

THE CLEANSING OF MAN'S SOUL

BY

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BEAUTIFULLY written MS. of the end of the fourteenth century, MS. *Douce* 114, takes for its title the phrase used by its anonymous author in a general description of its subject. The author, probably a Benedictine, writing for a 'religious sister' also in a Benedictine convent, finding that the community's knowledge of the doctrine of penance was both insufficient and confused, and considering the complexities of the available Latin 'penitentials', proposes to reduce into a vernacular compilation of three parts all the necessary instruction on contrition, confession and satisfaction. He writes: 'Also seldom have they little comfort of their confessors to teach them that speedful . . . and needful were of the sacrament of penance . . . at their request and because ye have none other understanding of other manner of Scripture than of such as is written in your mother tongue, I will etc.' The three parts are divided into seven chapters each, and though long it is a simple straightforward and useful piece of work, full of homely illustrations, and must have been a great comfort to the nuns and their superiors.

The author treats of prayer as a part of satisfaction and it is in these pages that we shall find material to link up with the work of Hilton. The author deals mainly with vocal prayer, both liturgical and other prayer including intercession. The conditions and dispositions for 'fructuose' prayer are first considered and then comes an obvious reference to the controversies on mystical prayer of the time. He says that 'prayer be not of too many words which be not speedful nor fructuous, for the desire of the heart sufficeth to our Lord which knoweth each heart', but he adds (fol. 136), 'take not these words in favour or strength to their opinions of new teaching which now-a-days teach that a man should not speak in prayer but think that he will, and that sufficeth. I mean not so for I know their teaching is not true, but I mean that a short prayer, prayed faithfully with sober hope and fervently without sloth or feignis and meekly prayed without presumption is more acceptable to God, than a long prayer with much speech feyntliche prayed without faithful hope and meekness.' He continues, referring evidently to the vocal and mental prayers of those not obliged to the recitation of the Office, 'Nevertheless to some that cannot nor (be)longeth not to occupy them otherwise in other divine service, to such, long time of praying is speedful'. And again of vocal prayer:

'Also against them that teach you always to think and to pray none other wise, I say, after the teaching of holy fathers that vocal prayer which is prayer sounded with the voice is speedful, not to teach our Lord God what our will is, but that we may more openly and better understand ourself (fol. 137), in our showing outward and by our open showing more clearly consider when we pray, and by consideration and entent of our prayer ask and pray more devoutly'.

Then he castigates those who pray so loudly as to disturb their neighbours and those who interrupt their prayer thus: 'Now to say one verse and a pater noster and go jangling a while or be busy about some vanity, and go again and say the remnant, this is interrupted prayer'. He commends simplicity: 'That a man entent to no curious words, for as Saint Gregory saith, "idleness of prayer is openly shewed in gay making of words but very and true praying is to sound bitter sorrowing compunction and not in curious speaking"'. This passage may reflect the subtle influence, even within the enclosure, of the contemporary taste for extempore prayer which accompanied the Lollard popular preaching.

After a passage on the needful disposition for prayer, purity of soul, meekness, patience, peace and charity, there follows a section on devotion in which the author has some unexpected ideas that place him with the apologists on the gift of tears.

He defines devotion as 'a tenderness of heart whereby a man lightly bursteth into tears . . . therefore women and other of tender hearts and soft of complexion have oftener and sooner tears and more abundant than others'. It is also 'a fervour of good will which may not withdraw the heart without showing of some open token outward'. And further it is 'a lowly and meek devotion or desire into our Lord . . . engendered of compunction'. And finally it is a fire of love lifted up and raised only to God or to heavenly creatures'. It 'moveth and pricketh a man inward and outward to the service of God. Devotion much used maketh the body and soul of a man flourish fair and likingly in worship and in dignity before God and man.' 'It purgeth us body and soul from all things that may let or (an)noye us and showeth us a right way to everlasting bliss. It is so needful in prayer that . . . without any kind of devotion outward and inward, prayer is dead or as travail without speed.' Clearly he has in mind the theological definitions of *devotio* and not the modern use of the word falsely allied with the business of 'feelings', for he follows up with an important passage (fol. 142):

Marvel not why I say without all manner devotion outward and inward, for there may be and it is full great devotion in a soul that is in rest and burneth in love or desire and yet sheweth

none tokens outward; and albeit that all men and women be not touched (a)like with such burning, yet peradventure some sight the soul hath to God, though it be full simple with a know- ledging of his godhead or with a desire of ghostly savour in time of prayer, and in the time showeth no token outward. For her devotion is only inward either by a still manner of praying with a soft speech or else without speech by meditation only in the soul.

