

THE DIVORCE OF MYSTICISM FROM THEOLOGY—II

BY

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THE Rhenish school drew into its orbit many of the contemplatives of the time.¹ They were not of the stature of their predecessors. The sole exception to this mediocrity was of course Bl. John Ruysbroeck (†1381). This great mystic of Groenendael depends in more than one point on Master Eckhart, but he has been careful not to leave any ambiguity on his 'dualist' thought, that is, on his doctrine of the distinction between God and the creature. The *Book of Supreme Truth* (*Dat boec der hoechster waerheit*) has expressly stated this: 'no creature can be or become holy to the point of losing its created nature and becoming God'.² Certain expressions of Book III of the *Spiritual Nuptials* (*De gheestelyke brulocht*) did however give rise to the criticisms of Gerson.³

Ruysbroeck's mystical teaching explains, then, in what measure man can arrive at union with God. At the beginning of his career as a writer, he admitted the possibility of the intuitive vision of the divine essence.⁴ Later he seems to have

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¹ See in this connection *Dict. Spirit.* vol. I. 324-325; W. Preger, *Geschichte der deutschen mystik*, Leipzig, 1874-1892, vol. II. pp. 3-306. In particular, Rulman Merswin (†1382; cf. W. Preger, *op. cit.* vol. III, pp. 245-407); the 'Friends of God' (cf. *Dict. Spirit.* vol. I. 493-500). In the fifteenth century one again comes across the influence of the Rhenish school in Nicholas of Cusa (†1464), who has remained famous for his attraction for the traditional Dionysian darkness and for his denial of a necessary knowledge antecedent to or concomitant with contemplation. Another example is Heury Herp (see further on in this article).

² *Ruusbroec-Genootschap* III, 276-277. cf. P. A. Van de Walle, *Is Ruusbroec pantheïstic!* in *Ons Geestelijc Erf*, vol. XII, 1938, pp. 359-391; vol. XIII, 1939, pp. 65-105.

³ P. A. Van der Walle, *art. cit.*; A. Combes, *Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson*, vols. I and II, published Paris 1945 and 1948. M. d'Asbeck (*La mystique de Ruysbroeck l'Admirable. Un écho du néo-platonisme au XIVe siècle*, Paris, 1930, p. 287) exaggerates to the utmost the contrast between Ruysbroeck's experience and dogma.

⁴ cf. *Spiritual Nuptials*, 3, 6.

been more reserved, as in the treatise on the Burning Rock (chapter 2). This treatise summarises the first two books of the *Spiritual Nuptials* in chapters 1 to 9, and in the following chapters sets out in detail the third book which is devoted to contemplation properly so termed. It has been supposed that this detailed exposition was a result of the discussions which, about 1330-36, centred on the face-to-face, immediate vision of God by the elect, discussions which ceased on the intervention of Benedict XII.⁵

As to Ruysbroeck's essential mystical teaching, three essential elements may be distinguished in it: exemplarism, introversion, and the life of union—elements which are traditional, but brought together here in an original synthesis.

At the root of exemplarism is Trinitarian doctrine. The divine life is a movement of flux and reflux, of expansion and contraction, proceeding from the unity of nature, whence proceed the three Persons, to return to unity in a common fruition. The eternal life of the creature, in the exemplary ideas, participates in this flux and reflux.⁶ Even the structure of the soul is framed upon the divine model, for, according to Augustine, its three higher faculties, memory, intellect, will, derive their natural origin from the unity of the vital principle. And this unity, like the 'unity as to essence' which man possesses in God, and like the 'unity of the lower powers', must be 'possessed supernaturally'.⁷ This is the work of man who goes down into the depths of himself by passing through the three stages described in the *Spiritual Nuptials*: *werkend leven*, *God-begeerend leven* and *God-schouwwend leven* (active life, desire for God, contemplation of God). Man thus discovers the image of God in the depths of his soul and associates himself with the life of the three divine Persons (one is reminded of Eckhart), until he attains, at the summit of contemplation, to the 'union without difference' with the divine essence, to 'possession'. This is the 'common life' which cannot be 'without exercise of love', and through which the human soul is drawn into the life of the Trinity itself.

