

ORTHODOXY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE¹

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IT may be as well to begin, in the approved scholastic manner, by defining one's terms; or at least by delimiting the field of discussion—a very necessary step surely with a paper so ambiguously worded as this one! 'Orthodoxy, my Lord', said Bishop Warburton, 'is my doxy—heterodoxy is another man's doxy'. No doubt we could improve on that and together hit upon a less question-begging statement of what we mean by 'orthodoxy'. All the same, I must try not to confuse the issue by taking too much for granted. And what are we to understand by that indeterminate phrase 'religious experience'? At the beginning of the century William James devoted a series of Gifford Lectures to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*—a work still being reprinted even in these days of paper shortage. James was professedly an empiricist, with but a limited gift for philosophical generalisation, so that his collected data have both the interest and the tediousness of a 'case book'; but they serve to show how varied are the phenomena which have been placed—whether legitimately or not is another question!—in the category of 'religious experience'.

However, it is, I think, both possible and justifiable, before the present audience, to clear the ground with the briefest preliminaries. By 'orthodoxy' I mean, of course, Christianity, and in particular the doctrinal position represented by St Thomas Aquinas, under whose auspices we are gathered here tonight. By 'religious experience' I understand—though here we are trying to describe what is essentially ineffable—some kind of experimental awareness of God, as distinct from an abstract knowledge based on inference, and as implying something more than the acceptance of divine revelation by supernatural faith. With the attempt to elucidate what is here involved we shall be chiefly concerned in this paper. The word which is normally used to describe this experience is 'mysticism'. 'One may truly say, I think', writes James², 'that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness'. So far at least, it is good to know that there is common ground between the empirical psychologist and the theologian. We find that the area of agreement can be extended yet further, to touch

¹ Being a paper read before the Oxford University Aquinas Society, 3rd December, 1947.

² *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 370. (Longman, 1944 ed.)

the nature of the experience itself. James speak of its *noetic quality*: Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime (ibid. p. 371).

These remarks, at least in their emphasis on the *cognitive* nature of mystical experience, will surely command the assent of every Thomist.

Here already we are at the heart of our subject, since we are concerned with the 'way of knowing' peculiar to the mystics. Before proceeding further, however, it may be well for us to withdraw a little in order to discover the relative place to be assigned to mystical experience in man's religious life considered as a whole. Many a practised spiritual director, while becoming neither cynical nor particularly insensitive, has come to regard mysticism with a qualified enthusiasm; in dealing with it he finds that his path is by no means 'roses, roses all the way'. There is indeed a complicating factor here—as touching the individual's liberty of spirit—which cannot be disregarded. Consider how much of truth there is in the following judgment upon the mystics, quoted from Henri Bergson's remarkable work *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*: 'As to theological teaching in general, it is true that they seem to accept it with utter docility, and in particular to obey their confessors; but, as has been shrewdly remarked, "they obey themselves alone, and a sure instinct leads them straight to the very man who can be relied upon to guide them in the way they want to go. If he should happen to depart from it, our mystics would not hesitate to shake off his authority, and, on the strength of their direct contact with the Deity, place their own liberty above all else" '3.

The genuine mystic, so we shall attempt to argue, is the perfect product of the Christian life lived as it should be; but the genuine mystic is rare and he (or, more likely, *she*!) has many counterfeits. Without entering upon any detailed personal psychology, it is worth while considering why the virtues of the mystics are so often neutralised by more dubious elements, to a degree which brings the whole business into disrepute with normal minded people. *Corruptio optimi est pessima*; never was that principle more painfully verified than here. Let me recall a well known passage from Harnack:

³ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Eng. trans.), pp. 211-2; quoting from M. de Montmorand, *Psychologie des mystiques catholiques orthodoxes*, (Paris, 1920), p. 17.

