

## HAS MAN A SPIRITUAL LIFE?

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**I**N talk and writing about religion the expression 'the spiritual life' is well known. It is assumed not only to have meaning but to mean something very important. It will not, therefore, be out of place to examine these assumptions in a review that is called LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, a title which has affinity, if not identity, with the expression in question. 'The spiritual life', 'the life of the spirit', how shall we distinguish them? Perhaps any distinction there may be will emerge later.

The spiritual life is considered to be something that a religious man should seriously engage himself in, and an important part of it for him will be his 'spiritual exercises', notably assistance at the sacrifice and reception of the sacraments, but also prayer, public and private, vocal and silent, and 'spiritual reading'. To settle on the measure and manner of these, he will sometimes, even regularly, have recourse to a 'spiritual director'. With good 'spiritual advice' he will be able to understand better his 'spiritual state' and his 'spiritual needs' and so be able better to set about performing his 'spiritual duties'. As a result of fidelity in this he will sometimes, perhaps, experience 'spiritual joy'.

This manner of speaking is very common and can be found in the 'spiritual classics', works in the reading of which we can gain great 'spiritual profit'. There is, for instance, the well-known and compendious *Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* by Fr A. Tanqueray, called *The Spiritual Life*. In the first chapter of part one of this, he treats of the 'origin of the spiritual life', and later on of 'the part of man in the spiritual life'. Instances of such expressions in religious writing could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. We shall look at a few more.

Near the beginning of his *Spiritual Exercises* St Ignatius Loyola writes . . . 'as walking, going and running are bodily exercises, in like manner all methods of preparing and disposing the soul to remove from herself all disorderly attachments, and, after their removal, to seek and find the divine will in the laying out of one's life to the salvation of one's soul, are called spiritual exercises'. (ed. Rickaby, p. 3.) Here the saint seems to think of a certain

parallel between bodily and spiritual exercises, sufficient at any rate for a comparison to be possible.

Less universally known, though once popular in this country, is Bishop Hedley's *Retreat*. In it he speaks of the spiritual life as 'not really complex; but its very simplicity is not attained without much consideration' (16th ed. 1951, p. 5). It is for him something that needs no introduction and justification even if it needs explanation.

These quotations from well-known and revered writers are not given in order to set them up for pillorying but to recall that the expressions under consideration are current in these, as they are in other, accredited authors. Nevertheless the expressions are open to question and it is with misgiving that one reflects on the notions that they seem to suggest and even to be intended to convey. When there is reference to a man's 'spiritual life' it is not unnaturally that the question forms itself in one's mind, 'as opposed to what?' His 'bodily life'? His 'animal or vegetable life'? Is the 'spiritual life' a part of the rest of his life or is it one among several 'lives' that he has? Both situations would disintegrate him horribly. The 'spiritual life' is, we find, something stressed, recommended and extensively catered for by the 'spiritual writers'. It is considered essential, nay, of overriding importance. Nothing must be allowed to destroy it, even to impair it. It is, then, thought of as something that might be in danger of these. But, if it is capable of being diminished or extinguished it is not an inevitable part of man's life. Not being identical with man's life, it is but part of it, or possibly one among several lives that man can live at one time or another. There is, therefore, the suggestion, the strong suggestion, that the spiritual life is a thing in itself, something that some people have and others have not and that all ought to have, that it is a kind of life distinct from other lives, often opposed to, and thought of as incompatible with them; with, for example, a bodily life, a life of pleasure, a sensuous life, a worldly life.

'Well', the spiritual writers might say, 'we conceive the spiritual life to be a way of living, just as a worldly life is a way of living, and spiritual exercises are those which especially or exclusively promote this way of living. We do not think that a single individual can have several lives at once. That would be absurd. Nor even that his life should have so many disparate

parts that never come together. That would still be an error. But we think both that the spiritual life is the most important element in life for those who have it, and that it is so much a better life which has it than that which does not have it, that the spiritual life may be considered to be the best kind of human life and may therefore rightly be spoken of in the way we do. It is then a carping criticism that you are making of us.'

