

## *Faith and Heresy*

by Geoffrey Webb

In an age when people ask whether God is better visualised as 'up there' or 'in here', it could be relevant to recall the medieval and Augustinian approach, which claimed that the best way to think of God was necessarily as that on which the intellectual structure of man is modelled – *mens, notitia, amor* or even *memoria, intellectus, voluntas*. In other words, the Trinity. For if a Christian holds in the first place that man is made in the image and likeness of his creator, then one can speculate about the original on the basis of the copy. 'For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine Tablet said.'

The traditional formula still had validity in the period of William of Saint Thierry because man was even then conceived as being sympathetically in accord with the universe around him, and with God. A divine quaternity related him to the four elements, the four humours, and so on, and divine trinity, in the same way, related him to the nature and the persons of God. It was apparently not difficult for twelfth century people to see themselves as part of the landscape, in an almost Chinese sense, nor was it difficult for them to see themselves as involved in the matter of God, 'as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin'.

We have already considered William's treatment of the vindication, as he calls it, of the three faculties of man by the three persons of the Trinity,<sup>1</sup> memory, reason and will, each being taken as his own by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit respectively. In the *Mirror of Faith*, the work of William's maturity, he introduces a further 'little trinity' in the three theological virtues, whose inseparability reflects the unity of the divine nature.

'There are many good gifts by means of which our Lord and God has decreed to save us, but, as Saint Paul says, there are three that remain, and these are faith, hope and charity. Now the reason why they are said to remain is because they are a permanent trinity in the souls of the faithful, placed there by the blessed Trinity as its own image and likeness. This is the image in which our inner man is constantly renewed, our little trinity becoming, through God's grace, ever more like the great Trinity which is its model . . .'

'Our trinity of virtues resembles its great model in that these three are so connected and conjoined that each is in all, and all in each. The object of faith is the object of hope and charity. The measure

<sup>1</sup>William IV. *The Cistercian Memoria*. January 1966.

of faith, and the quality of faith, are likewise the measure and quality of charity.'

This is the essential point in his conception, the fact that no one theological virtue can be considered in separation from the others. 'Faith begets hope, and charity proceeds from faith and hope. Just as the three divine persons share the same divine nature and are co-eternal, so faith, hope and charity are not in any sense prior to one another, since they are substantially one'.

William's *Mirror of Faith* would seem to have been written for the Carthusians of Mont Dieu, the same admired community who received the *Golden Epistle*, as a soothing remedy after the shattering experience of reading Abelard. The idea and the purpose of Abelard were not new, but his exposition was, and it seems to have made the brethren of Mont Dieu feel that they had never understood the faith aright. One can imagine without difficulty the kind of pain that William would feel at seeing this kind of distress caused unnecessarily. Perhaps this was the reason why his dislike of Abelard caused him to misrepresent the great man's thought, and why he was so intent on getting Bernard to silence him once for all. For William, who was of the mental stature to appreciate Abelard, to misquote him so outrageously would make sense if he felt that destructive cleverness deserved no mercy.

For the Carthusians of Mont Dieu, and for so many others whose whole life was given to God, faith was not something that you isolated and analysed, even though such analysis in isolation could obviously be very useful. Faith, for William's ideal religious, was part of a total experience of God, that always required faith, hope and charity in a close harmony. That was the first point. The second point of the *Mirror* aimed more closely at Abelard as a person, on the matter of humility. Abelard insisted, rightly enough, that faith must be reasonable because reason is our only guide. God respects human reason because he made it. The *logos* is God's reasonable speech to mankind. But reason for William was something a little more old fashioned, good if it took its cue from faith, and bad if it opposed it – the simple *credo ut intelligam*. The humble submission of man's mind to God, and to the gift of faith, meant accepting and trusting completely the goodness of God – the total submission of unquestioning love.

William's conviction was that the only people who really knew about faith were God's true lovers, however simple they might be intellectually, for they had made the hard apprenticeship. The initial stages of loving and believing have the same rather detached, arid feeling about them for the Cistercian authors who, as novices, had done what must be done because it had to be done, not because they wanted to do it. The believer accepts the facts of faith, not because he loves them but because he realises they are necessary. Then later, 'when charity is at work in the soul, it is sweeter and

surer than all human affection, for the Spirit is there present, giving undeniable witness that . . . the soul has become a child of grace, a child of God'.