⁵ Constitution *Benedictus Deus* of January 29th, 1336 (Denzinger-Bannwart, no. 530).

⁶ e.g. *The Book of the Twelve Requiems*, 28; *Spiritual Nuptials*, 3, 5; *Mirror of Eternal Salvation*, 17.

⁷ *Spiritual Nuptials*, 2.

Contemplation, then, for Ruysbroeck, as for the other writers of the Rhenish school, constitutes the highest point of an experience, the description of which is closely linked with dogmatic ideas. This is unquestionably speculative mysticism, but less intellectual in its procedure, as in its term, than that of Eckhart. Again, Ruysbroeck differs from Eckhart, and above all from Tauler, in the lesser importance assigned to 'technical processes of self-stripping'. He approximates to Suso in his concern for moulding a very rich personal experience to the terms of a speculative school of spirituality.⁸

Ruysbroeck's disciples at Groenendael were far from possessing their master's boldness. One of the most outstanding among them is John de Leeuwen (†1378). He seems to have clarified his master's thought. His treatise on 'What a man poor in spirit understands' distinguishes, like Ruysbroeck, active life, interior life (rather than the life of the desire for God), and the life of contemplation of God, but he adds to this threefold life that of abandonment, the total surrender of self to God.⁹ Fr L. Reypens, comparing the texts of Leeuwen with those of Ruysbroeck, concludes that 'for Leeuwen the highest mystical life is clearer, verbally, than in the case of Ruysbroeck: the summit is the true contemplation of God'. It does seem that here immediate contemplation, under the primacy of love, is in question, although such accuracy of expression is absent from the thought of the writers of that period.

As to the primacy of love, this disciple, who has simplified and clarified his master, here yields to the tendency of his time. The fact will be still more striking in another of Groenendael's spiritual writers, John of Schoonhoven (†1432), who obviously prefers the lower regions of asceticism to speculative mysticism. And in his conception of contemplation its humble and affective character supplants the dogmatic, theological or

⁸ We should add that besides this central conception of contemplation, Ruysbroeck does know the corporal mystical phenomena. The second book of the *Spiritual Nuptials* (*begeerend leven*) places them in the course of the first phase of this stage; they are the experiences *in den geest* (=in the spirit: revelations, intellectual visions); *boven zichzelf* and *boven den geest* (=above oneself, and above the spirit), although not absolutely out of oneself (rapture); and *boven zichzelf* (=above oneself: sudden illuminations, the work of God himself); cf. 2, 24.

⁹ This division closely corresponds to that which Fr St Axters, O.P., has suggested for the publication of an anthology of his works: Moral life, spiritual life, divine life.

intellectual tendencies of the Rhinelanders and of Ruysbroeck. The influence of the *Devotio moderna* is clear.

Thus the fourteenth century draws to its close as the Rhenish and Groenendael schools make what are perhaps the most daring efforts as yet attempted to unite theology and mysticism. But in these same closing years of the century a weariness, a disappointment, a scepticism can already be discerned. Neither the reality of contemplation nor its demands are questioned. But whether it is found at the end of these technical processes of self-stripping and these intellectual ascents is questioned. Its repercussions on the soul make more impression.¹⁰ There is mistrust of speculations on the Word being born in the soul and on the latter's return into the divine nothingness. There is surprise that contemplation should be confined to an élite enjoying the facilities of a strictly 'contemplative' state of life. Moreover the possibility of the direct vision of God is more and more questioned, and the gratuitous aspect of contemplation insisted upon. Is not love the essence of the Gospel? Were not the old monastic schools and the French school nearer to the truth when they made contemplation consist in a formal act of love? And when they made this derive from meditation on Christ?

