

# III ECUMENISMO ESPIRITUAL

## THE ENGLISH MYSTICAL TRADITION

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When great church traditions meet as in the Ecumenical movement, to discover each other's beliefs, they necessarily face those things which divide them, and their essential differences. But it is the things held in common, and the discovery that so much is held in common which draw us together in friendship and understanding. Of all this common ground, prayer, the face to face encounter with God, is the greatest. It is by studying prayer and praying together that we shall be drawn into a living fellowship and lead on to unity. As we pray together so we shall find God in each other, and each

other in God. It is for this reason that the topic chosen was "The English Mystical Tradition". Spirituality is the concern of all Christians, and the great mystics are our common heritage.

Every country has its outstanding figures in the field of spirituality. Often there have been peak periods, sudden flowerings of the contemplative life, the emergence of spiritual giants who have lived on, timeless figures whose greatness is never exhausted by succeeding generations.

Such a period occurred in Spain in the 15th and 16th centuries, with St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila as the key figures. Such a period had occurred in England in the 14th century, roughly 200 years before. The effect of the mystical writers of this period in England has been a double one. They laid the foundation of English literary style, and they have continued to influence the spirituality of England for the last 700 years. They are the spiritual heritage of both Catholic and Anglican.

But before we begin to speak of the English Mystical tradition we must say something of mysticism itself, and in particular of Christian mysticism.

The mystic is often regarded as a strange being divorced from the rest of us, graced with unique powers and living in a semi-dream world, irrelevant to ordinary life.

Yet in history the great mystics have frequently been men and women of affairs. They have had a strength of purpose, a creative capacity and a fund of compassion which have swept them into the position of leaders at critical times in history. St Bernard, St Catherine of Siena, and St Teresa of Avila: whatever else they were, they were very human and convincingly practical! For each of these figures this life of action was the end term of a long process of growth in the knowledge and love of God. Richard of St Victor summarises the process in the words of "The four degrees of passionate charity".

"In the first degree God enters into the soul and she turns inward into herself. In the second she ascends above herself and is lifted up to God. In the third the soul, lifted up to

God, passes over altogether into Him. In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends below herself."

This flow and return of the soul between Creator and creation is certainly a characteristic of Christian mysticism. It is perhaps the one characteristic which divides off surely from non-Christian mystical experience. It can only be explained by the truths of Christianity itself. For the Christian, as for Christ, union with God necessarily means union with his fellows.

By any standards the mystic is a great man, set up as a leader. He is a man whose function it is to communicate to others knowledge of God and of His ways. The Christian mystic has received from God a specific vocation —to be a teacher of others in the ways of prayer, and of charity. He is a disciple of love - love which is necessarily twofold: - love of God and of one's neighbour. The mystic is an expert in the art of communication - communication of the knowledge which he has of God's love. For this reason many mystics have been seers and prophets.

And following the path set by the mystic there is always an unknown multitude of ordinary men and women. They are the contemplatives whose hidden lives follow the same path of prayer and dedication. They are souls whose hiddenness is a vocation as surely as leadership is the way God chooses for the mystics who are their guides. We should not equate the mystic and the contemplative.

It is a mark of the mystic that what he has to say comes not from reason and study and high intelligence but from his living experience of God in his own soul. The mystic does not tell us what he *thinks* about God, but what he *knows*, what he himself has seen of the transcendent splendour of the Trinity. When he speaks of God he has a power to convince, to touch our own depths:

"...the study of the mystics, the keeping company however humbly with their minds, brings with it... a strange exhilaration, as if we were brought near to some mighty source of Being, were at last on the verge of the secret which all seek. 'All mystics speak the same language, for they come from the

same country'. The deep undying life within us came from that country too: and it recognizes the accents of home, though it cannot always understand what they would say". This, Evelyn Underhill comments, is itself one of the greatest proofs we possess of the reality of the experience.

What is the mystic trying to tell us? He often speaks in paradox - God is on one hand the utterly unknowable, the Alone, the Wholly - Other. On the other hand, he may be the Bridegroom, the spouse, the Beloved. The Omnipotent God is the object and origin of an intimate and personal love, and this love - relationship is fore-shadowed by the highest of human love. These two aspects of the human divine relationship thread their way through the writings of all the mystics.

