

WESTERN MYSTICISM

THE TEACHING OF
SS. AUGUSTINE, GREGORY
AND BERNARD

ON CONTEMPLATION *and the*
CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Neglected Chapters in the History of Religion



By **DOM CUTHBERT BUTLER**

Benedictine Monk of Downside Abbey

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The purpose of *Western Mysticism* is to set forth, in their own words, as a co-ordinated body of doctrine, what three great teachers of mystical theology in the Western Church have left on record concerning their own religious experience, and the theories they based on it.

The utterances of SS. Augustine, Gregory and Bernard, three of the great religious geniuses of Western Christianity, are such that the reader's attention may be quickly captured by the elevation, the eloquence, and the compelling fascination of the words wherein they lay bare the most intimate and sacred relations of their souls with God.

Western Mysticism is illuminating testimony to the validity of the mystics' claim, embodying also a doctrine at once elevated, sane and practical.

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DOM CUTHBERT BUTLER

WESTERN MYSTICISM

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the contact of pure substances—that is, of the soul and the Divinity (*Canticle*, stanza xix. 3).

A most sublime and sweet knowledge of God and of His attributes overflows into the understanding of the contact of the attributes of God with the soul (*ibid.* xiv. 16).

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and holy liquefaction, and quits herself, not only to be united to the well-Beloved, but to be entirely mingled with and steeped in Him. The outflowing of a soul into her God is a true ecstasy, by which the soul quite transcends the limits of her natural way of existence, being wholly mingled with, absorbed and engulfed in, her God (*ibid.* vi. 12).

FR AUGUSTINE BAKER, *English Benedictine*, died 1641

Mystic writers do teach that the proper end of a contemplative life is the attaining unto an habitual and almost uninterrupted perfect union with God in the supreme point of the spirit; and such a union as gives the soul a fruitive possession of Him, and a real experimental perception of His divine presence in the depth and centre of the spirit, which is fully possessed and filled with Him alone. The effects of this blessed perceptible presence of God in perfect souls are unspeakable and divine. ... They become after an

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- 1) *St. Cassian of Arles*
- 2) *St. Paulinus of Nola*
- 3) *St. Martin of Tours*
- 4) *St. Anthony*
- 5) *Cassian*
- 6) *Palacchini*
- 7) *Rufinus*

In the contemplation of God is the end of all good actions, and everlasting rest, and joy that never will be taken from us (*ibid.* i. 20).

That vision of God whereby we shall contemplate the unchangeable and to human eyes invisible Substance of God, alone is our summum bonum, for the attaining to which we are commanded to do whatever we rightly do (*ibid.* i. 31).

The contemplation of God will be the highest reward of the saints (*ibid.* xii. 22).

(2) *Though Contemplation really belongs to the next life, in this life some beginnings of it are possible, some passing glimpses or intuitions of divine things.*

Thus he says: Contemplation is only begun in this life, to be perfected in the next (*Tract. in Ioan.* cxxiv. 5).

Even in this life our soul hungers and thirsts for God, and we can find real satisfaction only in Him. This truth is enunciated in St Augustine's celebrated formulation of what may be called the Great Mystic Postulate: Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it rest in Thee (*Conf.* i. 1).

A. PRELIMINARY PHASES

(3) *The Remote Preparation for Contemplation lies in the Purification of the Soul.*

For Augustine, as for all true mystics, the indispensable condition of contemplation is such a purification of the soul as will render it fit for the ascent to the contemplation of God: a purification which is the result of a long process of self-denial and self-conquest, of mortification and the practice of virtue—in short, asceticism in the broad and full meaning of the word, viz. 'training'.

This is the teaching, for instance, of Cassian, who divides spiritual knowledge into two branches: *practical*, which consists in the elimination of faults and acquiring of virtues; and *theoretic*, which consists in the contemplation of divine things. There is no arriving at contemplation without a serious pursuit of practical discipline—asceticism—for 'in vain does one strive for the vision of God, who does not shun the stains of sin' (*Coll.* xiv. 1, 2). And so, in such a book as Fr Augustine Baker's *Sancta Sophia*, being 'Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation,' the section of Mortification, conceived identically with Cassian's practical discipline, occupies nearly as much space as that of Prayer. This truth is asserted, too, in the classical division of the spiritual life into the three phases of Purgation, Illumination, and Union, the first being that process of self-

to contemplation are for the most part intellectual in idea and in language, sometimes being frankly Plotinian. Western mystics commonly represent contemplation as attained to by and in absorption in prayer; but for Augustine it seems to have been primarily an intellectual process—informed, indeed, by intense religious warmth, but still primarily intellectual. It is the search for Something not subject to change, that leads the soul up to God, and it is represented as a great effort of intellect and will. This is very interesting and valuable; especially as it will be shown in the sequel that the religious experience described by Augustine as the culmination of these efforts, was, without any doubt, identical in kind with those described by the later mystics.

