

THE DIVORCE OF MYSTICISM FROM THEOLOGY (I)

BY

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ATHER H. Urs von Balthasar wrote recently in *Dieu Vivant* (No. 12, 1948): 'From the dogmatic point of view we no longer take the modern saints seriously because they themselves no longer have to be dogmatic. . . . They leave dogma to the prosaic work of "the schools" and become lyricists.' Such a statement is not an isolated one among spiritual writers today. And we need hardly add that as a rule it is made with a view to deploring this separation of 'sanctity' from theology.²

Some readers then begin to wonder whether sanctity in the Church has actually become a kind of lyricism or poetic enthusiasm. Is it a matter of 'mystical' intuition, rather exaggerated, a special 'grace'? Moreover the mentality of many of our contemporaries, sincere Catholics though they may be, echoes these questions. For them the point of view of the 'mystic' which they identify with that of the 'saint', the 'irrationality' of his conception of Christian life, of prayer and penance, are all things that should not be discussed. They are accepted or rejected; but in any case such a view of Christian life is not final. Some Catholics, again, are secretly disturbed if such things are discussed. They are afraid that discussion may disclose the abnormality of such practices or 'mystical' states. And then they would find it very difficult to justify the encouragement so constantly shown to such things by the Church.

There are indeed some theologians (with notable exceptions, thank God!) who have reacted almost in the same way. If all are agreed as to what constitutes the essence of sanctity, some prefer to leave the theological discussion of a 'mystical' conception of the Christian life free. They call it optional and the optional can only be secondary in relation to the essential, and the essential in this case is salvation, obligatory for all, without addition or subtraction.

As to the mystics, what characterises them, on the other hand,

¹ Translated, with kind permission of the Editor, from *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, April 1950, pp. 372-389, by K. Pond.

² Cf. A. Stolz, O.S.B.: *The Doctrine of Spiritual Perfection* (Herder, St Louis, U.S.A.).

is the conviction of the immense value of their inner experience. This explains their distrust of 'good Christians' who appear disapproving, and their caution, with regard to a certain theology which is cold, dry, geometrical, and which gives them only formulae in which they have difficulty in recognising their inward treasure.

For this state of affairs should we blame only the 'rationalism' of such theologians and of the 'common sense' Christians? The writings and biographies of modern mystics too often justify the impression that the 'sanctity' of their hero is the direct result of a sort of Copernican revolution, of a radical and voluntary upheaval, of a vision of the world, of God, and of themselves the very reverse of spontaneous ideas. Further, such writings seem to owe to dogma only the formulae, the framework, the mental pictures, but not their deep and real life, and with a few changes of wording they might equally well describe any sort of mysticism, true or false.

Should we therefore, on the contrary, blame only the mystics? Of course not. We know those manuals of dogmatic theology which devote a few paragraphs at the end of their treatises to *corollaria pietatis*. And those manuals of asceticism and mysticism that carefully label and classify the conditions and stages of spiritual progress. But we also know, alas, that in the eyes of the true mystic such classifications do not touch his real life. He sees only the God-who-is-Love, to be reached or discovered anew. He knows only Christ, the Father's Love made flesh, to bring us back to him. What is left of these burning truths under the pen of such authors? So we can begin to understand certain complaints and a certain bitterness....

We need not mince matters. We must say this at least that the present-day mentality does not easily find its level among the spiritual writings of the first ages of the Church. It is a far cry, for instance, from our present mystical writers to the author to whom the middle ages were so passionately devoted and who wrote the brief treatise on *Theologia Mystica*. The two words of this title remind us today of the works of which mention has just been made. When our contemporaries set themselves to read the Areopagite, the impression they get is one of ambiguity. Is it God who is in question, or some experience of God? Is it theology as such, the science of revelation, or mystical theology, the experience of revelation? Yet the middle ages, up to the thirteenth-century, the age of the great scholastics, lived and thrived on this union between theology and mysticism. In the doctors of the Church of that age,

knowledge and experience, objective and subjective met in harmony.

