

BLACKFRIARS

SPIRITUALITY¹

Since the last bulletin on spirituality was published in BLACKFRIARS there has been a spate of "spiritual" treatises, occasionally of value, often of interest and seldom harmful. They are strangely heterogenous. Reprints from such recognized masters of the spiritual life as Father Vincent McNabb and St. Francis de Sales mingle with essays on excesses of phenomenalist mysticism and anthologies of Divine Locutions. Behind them as inevitably as a landscape stretch the conventionally edifying panegyrics. It is an impressive witness to the existence of a Catholic reading public, wide in extent, strong in purchasing power and still incalculable to our publishing houses. Inevitably we can only select those French or English studies which seem to possess an intrinsic value or to illustrate the more urgent problems of English spirituality in the December of 1937.

It is natural for a Thomist to begin with the new edition of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Theologically it would seem to be the result of a synthesis of the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition with the Neo-Augustinianism latent in even the last of the great Victorines. But its theology like its psychology is one to which St. Thomas was indebted, and in its clear abstract passion for the blinded vision of the Divine it belongs to the same thought world as his own mysticism. It was Dom Justin McCann's discovery of Vercellensis which first placed it in its theological perspective, but the Order which produced the Meister Eckhart could never have felt alien from the author of the *Cloud*.

Yet if the 13th century Dominicans were the heirs to the 12th century Victorine synthesis of Dionysian and Augustinian mystical theory, the 13th century Franciscans were to become the representatives of the 12th century Cistercian school. It is characteristic that behind David of Augsburg lies William of St. Thierry and the slow Gregorian homilies. David of Augsburg died in the same year as St. Thomas, and his writings represent the third generation of a sobered Franciscan spirituality. His treatise *De exteriori et interiori hominis compositione* came to possess a considerable vogue in the Low Countries and in southern Germany and its ideals were to affect the Brotherhood of the Common Life. It is fortunate that Father Dominic Devas should have chosen it for translation.

¹ JUSTIN McCANN, O.S.B. (ed.) *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Burns Oates; 6s.); DAVID OF AUGSBURG, *Spiritual Life and Progress* 2 vols. (Burns Oates; 12s.); PROHASZKA, *Meditations on the Gospels* 3 vols. (Sheed & Ward; 22s. 6d.); HERMANS, *Mystique* (Cit   Chr  tienne, Brussels, pp. 430, n.p.); JAEGER, *The Mystic Life of Graces* (Burns Oates; 7s. 6d.); WILMART, *Pensees du B. Guigue* (Vrin, Paris; n.p.).

REVIEWS

The three tractates and two letters that compose it are practical rather than speculative in their purpose, ascetical rather than mystical in their tone. They are characterized by a solid desire for religious virtue, a heavy realism and a grinding sense of detail and a clear recognition of the limitations of human effort. Temperamentally David would seem to have been a moderate, culturally he would seem have been affected by the *burgher* common-sense and the young respectability of the rising German towns; "never use scent unless there is some very special reason . . . be quiet and unassuming, have nothing about you likely to draw attention to yourself." This may be far from Meister Eckhart, it is farther still from the Fioretti.

But even if we recognize that David of Augsburg was prematurely distant from the springtime of the friars this will not diminish our appreciation of the modern value of his work. As Dominicans we may attempt to be loyal to the old conception of the friar as *declassé* and free, and yet realize that it is becoming almost an anachronism in English religious life. Increasingly the great religious Orders are fitting insecurely into niches in the English social system. It is not the scarcity but the homogeneity of vocations which is the immediate danger. More and more the English priesthood is recruited from the prosperous or the penurious middle class. It is not unnatural that a religious should retain the preconceptions of his childhood or of his schooling in a community that shares with him a common cultural background and should die secure in the certitudes of the subsection of the class in which he was born.

A similar problem confronted the religious of late medieval Germany as each great Order slowly found a seemly level in the carefully graded life of the towns. David of Augsburg gives perhaps the earliest example of the adjustment of the ideals of a founder to this new cultural setting; the desire of religious perfection has remained constant but the note of passion has been succeeded by the note of devout respectability. More than two centuries later the spiritual writers of the Rhineland, Blomevanna and Werner Rolewinck and Conrad Kollin were to illustrate the same unachieved purpose. The problem was never to be solved, but it found its answer the surge of the Anabaptists among the city proletariat and the glare of burning churches.

Yet although the serene acceptance of the preconceptions of a single class may doom a priesthood to corporate sterility it has never been incompatible with individual sanctity. Even in their abrupt contrast the writings of Hieronymus Jaegen provide an instance. He came from a clearly defined milieu, he had been a deputy to the *Landstag* and a banker in the Moselle Valley when he died in 1921. He belonged markedly to

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his class and time. It is only through the sincerity of his own mystical experience that he chances to escape sporadically from the clogging influence of a single school; the intricate subdivisions, the conception of mysticism as a freak and contemplation as an abnormality, of levitations, ecstasies and locutions as phenomena of intrinsic interest. Perhaps the relation of the lay contemplative to the inadequate theologian is the ultimate *trahison des clercs*.

Seen in such perspective the *Mystique* of M. Hermans remains ultimately unsatisfying. It is a series of essays in the school of Bremond marked by delicate perceptions and intelligent phantasy. The studies of the Rhineland school and of Berulle have an especial charm. But to our own problems they are barely relevant. It is not enough merely to escape from the artificial flowers of 19th century French devotion and the waste lands of hagiography. Our need is for a direct return to the two central traditions of Catholic spirituality; the urgent practical wisdom of St. Gregory and the speculative vision of St. Thomas and of the Dionysian-Augustinian schools. In these last months we have had Dom Wilmart's edition of the mordant aphorisms of Guigue's *Le Chartreux*, the epigrammatist among medieval Gregorians, and the *Meditations* of Bishop Prohászka, whose devout discursive thought maintained the traditions of the homilies in 20th century Hungary. But the tradition that should be its complement is barely represented and practical advice without speculative vision will never free us from those smug pigeon holes in which we crowd. It is only vision which can bring with it the shattering of our content and the passion to be alone with the Alone.

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NOTICES

CHRISTIAN MORALS. By the Very Revd. M. C. D'Arcy, S.J. (Longmans; 5s.)

The pre-war guide to conduct was too often an uneasy combination of a residue of Christian principle with a collection of non-Christian and often enough anti-Christian conventions. The post-war world has rebelled against the irrationality of much of this amalgam; but in doing so it has failed to distinguish: "rational principles are confused with Victorian conventions, and it is assumed without question by many writers to the Press and by novelists that moral convictions are bound to be relative and based on feeling." If the Christian position is to be argued, therefore, we must first begin with this distinction, endeavour to show the absolute value of the principles which form the natural basis of the Christian moral system. This task Fr. D'Arcy has set