C. THE ACT OF CONTEMPLATION

Some of the principal descriptions of the Act of Contemplation have already been cited, but there are many others throughout the writings of Augustine. His characterizations are of quite unusual interest and value, from the vivid autobiographical, and therefore convincing, character of so many of them; from the intellectual and philosophical acumen of him who experienced them; and from the lofty eloquence with which they are related. Their many-sidedness, too, is a most noteworthy feature: he uses every sort of conception, intellectual and symbolic, as the vehicle for expressing the intimate relations into which his soul came with God. It seems that these efforts of him who was undoubtedly, on the whole, the greatest religious genius in Western Christianity, to express his highest religious experiences, must be worthy of careful study. A detailed analysis of all these passages, so far as I have been able to collect them, will therefore be made, and in the most important cases the actual Latin words will be given in the footnotes. The statements will be grouped according to the idea under which the Object contemplated is conceived.

Sometimes the Object contemplated is expressed in the terms of pure metaphysics. Such are:

Ultimate Reality

Augustine so describes the culmination of his own earliest experience: 'In the flash of a trembling glance my mind came to Ultimate Reality, Absolute Being—That Which Is.'¹

Elsewhere: 'God has given to His spiritual saints not only to believe, but to understand divine things,' and contemplation, 'wis-

¹ 'Mens mea pervenit ad id quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus' (*Conf.* vii. 23).

dom,' 'lies in cognition and love of That Which always is and unchangeably abides, namely God.'¹

Contemplation is 'the striving to understand those things that really and supremely are'; when attained to it is 'the full enjoyment of the highest and truest Good'; by it we attain to 'that highest Cause, or highest Author, or highest Principle of all things.'²

The Unchangeable

The intellectual or philosophical conception by which Augustine predominantly thinks of God is as the Being that is not subject to change: 'He truly Is, because He is unchangeable' (*de Nat. Boni*, 19). It was mainly the intellectual necessity he felt for Something Unchangeable as the basis and background of things changeable, that led him, more than anything else, out of Manichaeism into Christianity, and in his search for God he usually represents his mind as passing ever upwards through the grades of things subject to change, till it arrives at that Being 'in Whom there is no variation.'

And so his mystical experiences are often expressed in terms of this idea: e.g. as a perception of something unchangeable;³ a beholding with the mind's eye something unchangeable;⁴ a learning something divine and unchangeable.⁵ The same fundamental idea runs through the following descriptions of the act of contemplation, as the perception of unchangeable Good;⁶ as some vision of unchangeable Truth;⁷ as the search for some unchangeable Truth.⁸ Or again, the Light unchangeable; as where he says he 'saw with the eye of his soul, above his mind, the Light unchangeable';⁹ or 'arrived by some kind of spiritual contact at the Light unchangeable.'¹⁰

These partly neo-Platonic, partly Joannine conceptions of Truth and Light are favourite ideas with Augustine when speaking of contemplation and mystic experience.

¹ 'Cognito et dilectio eius quod semper est et incommutabiliter manet, quod Deus est' (*Enar. in Psalm. cxxxv.* 8).

² 'Appetito intelligendi ea quae vere summeque sunt ... perfructio summi et veri boni ... perventuri ad summam illam Causam, vel summum Auctorem, vel summum Principium rerum omnium' (*de Quant. Animae*, 75, 76).

³ 'Aliquid incommutabile persensi' (*Enar. in Psalm. xli.* 10).

⁴ 'Acie mentis aliquid incommutabile, etiam perstrictum et raptum, perspicere potuimus' (*ibid.*).

⁵ 'Divinum et incommutabile aliquid discitur' (*c. Faust.* xxii. 54).

⁶ 'Cernere incommutabile bonum' (*ibid.* xxii. 53).

⁷ 'Aliqua visio incommutabilis veritatis' (*de Cons. Evang.* i. 8).

⁸ 'Aliquam quaerit incommutabilem veritatem' (*Enar. in Psalm. xli.* 7).

⁹ 'Vidi oculo animae meae supra mentem meam lucem incommutabilem' (*Conf.* vii. 16).

¹⁰ 'Pervenire spiritali quodam contactu ad illam incommutabilem lucem' (*Serm.* lii. 16).

Augustine refers again and again in passages convincing by their eloquence and by their unmistakable personal character.

For instance, of the experience described in *Confessions*, vii 16, wherein he attained to a sight of the Light Unchangeable, he says: 'Thou didst stream forth Thy beams of light upon me most strongly, and I thrilled with love and awe.'

