

until new methods are found to meet the new emergency the legal person will continue to rank greater in importance than the human, the externals of religion will be divorced from its interior spirit, and victory or defeat in this hideous war will be equally incapable of affecting the ultimate collapse of the whole of the present civilisation.

### ' GREY EMINENCE ' <sup>1</sup>

*Where there is no vision, the people perish; . . . if those who are the salt of the earth lose their savour, there is nothing to keep that earth disinfected, nothing to prevent it from falling into complete decay. The mystics are channels through which a little knowledge of reality filters down into our human universe of ignorance and illusion. A totally unmystical world would be a world totally blind and insane. From the beginnings of the eighteenth century onwards, the sources of all mystical knowledge have been steadily diminishing in number, all over the planet. We are dangerously advanced into the darkness.*<sup>2</sup>

FOR several centuries now, Europe has been the battleground for an attack upon the very existence of the spirit of man, though it was during and after the eighteenth century that the attack reached its height; and it is man who has been more or less consistently the loser till almost the whole of his heritage has been taken from him. The stature of Christian man was infinite—we speak of Christian doctrine and belief not practice *quia omnes nos peccavimus*: we betray what we believe but that does not invalidate the beliefs—because seeking first the kingdom of heaven he could find oneness with God and be filled, and all the other things, the knowledge and love of created things and joy in them, and the whole of a happy human life, were added to him. He was a thing of majesty because he was God's child. But the New Order of the Renaissance did away with the grandeur and humbleness of Christian man (or, as Mr. Huxley styles him, 'theocentric man'); and substituted for them the abasement and pride of finite man, of man the measure of all things, of

---

<sup>1</sup> *Grey Eminence: A Study in Religion and Politics.* By Aldous Huxley. (Chatto and Windus; pp. 278; 15/-).

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 82.

man in the loneliness and isolation of his own selfhood remote from God. That isolation is the stuff of hell; for hell is not in its essence a punishment wrought upon man, but the state of being without Being which man inflicts upon himself; and all the ugliness and shame and squalor which are in the world are only the manifestation of that isolation and rootlessness which creation inflicted upon itself and which in the ultimate doom is made permanent. But for a time man remained unaware that he was in hell: there was so much beauty on the surface of life and within the confines of the natural man-measured world. The dream was not allowed to last, however, for the eighteenth century stripped man of all the beauty and awareness that were incompatible with rationalism: the Age of Enlightenment was a dark alley peopled with thinking machines: The nineteenth century denied even the higher ambitions of reason: it denied man's power to know reality and at the same time taught him that he was the puppet of a mechanist universe and that the miseries which industrialism had brought upon him were therefore without redress. And in these latter days we have seen the squalid end of the process of impoverishment, wherein reason is denied altogether and man is totally deprived of his personality and reduced to a capacity only for blind instinctive responses to the demands of a pseudo-absolute. Those in the contemporary world who still hold to something better than this or have been roused by its horror to a remembrance of something better than this have more to do than win a military victory over it; for if they beckon us back to the world of Economic Man as the fruits of victory they will find that endurance has no further limits: the battle for the soul of man will be over and will have ended in total defeat.

The question we have to ask with heavy misgiving is whether they can reasonably be expected to do otherwise or at least to do much better. The worlds of politics and religion are by now so completely sundered that it may well be thought wildly improbable that the one should heed the other. Yet what can the politicians 'do for their fellows by actions within the political field, and without the assistance of the contemplatives'? 'The answer would seem to be: not very much.' The modern West is the one historical civilisation which has been stupid enough to suppose that action without contemplation can be productive of good; and even in face of the shambles to which its belief has led it there is little enough reason to expect a radical change: it is always easy to find a scapegoat for misfortune and to ignore the conditions which produced the scapegoat. So we may expect more political action obedient to the formulas of enlightened self-interest and therefore productive of not very

