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**THE MYSTICS OF THE LATE MIDDLE AGES
AND
THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION**

**A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary
Department of Philosophy**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Divinity**

by

E. Edward Hackmann

May 1947

Approved by:






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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Mysticism has been an important element in human thought since earliest times. It has been said that there are four systems between which philosophical thought has continually fluctuated. These are: Sensism, Idealism, Scepticism, and Mysticism.¹ However accurate this classification may be, mysticism has exercised a potent influence on philosophy; at times becoming the basis of the entire system, but more often becoming simply one element in a complex system.

The terms "Mysticism" and "Mystic" are terms which one constantly meets in all books that deal with religious experience; and, indeed, in many books which are outside of the religious field. Quite commonly, however, they are so vaguely and loosely used that they convey no definite nor precise meaning to the reader's mind. In fact, it has been said that these terms have become the most ambiguous terms in the whole vocabulary of religion. People have termed any vague sense of spiritual things, any sort of symbolism, any hazily allegorical painting, or any poetry which deals with the soul as "mystical". Worse yet, all sorts of superstitions and magical practices have been described as belonging to the realm of Mysticism. Terms, which have been generalized to such an extent, have, indeed, almost entirely lost their individual, specific meaning; especially, when we learn that not one

1. Cousin, History of Philosophy, quoted in The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol.X, p.664.

of these uses of the term "Mysticism" is correct; although the persons to whom they are applied may, in some instances, be mystics.

Mysticism, according to its historical and psychological definition, is the direct intuition or experience of God; and a mystic is a person who has, to a greater or lesser degree, such a direct experience; one whose religious convictions and life are founded not merely on accepted beliefs and doctrines, but primarily on that which he regards as first hand personal knowledge and experiences. In the Greek religion from which the word comes to us, the MUSTAI were those initiates of the "mysteries" who were believed to have received the vision of the god, and with it a new higher life.¹ Mysticism, then, is the belief that man can be directly spiritually united with God through meditation upon Him, and surrender to His will.

Mysticism springs most frequently from an intense religious desire for an intimate communion with God, when this desire is accompanied with a speculative tendency of temperament. The practical element, ordinarily found in religion, tends to be subordinated in the mystic to the metaphysical.²

Penetrated by the thought of the ultimate unity of all existence, and impatient of even a seeming separation from the creative source of things, mysticism succumbs to a species of metaphysical fascination. Its ideal becomes that of passive contemplation in which the distinctions of individuality disappear, and the finite spirit achieves, as it were, utter union or identity with the Being of beings. As this goal cannot be reached under the conditions of relation and distinction which ordinary human thought imposes, mysticism asserts the

1. E. Underhill, The Mystics of The Church, pp.9-10.

2. J. M. Baldwin, Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, Vol.II, p.124.

existence of a suprarational experience in which this union is realized.¹

Any intense religious experience tends to be tinged with mystical elements; historically, both in philosophy and in religion, mysticism frequently appears as a protest against mechanical, external, or anthropomorphic fashions of representing God in His relation to man and the world. Unfortunately, however, in its impatience to contact the Divine directly, it ignores the limitations of thought altogether, and neglects the element of relativity, which must enter into all human conceptions of God. This attempt to transcend the bounds of reason and to define God without any anthropomorphic attributes, ultimately leaves man, as in Neo-Platonism, with the empty abstraction of the nameless and supra-essential One, the One which transcends both knowledge and existence.² The symbolic philosophy of ancient Egypt is dominated by mysticism. Mysticism is a fundamental element in the Taoism of the Chinese philosopher Lao-tze, which is a system of metaphysics and ethics. The same may be said of Indian philosophy; the end of human reflection and effort in Brahamanism and Vedantism is to deliver the soul from its transmigrations, and absorb it into Brahma forever. There is little of Mysticism in the first schools of Greek philosophy, but it already takes a large place in the system of Plato, as is evidenced in his theory of the world of ideas, of the origin of the world soul and the human soul, and in his doctrine of recollection and intuition. The Alexandrian Jew, Philo (30 B.C. - A.D. 50), combined these Platonic elements with the data of the Old Testament, and taught that every man, by freeing

1. Ibid., p.124.

2. Ibid., p.125.

himself from matter and receiving illumination from God, may reach the mystical, ecstatic, or prophetic state, where he is absorbed into the Divinity. Then came the most systematic attempt at a philosophical system of a mystical character, which was that of the Neo-Platonic School of Alexandria, especially of Plotinus (A.D. 205-270) in his Enneads. For Plotinus there exists, above all being, the One absolutely indetermined, the absolutely Good. From it came forth, through successive emanations, intelligence with its ideas, the world soul with its plastic forces, matter inactive, and the principle of imperfection. The human soul had its existence in the world-soul until it was united with matter, from which time its highest aim is to realize its mystical return to God. This is accomplished by freeing itself from the sensuous world by purification, and ascending by successive steps through various degrees of metaphysical order, until it unites itself in an unconscious contemplation with the One, and finally sinks into the state of ἔκστασις. His system is a syncretism of the previous philosophies with Mysticism as its basis. It is an emanative and pantheistic Monism.¹

With the influence of Christianity, the history of Mysticism enters a new period. The Church Fathers recognized the partial truth of the pagan system, but they also pointed out its fundamental errors. They insisted on a distinction between reason and faith, between philosophy and theology. They acknowledged the aspirations of the soul, but they pointed out its essential inability to penetrate the mysteries of Divine being. They emphasized that the vision of God is the work of

1. G. M. Sauvage, "Mysticism", The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol.X, p.664.

divine grace and the reward of eternal life. St. Augustine taught that we know the essence of things in rationibus aeternis, but this knowledge has its inception in the data of sense.¹ Pseudo-Dionysius gave a systematic treatment of Mysticism in his various works. He distinguished between rational and mystical knowledge, stating that by the former we know God, not in His nature, but through the wonderful order of His universe, which is a participation of the Divine ideas. However, he maintains there is a more perfect knowledge of God attainable in this life, which is beyond reason. This is the direct contemplation of the soul on the mysteries of Divine light. This contemplation in this life is possible only to a select few who attain this state through a very special grace of God. (The works of Pseudo-Dionysius exercised a great influence on the following ages. John Scotus Erigena in the ninth century used them as his guide in his De Divisione Naturae, however, neglecting the distinctions which Dionysius had made, he fell back into the pantheistic theories of Plotinus. In the twelfth century these mystical principles were propounded by Amaury de Bene, Joachim de Floris, David of Dinant, and that famous mystic, Bernard of Clairvaux. The thirteenth century produced no great champions of Mysticism, but there was an element more or less emphasized in the Schoolmen of this period.¹ The scholastic method, climaxing in Thomas Aquinas, sought to merge philosophy and theology. The mystical element in Thomism was the idea of essential unity of the soul in reason and will with God. However, unlike the mystics, Thomism taught that God was knowable only through logical processes of reasoning; there was no physical union

1. Ibid., p.664.

with God in this life. The mystical union with God was a special gift of grace, and was attainable only after death.¹ Then came the fourteenth century, and with it that great blossoming of speculative and practical mysticism which produced the most remarkable outburst of mystical religion that has occurred in the entire course of Christian history.