A second common paradox is that of light and dark. Some mystics approach the Unknowable through a darkness that is luminous, some approach the Lovable through the same dark. Always, at some period in their experience, the mystics enter a phase where the light of God creates in the soul a darkness that is alternately a blind, consuming agony and an inexplicable love. From this love comes the knowledge that translates into faith, hope and charity. Every mystic passes along this way of dark negation.

"But now you will ask me, 'How am I to think of God Himself, and what is He?' and I cannot answer you except to say 'I do not know!' For with this question you have brought me into the same darkness, the same cloud of unknowing where I want you to be! For though we through the grace of God can know fully about all other matters, and think about them - yes, even the very works of God - yet of God Himself can no man think. Therefore I will leave on one side everything I can think, and choose for my love that thing which I cannot think. Why? Because he may well be loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking never... Strike that thick cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing love, and on no account whatever think of giving up." (14th Century anonymous writer of "The Cloud of Unknowing").

Here, in one of the greatest of our English mystics, is expression of the *via negativa* - God the Unknowable. But the

Cloud of Unknowing is characteristically English also, it its balancing of the Unknowable with the lovable - "I choose for my love that which I cannot think."

A modern English contemplative has expressed the same experience. "What was that all about?" he was asked at the end of his prayer. - "If I knew what it was, it wouldn't be what it is," was the reply. But the same person could pray constantly: "Ah fair sweet Lord, Ah fairest, sweetest, dearest!"

The human being comes to know truths through various channels. There are truths which he knows by instinct, there are those he learns through the senses and there are abstract ideas which he learns through the intellect. For the mystic all these faculties are in action outside the time of prayer, and in the early stages of the search for God. But pure Mystical knowledge does not come by any process of experiment or reasoning. It is a knowledge given by God to that part of the soul which some call the "loving will". Intellectual knowledge and the loving will are not the same thing at all, and it is with the latter that the experience of the mystic is concerned. It is only through this faculty that such revelations as the following occur, recorded by Dame Julian of Norwich, a 14th century solitary with a profound sense of personal relationship to Christ.

"Our Lord Jesus oftentimes said: It is I, It is I, I am that which is highest, I am that which you love, I am that which you enjoy, I am that which you serve, I am that which you desire, I am that for which you long, I am that which you mean, I am that which is all. I am that which Holy Church preaches and teaches to thee. It is I who showed myself here to you."

Along these two roads of unknowing and of loving the mystic goes his way to God. Sometimes it is the blind unknowing which prevails, sometimes it is the inexpressible agony of love. Both experiences catch hold upon the human will and unite it by imperceptible degrees with the will of God, until, in effect, there are not two wills but one. Then the soul can say with St Paul - "Not I, but Christ lives in me", or with Ruysbroeck - "There are we all with God, without distinction, beatitude infinite and simple. There are we lost, drowned and liquefied into an unknown darkness."

John of the Cross:

*Oh night that was my guide  
Oh darkness dearer than the morning pride  
Oh night that joined the lover  
To the beloved bride  
Transfiguring them each into the other.*

The loving will and its journey towards God, is the key to the mystic life. The mystic way is a way of the will, an increasing conformity of the human will to the divine. It is a reliving of the life of God Himself in Jesus Christ.

"I have come from heaven not to do my own will, but to do the will of the one who sent me". (John 6: 38).

And in His agony at Gethsemani and in the Crucifixion, "He learnt obedience by the things that He suffered."

All true mystics correspond with Christ in a more visible way too. A life linked to God is inevitably given to all men in loving service by the road of suffering. "...the soul goes forth on God's behalf".

The loving will. Within the Trinity the Divine Will is in perfect harmony with itself. From this Divine Will proceeds the Incarnate Christ within whose being the Divine and human wills were exercised in perfect harmony as one Will. This conformity of the human will to the Divine was the essence of His perfection the perfect offering to God which brought about our redemption.