much. 'Political reforms cannot be expected to produce much general betterment unless large numbers of individuals undertake the transformation of their personality by the only known method which really works—that of the contemplatives.' In Mr. Huxley's view it is idle to expect any such transformation in the world of to-morrow; for 'technological progress, nationalism and war seem to guarantee that the immediate future of the world shall belong to various forms of totalitarianism,' and totalitarianism and mysticism or theocentric religion are incompatible. Whether in fact the world of to-morrow will belong to totalitarianism or not remains to be seen; foretelling the future is a hazardous pastime, and is certainly not the substance of this remarkable book. For Mr. Huxley there is an inherent incompatibility between the two worlds: the politicians are the 'brewers of poisons,' the mystics are the 'antidote-makers'; all that the former can do is to help 'to create a social environment favourable to contemplatives' or, at any rate, 'refrain from doing certain things and making certain arrangements which are specially unfavourable'; seer and ruler belong to different castes, and to attempt to pass from the one to the other is necessarily disastrous. Contemplation is what matters; and contemplation—the point was made very clearly by Mr. Propter in *After Many a Summer*—is the negation of social action, the unmasking of its futility. Fr. Joseph, the *Eminence Grise*, is a tragically fascinating example of a man who tried to achieve the ideal of the philosopher-king, a contemplative who became a politician. He failed; and ended only by degrading his contemplation and doing evil in the political world. His history raises absorbing and tantalising questions: how did he come to enter the political world at all; how could he accept the power politics of his time apparently without scruple; how could he imagine his two particular worlds to be compatible? These questions are dealt with in Mr. Huxley's brilliant study of the man; but it is the general questions which lie behind these, and with which Mr. Huxley is really concerned, that are of greater moment. Is the ideal of the philosopher-king a chimera? Is the nature of contemplation such that it cannot issue in action without destroying itself, cannot even be reconciled with the world of action? Does religion betray itself if it intrudes into the world of affairs?

The answers we give to these questions must depend upon what we mean by contemplation and by politics; and it is here that Mr. Huxley's argument demands most careful scrutiny. For him, the Church is faithful to the 'Dionysian tradition' of mysticism until the eighteenth century; then, with Bérulle and his associates, there comes a revolution in the theology and practice of mysticism, a revolution

which in fact hastens the destruction of contemplation itself; and the attack upon the quietists, once one has got beneath its surface justifications, is revealed as part of the conscious or unconscious assault by ecclesiastics upon mysticism itself. The 'Bérullian revolution' takes an important place among the causes which produced the practical disappearance of mysticism from the Church from the end of the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries because it changed the object of contemplation, substituting for the Unknowable the Humanity of Christ and the Passion, and so precluding the real aim of contemplation which is union with ultimate Reality.<sup>3</sup> It is obviously impossible to begin to consider such vast questions as the nature of contemplation and its relation to action in the world in the space of a review; but there is a considerable confusion here which calls for comment, for it goes to the root of the matter. It may be noted in passing, in the first place, that Benet Fitch's book was frowned upon for its quietist simplifications, so that he can hardly be bracketed with the 'over-orthodox' Bérulle. Secondly, and more important, it is a strange distortion to present the relatively unimportant Bérulle as the initiator of a revolution in mystical teaching. There have been throughout the history of the Church in the west two streams of mystical theory and practice: the one (the 'Dionysian') in which the accent is on the *via negativa*, the mysticism of the 'cloud of unknowing'; the other (the 'Gregorian'), which is more active, practical and personal, and which in later days, under the influence especially of the Ignatian school, evolved a technique of meditation or pre-mystical prayer which assumed great importance in the times with which Mr. Huxley is here concerned. Now it may well be that an over-emphasis on this technique, with its dangers of self-consciousness and activism, did in fact lead to a decline in mysticism—in view of the general temper of mind of the eighteenth century it might be expected; but it is quite unjustifiable to argue from this that the aim of the two ways of contemplation differed and that the Bérullian school substituted the incarnate Christ for the Godhead. On the contrary, in this respect there has been but one way of prayer throughout the Church's history: the way which is summed up in the words of the *De Adhaerendo Deo, per humanitatem ad divinitatem*, through the Humanity to the Godhead, and in the words of the Church's liturgy which prays not *ad Christum* but *per Chris-*

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Contemplation of persons and their qualities entails a great deal of analytical thinking and an incessant use of the imagination. But analytical thinking and imagination are precisely the things which prevent the soul from attaining enlightenment. On this point all the great mystical writers, Christian and Oriental, are unanimous and emphatic' (p. 80).