It is difficult to give an exact date or to assess the real causes of the separation of these two aspects of revelation. But we can follow through the three centuries which concluded the middle ages the evolution of ideas on this question. While investigating the subject of 'contemplation' during that period we came to realise that this was one of the questions where the progressive lack of understanding and even of harmony between theology and mysticism could not long pass unnoticed. Here, then, we may find a valuable test to help us to discover the circumstances, and to some extent the causes, of the present divorce between theology and mysticism.³



During the middle ages in the west the great doctors of the mystical life were St Augustine, St Gregory the Great, pseudo-Denys the Areopagite and Richard of St Victor. Other monastic authors, such as St Anselm and St Bernard, and even certain Greek fathers, also had a notable influence. Scholasticism, reaching its apogee in the thirteenth century, scarcely modified the programme; the sources from which its spiritual teaching was derived were almost exclusively and in that order, those we have enumerated.⁴ Along with and in spite of the 'juridical', 'moralistic', 'intellectualist' aspects which these 'scholastic' middle ages presented, we may see in this persistent influence the trace of yet another middle ages: the 'monastic' one. The latter, as we shall soon see, lasted well into the fifteenth century. It may be characterised in a phrase: a preference for the central facts of revelation as lived rather than for speculations upon revelation. The 'scholastic' middle ages, on the other hand, to the advantage of dialectic was devoted to scrutinising speculative problems which were increasingly peripheral compared with the central data of revelation,⁵ and gradually enlarged the fissure between theology and mysticism by the new method which it was perfecting.

A St Thomas will thus be able to maintain the contact between

3 Among the many recent examples of their separation we will mention only one, a significant one: Père Cayré, A.A., in his *Patrologie et histoire de la théologie*, found himself obliged to study christian life and thought successively from the seventeenth century onwards, whereas he could describe there two aspects up to and including the middle ages without disassociating them. Cf. also Père Congar's article 'Théologie' in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (Vol. 15, pp. 423-4).

4 G. Turbessi, O.S.B., *La vita contemplativa. Dottrina tomistica e sua relazione alle fonti* (Rome, 1944).

5 J. Leclercq, O.S.B., 'Médiévisme et unionisme' in *Irenikon*, Vol. XIX, 1946, p. 13.

them. The questions in the *Secunda Secundae* devoted to contemplation and contemplative life reveal very clearly his 'monastic' inspiration (if we may continue to use this terminology). Certainly his confidence in aristotelianism and the primacy given to the intellect in human psychology lead him to see in contemplation a formal act of the intellect. But on this basis he goes on to enquire whether the vision of the divine essence is possible to the human intellect and under what conditions; what are the degrees of contemplation; how is it related to love. Love, indeed, is the principle and also the term, and again it is the effect, of contemplation. Yet the perspective is clearly intellectualist.⁶ And he was coming across the justification for this perspective in great masters of the mystical life whom he read. With St Augustine, the doctor of love, he found the famous *Intellectum valde ama*, with St Anselm, *Crede ut intelligas*. Thomas, in short, combines this deep faith in the workings of the human intellect with the purest heritage of the monastic middle ages, in an harmonious synthesis which would lose by being commented on, systematised, scrutinised. In its simplicity his exposition says all that can be said—granted of course the aristotelian starting point; the primacy of intellect over will.

This starting point is categorically disputed by the Franciscan school. So much so that it may be wondered whether the mystical teaching of the last three centuries of the middle ages does not owe much more to the latter than to the Thomist school. The Franciscan school restores love to the primacy in contemplation and does so in fidelity to St Augustine himself. Man's beatitude, here below as in the after life, resides formally in the *fruitio*, in the enjoyment of God. It is from this angle that it is necessary to understand the Franciscan conception of contemplation, such as we find it, for instance, in the *De triplici via* or in the *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum* of St Bonaventure, or in the writings of Blessed John Duns Scotus. This conception continues, more closely it would seem than in the Dominican school, the spirit of the 'monastic' middle ages and the whole movement of Christocentric and affective piety which stirred the Europe of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with St Bernard and, especially, St Francis of Assisi.