If this is more or less what is meant when the spiritual life is being spoken of, then almost all of our criticism of the expression must be withdrawn. But it is not clear that this is so, rather there are serious grounds for believing that it is not so. Let us look again at the authorities already adduced in the discussion. What does Tanquerey mean by the 'spiritual life'? 'Man is a mysterious compound of body and soul', he tells us. 'In him spirit and matter closely unite to form but one nature and person. Man is, so to speak, the nexus, the point of contact, between spiritual and bodily substances—an abstract of all the marvels of creation. He is a little world gathering in itself all other worlds, a microcosm showing forth the wisdom of God who united in this fashion two things so far apart.' This, even with benign interpretation, is already, some of it, dangerous talk. Certainly Tanquerey wants to insist on the unity of man. The question is whether he does not, while trying to secure it, betray it. He continues: 'This little world is full of life; according to St Gregory one finds there three sorts of life, vegetative, animal and intellectual. . . . These three kinds of life are not superimposed one on another, but they blend and arrange themselves in due relation in order to converge towards the same end—the perfection of the whole man.' Again we see his anxiety to safeguard the unity of man and his adoption of equivocal, if not worse, terms in which to do it. Man is in fact left with a plurality of lives. Moreover, and this is not an uncharacteristic feature in 'spiritual' writing, he slurs the meaning of his authority. St Gregory wrote *homo habet vivere cum plantis, sentire cum animantibus, intelligere cum angelis*. We might more faithfully render 'man has, in common with plants, the activity of life; with animals, that of sensing; with angels, that of understanding'. This does not give him three lives, but the other way of speaking does.

St Ignatius Loyola not only believes in a distinct spiritual life but thinks that its activities can be visibly manifest. He writes:

'When he who gives the Exercises perceives that the exercitant experiences no spiritual stirrings in the soul, such as consolations and desolations, nor is troubled by various spirits, he should carefully interrogate him concerning the Exercises, whether he is doing them at the appointed time, and how, etc.' (ed. Rickaby, p. 5.)

*The Imitation of Christ* is, perhaps, the best-known of all spiritual classics. Does it favour the way of speaking that we are condemning? Perhaps because of its unintellectual, not to say anti-intellectual, outlook it does not overtly divide man so much. It is not, however, free from a tendency to excessive 'spiritualizing'. 'Keep your friendship', it says, 'for God and his holy angels, shunning the acquaintance of men.' At first sight, and especially if one has been brought up with this sort of thing, it seems very edifying. But it does not, on reflection, accord with the thought of, for example, St John when he said, 'He that loveth not his brother whom he seeth, how can he love God whom he seeth not?' (1 John 4, 20.) Recent translators of *The Imitation*, Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley, have fathered on it more 'spiritualization' than it has. For instance, in Bk. I, c. 18, the text twice refers to 'spiritual progress', *ad spiritualem profectum, in spiritu proficiebant*, in sections 2 and 4 respectively. This milder expression is rendered by these translators, 'to rise higher in the spiritual life', 'they advanced . . . in the spiritual life', shifts of conception which tell more about the translator's outlook than about that of their original.

But of our authors it is Bishop Hedley that is most incautious, surprisingly, since although less celebrated he is more large-minded and better balanced in judgment than the others. In c. 2 of his *Retreat* he expounds the spiritual nature of the human soul and, let it be said, explicitly allows that the body of man causes his soul to be 'different from any other spirit'. But he tends to talk of man as a spirit as of a substance complete in its nature. And he actually says 'A human being may be said to *be* his soul' (his italics). Further, until we die, we have, even the best of us, he thinks, not yet reached our real life. 'Your real life is all to come after the dissolution which you call death' (p. 10). Reading the 'all' here one wonders whether the holy Bishop thought of what he wrote, forgetting in this way as he does the life of the mystical body of Christ or relegating it wholly to the *post mortem*

state of man. 'But you know what he meant', someone will say. Do I? How do I, if he, reputed a careful Thomist, does not tell me? Spiritual books have as their purpose the guidance of men to the truth in the following of Christ. They should, therefore, tell the truth and in a way that does not mislead. The sentence quoted is either false or misleading, or, improbable hypothesis, Bishop Hedley did not mean us to take his statements seriously.

But, it may still be argued, are we not complaining unreasonably about a *façon de parler*, a mannerism, of the spiritual writers, one moreover that is quite respectable and goes back a long way, to the Fathers of the Church, to St Paul himself? Does not St Paul say, 'Walk in the spirit and you shall not fulfil the lusts of the spirit. For the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. For these are contrary one to another: so that you do not do the things that you would' (Gal. 5, 16)? In view of this can it be so wrong to speak of the 'spiritual life'? Surely the Fathers have on the strength of this and other texts from the new testament handed on to us a perfectly legitimate conception of the 'spiritual life'? In this two broad admissions may be made at the outset, first that it is true that the notion of the spiritual life does in some way derive from the Bible, and second that there is in consequence some legitimate sense in which we may speak of it. It does not of course follow that spiritual writers generally have adhered to a sound notion of it. Our contention is that very often they have not.