An old fairy tale tells of a man who lived in ignorance, dirt and wretchedness; and whom God invited, on a certain day, to wish whatever he might fancy, and it should be given him. And the man began to wish things, and all these things were given him. At last he became presumptuous, and desired to become as the great God himself: when lo, instantly he was sitting there again, in his dirt and misery. Now the history of religion—especially among the Greeks and Orientals—closely resembles this fairy tale. For they began by wishing for themselves certain sensible goods, and then political, aesthetic, moral and intellectual goods: and they were given them all. And then they became Christians and desired perfect knowledge and super-moral life: they even wished to become, already here below, as God himself, in insight, beatitude and life. And behold, they fell, not at once indeed, but with a fall that could not be arrested, down to the lowest level, back into ignorance, dirt and barbarism . . . Like unto their near spiritual relations, the Neo-Platonists, they were at first over-stimulated, and soon became jaded, and hence required ever stronger stimulants. And in the end all these exquisite aspirations and enjoyments turned into their opposite extreme.⁴

Thus there are 'cliffs of fall frightful' lying close along the path of those who would make the ascent to the summit of Mount Carmel. The Christian has to take care that his search for the ultimate Reality bears somewhat different characteristics from the Neo-Platonic flight of 'the alone to the Alone'; he may indeed be summoned to the heights, but he has no call to become a 'superior person'. It is no accident that the 'intellectual' and the aspirant to mystical experience sometimes meet together in one and the same individual; for there is this in common to both interests, that they offer a means of escape from the disturbing contingencies, the stubborn unyielding facts, the rude shocks of every-day life. Again mysticism, besides satisfying the intellectual and aesthetic requirements of our nature, can conveniently leave our conscience and moral sensibility undisturbed. There is a curious affinity between the mystical and the antinomian temper of mind. 'The spiritual man judgeth all things', says St Paul; 'Love and do what you will', says St Augustine. But when these sayings are adapted to their purposes by lesser men than St Paul and St Augustine, there is no knowing what they may be held to justify. Cruelty, injustice, sexual licentiousness and every form of perverted self-will have all been indulged in by mystical-minded persons who, considering themselves to have transcended the moral law, have, quite logically, become a law unto themselves.

It is not then to be wondered at that we find earnest Christians,

⁴ Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, ed. 1888, Vol. II, pp. 413-4, 417; quoted by F. von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol. II, p. 351.

and even serious religious thinkers, who look askance at mysticism and all its works. Better by far, they say, to stick to the safe, if more pedestrian, paths of normal morality and practical devotion, eschewing enthusiasm. And yet . . . , and yet . . . , *abusus non tollit usum*; the true mystics remain the glory of the Church, the envy and inspiration of those who gaze at them from afar and know of their experience only at second hand. Let us not incur the charge of belittling our own heritage.

We may therefore conclude, says Bergson, that neither in Greece nor in ancient India was there complete mysticism, in the one case because the impetus was not strong enough, in the other case because it was thwarted by material conditions or by too narrow an intellectual frame. . . . For complete mysticism is that of the great Christian mystics. . . . There is no doubt that most of them passed through gates resembling the various culminating phases of the mysticism of the ancients. But they merely passed through them: bracing themselves up for an entirely new effort, they burst a dam; they were swept back into a vast current of life; from their increased vitality there radiated an extraordinary energy, daring, power of conception and realisation. Just think of what was accomplished in the field of action by a St Paul, a St Teresa, a St Catherine of Siena, a St Francis, a Joan of Arc, and how many others besides! When we grasp that such is the culminating point of the inner evolution of the great mystics, we can but wonder how they could ever have been classed with the mentally diseased. True, we live in a condition of unstable equilibrium; normal health of mind, as indeed of body, is not easily defined. Yet there is an exceptional, deep-rooted mental healthiness, which is readily recognisable. It is expressed in a bent for action, the faculty of adapting and re-adapting oneself to circumstances, in firmness combined with suppleness, in the prophetic discernment of what is possible and what is not, in a spirit of simplicity which triumphs over complications, in a word, supreme good sense. Is not this what we find in the above-named mystics? And might they not provide us with the very definition of intellectual vigour? (op. cit. pp. 194-5).