What makes the fourteenth century so unique in the history of mystical religion is the extraordinary extent of the flowering of the human spirit. No one rare beacon soul overtopped all the rest, but a whole garden full of beautiful souls came into bloom as though by a prearranged harmony. Germany, especially the Rhine valley, was the center of the outburst of radiant life, but it knew no limits of country or race, and Italy, France, England, the Netherlands and Switzerland all felt the fresh spiritual life bloom forth, as though a vernal equinox had swept over these lands.²

It is this group of mystics, and their influence on the Lutheran Reformation which we wish to examine in this paper, and as representative of this group we shall treat in order: Meister Eckhart, Jan Ruysbroeck, The Brethren of the Common Life, Heinrich Suso, Johann Tauler, The German Theology, and finally, a man who cannot be ignored, because of his direct contact with the Reformation itself, John Staupitz.

We shall see that it was possible for these late medieval mystics to exert their influence in two ways. Either they may have influenced the great Reformer himself, or they may have influenced the people among whom the Reformation was to be fostered. They may have influenced Luther either in his mental or doctrinal development. And they may have influenced the common people through their teaching and activity in preparing the minds of the people for the ideals of the Reformation.

1. A. Fuller, History of Philosophy, p.406.

2. R. M. Jones, The Flowering of Mysticism, p.9.

CHAPTER II

INFLUENCES PREPARATORY FOR LATE MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM

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INFLUENCES PREPARATORY FOR LATE MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM

Before proceeding to the discussion of the Mystics, their doctrines, and their influence, let us look for the cause of this unique outburst of Mysticism in the fourteenth century. If we are to understand their work and motives we must first understand their background and environment; what caused them to be what they were.

Every mystic is profoundly influenced by his environment, and cannot be understood in isolation from it. He is rooted in the religious past of his race, its religious present surrounds and penetrates him whether he will or not, and through this present and this past, some, indeed much, of his knowledge of God must come. However independent, however direct the revelation he has received, careful investigation shows how much, as a matter of fact, he owes to his spiritual ancestry, his reading, the influences that have shaped his early life.¹

In fact, if the Mystic were the solitary soul that he sometimes portrays himself to be, he would, indeed, have no significance for his fellow human beings.

The late medieval Mystics were not generally grouped into formal organizations, but they were bonded together in the fellowship of a common religious purpose. Their religious thought and expression was by no means uniformly homogeneous, but they all did agree in their serious attempt to secure purity of heart and life through union of the soul with God. For them, Mysticism was a phase of Christian living. In contra-distinction to the outward and formal practice of

1. E. Underhill, *op. cit.*, pp.17-18.

of religious rules of that time, mysticism was for them a devotional habit whereby they could experience religion in contrast to a mere intellectual assent to tenets. It became for them a "conscious effort of the soul to apprehend and possess God and Christ, and expresses itself in the words, 'I live and yet not I but Christ liveth in me'".¹ In many respects, it was for them what we now term "personal religion". Their mysticism can perhaps best be described as, "the love of God shed abroad in the heart".² Intuition occupies a prominent place in their religion, and the means by which one attains to this level of religious experience are through self-detachment from the world, self-purgation, prayer and contemplation.

This then was the mysticism which burst forth with such intensity in the late Middle Ages. It was in a sense a bold and liberal movement. It was liberal in the sense that it emphasized the importance of the individual person, and placed special stress on man for his own worth and for his own sake. It was bold in the sense that it emphasized the principle of direct approach to God through inward paths.

The reasons why the fourteenth century should produce such a movement are manifold. In the first place, the general mood of the late middle ages was one which fostered mystical tendencies.

All things presenting themselves to the mind in violent contrasts and impressive forms, lent a tone of excitement and of passion to everyday life and tended to produce that perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness which characterize life in the Middle Ages.³

1. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol.V, Part II, p.237.

2. Ibid., p.238.

3. J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, p.2.

Mysticism was a natural outlet for man's spiritual impulse. The conquest of the Moslem world and the recovery of Christ's sepulchre in the Holy Land had been accomplished. The future period, which we call the Renaissance, with its spirit of adventure and attempt to leap all barriers, was yet to come. This was sort of an interim period - a pause in outward activity of the Church; and yet there were these great men who wished to make some conquest of their own; and in compensation for the lack of outward activity, they turned their energies inward. They set themselves to the task of exploring and conquering their inner domain. This attempt to be at home in the world within, says Rufus Jones, was just as much a characteristic of that period as the passion for recovering the sepulchre of Christ had been characteristic in the period of the Crusades.¹

More significant than this reason however, were the unusual occurrences of various unique disasters which tended to set many deeply serious minds on the mystical quest, as though they had been summoned by these divine omens to return to God. The recurrent epidemics of the most startling of the events. They vividly portrayed for people the brief transitory nature of life here on earth and of the infinite importance of man's eternal destiny. "No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death."² It was furthermore a period of civil war, of schisms in the empire. Louis of Bavaria and Frederick of Austria were contending for the crown and producing as a result widespread

1. R. Jones, op. cit., pp.16-17.

2. J. Huizinga, op. cit., p.124.

havoc throughout the German cities. To further complicate conditions, the Pope, who supported the claims of Frederick, laid the interdict upon cities which sympathized with Louis, so that just at the time when people would naturally have sought the comfort and support of the external Church, they were deprived not only of the services of the Church, but of heaven itself. Thus people were not adverse to seeking God directly through the medium of mystical experience.

But there was one situation in the fourteenth century which far exceeded in importance any other influence on the minds of church people, and that was the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy from 1305-1377. The Popes during this period were in France, and were more or less puppets of that kingdom. To the minds of the faithful Romans, the Popes were no longer the impartial Vicars of Christ, ruling in the Eternal City, dispensing wisdom and justice over the Christian world. This, together with the lowest moral conditions which existed in the Church, was the most important factor in the spiritual awakening which came. Men and women might have remained apathetic and drifted along with the morals of the time, but to truly pious individuals, and to the mystics in particular, the evidence of evil lives and wickedness in the Church of God, where there should have been piety and holiness, came as a tremendous challenge. They determined to show forth the purity and ideals of Christ's life in their lives. They determined to depict for the Dominican and Franciscan monasteries, which had degenerated in morals and were living in sanctimonious ease and comfort, the original ideals of holy life and communion with God. Likewise, too, they were determined to show to the parish priests the glorious power

of the pure truth stripped of ulterior motives of vain glory and financial reward, and the glory of seeking alone the salvation of souls for Christ. Their mission was to bring salvation within reach of the common man, and for this purpose they employed the language of the people. The use of the vernacular was a very necessary step in freeing the people from the bonds of Rome. It served to produce greater piety and participation in religion. It tended to bring the individual into direct contact with God, without mediation of a priest. It helped the common man to understand that he himself was a priest of God. There can be no question that the Mystics considered it their divinely-appointed mission to save the Church by the intensity of their faith, by the miracle of their lives united and made one with God, and by the simple sincerity of their teaching and preaching. And yet in spite of this seeming opposition to the Roman Church, the Mystics were extraordinarily appreciative of its sacraments, naively trustful and confident of its central faith, its doctrines, and its offices. Everywhere there was unmistakable loyalty to the Church.¹

1. R. Jones, op. cit., pp.21-23.

CHAPTER III

MEISTER ECKHART

In 1294, Eckhart was elected to the episcopate of the diocese of Soissons, France. He was a prominent figure in the Dominican Order and a leading philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages. His teachings, which emphasized the unity of God and the soul, were influential in the development of Christian mysticism. He was also a prolific writer, and his works, including the "Sermons of Meister Eckhart," have been widely studied and translated.