Within the Trinity the unity of will is substantial, of its very nature: within the incarnate Christ the begotten will of the Son of Man lives in perfect harmony with the uncreated will of the Son of God: the two are one by virtue of the hypostatic union between godhead and manhood.

In fallen man our will is prone to variance from the will of God. It is united to Him only by Grace, itself the gift of God. Ours is a will which has been marred, its functioning deformed by sin, its freedom restricted by earthly passions. We are at war with ourselves. As the "Cloud of Unknowing" puts it we are "Sin in the lump".

It is the vocation of the mystic to point the way to union with the will of God, by grace. He shows us also the slow

purification of our will to that end and the developing relationship with God. The mystic way is a way of increasing wholeness, a restoration of true personality, until we become whole men. Only then do we live in the whole Christ, one with the will of God. Yet our union with God is a union by grace. It is neither begotten nor uncreate. It is not forced upon us, but requires that we turn freely to God that God may have His will with us.

“Your whole life now must be one of longing, if you are to achieve perfection. And this longing must be in the depths of your will, put there by God, with your consent. But a word of warning: he is a jealous lover, and will brook no rival; He will not work in your will if He has not sole charge; He does not ask for help, He asks for you. His will is that you should look at Him, and let Him have His way... lay hold of God then, and see how you fare. God is ready when you are and is waiting for you.” (“The Cloud of Unknowing” Chapter II).

God woos the soul which lovingly responds and gradually there is established a mutual bond which unites the two wills in one creative purpose: —Here is a contemporary expression of that experience:

*Thy will and mine therein, O Lord,  
not my desires,  
for my will is caught in Thine  
as a strand within the rope.*

The Mystic is one for whom God is the supreme and abiding experience, the ground of his being and the object of his love.

In order to attain union with this beloved, the mystic lays himself open to the divine activity within his soul, to purification and enlightenment, to the searing pain of love and the darkness of self-knowledge. In this process he quickly discovers that his prayer is not primarily his own action but the activity of God within him, an activity to which he is invited to respond, and an activity which slowly, by clearly defined stages, restores the wholeness of man made in the image of God, destroying overt sin and the roots of deviant desires.

As he travels the road of self-knowledge, so also the mystic approaches closer to God and finds himself lost in the bliss of this divine relationship. There is, for him, an alternation between knowledge of self and knowledge of God, he is thrown from the one to the other in an ever increasing intensity of experience, now drowned in the misery of self, now absorbed in the experience of God. Each experience of one leads to new knowledge of the other, until finally through a dark tunnel of willed and loving response he emerges into a knowledge of God as one with himself, and a mastery of self as one with God. It is a state of being wherein is no disunity, no disorder, no separation between man as image and God as origin. Few attain on earth to this consummation of their lives, those who do, emerge as beacons on the road for others.

It is to the two great Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century that the Western world owes its understanding and interpretation of this pathway to God - to St John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. I do not need to outline the classical stages they describe - the Purgative way, the Illuminative and finally the Unitive way, culminating in the marriage between heaven and earth within the human soul. Their interpretation of the stages through which the soul passes on its way to God has never been seriously challenged and never bettered in later centuries - They in their turn owed something to those who had gone before, in particular to Dionysius the Areopagite and to Richard of St Victor who, though not an Englishman, was at least as close to our shores as Scotland or Ireland.

But though we have to wait until the sixteenth century before we find a scientific analysis of the mystic way, yet this way existed before, and because it is necessarily the same way in any time and place we can see in the lives of earlier mystics the stages of development which St John and St Teresa describe. In the same way, we can find evidence of the same experiences in more modern contemplatives who have not necessarily studied the classical writers. The mystic way is God's way, the way by which He leads a soul to perfection for His own purposes. Therefore it is a universal way and recognisable wherever it occurs.

Two hundred years before the great Spaniards, there was a sudden flowering of mysticism in England. These fourteenth

century writers are outstanding for more than one reason. Firstly they represent a literary triumph, the first great classics of the English language, preceding even Chaucer; Secondly they are themselves great contemplatives, and finally they have proved to be major influences upon the spirituality of England.