tum. This is the process which all Christian mystics of whatever age or school have followed; which is why, for example, an exponent of the method of the Bérullian St. John Eudes speaks of his view of prayer as 'profoundly theocentric,' and why Evelyn Underhill quotes from Bérulle himself when showing that 'Christocentric worship 'when rightly understood (is) not an alternative to pure theistic devotion but a special form of it.'<sup>4</sup> When therefore Mr. Huxley tells us that the 'contemplatives of the Dionysian tradition . . . had adapted dogma to their own experience, with the result that, in so far as they were advanced mystics, they had ceased to be specifically Christian,' one can only say that it would be very hard to prove his contention from the life of any of the great Christian mystics. The Christian is concerned first to put on Christ and then, living in him, to find the fulfilment of the Christ-life in union with the Godhead—hidden *with Christ in God*. The Incarnation, with all that it implies of charity, of action in and for the world, is not something that the mystic outgrows, but something that he responds to, assimilates, fulfils in himself, by union with the Godhead. And because the heights of mysticism are thus the realisation of the Incarnation they are precisely what Mr. Huxley would have them not to be: they are not the denial and rejection of the world, of action, of fellowship and service, but the implicit affirmation of them, an affirmation which of its own energy will overflow into action of the most practical sort. It has indeed been remarked that what differentiates the great mystics from the psychopaths is precisely their zest and ability for doing good: St. Teresa, with her numerous religious foundations and her general air of motherly good sense, is an obvious example. We may recall the wise words of M. Maritain: 'This activism and pragmatism (of the West) are, so to say, the catastrophe of something which is very great indeed, but which the spirit of

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C. Lebrun: *The Mystical Teaching of St. John Eudes*, p. 133; E. Underhill: *Worship*, p. 69. The mystics with whom Mr. Huxley deals are mainly concerned with the lower (introductory) stages of the mystical life; Fr. Joseph himself for example was concerned in his teaching with the prayer of quiet; there was no departure from tradition in associating these forms of prayer with the Passion—has not the very 'Dionysian' Tauler left us *Meditations on the Passion*?—and equally certainly there was no intention of substituting these introductory stages for mystical prayer itself. The ascent of Mount Carmel demands a technique, intellectual as well as moral; it may be held that this particular sort of technique is too cerebral or too 'busy' to achieve its object perfectly, or that those who taught it in the days of Fr. Joseph put so much emphasis upon it as to obscure its object; but the main point here is that neither they nor their technique set out to obscure that object, and that the possession of the objective by the highest mystics in its turn does not exclude, but on the contrary implies, active concern for the redeemed world and its Redeemer.

separation from God has jeopardised: the catastrophe of that generosity, that propensity to give and to communicate to others, that sense of ontological superabundance, which comes from charity and from holy contemplation overflowing into action. Whereas it has to be asked whether the impassible contemplation of the east . . . does not in its turn betray, in the very spiritual order itself, a pragmatism incomparably more subtle, but which none the less shirks the witness which God expects of humanity.<sup>5</sup> Christian mysticism at its highest is the fulfilment of the Incarnation and of charity; and it is this fact which enables it to serve the world and may enable it even at the eleventh hour to save the world in the power and at the prompting of God. It is able to serve and to save because at the very summit of union with the Infinite and Unknowable it remains humble and homely: it is never too absorbed, too proud, to remember the little things of the world, the needs and cares and sorrows of men and women, nor to love with God the creatures he has made and redeemed and in which his glory is made manifest. It is strange that this should be obscure to Mr. Huxley with his concern for the world in which we live—so obscure apparently as to lead him into the uncharacteristic (because ill-informed and unscholarly) gibes which every now and then obtrude into his pages.<sup>6</sup> We are all children of a single family; and it is as a family that we are meant to return to God, the Infinite Incomprehensible who is yet the Father of us all.

Christian mysticism, then, so far from being incompatible with action, of itself impels to action. In the heart of the mystery of the mystic's union with the Unknowable he discovers the desire and energy for redemptive action which alone can win back the world to God. The salvation of the world depends upon the mystics in a way other than that which Mr. Huxley has seen. It is not enough to know the truth and tell the truth. It is indeed one of the most deeply disturbing features of our present-day world that the speculations and debates of intellectuals seem so often to be self-confined, to lack the vital energy that turns theory into reality. It is a phenomenon of a *fin-du-siècle* society.