The fifteenth century, finally, will draw the full consequences from the primacy of love in contemplation, and it is the chief merit of a movement originating in the Low Countries, the *Devotio Moderna*, to have brought mystical life down again, even in its theoretical exposition, to the level of all. Moral and ascetical life, the love of God in concrete terms, returns to the foreground. This 'moralistic' tendency is found to some extent everywhere. There is also found a kind of passage from the 'objective' in contemplation (God, Trinity, Christ, grace . . .) to the 'subjective', to the 'psychological' (love, consolation, virtues . . .). This other tendency is also found very frequently. Such movements do not yet lead to psychological syntheses of the mystical life like those of the sixteenth century in Spain. But we are on the way.

The causes of this movement are many. The speculative schools and Groenendael no longer provide men of outstand-

¹⁰ This is sufficiently clear in England with Julian of Norwich (†1412) and Margery Kempe (†1438), and in Switzerland with St Nicholas of Flue (†1487).

ing importance comparable with those who lent them distinction during the preceding centuries. Nominalism discredits the operations of reason, even when enlightened by faith; the wordiness of theological discussions, the abandonment of vigorous metaphysical speculation lead to the same discredit; and the latter reacts upon the endeavours of speculative mysticism. The religious decadence of the fifteenth century calls for a movement of reform; hence the emphasis on moral and ascetic interests. The new-born humanism directs man's attention to man himself. But at the same time this humanism turns back towards the ancient sources, both pagan and Christian. This return to the ancients is very marked in the case of certain mystics as, for instance, Gerson, Denys the Carthusian, and even in the religious philosophy of a Marsilio Ficino.

As a result of this situation, the fifteenth century has a more modest conception of contemplation than the speculatives of the fourteenth—an attitude which is not without grave consequences for the future. It has to be admitted that it is at this precise moment that the division between theology and the mystical life occurs and that henceforward this separation will be irremediable.¹¹ To quote only one example, the *Imitation* warns its readers against the dangers of knowledge—and it is right in attacking the abuses of a scholasticism which is intemperate to the point of losing the power to verify its own findings. Those scathing pages were directly aimed at the theologians. It is not surprising that in their eyes the *Imitation* becomes the type of a new literary *genre*, the 'book of devotion'. And such literature 'dogmatically is no longer of any importance'.

Numerous antecedents of the *ama nesciri* and *Quid prodest magna cavillatio de occultis et obscuris rebus, de quibus nec arguemur in iudicio* can unquestionably be found. Did not St Thomas himself realise, after the ecstasy of December 6th, 1273, that his great speculative effort was only straw in comparison with the vision of God? *Quid curae nobis de generibus et speciebus?* It might be the echo of a St Peter Damian. . . .

Nearer to the fifteenth century the most marked accents of this attitude of disillusionment break out first of all in England.

¹¹ cf. M.-J. Congar, O.P., art. *Théologie*. *Dict. Théol. Cath.* vol. XV, col. 411-13, 423-4. The division between scholastic theology and mystical theology occurred 'particularly from the fifteenth century'.

The *Fire of Love* and *Form of Perfect Living* of Richard Rolle (†1349) ignore scholasticism or even, one might say simply, all abstract theories. Is not God unknowable? Is not the contemplation of him necessarily obscure? And is not its essential part equivalent to love, and concretely to the love of Christ? And when Rolle sets out to describe contemplation he can only find analogous psychological experiences to bring forward: interior fire (*calor*), song (*canor*), rapture (*raptus*), sweetness (*dulcor*).

In the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1350-1370) the descriptions are still further stripped of scholastic vanities.¹² This admirable treatise, perhaps the most beautiful of the whole fourteenth century, is Dionysian down to its title (this is taken from the *Theologia Mystica*). 'Apophatism' there reigns supreme: 'Love alone can attain to God in this life, but not knowledge'. And to reach the one object of contemplation, this 'cloud of unknowing' which is God, there is only one way: the 'cloud of forgetting' of creatures, a cloud which love alone will pierce, like a bold arrow, in a stark and naked flight. Truly, the vain chatterers merely deserve good-natured contempt.