What then of St Paul? His uses of the terms 'spirit', 'body' and 'flesh' are well known to be complex and obviously a full statement of them cannot be given here. It may suffice to consider two passages most in apparent conflict with the view now being advanced. One of them has been quoted already—Gal. 5, 16; the other is Rom. 8, 4, 'That the justification of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. For they that are according to the flesh mind the things that are of the flesh: but they that are according to the spirit mind the things that are of the spirit.' It is to be noted that Knox translates the phrase behind the Douai version's 'they that are according to the spirit' by 'to live the life of the spirit', inaccurate if not tendentious, for the 'life of the spirit' might be taken to mean what St Paul meant but might more plausibly mean a 'spiritual life' in a later sense. It might mean simply a life that is

according to the requirements of Christian teaching or it might mean some kind of special life proper to 'spirits'. We must not, however, credit St Paul with the intention of any subtle psychologizing. As Bonsirven says, 'Though seeming to oppose flesh and spirit, his dualism in morals in no way derives from the metaphysical dualism of the Greek philosophers. Semite in his way of thinking, familiar with the language and outlook of the Bible, he does not divide up man, but takes him as completely one person, a person identified first with body and flesh, despite the role attributed to the soul, the spirit and the heart.' (*L'Évangile de Paul*, p. 104.) In the texts that we are considering Père Allo also explains St Paul's use of the word 'spirit' as an exclusively moral one: it is opposed to 'flesh', in the sense of human weakness and vices. It would mean then something like 'moral strength and virtue'. One is tempted to say that it is simply St Paul's Hebrew way of speaking about men as acting well or acting badly. But it is more than this. He recognized the complexity of elements in man, their diversity and their frequent contrariety, though he neither analyses them closely nor classifies them. When, in Romans 8, 10, he says 'If Christ be in you the body indeed is dead, because of sin: but the spirit liveth, because of justification', he gives us our best ground for talking about the spiritual life. But we should know what he means: 'the body is dead' is not to be taken as meaning that our present body is a corpse, which is false, but that our fleshly nature is mortal, which is true; on the other hand 'the spirit liveth' is not to be taken to mean that our soul 'alone' is affected by the life of grace given by justification but that man himself is. St Paul uses 'body' and 'spirit' for man as a whole, though man considered in different ways.

This brings us to the final point, to sound an alarm against the unchristian dismemberment of man, leading to an unchristian emphasis on one of the *disiecta membra*, man's 'spirit', and its 'life'. Those writers on the Christian life most addicted to this are not necessarily aware of what they are doing, indeed we have seen some of them doing it in the very act of trying not to. But the habit remains and it can lead to some false notions and some unnecessary problems. One of the false notions is that there is spiritual exercise as well as bodily (St Ignatius), another is that of a spiritual duty as distinct from a non-spiritual duty. One of the unnecessary problems is that of finding a way for lay people or

people 'in the world' to lead the spiritual life when we have already given it characteristics of a kind incompatible with the necessary circumstances of most men's lives. Another is that of preserving 'recollection', for because of this wrong notion of the spiritual life, a mistaken idea of recollection has arisen. It is taken to mean not, as it should, a gathering and focussing of one's powers under the direction of reason, but a supposed shutting off of all 'non-spiritual' objects and activities, a project as impossible as it is undesirable. 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see and the ears that hear what you hear', said our Lord, and it is a tragedy that Christians have so often tried to substitute for his teaching that of Plotinus. It is probably fortunate that most Catholics do not read the 'spiritual' books anyway: it is certainly a pity that more of us do not read the Bible more often, so that the market for the former would dry up entirely.

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## NOTICE

ON the title page of our April issue, readers will notice a change of address. While our editorial work continues to be done at Blackfriars, Cambridge, the production and publication of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT will be taken over in April by Blackfriars Publications Limited, 2 Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E.C.4, a company recently set up by Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, Her Majesty's printers, in close co-operation with the Dominican province.

While the new arrangements will have no effect whatsoever upon editorial policy, it is hoped that the setting up of a separate company, backed by the considerable experience of Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, will in time provide a firm and positive basis for the growth and expansion of Dominican publishing enterprise.