But to say that Christian contemplation overflows into redemptive activity is not at all the same as saying that it overflows into politics. On the other hand, unless the political world is leavened, how shall

---

<sup>5</sup> *Questions de Conscience*, p. 153.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. that Catholics believe in the 'magic efficacy of rites and sacraments'; that orthodox Christianity has always tended to confuse 'the merely psychic with the spiritual'; that petitionary prayer is appropriate only to those whose 'religion is anthropocentric.'

the world as a whole be healthy? We cannot ignore the political world; it will not let us. Here again Mr. Huxley seems to load the dice by speaking not of politics but of power politics. Where Fr. Joseph is concerned that is accurate enough; but not when the main issue is under discussion. There are three separate questions: (1) can a mystic enter the political arena without endangering his mysticism, even when political action is based on religious truth? (2) can he enter the arena of power-politics not in order to play his part in them, as Fr. Joseph did, but in order to combat them? (3) can he enter the arena of power-politics and play his part in them but with the idea of leavening them and, if possible, transforming them from within? To the first question the answer is surely, Yes: if St. Teresa could govern her nunneries without danger to her contemplation, another mystic of equal calibre could govern a kingdom without danger to his mysticism. To the second question, too, the answer is surely, Yes; and indeed some such activity is the logical application of Mr. Huxley's own view that the mystic is the salt without which the earth will not be salted: for the mystic will not salt the earth if he abandons all contact with the earth. It is precisely this that the papacy does in its political interventions and by its political encyclicals, setting up a vivid contrast between the world as it is, governed by power-politics, and the world as it might be if governed by Christian principles. And what of the third question? It is the old dilemma of mucking-in and mucking-out; it must depend for its solution not only on the special character and strength of the individual, but on the degree in which the power of Mammon is entrenched. There are times when integrity can be saved only by a flight from Egypt; but on the other hand the Incarnate Word in his mystical Body lives in and for the world, and the Church is not an ivory tower. As the Christian may share in Christ's redemptive activity by taking on himself the cross of industrialism in order to redeem the world of industrialism, so too he may be called to enter the world of politics to redeem the world of politics. Dangerous, no doubt; but charity is often dangerous: was it not St. Dominic who wished to be a stone blocking the mouth of hell itself? It remains true that political reform will be of little avail unless at the same time 'large numbers of individuals undertake the transformation of their personality' by the method of the contemplatives. To be a contemplative is thus a social as well as a personal obligation. The only practical way of government is that of the philosopher-king, though wisdom and power need not necessarily reside in a single individual provided only that power is obedient to wisdom. It is the burden which democracy places on the shoulders of

the citizens that if the state is to be healthy each and all must be contemplatives, or at least aware of and obedient to the wisdom of the contemplatives in their exercise of power. The failure of Fr. Joseph was a personal failure; and does not alter the fact that the destiny of each of us is to be, in however humble a degree, philosopher-kings. The Christian mystic can never outgrow the *Our Father*: the deeper his absorption in the mystery of the Godhead, the more intensely is his spirit and his whole life a prayer that the kingdom of God may *come on earth*, as it is in heaven.

These questions are of such importance that we have spent much time upon them, at risk of presenting an unfair picture of *Grey Eminence* as a whole. As biography it is a fine and vivid piece of work; as a study of a complex psychological tangle it is absorbing; more important, it is a brilliant and forcible statement of the only solution to the main problem which now confronts our world, a solution in default of which we can have nothing to look forward to but disintegration and death. To quarrel with elements, however important, in Mr. Huxley's argument without stressing one's adherence to its main contention would be an unpardonable falsification. There is no telling how great a good the book may do. Its moral is hard; but the worst tactic to pursue with hard facts is to refuse to look them in the face. And perhaps it may be suggested that hope springs from that very charity and fidelity to the fulfilment of the Christ-life of which we have been speaking; for it is that which has enabled and now enables so vast a multitude of simple unknown souls to be of the number of the contemplative saints, the salt who still may *disinfect and save the mass and lead the world back again*, though slowly and painfully, to health and humility and happiness, to the recovery of its soul.

GERALD VANN, O.P.