CHAPTER III

MEISTER ECKHART

The first figure to whom one is attracted in considering the influence which the Mystics wielded on the Reformation is "the greatest figure in the fourteenth century mystical movement, and one of the greatest mystics of all Christian history".¹ We refer to Meister Eckhart.

Johannes Eckhart was born at Hochheim, near Gotha, about the year 1260. He joined the Dominican Order at Erfurt, and after studying there, and possibly at Cologne, he pursued advanced studies at the University of Paris, where he became a master of theology in 1302. Two years later, he was made provincial of the Dominican Order in Saxony; and in 1307 he was appointed vicar-general for Bohemia. In both provinces he became distinguished for his practical reforms, and for his persuasive preaching. Released from his offices in 1311, Eckhart taught in Paris until 1314, when he was sent to Strasbourg. Later he was transferred to Cologne, where, in 1326, the archbishop took proceedings against his doctrines. In 1327, the year of his death, Eckhart publicly declared his orthodoxy and appealed to Pope John XXII, but after his death in 1329, the Pope condemned twenty-eight of his propositions as heretical.²

Doctrine

Eckhart's system of theology has been described as scholastic mysticism, because he colors the Aristotelian elements in Aquinas with

1. Ibid., p.61.

2. "Eckhart" Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, M'Clintock and Strong, Vol.III, p.49.

the mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius.¹ As in all mystical systems, the two most important doctrines for him are those of the Divine nature, and of the relation between God and the creature, especially the human soul. His fundamental notion is God's eternal efflux from himself and His eternal reflux into himself; the procession of the creature from God, and the return of the creature, by self-denial and elevation above all created things, back into God again.

In his theology proper, Eckhart distinguishes between God and the Godhead. The Absolute is called the Godhead, as distinguished from God. As such, it cannot be revealed. It is concealed in absolute obscurity; being not only unknown and unknowable to man, but even unknown to itself. The Godhead is a spiritual substance of which it can only be said that it is nothing. The Godhead can only become manifest in its persons: the Father, Son, and the Spirit, which are different aspects of the one God. These aspects become separate persons only outside the Godhead. The Father pours out Himself; being poured out He is the Son. The Son returns eternally back into the Father in love, which unites both. This love, the common will of the Father and the Son, is the Spirit. These persons of the Trinity are held together by the one divine nature common to all of them, and this nature in the Godhead is the revealing principle. God, in His nature, is the unity of these persons; in His essence, He is the essence of the divine persons and of all things. God's life is His self-cognition. God must work and know Himself. Eckhart continually repeats that finite understanding cannot comprehend God, and yet he becomes the victim of

1. "Meister Eckhart", Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.VII, p.907.

attempting to describe the indescribable God in terms of definite conceptions. Thus his descriptions become quite vague and at times are well beyond human comprehension.¹

In his cosmology, Eckhart begins with the principle that God is the cause of the world. All things exist from eternity in God, in an eternal world of ideas. Distinct from this is the world of creatures which was created in time and out of nothing. The act of creation, however, is not a temporal act, for with God there is no time. The "now" in which God created the world is the "now" in which I speak, and the day of judgment is as near to this "now" as is yesterday. The Son is the unity of all the works of God. In Him the Father has revealed Himself and all creatures. The return of the Father into Himself includes the like return of all creatures into the same eternal source. The ideal world is essential in the conception of God; before the creatures were, God was not God. Thus, for Eckhart, God is not only in all things, but God is all things. Outside of God there is nothing but nonentity. All creatures, therefore, have no essence, except so far as God is present in them. Eckhart does not attempt to explain the apparent independent existence of things. In one passage, Eckhart accounts for the plurality of concrete existence by the fall of man; but evil itself and sin are left unexplained. The means for bringing all things back to God is the soul, the best of created things.² It is immaterial, entire, and undivided in every part of the body. Its faculties are the external senses, and the lower and higher faculties.

1. F. Ueberweg, History of Philosophy, Vol.I, pp.473-475.

2. Ibid., pp.475-476.

The lower faculties are the empirical understanding, the heart, and the appetitive faculty; the higher faculties are memory, reason, and will. The soul is not subject to the conditions of space and time. Its highest activity is that of cognition, of which there are three kinds: sensible, rational, and supra-rational; only the last reaches the whole truth and union with God. The first requirement, then, is to grow in knowledge toward infinite cognition. But if this knowledge is too high, one must simply believe in Christ, follow His holy image, and be redeemed. This process must be followed by all, for truth is really incomprehensible to empirical understanding; for if it were capable of being understood, it would not be truth. In deriving union with God, then, there is a transcendent sphere which, when reached by man's reason, cannot be fathomed. This sphere reason reveals in the innermost recesses of the soul, where reason and will are in living interchange. The will, illuminated by the divine light, plunges into a state of non-knowing and turns from all earthly things to the highest Good, God. Thus faith arises, which begins with spiritual understanding, and ultimately takes possession of the entire soul and guides it to its highest perfection, perfect union with God.¹ This is the ultimate desire of all creatures; therefore they strive first to pass into human nature either through the reasoning powers of man, or through actual bodily assimilation by eating and drinking. Thus in the form of human nature, man and all creatures strive to return to their original source, the undeveloped, undisclosed Diety.²

1. Ibid., pp.472-473.

2. Ibid., pp.476-477.

This conception of the return of all creatures to God through the soul gives the principle of Ethics to Eckhart. This union of the soul with God is for him morality which is attained by death of one's self, and burial in God. Only in this way may man again become that which he was when he as yet was not. This state is called "decease"; it implies complete submission to God's will, joy in all sufferings, joy in the vision of God, as also in His absence. The highest degree of "decease" is poverty. The poor man knows nothing, wills nothing, and has nothing. As long as man still has will to fulfill God's will, or desires God, or eternity, or any definite object, he has not yet reached perfection. The "deceased" man does not even pray, for God from eternity foresaw all things, including our prayers, and so from eternity has either granted or refused them. When man does attain this state of "decease", then God brings forth His Son in him, which action is the sanctification of man. All moral action is nothing else than this birth of the Son in the soul. In this birth, all men become one emanation from the eternal Word; and he in whom this birth takes place can never fall again. From this principle, Eckhart deduces his various doctrines of Ethics. The sanctified man must be virtue in his essential condition. All virtues should become necessities, being performed unconsciously, not for some purpose. Works do not sanctify man, but man sanctifies the works. All virtues are one virtue, the principle of which is love. Love ultimately is God Himself. Eckhart places a low estimate on the works of man, as fasting, and asceticism. In themselves, works are neither good nor bad, but it depends on the spirit of the one who is doing them. To believe that salvation depends on man's works is condemned as an idea

from the devil. The true inner work is an independent rising of the reason to God in simple immediate unity. Man can progress in sanctification until his death, but the state in which he is found at his death will be his eternal state. Complete sanctification is attainable, however, in this life. Man can arrive at that state where it is impossible for him to sin; when the entire outward man becomes an obedient servant of the sanctified will, and man's blessedness and God's blessedness become one. This freedom from sin, however, belongs only to the "inner ground", or "little spark" of the soul. Only this faculty of the soul remains united with God at all times. Man neither can, nor must he continue in the "deceased" state with his entire body, else he would destroy his very nature. Man is not to merely contemplate on union with God without working, but he is to remain a temporal, rational, working creature here on earth. Eckhart warns not to be satisfied with a God merely conceived in thought; for if thought perishes, God also perishes. But, by faith man is to arrive at the state in which God essentially dwells in him, and he in God.¹