Now one century earlier Richard of St Victor was still defining contemplation in a formula which, taking into account the different nuances, was to sum up closely that which the earlier centuries had

6 G. Turbessi, *op. cit.* pp. 34-75. Cf. II-IIae, q. 180.

attained: *libera mentis perspicacia in sapientiae spectacula cum admiratione suspensa*.⁷

When these words are weighed attentively and compared with the definitions of the two great schools of the thirteenth century, everything seems to indicate that St Thomas's adoption of dialectics and of aristotelianism—a practice for which St Bernard had vehemently reproached Abelard in the previous century—was causing him to lay the emphasis on the first words of Richard: *mentis perspicacia*, whereas the Franciscan masters, more faithful to the spirit of Augustinianism, laid the emphasis on his last words. These nuances certainly did not imply, in the thought of anyone concerned, neglect of the remainder of the definition. But we can sense a danger. These two emphases could become exclusive: as in many doctrinal controversies, each of the conflicting parties is tempted to insist on the 'specific difference' which separates it from the other, so much so that finally the said specific difference assumes the form of an absolute essential, under penalty of betraying the very spirit which is inspiring each of the tendencies. Ideas on contemplation do not escape this law.

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These few indications briefly assign the positions at the end of the thirteenth century. It must not, however, be imagined that during the next two centuries the reactions of ideas upon one another are going to occupy the entire scene where spiritual doctrines are concerned. There is never, particularly in such a field, an absolute break with the past. Side by side with the 'scholastic' middle ages which attain their apogee at this period, the old spirit of the 'monastic' middle ages is to experience, thanks to Cîteaux and to Assisi, a more or less vigorous survival, as we have said. We could cite many names in proof of this;⁸ but the survival is increasingly active outside theology, and the almost despairing efforts of the fourteenth century to preserve the union between theology and mysticism has no future.

Theology, as we know, had made considerable progress in the thirteenth century. It had clarified its method and its object, it had

⁷ *Benjamin major* I, 4; P.L. CXCVI, 67. It is remarkable that St Thomas never quoted this definition which he cannot have failed to come across in Richard; but he has quoted another, more intellectualist, which is to be found at almost the same place in the *Benjamin: perspicax et liber animi contuitus in res perspicendas* (II-IIae q. 180, a. 3, ad. 1).

⁸ In his original article the author here refers to an interesting list of fourteenth and fifteenth century spiritual writers and mystics.—Ed.

seen new horizons opening before it and fresh tasks coming to light. Not unnaturally, such an advance at one point is balanced elsewhere by hesitations, as men recognise the need for readjustment in order to reconsider the other branches of learning in relation to these new developments. Just as the recent discoveries of nuclear physics necessitate the revision, not only of the art of war but of many human values.

The great merit of the Rhenish Dominican school lies in their attempt to make this adjustment. Its great theorists do not always appear to have had personal knowledge of the highest experiences of mystical contemplation. These Rhinelanders are preachers and spiritual directors. But they are theologians too. In 1267 the direction of the Dominican nuns was entrusted expressly to 'learned' friars.⁹ This land of apostolic activity, combined with their scholastic formation, explains their pronounced taste for 'speculative mysticism'. We need not think that this speculative mysticism is due to the adoption of the framework and method popularised by the *Summa Theologica* of St Thomas. It is rather a question of an effort, a 'dialectic', which tries to describe both mystical union and contemplation in relation to the psychological effects of grace overflowing into the soul which has been stripped by renunciation, in relation also to certain great doctrinal themes.¹⁰ Not unreasonably, it has been possible in this way to find an affinity between their conception of spiritual progress and that of Neoplatonism or Stoicism.

The founder of the school was Master Eckhart (†1327).¹¹ He had unquestionably come under the influence of the extremist tendencies into which, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, certain heterodox spiritual groups were falling: such as the Ortlibians, Beghards, Brethren of the Free Spirit. The latter rejected the value of works, that of the sacramental life, and all ecclesiastical discipline. In their moral behaviour they adopted both the rigorism and the laxity of the Manicheans of all periods: rigorism in the 'self-stripping' which was to be a prelude to the 'liberty' of spiritual union. Master Eckhart also preached renunciation of all created things (what he used to call *Abgeschiedenheit*), to attain to purely spiritual union with, and

⁹ On the 'speculative' repercussions of this task of spiritual direction see G. Théry, O.P., 'Le développement des études eckhartiennes', in *Supplement to Vie Spirituelle*, No. 7, 1948, pp. 321-325.