So far the philosopher of the *élan vital*. All the same, it was profitable surely to have taken a glance at the seamy side of the picture. We are thereby warned not to oversimplify a subject which readily lends itself to oversimplification. What emerges is that, if we are to reach a satisfactory theory of mysticism, we must take account of its possible aberrations and be able to distinguish between the genuine and the spurious. And here there is a preliminary test which can easily be applied; yet it is one which is curiously disregarded: I mean the assessing of every man's spiritual life by the standard of the New Testament. According to the degree that the soul's aspirations are centred and fixed on the person of

Jesus Christ is their soundness to be judged. These are elementary principles, of course; but just because we take them for granted there may be some danger of our overlooking their implications. Do we not sometimes find the metaphysician and speculative theologian discussing, and even dogmatising about, mystical experience with scarcely a reference to the Gospels? Some such criticism as this could doubtless be fairly levelled at the present paper! But at least let us try to be aware of what we are about. There is perhaps no other department of theology in which greater discrimination is called for on the part of the Christian thinker if he is to prove guiltless of the often made charge that he is distorting the primitive Christian message by imposing upon it the categories of Greek philosophy. Even the most casual student who is beginning to form definite views on these matters may profitably ask himself how much of his theories on the spiritual life derive from Aristotle's Ethics, and how much from the Sermon on the Mount, the Last Supper discourses in St John, and the thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians.

Maybe this is a disturbing suggestion to place before an audience of Thomists! Has not St Thomas himself been called the Christian Aristotle? And is not his own moral theology, and indeed his theory of mysticism, impregnated with Aristotelian thought? At first glance it might seem so. None the less, I believe it can be shown that the pure stream of evangelical devotion emerges from the canals and aqueducts prepared for it by St Thomas with its waters unadulterated and their torrential force only apparently diminished. 'A perfect harmony between the demands of reason and those of the most exacting religious feeling, such is the secret of St Thomas', observes Etienne Gilson⁵. Let us see whether we cannot find corroboration of this view in the Thomist account of mystical experience. We must, however, bear in mind that St Thomas is not concerned with the accidental by-products of mysticism, but with its basic theology. In what we may call the epiphenomena of the spiritual life he had, like St Paul, but slight interest. Corporeal and intellectual visions, ecstasies, locutions, levitations and the like might prove, like the power 'to speak with the tongues of men and of angels', to be no more significant than 'sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal'.

We should, then, be following a false trail were we to look for St Thomas's teaching on what is essential to mystical experience in his treatment of the *charismata*, or, in scholastic terminology, the *gratiae gratis datae*; that is to say, those graces which are given not for the individual's own sanctification but for the benefit of the

⁵ *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Annual Lecture on a Master Mind* (Henrietta Hertz Trust of the British Academy), 1935, p. 13.

Church as a whole.⁶ This point was unfortunately overlooked by the author of the article on Roman Catholic Mysticism in Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, according to whom: 'St Thomas Aquinas, though an ecstatic, has left us no disquisition on mystical theology . . .'. This learned authority attempts to make up the seeming deficiency by a conjectural reconstruction of St Thomas's views from the material available. The result is an essay bearing chiefly upon the relation between the 'Aristotelian theory of cognition' and 'St Thomas's theory of prophecy and vision', to reach the conclusion which '*we should anticipate*'⁷, namely, 'that St Thomas . . . must regard mystical theology⁸ as the angelic consciousness communicated to man'. Concerning this view of the matter, the author is obliged to admit that he has left the beaten track of Thomist exposition; 'The theory just exposed as latent in St Thomas has not been discovered by most of his followers and commentators . . .' Indeed, no!

This is no occasion for *odium theologicum*; it is hardly the place for discussing questions disputed in the schools; but it would be no tribute to the present audience to ignore the controversial aspect of these problems. I am persuaded that an examination of the nature of mystical experience is fundamentally a *theological*, and not an epistemological, enquiry. Its proper starting point is not any theory of natural cognition, but the revealed Word of God, as being the only assurance we can have of the possibility of man's union with the Deity. To begin with an analysis of our cognitive processes, and then to interpret mystical experience in the light of the results, seems to me to be a serious error in method; for this line of investigation, even when it takes account of the *revelata*, necessarily remains on the psychological or, at best, the metaphysical, plane. It must be admitted that the text of St Thomas, materially considered, can easily lend itself to this kind of treatment. In other words, it is not difficult to portray him as an uncompromising intellectual, and so to interpret his theory of religious experience as being but a Christianised form—and superficially Christianised at that—of Hellenistic and Neo-Platonic mysticism. Those 'Thomists' who stress the 'intuitionism' of St Thomas at the expense of the place he assigns to the theological virtue of charity, as being the key to his doctrine of divine contemplation, do him a grave injustice and can find little support in his recognised interpreters. 'I think that the truer theology of supernatural contemplation', M. Maritain

⁶ See St Thomas's discussion of 1 Cor. 12; I-II, 111. 4, 5.