With regard to Christ, Eckhart teaches both an eternal and temporal incarnation. He maintains that Christ was both man and God united in one person. Christ's person is eternally present in God as the second person of the Trinity. He assumed the human nature, but not the nature of a particular man, but of humanity which exists eternally in God as an idea. Christ was miraculously born at a definite moment of time, but at the same time he abides eternally in God. The human and divine natures are united in Christ in such a manner that each subsists in

1. Ibid., pp.477-480.

its own individuality, the bond of union being Christ's person. Christ's soul was the wisest ever created. By nature, it was like any other man's soul, but through moral exertion, Christ raised Himself into immediate proximity of God; which now also we can do through Him. Christ is thus to be our pattern, whereby man can regain his former glory of moral perfection which had been lost in the Fall of Adam. We are to become not one man, but humanity and thus receive by grace all that Christ had by nature. Christ is the Redeemer by his moral merit. We are to strive after Christ's humanity until we attain His deity.¹

This then, in brief, is a summary of Eckhart's theological thought. It is an interpretation and in some respects a modification of the dogmas of the Christian Church, based on his fundamental metaphysical conception of the soul's essential equality with God. His mystical elements are his conception of the highest activity of reason as immediately accessible to the divinity, his denial of the being of all finite things, and his doctrine of complete union with God as the supreme goal of man.

Influence

The influence of Eckhart's theological and mystical discourses on later generations is incalculable. He has justifiably been called "the father of German philosophical language".²

The type of his character and teaching was derived from the innermost essence of the German national character, and in Germany the impulses which his doctrines gave to

1. Ibid., pp.480-482.

2. "Johannes Eckhart", op. cit., p.907.

thought have never ceased to be operative, even when his name has been almost forgotten.¹

This same passage concludes with this tribute to Eckhart, "the doctrine of Eckhart, the German, prepared the way through its ethics for the Reformation, and through its metaphysics for later German speculation".²

The doctrines promulgated by Eckhart led to the formation of two parties each claiming Eckhart as their father. The one, misinterpreting and misapplying Eckhart's doctrines, developed into a fanatic heretical sect, who were morally depraved and decidedly pantheistic in their teachings. This group is of no importance for us. The second party, however, combined Eckhart's doctrines with a modified form of personal piety. It is this group of Eckhart's disciples who were instrumental in perpetuating Eckhart's doctrines and making their influence felt on the Reformation itself. Eckhart's purpose in his doctrines was not the promulgation of the Church and its teaching, but he aimed to advance Christianity, as he understood it, through edifying speculation; and to render it comprehensible to each individual by the transcendent use of reason.³ This was his contribution. It was this contribution that finally influenced the Reformation itself. While he had no direct influence on Luther himself, yet through his treatises, theses, and especially his sermons he exerted his influence on later mystics who in turn were directly influential upon the Reformation. Eckhart's direct influence extended over Ruysbroeck, Tauler, and Suso. Thus, in almost all of the mystics which we shall treat, we shall detect unmistakable

1. F. Ueberweg, op. cit., p.483.

2. Ibid., p.484.

3. Ibid., p.468.

traces of Eckhart's doctrine and thought. Thus while he cannot be classified as a direct forerunner of the Reformation, yet he did lay the foundation upon which the later great Mystics built.

The penetration and boldness of his genius, as well as the deep piety of his nature, must be fully acknowledged. Only it might perhaps be premature, on the score of the latter qualification, to class him, as Arnold has done, with the precursors of the Reformation.¹

1. C. Ullman, Reformers Before the Reformation, p.29. The reference to Arnold's statement is found in the Hist. Theol. Myst. Francof. 1702, p.306.

CHAPTER IV

JAN RUIJSBROECK

- 1. G. Wilson, pp. 111-112.
- 2. P. James, pp. 112-113.
- 3. G. Wilson, pp. 111-112.

CHAPTER IV

JAN RUYSBROECK

Mysticism as it was developed from the principles of Meister Eckhart, attracted many disciples. The first of any importance for us was the great Dutch mystic, Jan Ruysbroeck.

Jan Ruysbroeck was born at Ruysbroeck, a village situated on the Senne between Brussels and Hall, in the year 1293. He attended school for four years at Brussels, but where he pursued his later studies is not known.¹ In 1317 he was ordained priest and was appointed vicar of St. Gudule Church in Brussels. He applied himself with zeal to his duties as a priest until his sixtieth year, when he retired with his uncle Jan Hinckaert and Franc van Coudenberg to the monastery of Groenendael, near Waterloo.² Here as prior, he gave himself to meditation and mystical writing. Known as the "Ecstatic Teacher", he became the author of a reformation among the Augustinian canons which were scattered throughout the Netherlands. At this monastery, he passed the remainder of his life, which due to his simplicity and temperance was prolonged to an extreme old age. He died on the second of December, 1381, at the age of eighty-eight. He was interred in the church of his monastery.³

Doctrine

Ruysbroeck's theology begins with the Divine Being; then discusses man; and finally as the great end of his speculations, shows how man

1. C. Ullman, op. cit., p.321.

2. R. Jones, op. cit., p.199.

3. C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.34-35.

may become united with God without losing his independent existence or identity.

In his theology proper, he teaches that God is the "super-essential essence of all being." With God there is no time nor place, no desire nor possessing, no light nor darkness. He rests eternally in Himself, and yet He is the activating and living principle in all creatures. Thus He manifests Himself in His eternal actions of knowledge, volition, and love. God is one in nature, yet He is three in persons. In His one nature, He rests eternally in Himself; in His triune person, He is living and productive in all eternity. These three persons are distinct in reality, and not merely in our human conception of God. The Father is the eternal, essential person. He begets eternal wisdom, which is the uncreated, perfect image of Himself, and which is called the Son, the second person of the Godhead. From this mutual spiritual communion, there springs up an eternal fire of love which burns between the Father and the Son. This is the Holy Spirit, the third person, who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son and again returns into the Godhead.¹

In regard to cosmology and anthropology Ruysbroeck taught that God brought forth the universe from nothing, by His eternal wisdom, the Son, and of His own free will. Likewise, man proceeds from God in His image and figure. Man is formed mortal as to his body, but endowed with eternal life as to his soul. Man's soul possesses three essential powers which are intellect, memory, and will. When these three powers are endowed with God's grace, then we can be like God and can do all things. Man's will, freed through God's merits, always urges him to do

1. Ibid., pp.36-37.

good, and to refrain from evil; but it is only with the addition of God's grace that man can attain final union with God. God is willing to accept every man who is also willing to come to Him.¹

In his Christology, he teaches that Christ, the Son of God was begotten in eternity, and born as a man here in time. He is the perfect image of God, and as a man was united incomprehensibly with God. His life here on earth was a pattern of perfect humility, love, and patience. He thereby becomes our Leader who perfectly perfected the Law and propitiated the Father, so that He now is the source of all that is needful for our salvation. He is the source of true light, not only for the Roman Church, but for the entire world.²

Ruysbroeck's Ethics propose the path of return to God for the soul. To attain this unity, there are three steps, or stages of progress which man must pass through: the active life, the inward life, and the contemplative life.³ The active life consists in serving God outwardly by such deeds as abstinence, penitence, good morals, and holy actions. These works of course are not perfect nor holy, but they do constitute the first step in ultimate union with God. While performing these outward works, however, we should not forget to turn our minds inward. "By feeling love we turn inwards to God, acquire oneness of heart with him, spiritual freedom, conquest over the distractions of sense, and the guidance of the desires and senses to unity."⁴ In this second state we are alone with God; He descends to us in grace and we exalt ourselves

1. *Ibid.*, pp.37-38.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.38-40.