¹⁰ Cf. M. de Gandillac, 'Tradition et développement de la mystique rhénane, Eckhart, Tauler, Seuse', in *Mél. Sc. Relig.*, Vol. III, 1946, p. 76.

¹¹ Cf. an excellent portrait of the physiognomy of Eckhart by G. Théry, *art. cit.*, pp. 310-318.

contemplation of, God. This theme is developed alongside a dialectic which varied slightly in the course of his career.

At the outset, during his first period in Paris (1301-1303), his turn of mind, readily given to paradox, brought him to admit the nothingness of the soul 'so long as it has not attained to the totality (even were this beyond the power of thought) of the divine-in-itself';¹² and at the same time the 'nothingness' of the divine being (because being as such is always limited). This point of view impels him to exaggerate, even in spiritual matters, the Thomist primacy of the *intellectus* over being, to the point of setting it up as an ontological axiom (*cf.* the first of the *Quaestiones parisienses: intelligere est altius quam esse*). In the human soul, the highest part will thus be the reason (*Vernunft*), known also as the 'spark' or fine point of the soul (*Seelenfunklein*) or sometimes as the ground of the soul (*Grund der Seele*). This something (*Etwas*) is the seat of the divine life and so of contemplative life. It is divine. A dangerous theory! At the Cologne trial in 1327 he explained that this *Etwas* was not intended to signify the increatability of the soul or of a part of the soul, which in fact saves his teaching from the flavour of pantheism and makes it compatible with the dogma of the divine indwelling in the soul.

After the Parisian period Eckhart went on to re-establish the primacy of being, to distinguish God (the word implying the subject of the attributes assigned by us to the divine nature) and the Deity (what is unknowable in God, what radically distinguishes him from the created, what causes him to be himself), and moreover to explain that the 'birth' of the Word by grace takes place in the *Seelenfunklein*. This birth is consequent on freedom from sin and from what was called the *via activa* (the moral, ascetic, sacramental life, 'active' prayer). It is consummated in 'identity' with the Deity. Only then does true contemplation exist. And though this 'contemplation' is of the intellectual type, yet in it vision and love are united in a single act in which man finds 'all blessedness, solely from God, through God and in God alone'.¹³

John Tauler (†1361) was Eckhart's disciple at Cologne. He is very closely linked with his master, so far as doctrinal ideas are concerned. *Vernunft* becomes *Gemut*, but this word is often untranslatable: 'fundamental will' has been suggested. The *Grund* of the soul holds a place at least equally important in his religious psychology [as in

12 M. de Gandillac, *art. cit.*, p. 44.

13 Cf. the treatise on *L'homme noble*, ed. Ph. Strauch (Berlin, 1933).

Eckhart's]. He has the same doctrine of the Father begetting the Word in the *Gemut* of the soul, the same doctrine of the divinisation of the soul by 'the *Gemut* which sees itself as God in God whilst still remaining created',¹⁴ the same doctrine of the self-stripping indispensable for attaining to this divinisation and ultimately to contemplation. But, more prudent than Eckhart in his assertions, more cautious in regard to theological subtleties, more reserved as to the possibility of total abandonment which 'here below is never complete except for a very brief time', he lays the stress on the 'technical processes of self-stripping'.¹⁵ Man is, as St Paul says, body, soul and spirit. A tripartite division which explains the triple renunciation of the spiritual ascent. The 'external man' will be purified by the moral life, the 'man of reason' by the education of the mind, of the intention and of good works. After these purgations, the 'interior man' will be purified too because God will dwell in him; he will be enlightened in a moment in contemplation and on fire with love (sermon 68). It should be noted that in this deification of man love is above knowledge (sermon 64).