⁷ Italics mine.

⁸ *Mystical Theology*, here used in its earliest sense as being, not a branch of theological science, but the equivalent of the more modern 'mystical experience'.

justly remarks⁹, 'is to be found less in a theory of the *intuition* of God than in the substantially converging views of John of St Thomas and St John of the Cross regarding divine experience by means of the union of love'.

Before coming to first principles, a word must be said about the visions, ecstasies, raptures and other abnormal states which seem sometimes to accompany mystical experience. Here we may note that the great mystics themselves were the first to warn their disciples to set no store by these things. Their own visions, when they had any, they generally regarded as of secondary importance, as wayside incidents; they had to go beyond them, leaving raptures and ecstasies far behind, to reach the goal, which was identification of the human will with the divine will. These last remarks I owe once more to Bergson; than whom, as touching the psychological and physiological aspects of these matters, no one has written more wisely. He continues:

The truth is that these abnormal states, resembling morbid states, and sometimes doubtless very much akin to them, are easily comprehensible, if only we stop to think what a shock to the soul is the passing from the static to the dynamic, from the closed to the open, from everyday life to mystic life. When the darkest depths of the soul are stirred, what rises to the surface and attains consciousness takes on there, if it be intense enough, the form of an image or an emotion. The image is often pure hallucination, just as the emotion may be meaningless agitation. But they both may express the fact that the disturbance is a systematic readjustment with a view to equilibrium on a higher level: the image then becomes symbolic of what is about to happen, and the emotion is a concentration of the soul awaiting transformation. The latter is the case in mysticism, but it may partake of the other; what is only abnormal may be accompanied by what is distinctly morbid: we cannot upset the regular relation of the conscious to the unconscious without running a risk. So we must not be surprised if nervous disturbances and mysticism sometimes go together; we find the same disturbances in other forms of genius, notably in musicians. They have no more to do with mystical inspiration than the latter with musical.¹⁰

To speak theologically, we may say that if these abnormal states—for example, the stigmata or the receiving of some private revelation—are truly marks of divine favour, then they are graces given not for the sanctification of the individual recipient (*gratia gratum faciens*), but for the edification of the whole Church (*gratia gratis data*). Now if there is one point indisputably certain in the teaching

⁹ *Redeeming the Time*, p. 233.

¹⁰ Bergson, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-6.

of St Thomas it is that mystical experience is a function of the supernatural organism, comprising sanctifying grace, the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit—with which every Christian is endowed at Baptism. It is within this framework, and not in connection with the angelic knowledge, or Adam's intellectual gifts, or the revelation given to the prophets, that we can most easily discover St Thomas's mind on the nature of infused contemplation, which brings with it the quasi-experimental knowledge of God enjoyed by the mystics.

Nor is this simply a question of method; more is involved even than the avoidance of theoretical error; it can be shown that the view we take at this point is pregnant with practical consequences for the spiritual life. Were we, for example, to identify mystical contemplation with visions and revelations, then we should be regarding it as among the *charismata*, the spiritual gifts enumerated by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, and not as part of that 'more excellent way', that is, the life of charity, of which he goes on to speak in the thirteenth chapter. In other words, we should be taking the view that the experience of the mystics, instead of being the natural and perfect fruit of Christian spirituality, is no other than an accidental by-product, a grace no more to be sought after than the power to work miracles or to speak with tongues. 'Nothing is more strongly to be condemned', writes Père Garrigou-Lagrange,¹¹ 'than the desire for revelations, while at the same time nothing is a more fitting object of desire than the perfect spirit of faith which is to be found in infused contemplation, leading as it does to union with God.' 'It is therefore a gross error', he continues, 'an error all too common, to confuse desire for revelations with the desire for infused contemplation. Not only is the first to be condemned, it actually is thus the foundation upon which the whole supernatural structure turns us away from the infused contemplation which is above all desirable. St John of the Cross in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*¹², offers the best commentary on the words of St Thomas: *gratia gratum faciens est multo excellentior quam gratia gratis data* (I-II. 3. 5); sanctifying grace (together with the charity and the gifts of the Holy Spirit which accompany it) is far superior to the *charismata*, including the very highest of these, the gift of prophecy.' 'And now there remain faith, hope and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity' (1 Cor. 13. 13). St Thomas takes his stand not with Aristotle or Plotinus but with St Paul. What dominates the whole of his specialised treatment of Christian spiritu-