William often returns to this convincing interior witness of the spirit, the *conscientia*, best translated perhaps as a consciousness, an awareness that the Holy Spirit is truly present in the soul, effectively at work, and making himself felt. He is a someone, whose reality leaves a Christian in no possible doubt of his presence. And it seemed a tragic thing that monks who had such a true awareness of the Spirit should be beset by foolish doubts, and above all by one who could have learned so much from them.

Faith, said Abelard with justice, was often used as a cloak for apathy and mental laziness – the mentality of 'You're not supposed to understand it, it's a mystery!'. But a mystery was not, he rightly claimed, beyond some kind of mental grasp, made possible by faith. Faith was meant to take you deeply into the mystery, it was a vehicle *into* truth, a deeper dimension of truth. And on this point William could agree entirely, for this was true 'of those simple souls who are God's privileged friends, who have a special grace of simplicity bestowed on them from above. It is precisely these, in fact, who do possess the faith that their heavenly father reveals to them in silence, over and above the faith that flesh and blood reveal'.

The 'mystery of mysteries' for William, *omnium sacramentorum sacramentum*, is the Holy Spirit, the divine will in person, who reveals himself to the soul that he makes his own. The *conscientia* that he speaks of, our awareness of the Spirit's presence, is a joint knowledge according to the etymology of the word, and thus a knowing together with the Spirit. It has the same connotations of close cooperation with the Spirit that we find in William's use of *consensus*,<sup>2</sup> defining exactly how two can act together so inseparably as one that is impossible to analyse the function of each independently.

There are three principal stages that are singled out in the *Mirror* to emphasize the growing cooperation of the Holy Spirit with faith. William gives a detailed development on doubt, to start with, to show how the Spirit is piloting the soul into deeper and deeper dimensions of understanding all the while. Then comes a vivid moment when, at the end of the labyrinth, a Christian 'stumbles into the radiant presence of his Mediator with God, who is himself both God and man' . . . 'He is the image of the invisible God. The soul that contemplates him realises the greatness of his goodness in taking flesh for our sake. It perceives the great power of his divinity for he is God. It experiences within itself the glory of God's grace, and being united to Christ, finds itself made one with the divine image of the Father in the Son'.

At this stage of course, it is almost impossible to say exactly how much one is talking about faith, how much about love. The ex-

<sup>2</sup>The Transformation Theme. *New Blackfriars*, October 1965.

perience in question is such a spectrum that one would falsify William's purpose if one suggested that now love takes over and leaves faith behind. This, after all, is the familiar encounter of the Song of Songs, the bride and the bridegroom, the *dulcis memoria*. It is an anticipation of eternity, and faith is already moving towards clear vision. Nonetheless it is still faith, but a faith so transfused with love as to be a world removed from the first steps with their doubtful dreads.

The third stage is not, as one might have expected, the end of the development. It is really only the beginning, a blissful vision that will give strength and serenity for the unexciting years that lie ahead, the raw material with which our salvation is worked out. William's intuition of beatitude, now and hereafter, is to find himself in a central point inside the divine triangle, an extravagantly satisfying conception that leaves nothing to be desired. The Holy Spirit is the mutual embrace of Father and Son. 'All men, if they have one heart and soul in God, are made one spirit with God, when heart and soul live in the unity of the Trinity, the source of all charity'.

Although the *Mirror of Faith* considers its subject from the point of view of the individual, there is always sure to be an implicit reference to the life of the community. The *processus conversationis et fidei* that Saint Benedict's prologue speaks of, a combined progress in monastic life and faith, shows the intimate connection which, for William, is enhanced by his sight of God's face in the faces of the pure in heart. To be embraced in the midst of the Trinity, and in the midst of the community, are experiences that reflect one another. People – even Saint Thomas – have wondered how William could seriously suggest that one might achieve a point of perfection at which the possibility of sin was no longer a problem. Perhaps it was because the double experience of Trinity and community had made his love an ever fixed mark. Or to put it more simply still, a Christian can't be an agnostic, because he knows whom he loves.

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