3. "Jan Van Ruysbroeck", *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol.XIX, p.777.

4. C. Ullman, *op. cit.*, p.41.

to Him in love and devotion. This leads to the third and final step the contemplative life; in which state God, who is love; unites Himself with us in perpetual love. This contemplation is above all ideas, measure, reason, admiration, or desire; man is simply reposed in perfect love in God.

This highest stage of contemplation also coincides with the most perfect love. But both, perfect apprehension, and perfect love which is identical with it, are no more action but pure rest. It is above all action, free and exempt from all exercise, passive to that divine love which changes the spirit of man, consumed and in a manner annihilated into itself, so that he forgets himself, and no longer knows either God or himself or any creature, or any thing but the mere love which he tastes, feels, experiences, and possesses, in simple repose.¹

Influence

"Next to Meister Eckhart in depth of life and in the massiveness of his spiritual impact of all the mystics of this fourteenth century movement is Jan Ruysbroeck, the greatest Flemish mystic."² The chief of his mystical writings are, The Ornament of Spiritual Marriage, Speculum Aeternae Salutis, De Calculo, and Samuel, sive de Alta Contemplatione.³ Ruysbroeck's doctrines coincide with other mystics in the fact that he taught that man must be assimilated completely with God, and this was to be accomplished through contemplation, renunciation of all volition and action. However, as profound as his mysticism was, his great importance for us lies in his insight into the moral corruption which existed in the Church and his efforts to introduce reform. His influence on the Reformation was not exerted upon Luther, but rather upon

1. Ibid., pp.43-46.

2. R. Jones, op. cit., p.194.

3. "Ruysbroeck", op. cit., M'Clintock and Strong, Vol.IX, p.183.

the common people among whom he labored. He preached moral reform, and was instrumental in bringing the personal aspect of Christianity into a personal relationship with the individual. "The moral spirit with which the mysticism of Ruysbroeck was imbued, generated in his character, along with the taste for contemplation, a love also of the practical, and even of the reformatory."¹ While Ruysbroeck was a faithful member of the Roman Church, yet he could not close his eyes to the moral corruption within the Church, and this he evidenced by the views which he held of the condition of the Church and public life in general.

However strong might be Ruysbroeck's determination to be a true member of the Church, and to live and die as a servant of Christ in the Catholic faith, still, in general, he took an attitude, which to a certain extent was one of opposition to the dominant Church, maintaining the principle of Internalism, in opposition to that of Secularisation, and exalting the spirit of faith, charity, and contemplation, as more excellent, when compared with the performance of works.²

In denouncing the corrupt morals, he censures not only the laity of all classes and positions, but also the monasteries, the priests, the higher prelates, and even the Popes themselves. Among the laity he denounces the dancing, feasting, and licentiousness, and deploras the fact that every spiritual gift of the Church is available to anyone with sufficient wealth. He speaks sharply against the three vices of "sloth, gluttony, and debauchery," which he says are prevalent in the monasteries. He reminds them that this was not the original purpose of the monasteries. He laments the fact that now the only purpose of the monasteries seems

1. C. Ullman, op. cit., p.49.

2. Ibid., pp.49-50.

to be to acquire wealth and live in luxury and ease. The Priests, he says, are no better. The only time they hurry to the Church is when there is a fee in prospect, otherwise they are slothful, living with their concubines, and ruling the people as tyrants. They have wholly lost sight of the spirituality of their office. Likewise, the higher Prelates, he condemns, saying that many of them are as corrupt as the lower clergy. Their great pride is in their wealth, their elaborate feasts, and their immense train of horsemen and servants. They do nothing to better the lives of the clergy, investigating only the most flagrant crimes. Even in these, he says, the offender is acquitted upon payment of a fine in proportion to his wealth. "In this way all obtain, each what he wants: the Devil the soul, the Bishop the money, and the unhappy and infatuated men a momentary gratification." He likewise censures the corrupt Popes. They too, he says, like the bishops and prelates "bow the knee to earthly riches". He says their interest is centered on worldly things, and they are entirely ignorant of their spiritual obligations of their office. He avers that if the spiritual shepherds of the early Christian Church had been as unspiritual as the Church rulers now, the Church never would have flourished.¹

Thus we see that Ruysbroeck was inclined both to speculative mysticism and yet to moral reformation. Both of these tendencies were continued, and were of importance to the Reformation. The mystical tendency was carried on chiefly through Johann Tauler, and the tendency for practical reforms was carried on chiefly through Gerhard Groot and the institution which he founded, the Brethren of the Common Life. Both

1. Ibid., pp.50-54.

of these tendencies, however, frequently intertwined with each other in their progress. We shall first consider the implications of the latter group, and then we shall return to mysticism as it developed in its speculative forms on the native soil of the Reformation.

CHAPTER V

THE HISTORY OF THE STANISLAW LINE

CHAPTER V

THE BRETHREN OF THE COMMON LIFE

The first of the Brethren of the Common Life was Gerard Goyens, a Dutchman, who came to Louvain in 1384. He was a man of great piety and learning, and he was joined by many other men of like mind. They lived in a community, and they devoted themselves to the study of the Bible and to the education of the young. Their life was one of simplicity and devotion, and they were much respected by the authorities of the University of Louvain. The first representative of the Brethren of the Common Life was Gerard Goyens, who was a Dutchman. He was a man of great piety and learning, and he was joined by many other men of like mind. They lived in a community, and they devoted themselves to the study of the Bible and to the education of the young. Their life was one of simplicity and devotion, and they were much respected by the authorities of the University of Louvain.

Gerard Goyens was born in the year 1345 in the town of Goyens, in the province of Friesland. After receiving his primary education at his native town, he went to study at the University of Louvain, where he spent several years. He was a man of great piety and learning, and he was joined by many other men of like mind. They lived in a community, and they devoted themselves to the study of the Bible and to the education of the young. Their life was one of simplicity and devotion, and they were much respected by the authorities of the University of Louvain. After visiting the papal court at Avignon about 1370, he returned to Louvain, where he was appointed to the post of rector of the University. He was a man of great piety and learning, and he was joined by many other men of like mind. They lived in a community, and they devoted themselves to the study of the Bible and to the education of the young. Their life was one of simplicity and devotion, and they were much respected by the authorities of the University of Louvain.

CHAPTER V

THE BRETHERN OF THE COMMON LIFE

Chief Representatives

We now come to an organization who, through a fresh and peculiar combination of the practical tendency of the more ancient fellowships with the traditionary doctrines of mysticism, actually effected a partial reform, and in a much higher degree prepared for a new condition of things to come. We refer to the Brethren of the Common Life.¹ The chief representatives of this practical movement were Gerhard Groot, the founder of the organization, Florentius Radewins, Gerhard Zerboldt, and Thomas à Kempis.