¹¹ *Perfection chrétienne et Contemplation*, Vol. II, p. 546.

¹² *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk II, c. 27.

ality in the Second Part of the *Summa*, is his preliminary discussion on the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, to which he devotes no fewer than forty-five questions.

'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing nor uncircumcision: but faith that worketh by charity' (Galatians 5. 6), writes St Paul to the Galatians. St Thomas, in his own terminology, teaches the same doctrine; with this very text in mind he insists that charity is the *form* of faith, giving to it its perfection, since it is only by love that the soul is wholly ordered to God (II-II. 4. 3). Yet charity cannot exist without faith; the theological virtue of faith is thus the foundation upon which the whole supernatural structure is built. By faith is meant something more than *trust*; though a large element of trust there certainly is. How could it be otherwise in that act of submission whereby we surrender our minds and hearts to God? But faith also implies conviction; by it we hold something for true, we gain an accession of knowledge based not on external evidence but on authority; we are admitted into the divine secrets, taken into God's confidence to learn something of his own nature and of his plans for ourselves. And here it must be stressed that, fundamentally, the object of our faith is God himself and not the credal statements *about* God. Inspired Scripture, the Creeds, the dogmatic definitions of the Church are indeed the means whereby the object of our faith is proposed to us in intelligible terms; but, to quote St Thomas himself, *actus . . . credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem* (II-II. 1. 2 ad 2); the believer's act of faith has for its term not the formula of the Creed but the *thing* to which that formula relates. In other words, it is the First Truth, God as disclosing himself to us by revelation, that is the object of our faith (ibid, ad 1).

From this it is not difficult to see why, for St Thomas, mystical contemplation always operates within the sphere of faith; since in this life there is no higher medium of knowledge available for man than what is offered him in the first of the theological virtues. Forgetfulness of this elementary piece of Thomism, an *a priori* 'anticipation' that mystical knowledge must be a 'gift which is above faith', was what led our author in the Hasting's Encyclopaedia so seriously to misrepresent St Thomas's position. He did not observe the point made in the *Summa Theologica* against Hugh of St Victor, namely, that the only contemplation which surpasses faith is that of the Beatific Vision. According to St Thomas, the contemplation of the angels and of Adam before the Fall did not transcend the level of faith, even while they received a greater illumination from the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom than we do here on earth (ibid 5. 1 ad 1). But the gifts of the Holy Spirit—though they enable the powers

of the soul to act *modo divino* and are the proximate source of the mystical experience—are yet subordinate to the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (I-II. 68. 8). So far as the *Object* specifying the mind is concerned, the greatest of the gifts, wisdom, while bringing an experiential illumination to faith, adds nothing to its content. Commenting on the famous description of faith to be found in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, St Thomas explains that faith can be called 'the substance of things to be hoped for' because, by the assent of faith, we possess the first beginnings of the object of Christian hope—i.e. the truths through the contemplation of which we shall be beatified in heaven—because faith virtually contains them (II-II. 4. 1). Short of the Beatific Vision, then, we can have substantially no more intimate knowledge of God than that brought to us by supernatural faith.