The first of these, and the most lyrical, is Richard Rolle, during the middle ages by far the most widely known of the English spiritual writers. He lived around 1300-1349. Educated at Oxford and perhaps in Paris, he was mystic poet, wandering preacher and recluse. His experience appears to be somewhat atypical, or else he only speaks of one phase or aspect of his mystical experience. For him God is heat, sweetness and song, an experience which appears to have little in common with the Divine darkness which overwhelms most mystics. His voluminous writings are still mostly in manuscript and await the attention of scholars. "In the beginning truly of my conversion and singular purpose, I thought I would be like the little bird that for love of her lover longs, but in her longing she is gladdened when he comes that she loves. And joying she sings, and singing she longs, but in sweetness and heat. It is said the nightingale to song and melody all night is given, that she may please him to whom she is joined. How much more with greatest sweetness to Christ my Jesus should I sing that is spouse of my soul by all this present life, that is night in regard of clearness to come.

(The Fire of Love. Bk. 11 Ch XII).

The second group of work is anonymous and was written between 1349 and 1395, as we can gather by interior evidence. The major work by this author is the "Cloud of Unknowing". This owes much to the early Pseudo-Dionysius and again, much to Richard of St Victor, but it has the stamp of a great mind and a great originality. There is about the book an assurance that comes only of personal knowledge and there are traces of an outline of the mystic way similar to the work of St John and St Teresa. In fact, as one compares some of the chapters of the "Cloud of Unknowing" with St John's description of the Night of the Spirit one is forced to ask whether St John knew this work and in some measure made use of it. The book was the standard spiritual classic in England when the reformation scattered the religious communities.

We know that the monks took it with them to Flanders where it had a major influence upon Augustine Baker and Dame Gertrude More. Did it also find its way into Spain, perhaps with the Benedictines who settled at Valladolid at San Benito el Real? There is an interesting enquiry to pursue.

The next work, historically, is the "Scale of Perfection" by Walter Hilton who died in 1396. Circulated for over a century in manuscript it was first printed in 1494 and thereafter became one of the favourite religious works read by the laity. This is really a work of spiritual direction and a most competent one, written by a man who was himself an advanced contemplative. It lacks the ordered scientific precision of a St John of the Cross, but develops the theme of perfection, in terms of a pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem. "Spiritually interpreted", says Hilton, "Jerusalem is the vision of peace and symbolises contemplation in the perfect love of God. For contemplation is nothing other than the vision of Jesus, who is our true Peace... If you really wish to make swift and substantial progress along this road to Jerusalem you must constantly bear in mind two things, humility and love. That is, I am nothing, and I want only one thing. Fix the true meaning of these words permanently in your subconscious mind and purpose, so that they will guide you even when you are not thinking of them. Humility says, 'I am nothing, I have nothing,' Love says, 'I desire one thing only, which is Jesus'. When deftly touched by the finger of reason, these two strings, secured by the thought of Jesus, make sweet harmony on the harp of the soul, for the lower you strike on one, the higher the sound on the other".

This little group of fourteenth century writers stands out in England as the fifteenth century group stands out in Spain. Taken together, they show all the characteristics of true mysticism which are later to be schematised by St John. Richard Rolle seems to exemplify the Illuminate way continued in his case for almost a lifetime; the "Cloud of Unknowing" leads us into that untranslatable darkness of the Night of Senses and the Night of the Spirit, to which St John devotes so much of his work. Finally in Dame Julian we have a vivid account of an experience which would appear to be that of the Betrothal, the entry into the Unitive life.

Dame Julian's "Revelations of Divine Love" is perhaps the most beautiful of all the fourteenth century English mystical works. She lived from 1343 to around 1413 and was possibly directed by Walter Hilton. These "Revelations" are the most homogeneous of all the works of the four writers, for they are centred upon one vivid visionary experience which Dame Julian had at the age of thirty, when she lay in danger of death. The visions lasted for five hours, succeeding one another, and were followed by one more the following night. Several were concerned with the sufferings of Our Lord during His passion. For twenty years Dame Julian pondered upon these visions and the insights which came to her as a result of them. While it is the "Cloud of Unknowing which has proved to be the spiritual classic 'guidebook', yet this most beautiful book of Dame Julian's is perhaps more interesting as a spiritual testament. It is a unique document in any language. For this reason we shall look at it now, rather than speaking general terms on the whole group of books.