Another Englishman, Walter Hilton (†1396), to counteract the more or less non-conformist tendency of his predecessors, attempted a didactic treatise on the spiritual life. The *Scale of Perfection* deals with the right means of attaining perfection. Now the latter consists in the love of God, which is consummated in perfect contemplation—a double equation from which it follows that contemplation is none other than 'a love of God so full of sweetness, of delight and of fervour that [the soul] is rapt out of itself. At this moment at any rate it becomes one thing with God, it is transformed into the image of the Trinity.' And Hilton expresses the psychological tendency of his school when he distinctly compares this union to that of marriage

¹² *Cloud*, ch. 8. One is particularly struck by the *Cloud's* esteem for certain techniques of contemplation, such as the repetition of a simple word: *God, sin, love*. The purpose of such repetition is to pierce the 'cloud of unknowing'. There is a certain analogy between this process and the 'aspirations' recommended by Hugh of Balma in the thirteenth century, and by Henry Herp in the fifteenth. St Ignatius of Loyola did not despise such artifices (see M. Olphe-Gaillard, S.J., *De l'usage et de l'utilité des méthodes contemplatives dans le catholicisme*, in *Et. Carmélitaines*, 1949 *Technique et contemplation*, pp. 69-76). It is superfluous to stress the connection of this process with that of orthodox hesychasm, from the eleventh to the fourteenth century (see A. Bloom. *ibid.*, p. 49-67).

(Scale 1, 8) and when he describes its preparatory stages as a 'night which is not without some light and which brings us near to the true day' (Scale 2, 24). Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are here foreshadowed.

But it is chiefly on the continent that the moralising and psychological tidal wave is to break. There, from the end of the fourteenth until the sixteenth century, spiritual life is dominated by the *Devotio Moderna*. The founder of this movement, Gerard Groote, died prematurely in 1384. His forceful personality gave a vigorous impulse of renewal to the religious life of the Low Countries. He did not indeed completely deny the earlier tendencies. He and his disciples are not without certain doctrinal connections with the Rhenish school or with Groenandael. They gladly diffuse the type of pious *Meditations* on the life of Jesus or on other religious subjects, a type already known in the previous century and sponsored, incorrectly indeed, by the name of St Bonaventure. They will also produce preachers of merit, animated by a genuine zeal for the revival of the decadent Church of these Middle Ages in decline.

Before all else they were spiritual writers. Gerard Groote himself has left a considerable number of autobiographical, oratorical, epistolary and ascetical works, in which the characteristics of his spiritual temperament can be discerned: a certain practical voluntarism, an anthropocentrism based on solicitude for eternal salvation, a certain pessimism as dissatisfied with existing forms of religious life as it is with marriage, a reaction against the pantheistic forms of false mysticism which are spread to some extent more or less everywhere. All this cannot but inspire him with mistrust for the speculative mysticism of Groenandael and others. Is contemplation to be identified with charity? always the same refrain: *contemplatio seu perfectio caritatis* (Epist. 45). It would seem that he finds any more exact definition superfluous. The one thing which is important to remember is the preliminary and serious self-stripping, the *spiritualis paupertas* (Epist. 71) and the *imitatio humanitatis Christi*, the mode of access *ad divinitatem per contemplacionem* (Epist. 9). (Another mode of access, parallel to contemplation, is the active life: at the close of the century this sort of equivalence between the two lives, contemplative and active, against

which Rolle, for instance, was protesting vigorously half a century earlier is regarded as self-evident.)

In his dominant ideas, Gerard Groote was followed by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (†1398; more systematic than Groote in the technique of meditation), Gerlac Peters (†1411), and Thomas à Kempis (†1471). The latter deserves particular mention by reason of the extraordinary influence which the four small treatises put together under the name of *De imitatione Christi* (a title inspired by the opening words of the first treatise) exerted. Thomas à Kempis, as there is more than one proof, was certainly not an extremely original mind. This suggests a certain reserve in attributing to him the entire authorship of the *Imitatio*. Whatever may be the truth or otherwise of this question, he can be considered as its final editor.¹³