In all this, it goes without saying, we speak of *fides caritate formata*, the 'faith which worketh by love'. 'The ultimate end of faith', says St Thomas¹³, 'can only be God; for our soul (*mens*) is fixed upon God alone as its ultimate end. But the end, since it falls within the sphere of the good, is the object of love. Whence it follows that to believe in God, as the end to which we are tending, is the distinctive characteristic of faith informed by charity'. Contemplation is essentially an activity of faith, itself an intellectual virtue; but what most of all unites the soul to God in this life is charity, which is supernatural good will. In this, St Thomas's position, there is apparent difficulty—some have not hesitated to call it an inconsistency. It is said that the ontological primacy of the intelligence over the will is here being unjustifiably surrendered; what is demanded by a really consistent Thomism is not this collapse into voluntarism, but the maintenance of the intellect's natural superiority, an emphasising of its intuitive powers and their final realisation in a union with God by immediate vision.

Now there can be no manner of doubt that, for St Thomas, the intelligence is superior to the will which it directs; since it has for its object the universality of *being*, whereas the will is specified only by that aspect of being which renders it desirable, namely the good (I. 82. 3). St Thomas admits also that the happiness of heaven consists essentially in the Beatific Vision—i.e. the immediate intellectual vision of the divine essence—because it is pre-eminently through the medium of vision that we shall apprehend God for all eternity. In heaven charity too will attain its full perfection; but the beatifying love of God will then be nothing other than the necessary consequence of the immediate knowledge, in the light of glory,

¹³ *Comm. in Joannem*, cap. 6, lect. 3, v. 7. (Parma Edit., p. 409).

of the supreme God. Just as the properties of a thing derive from its essence, so our unchanging love for God, and the joy in being eternally united to him flow necessarily from the Beatific Vision, which will thus be the essence of our beatitude (I-II. 3. 4.). St Thomas here is but echoing St Augustine—*Beatitudo est gaudium de veritate*.

Nevertheless, assured though he is that the intelligence is the highest faculty in man, St Thomas takes his place with the innumerable saints and masters of the spiritual life who insist that, here on earth, it avails us more to love God than to know him. And he does this without departing by a hair's breadth from his own philosophical principles. He points out that, though one of our faculties may of its nature be superior to another, as we might consider sight to be superior to hearing, an *act* of the lower faculty can sometimes have greater intrinsic value than an *act* of the higher; to attend with our ears to the B Minor Mass is a worthier occupation than to attend with our eyes to an advertisement for Bovril. Thus, although the intellect is by its nature (*simpliciter*) superior to the will, of which it is the light, from a certain point of view (*secundum quid*) and in relation to God, the intelligence remains, here on earth, inferior to the will. Under the present dispensation it is more profitable to know the things that are below us than to love them, but as regards the things that are above us, it is better to love them than to know them. St Thomas gives the reasons for this with direct reference to the matter in hand (I. 82. 3).

It is the function of the intellect to draw the object of its knowledge, by means of ideas, into the mind which apprehends it. But the will, the faculty of desire, tends towards the object of its choice, the beloved, as it is in itself. That is why the soul is more ennobled in this life by loving God than by knowing him, even though—and this must never be forgotten—the love in question presupposes some degree of knowledge; for nothing is loved unless it is known. St Thomas expounds the same doctrine when treating explicitly of divine Charity. He poses the question, 'Whether God can be loved immediately in this life?' (II-II. 27. 4), and answers in effect as follows: Our knowledge of God in this life is mediated to us by means of ideas; hence it is to this extent indirect and will yield place hereafter to direct vision; but charity, even now, attains God directly and accordingly will yield place to nothing. Again, the reason for this is that knowledge, being produced in us by representations of the object known, is proportioned to the finite human intelligence; whereas love, on the contrary, since it tends towards the beloved object, is proportioned to that object as it is in itself; hence our love of God is not limited in the same way as is our knowledge of

him. Charity is superior to faith and hope, St Thomas teaches explicitly (ibid. 23. 6), because, while faith attains to God as the revealer of truth and hope attains to him as the giver of the good things we need, charity attains to God as he is in himself, seeking nothing, content only to rest in him.