One great interest of this book lies in the clarity with which Dame Julian describes not only the vision themselves but the insights which developed over the years. These insights have all the characteristics of the Unitive Way as it progresses towards full union with God. It is instructive also that, although she speaks but briefly of her life and spirituality before this event, nevertheless in few words, she outlines the conditions which must necessarily precede this unitive experience. Again, Dame Julian is perfectly clear that her experiences are given not for herself, but for others, that they may better understand God's way with the Christian soul. If one analyses her teaching, it becomes clear that here, within the framework of vision and its interpretation, we have spread out before us the whole spiritual development from conversion to union which was later schematised by the the Spanish mystics. Dame Julian describes a subjective experience, speaks of the insights that God gave her, and seems to do little more, but in that telling she teaches all that a contemplative soul needs to know and describes accurately the stages of contemplative growth. As a document which comes out of the unitive experience of the Love of God, the "Revelations of Divine Love" seem to rank with the "Spiritual Cantic" of St John, or the works of Ruysbroeck.

Dame Julian has a charming simplicity which is deceptive. In concise words she expresses profound truths. Take, as an example, the little thing she saw as a hazel-nut in the palm of her hand, as round as a ball:

"I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought - 'What is it?' and I was answered 'It is all that is made'. I marvelled how this could be, for I thought that it might suddenly have fallen apart for littleness. And I was answered: 'It lasts and ever will last because God loves it.' And so everything has being by the love of God."

She goes on: - "In this little thing I saw three properties: God made it, God loves it, God keeps it. But what is the Maker, the Keeper and the Lover? - this I cannot tell, for until I am substantially united to Him I can never have full rest nor true happiness: that is to say until I am so united to Him that there is absolutely nothing created between me and my God."

"And our Lord God showed me that it is the greatest possible joy to Him that a helpless soul comes to Him simply and plainly and naturally. For this is the true yearning of the soul, by the touching of the Holy Ghost, as I understood from this vision - "God, of Thy goodness give me Thyself; for Thou art enough for me and I can ask nothing less that could be full worship of thee; and if I ask anything less, I am forever the poorer, - but only in Thee have I all."

Or again, let Julian repeat the words she heard Our Lord utter: - "All shall be well. You shall see for yourself that all manner of thing shall be well. I may make all things well, I can make all things well. I will make all things well, and I shall make all things well; and you shall see yourself that all manner of thing shall be well."

There is a robust naturalness about Dame Julian which appeals to us in this modern world. She has no illusions about herself or others, yet a profound trust in God's ability to overcome our weaknesses:

"After this Our Lord showed me about Prayer. I saw two conditions, one is rightness, the other sure trust. But often our trust is not complete, for we are not sure that God hears us, as we think because of our unworthiness and because we

feel absolutely small - for we are often barren and dry after our prayers as we were before, and this, in our feeling of our own helplessness, is a cause of our weakness. I have felt like this myself. All this Our Lord suddenly brought to my mind and showed these words: - 'I am the ground of your petition: first it is my will that you should have it and after, I make you ask for it, then I make you beg for it and you beg. How, then, could it be that you would not have your request granted?'

Nevertheless, despite her confidence in God's willingness to answer our prayers, Julian is under no illusion that all is heat and sweetness and light.

"Pray inwardly, though you feel no pleasure in it; for it is profitable though you feel nothing, though you see nothing: yes even though you think you cannot do it. For in dryness and in barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then is your prayer well-pleasing to Me, though you think it profits you but little. And so is all your trusting prayer in my sight."

It has been said that the English traditional spirituality has a strong leaning to speculative theology. There is also the possibility that it may be *infused* theology. St Paul learnt his theology from no man, but from the Lord. So, perhaps, have many mystics - in fact part of their vocation lies precisely in this field: - they are there to break new theological ground, to lay bare some of the fallacies into which we have fallen by logistics, by a steady adherence to juridical and scholastic methods in the face of charity, or even of common sense! They are there also, to re-orientate the church when she is in danger of losing her single-pointed love of Our Lord. They are there to warn us of the results of any lack of charity, any harsh judgements, any proud adherence to our own points of view, the results of our self-willed acts. They are there to remind us that the church is always and everywhere one, and should be a witness to it. She is potentially without spot or wrinkle, but marred too often by failures and divisions.