Gerhard Groot was born in the year 1340 at the town of Deventer. After receiving his primary education in his native city, he continued his studies at the University of Paris, where he imbibed many nominalistic tendencies. Obtaining his masters degree, he went to Cologne, where he studied and also made his first appearance as a professor. After visiting the papal court at Avignon about 1366, he was made Canon of Utrecht and Aix-la-Chapelle. He was inclined to bask in the luxurious ease of corruption of rich clergymen of that time. In 1374, however, he experienced a conversion and retired for three years into the Carthusian monastery at Monchhuysen, where he diligently studied Holy Scriptures, and practiced strict asceticism. In 1377, having received

1. Ibid., p.57.

ordination as a deacon, he became missionary preacher in the diocese of Utrecht. However, because of his violent denunciation of the sins of the laity and clergy, accusations of heterodoxy were brought against him and he was prohibited from preaching.¹ This, however, only directed his energies into a different channel. About 1378 he visited the famous mystic Jan Ruysbroeck at his monastery at Groenendael. Not only the personal qualities of Ruysbroeck, but the entire social life of the monastery so impressed Groot, that as Thomas à Kempis tells us, Gerhard thenceforth felt himself determined to form an institution of a similar kind. Therefore returning to Deventer, he began by gathering the youth about him who were destined for the clerical profession. Thus began the society which was to grow into an extensive confederation. Groot presided over the first days of his creation; however, soon afterwards in 1384 he died of the plague in his native city of Deventer.²

Groot's immediate successor as overseer of the institutions of the society was Florentius Radewins, of whom Ullman says, "He may be considered as the second founder of the society, and contributed even more than Gerhard himself to the full development of its institutions."³ Radewins was born about the year 1350 at Leerdam. He received his higher education at the University of Prague, where he took his Master of Arts degree. Returning home, he was appointed Canon of St. Peter's Church in Utrecht. Here he first heard the preaching of Gerhard Groot, and soon a close friendship sprang up between the two. Soon afterwards, he resigned the Canonry of St. Peter's and moved to Deventer where he

1. "Groot", op. cit., M'Clintock and Strong, Vol.III, p.1013.

2. C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.67-70,77.

3. Ibid., p.82.

was ordained a priest and appointed vicar at St. Lebruin's. He was the first of the Brethren to be ordained a priest. At the death of Groot, he was entrusted with the management of the institutions of the Brethren, and under his direction several Brother-houses were established in Deventer. Later he also established many similar institutions in the principal cities of the Netherlands and Lower Germany. When he attained about the age of fifty, he became critically ill, probably as a consequence of his excessive mortifications, and he died about the year 1400. He was interred in St. Lebruin's Church at Deventer.¹

Gerhard Zerboldt, the next important personage in the work of the Brethren, was born about the year 1367 at Zuetphen. After brief attendance at several foreign schools, he received the chief part of his education in the Brother-school at Deventer where he attracted considerable attention among the Brethren. Thomas ¹Kempis, in his life of Gerhard Zerboldt, tells us that he was continually occupied with reading, studying, and transcribing the Bible and other religious works. He spent the entire day in his cell. He was entirely indifferent to the food he ate, and unduly neglected the needs of his body even in time of illness. He possessed sound judgment and wise insight in legal transactions, and often handled these for the Brethren. It was while he was on a trip of this nature that he became critically ill, and he died shortly after in the year 1398 at the age of thirty-one. ¹A Kempis tells us that Radewins and the Brethren lamented his passing since he had been "as a pillar of the house, and a right hand in matters of business".²

1. Ibid., pp.82-88.

2. Ibid., pp.105-106.

The final great representative of the Brethren, who is important for us, is Thomas à Kempis. Thomas à Kempis was born in the year 1380 in the small town of Kempen situated not far from Cologne. Since his parents were of poor station, Thomas naturally turned to the Brethren for education, since at this period they provided poor children with a means of subsistence, instruction, religious training, and offered them the prospect of a useful occupation after they completed their schooling. Accordingly, at the age of thirteen, Thomas set out for Deventer. At this school he occupied himself with copying and reading Holy Scriptures, and in rigidly performing all the religious exercises of the Brethren. After a time, Thomas came to live with Florentius Radewins, the head of the institutions, whom he greatly admired and revered. Radewins wielded a great influence on his later life; for it was under his direction that Thomas entered the convent of St. Agnes near the town of Zwolle. It was in this monastery that he spent the remainder of his life in religious exercises, delivering religious discourses, composing religious books, and transcribing books of others. He died in July 1471, at the age of ninety-one years.¹

Theology

The theology of the Brethren was not so much a system of doctrine as of a theory of religion. They were not interested in the dogmatic treatment of religion, but wished, by their own example and purity of life, to induce the common people to imitate them. They may well be called mystics, but they were practical mystics. They continually endeavored to explore their inner lives, to unite their inner selves

1. Ibid., pp.116-126.

to Christ, and were given to much meditation, but still they always retained this practical turn of mind which impelled them to also help instruct, and work among their fellow-men.

As Christian mystics they constantly aimed to imitate the lives of Christ, and the Apostles. They loved to seek parallels between Christ's life and their own, for their religion was one of action, of deeds. Groot had instructed them to read the Gospels and lives of the Church Fathers in preference to other books, as the former contained biographies. Paul's Epistles and the various books of the Old Testament were by no means neglected by them, however. As they read the Acts of the Apostles the thought must often have struck them that it was not at all necessary for a good Christian to seek refuge in a monastery. At any rate, their desire to win ever more souls for Christ kept them in the cities.... They were particularly fond of finding practical lessons in the selections from Scriptures read at their meals. These lessons they tried to remember for the purpose of applying them on specific occasions, and for the sake of mutual exhortation. Another feature of their practical mysticism was their collection of excerpts from writings perused by them. These were called, 'good points' or 'rapiaria'. Special notebooks or slips of paper were at all times kept in readiness in order to improve their knowledge.¹

Thus the theology and philosophy of the Brethren was based chiefly upon the New Testament, and the Fathers, and in a lesser degree also upon the works of Greek, Roman, and medieval philosophers. The best delineation of their theology as they taught it to the common people is perhaps that remarkable work, "Imitation of Christ". Although Thomas à Kempis is usually designated as the author, it is believed that he did no more than edit in this one volume, various writings of the Brethren which he found.² "At no other time and at no other place could Thomas à Kempis have gathered the material for the 'Imitation of Christ' but at Deventer between 1384 and 1400."³

1. A. Hyma, The Christian Renaissance, p.120.

2. A. Hyma, op. cit., p.176ff.

2. A. Hyma, op. cit., p.335.

Influence

With the Brethren of the Common Life, we have a group of mystics who exerted a very direct influence on the Reformation.

