Person of the Revealer could one conceive a just and complete idea of the transcendent newness of Christianity if one did not see that in this Person of Christ, such as the Apostles already show him to us and such as the Church never ceases to contemplate and reproduce him, the reality of Charity and the truth of Dogma are indissolubly united, Charity constituting the reality of this Dogma, as this Dogma itself constitutes the truth of this Charity.³⁴

As for the intellectual elaboration from which the dogma in its second state results, which is to say, in that abstract and learned formulation that multiplies it in distinct enunciations, wholly guided by the Spirit of Truth as it is, it nevertheless remains a human operation. The materials it

employs, just like those that entered into the first, spontaneous expression of faith, are human materials. They can thus serve them, too, in the real (though always inadequate) transmission of divine truth only in the measure to which they are *related to the Whole of Dogma*.³⁵ In the measure to which, on the contrary, they are considered each in isolation, the formulas cease to bear witness to the divinity of their origin; they lose the best of their meaning, ceasing to have relation to divine charity, such as it appeared to us in Christ. For our faith is one, and it is wholly summed up in You, O Jesus.³⁶ You are the center and the bond of all its “articles”. All its expressions, all its developments are only so many means of understanding You better and of situating ourselves better before You. This is why the historians who, instead of considering Christianity in its living unity—which one can do fully only if one lives it oneself—always scrutinize its elements only by taking them one after the other, as a series of detached pieces, resist any possibility of understanding it. The essence escapes them. They do not find the soul at the end of their scalpel. In Christianity, they find nothing divine, not seeing Christ in it.

How true it is, therefore, to say that if dogma is necessary for the maintenance of practice, the role of practice is nonetheless essential for maintaining the reality of dogma intact! We now discover the whole meaning of such an axiom. Without the truth of dogma—although there may be some good “unfaithful”—one will only have an apparent practice; but, on the other hand, without the reality of practice—although there may be some bad Christians—one will no longer have anything but an apparent dogma. On the one hand, a charity that is less than genuine; on the other, a superstitious belief or a verbal orthodoxy, an “orthology” without any real content. This is because, if the articles of faith are numbered, the Object of Faith is marvelously one. If

the former are formed of abstract propositions, the Latter is marvelously Living! And just as, according to the old Scholastic theory, all physico-chemical bodies, once assimilated by the human organism, are directly informed by the soul, so that there is no longer either carbon or oxygen, and so forth, but only human matter: so with all the elements, religious or profane in origin, that enter into the Christian synthesis. Constructed completely, in one sense, with human materials, the dogmatic formulas nevertheless express divine truth. Elaborated by men, they channel a part of divine revelation. But this is on condition, once again, that one always relates them to that same revelation, to the living Center, to the divine Center from which all radiates and to which all must lead us: to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the personal manifestation of Charity. Jesus Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge because in him dwells the fullness of the Divinity. Jesus Christ, Word of the Father, who speaks him and gives him entirely. There is no absolute newness, no revelation properly speaking, no true transcendence outside of the unique reality of his Person. We must always return to the words of Saint Irenaeus: "Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens."³⁷

Jesus, I believe in You. I confess that You are God. You are for us the whole Mystery of God.³⁸ What other definition of God would we seek than that given by your Apostle? And was it not in contemplating You that he found it? God is Love. This single word contains an unfathomable mystery, which I adore. But through You this mystery illumines our night already. For Love has done a great deed, and this Deed of Love, the Love made visible to our eyes, perceptible to hearts of flesh, effective and saving Love, is You Yourself! It is God made man, it is the Incarnation of God.

We stammer as we can. Our formulas are insufficient. Necessary to shield the treasure of our faith, their form

nevertheless troubles us. But your true adorers, O Jesus, haven't You Yourself said, are not those who put their trust in frail words: they are those who understand your feat and who, sustained by You—for that costs more than blood—strive to reproduce it.

An absolute feat: nothing has any value except through charity. Charity demands all, assumes all. Charity judges all.

An efficacious feat: through this “divine strength” already recognized by the Apostle Paul,^{[39](#)} he uproots us from our egotism, he *opens* us, takes us, raises us, makes us capable of adopting the contours of it in our turn. He eradicates the old man and implants the new man. *Operatorius sermo Christi.*^{[40](#)}

A finally definitive feat. Whatever might be the future progress of our race, whatever the enlargement of its knowledge or the refinement of its ideal, we will not be taken unawares. The coming of Christ has marked the fullness of time. No fullness, no depth will ever exhaust the Deed of Calvary.^{[41](#)}

That is why, peaceful about the past, we also look to the future without fear. “Quid amplius reservandum, cum amplius nihil sit plenitudine perfectionis?”^{[42](#)} Sure that our faith will never mislead us, we go ahead of the excavations of history and the research of science. Ahead, too, of human progress—and we know too well that all progress of the world will not obtain the least beginning of salvation! Ahead of the new values to which history gives birth through its crises. Man can vary and perfect his culture without end. He can discover and exploit new potentialities in it. The very Universe can grow immeasurably, and distant stars can one day reveal a humanity more numerous, more civilized—more miserable—than our own: the Deed of Christ would still take it in. It embraces all worlds, just as it shines above time. For all equally, for each one of us and at all times, for

those who believe in man and for those who despair of him, its rays are those of Eternal Life.

“He has come, the Christ of God, the Leader of the Promises! And without any doubt he has been, he alone, to the exclusion of all those who preceded him—and I have the audacity to say, he is to the exclusion of all those who follow him—the one awaited by the Nations.”[43](#)