All these aspects of the mystic vocation are present in Dame Julian: so much so, that one is tempted to think that she might become the patron saint of ecumenists.

In the fourteenth century, Wyclif gave the English the first vernacular Bible. At the same time the movement called

Lollardy centred about Wyclif. The movement foreshadowed many of the Reformation ideas. It was vigorously preached by lay preachers and even more vigorously put down by ecclesiastical authorities. Dame Julian, Walter Hilton, Margery Kempe and perhaps even the author of the "Cloud of Unknowing" were living in the thick of the controversy. Walter Hilton may have been one of those who were called upon to deal with the situation, to examine the 'heretics' and to suppress their works. His reaction to heresy is what one might expect in a period following so closely upon the famous bull "Unam Sanctam" of 1302 - he assumes that the heretics are damned.

But Dame Julian finds herself caught on the horns of a dilemma. She is a loyal daughter of her church, and therefore accepts its teaching: but at the same time, in the face of her vision of God's goodness, she cannot accept the idea of everlasting damnation. She saw God's love extended even to the heretics: - after what she has learnt of God in her visions, she cannot see how He can hate anyone. She is extremely cautious and correct, and constantly bows to the teaching of Holy Church, but somehow one feels that she is quietly, yet persistently pointing out that something is wrong somewhere.

What has happened to her? She has been given an infused knowledge of the love of God and of its meaning. Against this background she asks, promptly, one pertinent question - 'What then is sin?' ... "at this time the works of creatures were not showed to me, but the works of Our Lord God in the creatures: for He is the mid-point of all things, and He does all. And I was certain that He does no sin."

Dame Julian struggled with this little problem for twenty years. Equally she struggled with her conviction that all should be saved - though she carefully qualifies this, "all those who are in God's mind to be saved" - she has no mind to be condemned by Holy Church!

Listen, for a moment, to the lines of this struggle and ask yourself whether it is not today, a living issue - listen, and marvel that in the fourteenth a woman could write thus:

"When Adam fell, God's Son fell: because of the perfect union which had been made in heaven, God's Son might not be separated from Adam, by whom I understand All-man.

Adam fell from life to death, into the deep of this wretched world, and after that into hell: God's Son fell with Adam, into the deep of the Maiden's womb, who was the fairest daughter of Adam; and for this end: to excuse Adam from blame in heaven and in earth: and mightily He fetched him out of Hell... And thus has our good Lord Jesus taken upon Him all our blame, and therefore our Father neither may nor will assign more blame to us than to His own Son, the beloved Christ."

So she sees this redemptive action of Christ as affecting us all: but then she is faced with the face that: "Our faith is grounded in God's word, and it belongs to our Faith that we believe that God's word shall be safeguarded always. One point of our Faith is that many creatures shall becondemned... And since this is so, I wondered how it was possible that all manner of things should be well, as Our Lord had showed me at that time. As to this I had no other answer in the visions and sayings of Our Lord God but this: - 'That which is impossible to you is not impossible to me: I shall save my word in all things and I shall make all things well.'"

Throughout the ages God has sent mystics to show where we should be going, how we should treat our fellows, how we should walk the path of perfection towards union with Him. If only we would take to heart the words with which Dame Julian closes her meditation of more than twenty years:

"I desired often to learn what was our Lord's meaning in all this and fifteen years after I was answered: - 'Would you learn you Lord's meaning in this thing?' Learn it well: Love was His meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did He show? Love. Why did He show it? For Love. Hold fast to this and you shall learn and know more, but you will never know or learn in this vision any other thing at any time.' And so I saw with clarity that before God made us He loved us: which love was never lessened nor ever will be. And in this love He has done all His works, and in this love He has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our making we had beginning: but the love wherein He made us was in Him from without beginning: in which love we have our beginning. And all this we shall see in God without end."

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