In the first place, we may well conclude that they had some effect on Luther. We know that he was taught by the Brethren when he attended school at Magdeburg. While this does not necessarily indicate influence on his later development, yet we may safely say that they probably confirmed him in the piety in which he had been nourished. We also know that he was an avid reader of Gabriel Biel, who had been rector of the Brethren of the Common Life at Butzbach near Mainz. While we have no direct statement of Luther, it is probable that he also read the Imitation of Christ. "It was eagerly devoured at that time by men of his character."¹ "Luther often read it."² That he actually did read writings of the Brethren, we know from his significant statement found in his lecture on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where he says, "Nowhere have I found so clear an explanation of original sin as in the little treatise of Gerhard Groot: 'Blessed is the man,'³ where he speaks as a sensible theologian, and not as a rash philosopher."⁴ The best evidence which we have, however, that Luther was favorably impressed by the Brethren and their work, are his statements of 1532 addressed to the rector of the Brethren of the Common Life at Herford,

1. Ibid., p.316.

2. S. Kettlewell, The Authorship of the De Imitatione Christi, p.34. Quoted from A. Hyma, op. cit., p.317.

3. The quotation makes reference, not to Groot, but to the "Spiritual Ascensions" of Gerhard Zerboldt, which begins with: "Blessed is the man."

4. M. Luther, Vorlesung ueber den Roemerbrief, edited by J. Ficker, p.144.

I dare not indulge in great wishes, but if all other things were in as good a condition as the brethren-houses, the Church would be much too blessed even in this life. Your dress and other commendable usages do not injure the Gospel, but are rather of advantage to it, assailed as in these days it is by reckless and unbridled spirits who know only how to destroy, but not to build up.

And in the same year the German reformer addressed the magistrates of Herford in the following manner:

Inasmuch as the Brethren and Sisters were the first to begin the Gospel among you, lead a creditable life, have a decent well-behaved congregation, and at the same time faithfully teach and hold the pure word, may I affectionately entreat your worship not to permit any dispeace or molestation to befall them, on account of their still wearing the religious dress, and observing old and laudable usages not contrary to the Gospel? For such monasteries and brethren-houses please me beyond measure. Would to God that all monastic institutions were like them! Clergymen, cities, and countries would then be better served, and more prosperous than they now are.¹

As Luther indicates, the greatest influence which the Brethren wielded was effected upon the common people through the widely scattered institutions of the Brethren. If we study the constitutions upon which the Brother-houses were founded, and investigate the activities of the Brethren among the common people, we can readily see why they were of importance for the Reformation. A characteristic feature of the Brethren was their aversion to formal, lifeless observances. They stressed the inner things. Religion for them was to serve God with pure devotion. "There probably was no organized group of men and women in the Europe of the fifteenth and early centuries who so consistently sought to return to the ideals and customs of the apostolic church as did the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life."²

1. Briefwechsel, edited by E. L. Enders, Vol. IX, pp. 146-147.

2. A. Hyma, op. cit., p. 334.

The first institution was founded by Gerhard Groot as a union of brethren conformed, as far as the circumstances of the times would permit, to the apostolical pattern. Imitating the Church at Jerusalem, they mutually shared each others earnings and property. They lived according to the rule of the institution not from constraint, but solely from love for God and their fellow-man. ^x The grand objective of the Society was the establishment, exemplification, and spread of practical Christianity. "What Groot wanted was more Christianity, plain and simple. To follow in the footsteps of Christ, to bear his cross in humble submission, that was his aim."¹ This the Society endeavored to accomplish by the moral rigor and simplicity in their manner of living, by religious conversations, mutual confessions, admonitions, lectures, and social exercises of devotion, by transcribing and propagating sacred Scripture and by adifying religious treatises; but most of all did they promote this aim by the instruction of the common people in Christianity, and by reviving and improving the education of the youth. This instruction they gave gratuitously, and thus rendered the arts of reading and writing attainable to all. Thus, Groot, while he did not oppose the doctrines of the Church, hoped to combat the moral corruption found within the Church, and these germs of reform were soon to be fostered into further growth.²

Florentius Radewins, to whom the responsibility of directing the institutions was given after the death of Groot, directed them along the original lines which Groot had intended. It was under his capable

1. Ibid., p.24.

2. C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.70-81.

management that the Society reached its peak in development and importance. Their institutions multiplied throughout the Netherlands and were established in the principal cities of Germany.

There was a congregation at Muenster from the year 1400, founded by Henry of Ahaus, a missionary of the Deventer house. The same Henry of Ahaus instituted a society at Cologne in the year 1417 or earlier. There was a congregation at Osterberg near Osnabrueck as early as the year 1410, and one at Osnabrueck from 1415, at Herford from 1428, at Wesel from 1436, and at Hildesheim from 1440. The Brethren at Cologne founded the houses at Wiesbaden, Butzbach, near Mainz, Koenigstein on the Taunus, and Wolf on the Moselle. There were important houses at Rostock, Magdeburg,¹ Marburg, Cossel, and Emmerich, and less important ones in Wurtemberg; also one at Kempen, and at Cuhn in Poland.²

Of the activity of these institutions, Ullman says: "Their chief occupation was the religious training of the common people and education of the young, and in both of these departments they manifestly formed an epoch, and acted the part of reformers."³

The Brethren attempted to train the common people first of all by their example and by direct impulse on the people.

"Our house was founded," the Brethren of Deventer and Zolle wrote, "with the intention that priests and clerics might live there, supported by their own manual labor, namely, the copying of books, and the returns from certain estates; attend church with devotion, obey the prelates, wear simple clothing, preserve the canons and decrees of the saints, practice religious exercises, and lead not only irreproachable, but exemplary lives, in order that they may serve God and perchance induce others to seek salvation.... Toward this end we must direct all our spiritual exercises: prayer, meditation,

1. This was not strictly a Brethren house, but a cathedral school in which some of the Brethren taught. Cf. O. Scheel, Martin Luther, Vol. I, pp. 67-76.

2. A. Hyma, op. cit., p. 111.

3. Ibid., p. 94.

reading, manual labor, watching, fasting, - in short, the harmonious development of our external and internal powers."¹

However, the Brethren also labored incessantly to Christianize the common people through their discourses, which took either the form of sermons, or so-called collations, which was a sort of informal discussion. As a result of the impulse given by the Brethren, preaching was revived and revitalized. Their preaching was popular and lively, illustrated with many examples and sayings of pious and experienced teachers. And most important of all, it was delivered in the vernacular so that it was always intelligible to the common people. The collations were held on Sundays and holy days. These consisted in the reading and explanation of certain Scripture passages, and then followed a general discussion, in which often the audience of school boys and other people were invited to participate. Naturally, the vernacular was employed in these discussions also.²

The influence thus exerted on the common people by the brethren is incalculable. For not only were there a great many among them whose fame as orators brought people long distances to hear them, but it was their combined, their continued efforts, which must have brought tangible results, considering the great number of holy days they observed. Not one of them was as famous as a Brugman, Wycliffe, Hus, or Savonarola, but they formed a vast organization. Their voices were seldom heard on the streets, for they wished to avoid publicity. Nevertheless, their influence, though not always manifested visibly, reached the minds of thousands, while the books they circulated reached still larger numbers. They continued their labors in an orderly way. Like the persistent drops of water, which in the course of time even form impressions on the most solid rocks, so did the efforts of the Brethren of the Common Life affect the most perverse sinners.³

1. Constitution of the House of Zwolle, Quoted from A. Hyma, op. cit., pp.115-116.

2. C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.94-99.

3. A. Hyma, op. cit., pp.116-117.

The most important and beneficial activity of the Brethren, however, continued to be the education of the youth. Where they could not establish schools, they joined the schools that already existed endeavoring to promote both the spiritual and temporal welfare of the pupils. In their own schools, they gave instructions in reading, writing, singing, Latin, and religion - particularly in the Bible History.¹ The importance for the Reformation of educating a future generation in these things, and familiarizing them with Holy Scriptures in the vernacular, is quite evident. "Making the mother-tongue the chief vehicle of education, these schools sent out the men who are the fathers of the modern literature of Northwestern Germany and the Lowlands, and prepared the soil for the coming Reformation."² It was in this sphere of promoting the use of the vernacular that Gerhard Zerboldt contributed outstanding service. He wrote several treatises urging the use of the mother-tongue in religious services and contending for a vernacular translation of the Bible, so that common laymen could understand the sermons and read and study the Word of God.