In the work which is unquestionably Thomas's and in the *Imitatio*, tendencies rather similar to those instanced in the earlier authors have been found: affective devotion and contemplation of Christ's humanity, in order to attain to that of his divinity and to union with God in liberation of the soul. This is particularly evident in the second book of the *Imitatio*: paradoxical as it may seem, in the teaching of the *Imitatio*, the theme of the imitation of Christ thus appears rather infrequently, relatively speaking. Neither in the *Imitatio* nor in his other works does Thomas seem to admit the possibility of a transitory vision of the divine essence here on earth. The contemplation of certain privileged souls is a lower kind of vision only, different from the vision of the blessed, not only by its period of duration but by its nature: it only takes place *ex latere, modice, obscure*.¹⁴ One senses an anxiety to present the spiritual life in such of its aspects as are accessible to all Christians. Thus for practical purposes contemplation is identified with charity. Yet Thomas knows and describes, for instance in the *De elevatione mentis*, the mystical vision of divine truth, but through the intervention of a special grace.

¹³ We do not intend to enter into the endless discussions as to the authorship of the *Imitatio*. It is recognised that the latest theory on this subject is that of Fr J. Van Ginneken, S.J., who traces the origins of the *Imitatio* back to Gerard Groote himself, and considers Thomas as its editor, or simply its final compiler.
¹⁴ cf. G. Clamens, *La dévotion à l'humanité du Christ dans la spiritualité de Thomas à Kempis*. Lyon, 1931.

In a word, the *Imitatio* would seem to sum up certain tendencies of spirituality during the first half of the fifteenth century. And for many future generations it will remain the clearest and simplest expression of the *Devotio Moderna*.

Thus the movement appears under a rather favourable light. It was admittedly under suspicion, as early as Gerard Groot, by reason of certain links with the heterodox mysticism of the fourteenth century. Later its influence on the dawning humanism of the fifteenth, and on the Reformation of the sixteenth century was also regarded with suspicion. The esteem with which Luther, and possibly that with which Wessel Gansfort and Erasmus regarded it, would perhaps justify this severe judgment. Moreover the Church urgently needed new blood, and a spiritual and interior renewal. And after the speculative excesses of the thirteenth and particularly of the fourteenth century in spiritual matters, the return to the absolute primacy of charity, the return to concrete conformity to the life of Christ, the return to the interior virtues (humility, detachment . . .): all this was in itself a sane and healthy reaction. Matters developed as if the profound mind of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, had discerned the danger of an exaggerated intellectualism and that of a too highly developed 'technicisation' of the soul's interior ascent.

And yet one cannot but recognise what this sane reaction has cost. The widening gap between decadent scholasticism and the new masters of the mystical life will become the gap between theology and mysticism in themselves. To no avail will Denys the Carthusian (†1471), with his immense erudition, search among the Fathers for the bases of the *Theologica mystica*, seek to be the disciple of another Denys, the Areopagite, and strive to link up the Dionysian *via negationis* and 'darkness' with the formal primacy of the intellect of which St Thomas has convinced him. In vain will Pierre d'Ailly (†1420), Gerson (†1429), and Robert (†1458) seek to follow the pseudo-Denys, St Augustine, St Bernard, Richard of St Victor, St Bonaventure, in spiritual matters and proclaim their link between speculative and mystical theology in his works *De* mistrust of the Rhenish school and Ruysbroeck; Gerson, in particular, will have posited to no purpose his thesis of the

*mystica theologia practica*¹⁵—despite the fact that the former is based on the rational powers whose object is the true, and the latter on the affective powers whose object is the good. All these writers are merely developing again in the fifteenth century the common ground of the monastic Middle Ages above the excesses of, and certainly also in reaction against, the speculation of the fourteenth century. And the movement which originated at Windesheim with Gerard Groote will ultimately prove stronger than these survivals of a past which will soon be finally over and done with.