Henry Suso (†1366), born between 1296 and 1302, joined the Order of St Dominic at a very early age. He may have been Eckhart's disciple at Strasbourg and Tauler's fellow student. He strains every nerve to maintain a clear line of demarcation between the licence in spiritual things of the false mystics and the true stripping of the soul. This is the purpose of the *Book of Truth*, very probably written between 1327 and 1329.¹⁶ He himself, unlike his predecessors, it would seem, had mystical experiences, and, like Tauler, had personal acquaintance with the painful trials which accompany true self-stripping, the true *Gelassenheit*. At the moment in which the soul 'loses the consciousness of being distinct from God', Suso sees 'union without distinction'.

The *Book of Truth*, chiefly in chapter five, seeks to define clearly Eckhart's thought on this point. He insists on the transformation of man into Christ. As Eckhart had done, he describes this transformation as a 'generating mode', a birth. But Suso approximates more

¹⁴ Sermon 64, ed. Vetter.

¹⁵ M. de Gandillac, *art. cit.*, pp. 60-72; B. Lavaud, o.p., 'Les épreuves mystiques selon Jean Tauler', in *Rev. thomiste*, Vol. XLV, 1939, pp. 309-329.

¹⁶ His *Book of Eternal Wisdom*, written in German, and its Latin adaptation, the *Horologium Sapientiae*, composed between 1333 and 1341 (it is not known which preceded the other; Mgr C. Gröber, *Der Mystiker Heinrich Seuse* (Frib.-en-Br., 1941), dates the first of them from 1348) have a more modest ambition: to put before the reader 'simple thoughts' which recall the *Imitation* and will be a help to meditation on the suffering Christ.

to the way the fourth Gospel speaks: this new birth is that of man and not a new birth of the Word in the *Ground of the Soul*. Like Eckhart and Tauler, Suso reminds us of the indispensable self-stripping which effects the union of the essence of the soul with the 'One', the 'Eternal Naught'. (In this paradoxical expression, frequent from his pen, will be seen the definite influence of the negative Dionysian theology—through Eckhart, in particular). This union is beyond all comprehension. It has its corollary in the union of the powers of the soul, which attain to God without the intermediary of 'created species'. In this intuition, 'through non-knowing, the Truth becomes known'. This 'annihilating absorption in the Naught', of the soul and its faculties which 'lose themselves' in God, does not do away with the distinction between Creator and creature: like the eye which 'becomes one with its object and yet each of them remains what it is'. There is beatitude, when the soul 'contemplates God unveiled' and loves him, without knowing that it knows and loves him—such knowledge would be a screen—when it 'rests wholly and alone in the Naught and knows nothing of the being which God or the Naught is'. Such knowledge 'without any image or similitude' of God or of creatures in God is the 'morning knowledge', in contrast to the 'evening knowledge' in which images and distinctions remain. Suso continues his explanations emphasising against the heterodox mystics, the possibility of sinning which remains to the man who is thus exalted; and stressing also the humility necessary to all (especially if they have not attained to the comprehension of 'what the aforesaid Naught is') in 'holding fast to the common teaching of Holy Church'. 'We see many good and simple men who attain to laudable sanctity without having received a vocation for this.'¹⁷

Suso's *Book of Truth* is unquestionably one of the finest pieces of writing on contemplation which have come down to us from the fourteenth century. In meditating on it one is amazed at the intellectual and dialectical boldness of its author and at the unique skill with which he has treated one of the most difficult, perhaps the most difficult, of all subjects. (*To be concluded*).

¹⁷ On a lower level than contemplation properly so-called, of which the *Book of Truth* treats, Suso recognises several other 'states of prayer' which it has been possible to characterise (cf. J. A. Bizet, *Henri Suso et le déclin de la scolastique* (Paris, 1946), pp. 263–266) as corresponding with the 'recollection' and 'ecstasy' of later authors. Above ecstasy, he also recognises 'transport' (*iibervart*) and 'rapture' (*abzug*) of which St Paul had experience; the former 'is distinct from rapture in that it leaves the mind in its own state instead of its being completely caught up in God'.