The idea of interior sweetness and joy is the dominant note in the long mystical passage in the 'Enarration' on the forty-first Psalm:

a mysterious and hidden interior pleasure;
something melodious and sweet to the ears of the heart;
ravished by desire to the inward sweetness of God;
rejoiced by a certain inward sweetness.¹

He speaks of 'a holy inebriation' (*c. Faust.* xii. 42); of being 'fixed with sweet delight in the contemplation of Truth' (*ibid.* xxii. 56); of the delight of the human heart in the light of Truth (*Serm.* clxxxix. 6); of 'arriving at a shrine of quiet' (*Ep.* cxx. 4); of 'a breath of serenity and eternity' (*de Quant. Anim.* 76).

This last piece deserves to be quoted more fully:

The soul in contemplation will arrive at that most high and secret reward for sake of which it has so laboured; and in which are such joys, such a full enjoyment of the highest and truest Good, such a breath of serenity and eternity, as are indescribable.²

In more than one place he definitely gives utterance to the idea that the joy felt in the mystical experience is a foretaste of the joy of Heaven, which is but as a perpetual prolongation of those momentarily experienced during the heights of contemplation.

Thus, when 'in a flash of thought he touched the Eternal Wisdom,' he declares:

Were this prolonged, and the vision ravish and absorb and wrap up its beholder in inward joys, so that life might be for ever like that one moment of understanding; were not this the entry into the joy of Heaven? (*Conf.* ix. 25).

Similarly:

Sometimes Thou dost admit me to an interior experience most unwonted, to a wondrous sweetness, which, if it be brought to pass

¹ 'Interiorem nescio quam et occultam voluptatem: nescio quid canorum et dulce auribus cordis: raptus desiderio ad interiorem dulcedinem Dei: iam quadam interiore dulcedine laetati' (*Enar. in Psalm.* xli. 9, 10).

² *De Quant. Anim.* 74, 76 (Latin cited above, p. 43).

in me, there will be something which will not be this life [i.e. I shall have a foretaste of eternal life.]¹

Transiency of the Experience

Here again St Augustine's descriptions of his experiences tally perfectly with those given by the great mystics. They speak of contemplation as a sustained effort of the soul, by recollection and introversion, to mount to God; when successful, the soul enjoys a brief period—often but momentary—of supreme exaltation in the contemplation of God and union with Him; this is followed by a recoil whereby the soul falls back from its height into its normal work-a-day state, wherein it recuperates its forces for another flight.

This whole process is exactly and eloquently described by Augustine in various passages. The struggle upward of the soul to raise itself above earthly things and ascend to the contemplation of God is vividly depicted in the passages from the Seventh and (especially) the Ninth Books of the *Confessions*, cited under §B, above.

In these same passages the transient and momentary character of the experience itself is brought out by such expressions as these:

In the pre-Christian experience, described in language largely Plotinian, when his mind reached to Absolute Being, it was 'in the flash of a trembling glance';² and in that other later experience, when mother and son together soared aloft to some realization of the heavenly life, they 'barely touched it with the whole beat of the heart,'³ and 'in swift thought they touched the Eternal Wisdom';⁴ so that the experience was but 'a moment of comprehension.'⁵ Elsewhere it is said that the experience is enjoyed 'briefly and hastily, and as it were in passing,'⁶ nor 'can it be endured for long.'⁷

Such momentary supreme elevations are followed by a recoil of the soul, beaten back to its normal conditions. This falling away from the height with such difficulty attained is described by all the mystics, and by Augustine in many places.

After experiencing at times a wondrous inward delight, I fall back again, weighed down by my miseries, and am absorbed again in my normal state (*solita*) (*Conf.* x. 65).

¹ 'Aliquando intromittis me in affectum multum inusitatum introrsus ad nescio quam dulcedinem, quae si perficiatur in me, nescio quid erit, quod vita ista non erit' (*Conf.* x. 65).

² 'In ictu trepidantis aspectus' (*Conf.* vii. 23).

³ 'Attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis' (*ibid.* ix. 24).

⁴ 'Rapida cogitatione attingimus' (*ibid.* 25).

⁵ 'Momentum intelligentiae' (*ibid.*).

⁶ 'Perstrictim et raptim—quasi per transitum' (*Enar. in Psalm. xli. 10*).

⁷ 'Vidi nescio quid diu ferre non potui' (*Serm. lii. 16*).

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By Evelyn Underhill

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An Appendix contains an historical sketch of European Mysticism, and there is a very complete Bibliography.

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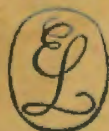
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