One of the most faithful of St Thomas's interpreters, John of St Thomas, has an illuminating comment on the relation between faith and charity in mystical contemplation: 'Faith in its obscurity attains God, while remaining as it were at a distance, in as much as faith is in things unseen. But charity attains immediately God in himself, uniting itself intimately with that which lies hidden in faith. And thus, although faith, as proposing the object, regulates love and the union with God, nevertheless, in virtue of this union whereby love adheres immediately to God, the intelligence is uplifted by a certain affective experience so as to discern divine things in a higher way than the aforesaid obscurity of faith would allow of; because it detects and knows that more lies hidden in the things of faith than faith itself makes manifest, since it finds there more to be loved and affectively tasted. Wherefore on account of this 'more' which it knows, the intelligence discerns divine things more profoundly (*judicat altius de ipsis rebus divinis*), relying now not so much on the mere witness of belief (*testimonium credentis*) as on the affective experience, together with an impulsion of the Holy Spirit thus moving, uplifting and reassuring the intelligence'.¹⁴

Something more, then, than acts of faith and charity underlies mystical experience; there is needed the activity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These, more particularly the gift of wisdom, are what attune us to the things of God; their function is to make the soul alert and responsive to divine inspiration. The theological virtues, though themselves more perfect than the gifts and regulating their activity, are subject in their exercise to rational deliberation. We ourselves, aided by actual grace, can at will elicit an act of faith or charity. What is essential to the act is undoubtedly divine, but its mode of production is human and, to that extent, unworthy of its object. The soul is not yet at home with God. It is like a lover professing his love in letters and elaborate speeches instead of by a glance and a touch of the hand. When faith is illustrated by the gifts of knowledge and understanding, and charity by wisdom, then all hesitation disappears and calculation and forethought give place to a heavenly instinct. The Holy Spirit himself takes charge and man is literally inspired.¹⁵

¹⁴ John of St Thomas, *Cursus Theologicus*, VI. 70. 18. 4.

¹⁵ See I-II. 68. 1, 2. A less summary exposition of this doctrine is attempted in my book *The Love of God*, pp. 99-102, 231 ss.

Under the influence of the gift of wisdom the mind discerns the things of God from a certain affinity with them, as the virtuous man—who may know nothing of the science of ethics—judges of virtue. This affinity arises from the fact that the mystic—for it is of him we are speaking—is not merely learning about the object of his search, but is actually *experiencing* it: *non solum discens, sed et patiens divina*. This experience, St Thomas holds, is essentially cognitive, since wisdom resides formally in the intellect; but its cause is in the will, which is the seat of charity, because ‘the aforesaid sympathy or affinity with the things of God is the result of charity, which unites us to God to the degree spoken of by St Paul, where he says: (1 Cor. 6. 17) “the man who unites himself to the Lord becomes one spirit with him”’ (II-II. 45. 2). We are here on the threshold of an intuition of God, but beyond the threshold, we would maintain, the mystic does not pass in this life.

Even at the height of infused contemplation the being of God is not directly perceived, for the veil of faith remains. He is indeed known as he is in himself, *in seipso*—at least in the sense that he is now present within the soul (*mens*) as the object of its knowledge and love (cf. I. 43. 3)—but he is not yet known according to his own ineffable mode of being, *sicuti est*. God is known, not face to face, but through the effects of filial love, *per effectum amoris filialis*, as St Thomas glosses the text, ‘The Spirit himself thus assures our spirit, that we are children of God’ (Rom. 8. 6). Not that God is known only by inference from these effects. This would make the knowledge remote and indirect and would be against the evidence of the mystics themselves. The divine ‘touches’ and the tasting-knowledge (*sapida cognitio*) resulting from them are not realities which, being first of all known, lead the mind on to recognise the closeness of its union with God. Like intellectual concepts, their function is primarily *representative*; they are the *media* through which the divine essence presents itself objectively to the mind in all but tangible form. Thus the knowledge of God can be described as immediate, though imperfectly so, on account of the residue of obscurity which only direct vision can remove. Not until heaven is reached will the soul be wholly transparent to God. Thus it is that the ‘experimental’ character of the mystics’ knowledge is not quite unqualified; in St Thomas’s phrase, it is a *quasi-experimental* knowledge: *cognitio ista est quasi experimentalis*¹⁶.