Notwithstanding this the author goes on to defend outward devotion such as breaking out into loud praying and tears so long as this be accompanied by true contrition and he quotes 'Aldreus the holy man' on this point¹. This passage is primarily of interest in that it links the book with the controversy about Margery Kempe which took place only about ten or twelve years later². Finally, he concludes that though devotion is needful at all times it is most to be desired in 'time of Mass' and 'in time of service that he is bound to say and in prayers enjoined for penance' . . . 'and much more it should be desired in such prayers than in any other prayers or devotions. For some peradventure for un cunning say their service the more hastily, for devotion which they feel more plenteously in other prayers or meditations and this is a temptation. Of this matter ye have a boke in English I trow, which is clepid amongst you the chastening of Goddes children.'

In this way the chapter ends and this important reference links up with the prolonged discussion on liturgical prayer and vernacular psalters which formed an afterthought to the *Chastising*. The MS. of the *Cleansing* belonged in the year 1401 (according to the inscription on the fly-leaf) to Sibille de Felton, Abbatisa de Berkyng. She was Abbess from 1397 to 1419 and she also possessed a copy of the *Chastising*. It has been suggested that both MSS. were written for her community and there are indications that support this. In any case her community was well provided with instructions on temptations and penance, both in the matter of 'ransacking' their consciences and of quieting them.

It is curious to note that *both* works end with a recapitulatory chapter in which the recapitulation is followed by a quite long afterthought on prayer introduced in the *Chastising* by this 'temptation' (to hasten the saying of Office so as to get to one's preferred devotions). 'I should have made mention before among other temptations but it was not then presented to my mind' and then after his instruction on this subject, there follows his ruling that though

1 Contrast Hilton, *Scale*, II. ch. 29.

2 There seems to be a beginning here of the emotional tendency which overwhelmed religion in the fifteenth century and led to a disastrous popularisation of doctrines.

the nuns may use psalters and mattins of our Lady in English for devotion, these translations should not be used to the exclusion of the Latin version which must be used for the choir recitation and for fulfilling enjoined penances.

The author of the *Cleansing* in the pages following his recapitulation breaks into a discussion on the reforming of the souls in its 'three nights, mind, reason and will', which includes the only references in the whole work to mystical prayer. Having regard to the similarity between these descriptions of the 'nights of the soul', the need and manner of its reformation, and the phrases on mystical prayer and the definitions and discussions of Hilton in the *Scale* (see *Scale*, I, ch. 43, and many chapters in part II) it seems well to print the whole of these latter pages of the *Cleansing* so that comparison and contrast may be made. They stand, in their own right, as the most interesting, concise and beautiful passages of the whole work.

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Fol. 148, l. 12. (Following upon the recapitulation of the whole book.)

Lavamini mundi estote. After much cleansing of your soul then shall ye begin to turn to our Lord Jesus Christ and seek again that was lost. For as much as the soul beholdeth and seeth inwardly that he was foul deformed and by uncleanness far out from the presence of our Lord,³ so much the rather and more the busier he travaileth to be reformed to that fairhead, ghostly semelyhead which was lost, and this is the (fol. 148) cause of the reforming, for as I said you at the beginning of this book, a soul hath three nights, mind, reason and will.⁴

Mind we have for we should rest in God. Reasons we have for to know God and will we have for we should love God. But by sin our mind is unstable and fetering. By sin our reason is blinded and by sin our will is all crooked. Of this each man hath experience. For oftsithes both in ghostly things and all others our mind is occupied with such things which cause rather unrest than rest. Our reason receiveth falsity for truth, and our will ches [chooseth] worse for the better. And all this is because the soul forsook him that is only God and all goodness in whom it might have had all that is good. But as I said, when the soul is turned from filth unto uncleanness, then it desireth fervently to be reformed in mind, reason and will, and about this reformation should be our business and travail. And for we may not suddenly come to the highest degree of this reformation, (fol. 149) therefore the soul studieth how it may by process and by increase come from the lowest to the middle and from the middle come to the highest. And if it like you to know a

³ A characteristic Hiltonian phrase.

⁴ Cf. fol. 8, sq., and compare with *Scale*, I, ch. 43 and II, ch. 31 and 32. II, ch. 31 and 32.

way of reformation, how ye shall begin to be reformed in mind, reason and will, gladly I will show you after my simple knowing as I am reformed⁵ by scripture and by communing. For by experience or by practice of this matter, I can neither speak nor write.