In the Low countries and Germany, the influence of the *Devotio Moderna* quickly made itself felt. After Thomas à Kempis there are other representatives of the movement of considerable merit: the Franciscan, Henry Herp (†1477), whose eclecticism does not despise certain affinities with Ruysbroeck,¹⁶ and Jean Mombaer of Brussels (†1501). In the latter particularly a rather anxious preoccupation with the degrees of meditation and mental prayer may be discerned.

Herp and Mombaer deserve particular attention on account of the diffusion of their writings. As a result of the Spanish domination of the Low Countries, these were translated and distributed in Spain. Thus Garcia de Cisneros (†1510), in writing his well-known *Exercitatorio de la vida spiritual*, has written merely an anthology in which Thomas à Kempis, Jean Mombaer and Gerard of Zutphen figure largely.¹⁷ And through

15 cf. J. Stelzenberger, *Die mystik des Joannes Gerson*, Breslau, 1928; J. L. Connolly, *John Gerson, Reformer and Mystic*, Louvain, 1928.

16 To the extent that he has been called the 'herald of Ruysbroeck'. Yet his *Spiegel der Volkomenheit* (ed. L. Verschueren, 2 vols., Antwerp, 1931) merely translates into subjective language Ruysbroeck's speculative teaching. His doctrine is dependant on his theocentric conception of the relationship between man and God. The essential, with the help of grace, is still union with God in knowledge and, above all, in love (a Franciscan characteristic), with as its necessary complement the fulfilling of the divine will, the ascent towards which is marked by progress in renunciation, the practice of the virtues and prayer. Like the Carthusian, Hugh of Balma (thirteenth century), but in a manner which is less affective, Herp gives an important place in prayer to 'aspirations' (*toegheesten*)—a preference which goes hand in hand with a certain distrust of spiritual consolations. The latter are neither the sign of perfection nor the guarantee of divine action. This does not prevent him from recognising, above the interior active life and the contemplative life, a third life, 'supereentially contemplative' (*ouerweselic*), characterised by its gratuitousness and passivity. Note that the Franciscan primacy of love and of the imitation of Christ (*exercitia Christi formalia*) always retains its rights in this ascent, the framework of which recalls very closely that of Ruysbroeck.

17 cf. M. Alamo, *Cisneros (Garcia de)* in the *Dict. Spirit.* vol. II, pp. 910-921.

Cisneros, St Ignatius of Loyola comes in contact with the *Devotio Moderna*. A little later it will influence St Teresa of Avila, chiefly through the intermediary of the Spanish Franciscan, Francis of Osuna (†1540).¹⁸ Thus in its most eminent representatives, Spanish spirituality of the sixteenth century owes to the *Devotio Moderna* more than one characteristic feature. And, further, when we realise the primary influence which these Spanish mystics and spiritual writers exercised on those of later centuries, whether Spaniards or others, we see what we owe, even today, to this *Devotio Moderna*.

But, it must be repeated, if the inheritance which it has handed down to us did contain in germ the moralistic and psychological trend of our spirituality, it no longer contained, except in a relatively extrinsic way, all that constitutes the sublimity of the Pauline and Johannine doctrines of the spiritual life. Before the advent of scholasticism, the Middle Ages lived on the mystical teaching of the New Testament to the depths of its being. Whilst since then this patristic and scriptural vision has not been forgotten, it is a fact that henceforward the mystical experience will be described *within the framework, with the guarantee* of these truths, much more than as the experience of such truths.

Where are we to place the origin of this cleavage? It seems to us that the end of the fourteenth century, with its speculative mysticism on the one hand and the *Devotio Moderna* on the other, gives us the exact moment.

Perhaps our contemporaries have some lessons to learn from this investigation. We are very skilled in the art of writing the history of the past and of the doctrines on which the past has lived. But are we equally skilled in following out its teachings? Are we always prepared to 'create' in the direction which history shows us to be the true and the right one?

¹⁸ cf. R. de Ros, *Un maître de sainte Thérèse, le Père François d'Osuna*, Paris, 1936; P. Groult, *Les mystiques des Pays-Bas et la littérature mystique espagnole du XVI^e siècle*, Louvain, 1927.