But let the mystic who is also a poet and a theologian speak for himself. So St John of the Cross, commenting on the twelfth stanza

¹⁶ I *Sent.* 14. 2. 2 ad 3.

of his own *Spiritual Canticle*, tells us that

The propositions and articles which faith sets before us . . . [are called] . . . a silvered surface . . . ; faith is compared to silver with respect to the propositions it teaches us, and the truths and substance which they contain in themselves are compared to gold; for that same substance which now we believe, clothed and covered with the silver of faith, we shall behold and enjoy in the life to come, fully revealed, with the gold of faith laid bare. . . . So that faith gives and communicates to us God himself, but covered with the silver of faith; but it fails not for that reason to give him to us in truth, even as one may give a silvered vessel, which is also a vessel of gold, for, though covered with silver, it is none the less a golden vessel that he gives . . . Oh that thou wouldst but give me these truths which thou teachest me formlessly and darkly, and which are veiled in thy articles of faith, clearly and formally revealed in them according to the entreaty of my desire.¹⁷

Thus, for one who is acknowledged on all hands to be among the greatest of the mystics, the orthodox creeds and dogmatic formulas, far from hampering his soul's liberty, were in fact the focal points of its contact with God. We may conclude, then, that there is a closer connection between genuine religious experience and orthodoxy than is popularly supposed. It used to be the fashion to insist on a sharp antithesis between the 'religion of authority' and the 'religion of the spirit', between the 'institutional' and 'mystical' elements in religion; but that time has now passed. One reason for this may be that we have come to realise that uncontrolled individualism is, quite literally, the curse of Adam; its results in the political and economic spheres constitute the main contemporary problem; in the realm of religion it is tragic folly, an attempt to stultify the life-work of Christ. Satan is the only religious individualist who has been known to survive. As for the rest of us, we must be bound together in community of life or else perish; and if a religious community is to be saved from disintegration it must have an orthodoxy in belief. The Christian mystic may enter the *beata solitudo*; but not before he has met his obligations to the brotherhood, and not without bearing their needs and sufferings in his own heart; for they have claims upon him, in virtue of their common membership of Christ's mystical Body.

May I end with a brief quotation from Baron von Hügel, who still retains his title to be listened to on these matters:

Never has religion been purely and entirely individual; always has it been, as truly and necessarily, social and institutional, traditional

¹⁷ *Spiritual Canticle*, 12: Professor Allison Peers's translation of *The Works of Saint John of the Cross*, Vol. II, p. 246-7.

and historical. And this traditional element, not all the religious genius in the world can ever escape or replace: it was there, surrounding and moulding the very pre-natal existence of each one of us; it will be there long after we have left the scene. We live and die its wise servants and stewards, or its blind slaves, or in futile, impoverishing revolt against it: we never, for good or ill, really get beyond its reach.¹⁸

‘THE BELOVED’

BY

COLUMBA CARY ELWES, O.S.B.



INCE God is love, so too is Christ. But what is love? It is not enough to say that love is the giving of oneself as Christ our Lord did upon the cross for this act is but an outward expression of love and the same act could be not love but a crime. What then is love if God is love?

It is not the urge we have for something we do not possess for God has all and more than all. He is infinity, and yet he loves.

Perhaps, to know its nature, we should begin with ourselves, for all our knowledge of God is known by analogy with ourselves. We have such things as qualities. He is these things. Whatever we obtain, that we obtain from him. He is that and more. He is knowledge; he is power, wisdom, prudence, peace, love. We have them as passing gifts but we know them best in our own souls.

(a) Love of Desire.

What is love in us? We love ourselves. We know we love and yet what love is escapes our grasp. We call it ‘will’ to distinguish it from cold objective knowing; and yet it is in the knowing that love comes. But for knowing we could not love; this very knowing is impelled to act by desire. Loving in us seems mostly a craving for completion beginning with a sense or knowing of our incompleteness, our lack of fulfilment. In all our life, in each part of it, we struggle for entirety, wholeness; in our bodies which but for the vile fall would be a sweet symbol for heavenly things, we seek fulfilment. The two sexes are mutually fulfilling. Nor did St Paul fear to show the parallel when he said that marriage was the symbol of Christ and the Church. Our senses too seek completion, the answer, the echo from without; the ear in sweet-sounding harmonies, the sense of smell in flowers, touch in soft silks, taste in delicate wines and choice meats; and finally the mind, that world in little, that chasm of emptiness hungering to be filled, with such capacity that no

¹⁸ F. von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol. I, p. 59.