See then first of the reformation of mind. Beginning of reformation of mind is to bring again the heart which wilfully was travailed with vain thoughts, and to travail to have his mind in God and of God by praying, reading and by remembering and oft thinking on God or that longeth to God. This must be the beginning of the reformation of mind. The profit and increase of this reforming of mind is that a man ententively⁶ do his might and business to gather in his thoughts from unrestful (fol. 149) evagations or running about and occupy his thoughts about God and set fast his mind in our Lord, with continual exercise in devout prayers and holy meditations of the incarnation and passion of our Lord and of his innumerable benefits and gracious gifts with sorrowing for our unkindness, wretchedness and unstableness. This may be profit and encrease of reformation of mind.

Perfection of this reforming is that a man fully be absorbed into God by passing out of mind from himself that he forget himself and all other creatures for that time, and rest him only in God without any letting of thoughts or of imaginations.⁷

Beginning of reformation in reason is to believe sadly and stably in the faith of holy church, for as I said you our reason is made blind and our inward knowing is made so dark by our sin that we may not know nor find the soothfastness as by ourselves. Wherefore our God by his endless (fol. 150) pity condescended to us in comfort that we should not abide in sorrow and heaviness and gave us knowledging of soothfastness in scriptures, to the which his will was that we should believe, where sufficiently and soothfastly we should [find] all things that be to us necessary and speedful to the soul's health. Not to that entent for we should follow our own natural wit and feeling in that scripture but to submit our feelings and wit to the rules of faith after the understanding of holy doctors of holy church, be cause we should not fall into errors, for to them our Lord gave the soothfastness of understanding, rather than to others by his special grace and for purity and cleanness that was in their souls.

Therefore the beginning of reformation of reason is to believe steadfastly as holy church believeth and then to be washed and cleansed ghostly by the sacrament of penance, that by cleanness of soul and exercise thereof and abiding therein a man may (fol. 150) then profit and increase in that reforming and be lightened by the light of grace sent from God and have some understanding of the rules of the faith, by the reason of the soul, which our Lord hath

5 Probably scribal error for 'informed'; see next sentence.

6 With 'intention'.

7 Cf. *Scale*, II, 30, §2.

lightned. For sooth it is, faith is above man's reason so that no man may comprehend it as by himself, but so it may be lightned of our Lord that he shall see clearly in his soul, that there is nothing more reasonable than Christian faith, and thus may reason be informed and perfect and increase by sad belief on the faith of holy church and by continuance in purity and cleanness of soul.

Also reason may be so reformed with such stableness of faith and cleanness of soul that it may come to the height of perfection. Perfection of reason in this life is to be ravished above himself, ghostly to see our Lord God by an inward and intellectual knowing through purity of soul, without any imaginations or bodily likeness and with[out] any arguments of natural reason. Thus perfection of reason (fol. 151) may be cleped reforming of reason as in this life which must begin and increase in the manner that I have said before.

Beginning of the reformation of the will, after that reason is lightned with a soothfast knowing of God and a knowledging to God then to withstand vices and with a good will truly and faithfully increase and abide in virtues for God which will was tofore crooked and bowed and all turned away from God. Therefore it is needful when the soul is washed and cleansed and the will turned again upright to the will of God, that a man constrain himself that he accord even without any bowing with the will of God, withstanding all contrarious stirrings by virtuuous working.⁸ Thus may the will be reformed and kept by cleanness of the soul, if a man will profit and increase in this reformation. The profit and increase in this reformation is to turn all affections and desires in to virtues without any contrariety of will, so that there be no will (fol. 151) nor desire or affection which accordeth not with the will of God; and if this reformation be thus increased by exercise, then may it come to perfection. Perfection of this reformation is to have all one in spirit, in will with God, belief that a man will not else or desire not else but God, and fully to be fed with the sweetness of the savour. . . . Then by exercise and long exercise in travail bodily and ghostly in that reformation ye may come to perfection such as God will send in this life⁹, with a desirous love and a loving desire to our Lord Jesus Christ.

To that blissful Lord Jesu, I commend you all, and me unworthy to your holy prayers, by merits of his passion which was our redemption, beseeching him lowly, grace to grant us clearly to be cleansed, (fol. 152) and so in this life to be reformed, that after we be passed, we may see him glorified, by whom and in whom is everlasting life. Amen, amen, pur charité¹⁰.

⁸ The author is describing what Hilton calls 'reformation of feeling' and there is a remarkable likeness, but Hilton carries the doctrine further, emphasising both active and passive union. Cf. *Scale*, Bk. II, ch. 5, 36.

⁹ Cf. Hilton, *Scale*, Bk. II, ch. 17, first and last paragraphs.

¹⁰ It has been established that this work is one source of Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*