There can be no doubt that principles such as these, and the example of the Brethren contributed greatly to spread the reading of Scripture among the laity, and to make the use of the mother tongue in the department of religion more universal; and it is scarcely necessary to remark of what consequence this was for the Reformation; Luther stands as the historical proof of it.³

Use of the mother-tongue had various important consequences. Not only did it produce more vigor in preaching, but it also gave prayers new meaning for the common people so that they could pray more sincerely

1. C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.99-102.

2. P. Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol.V, Part II, p.281

3. Ibid., pp.112-113.

and earnestly. All this not only tended to produce a greater depth and ardor in piety among the people in general, but it actually freed them from the bond of darkness in which they had been held by the Roman Church.

As soon as the German preached and heard German sermons, read a German Bible, possessed a German theology, and prayed German prayers, the bond which connected him inwardly with Rome was severed; and inward separation could not but soon lead to outward separation also. The vindication of the national independence was completed by Luther, who never could have become the reformer of Germany and Europe, had he not written, and spoken, and sung, and thundered in German.¹

So we see that the Brethren of the Common Life did wield a very real influence for the Reformation. In the first place, we may well conclude that they had some effect on Luther, for we know that he was taught by the Brethren when he attended school at Magdeburg. We also know that he was an avid reader of Gabriel Biel, who had been rector of the Brethren of the Common Life at Butzback near Mainz, and that he read writings of Gerhard Zerboldt. And the way he praises the Brethren at Herford as late as 1532 makes us conclude that he always respected them very highly.

Secondly, as a far as the influence on the common people is concerned, their influence is incalculable. Certainly, the influence of an organization which "instituted the only lasting reforms of the whole fifteenth century, corrected the Vulgate, translated parts of the Bible, sent thousands upon thousands of religious books throughout western Europe, reformed schools and textbooks, comforted the sick, consoled the afflicted, fed the poor, lodged the homeless, and composed that

1. Ibid., p.113.

well nigh perfect fruit of Christian mysticism: 'De Imitatione Christi,'¹ the influence of such an organization, we say, is incalculable for the Reformation. "While it must be admitted that a good deal of the humanists' contempt for their predecessors (of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) was justified, it was the education that these had provided that made the rapid advance of the sixteenth century possible and the success of the Renaissance ideals so complete."²

By avoiding notoriety and scandal, by preaching reform to all men and women without stressing unduly the faults of the clergy, the brethren labored unnoticed by those historians who record only the interruptions against the course of nature, against peaceful reform and bloodless revolution, thereby ignoring the great movement which throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries helped to change the medieval mind into the modern mind.³

1. A. Hyma, op. cit., p.39.

2. A. Hyma, op. cit., pp.117-118.

3. G. R. Potter, "Education in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," The Cambridge Medieval History, Vol.VIII, p.717.

CHAPTER VI

HEINRICH SUSO

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HEINRICH SUSO

We have seen how the practical tendency of Ruysbroeck's mysticism was carried out to its peak of development through the Brethren of the Common Life. Let us now return and observe the development of the speculative element and see what influence it had on the Reformation, if any. Our attention is first directed to the mysticism of Heinrich Suso and Johann Tauler, who were almost exact contemporaries.

Heinrich Suso was born at Ueberlingen on Lake Constance about the year 1300. His father's name was Herr von Berg, however, upon the death of his mother he assumed her name of Suso. Due to the influence of his mother, he entered the Dominican convent at Constance at the age of thirteen, where he spent about five years, and then went to the University of Cologne, where he studied scholastic philosophy and theology. It was here that he came under the influence of the greatest of German mystics, Meister Eckhart; and subsequently he entered a monastery in Constance where he subjected himself to the most rigorous asceticism. After ten years of seclusion, he wandered through Swabia as a preacher, where, it is said, he won the hearts of all, especially of the nuns, by his gentle, persuasive eloquence. About 1348 he seems to have settled in a convent of his own order in Ulm, and here he died on the twenty-fifth of January, about the year 1366.¹

1. "Heinrich Suso", *op. cit.*, M'Clintock and Strong, Vol.X, p.39.

Theology

Suso's theology like all mysticism mainly centers around God, man, and the union between them. He gives a summary of it in the words, "a meek man must be deformed from the creature, conformed to Christ, and transformed into the Deity".¹ The influence of Eckhart is quite noticeable.

God, for Suso, is the pure, single, undivided, universal Being, the cause and essence of all temporal being. However, Suso, is not a pantheist, for he recognizes a personal deity and discriminates between the divine and human being. As the perfect Being, God communicates with Himself in an eternal and in a temporal manner. In the eternal and perfect communication God emanates Himself as the Son. The Father pours Himself into the Son, and the Son flows back into the Father. The reciprocal love which results, is the Holy Ghost. The temporal and finite communication of God is creation. In this communication man is the chief subject. While he is created finite and transitory, he also receives the divine spark in his soul, by which he may return ultimately to God. The best example which man has in finding his way back to God, is the example of Christ, the Son of God manifest in the flesh. The manner in which man attains union with God, however, must take place in a certain order. First, he must renounce all worldly pleasure and sin, and turn to God in constant prayer, retirement, and virtuous exercises. Next, he must be willing to endure all affliction which he may encounter. And finally, man is

1. G. Ullman, op. cit., p.199.

to have "Christ's bitter passion, His sweet doctrine, His gentle walk, and His spotless life formed within him", so that Christ dwells within him. Then in a state of unconsciousness above time and space, man vanishes into God. This for Suso was the apex of Man's religious experience.¹

Influence

While Suso adhered strictly to Roman doctrine, and was wholly immersed in its symbolism and worship, yet he did exert some influence which helped prepare for the Reformation. His chief writings, which abound in imagery and comparisons drawn from nature, are his Autobiography, Buchlein von der ewigen Weisheit, and his Buchlein von der Wahrheit. To these must be added his sermons and letters. As such, his influence operated in two ways; indirectly, inasmuch as he produced a religious consciousness among the laity by his mysticism, and instituted fellowships among godly people, which led to inward separation from the church and the control which she exercised in all spiritual affairs. This he did in his wanderings throughout Swabia and Alsace.

Wandering about in Swabia, Alsace, and as far down as the Netherlands, he took an interest in all the weak, the languishing, and the lost, brought sensual men to God, endeavored to withdraw their mind from an earthly, and raise it to a heavenly love, comforted the sorrowful, and in many localities gathered together or consolidated quiet societies of 'friends of God' and 'good children'.²

At the same time his influence was exerted directly, inasmuch as he resolutely attacked the persons who governed in the Church, and in the corruption of all classes especially with respect to morals. He censures the

1. Ibid., pp.199-201.

2. Ibid., pp.195-196.

hierarchy and all classes of people in much the same manner as Ruysbroeck,
and conscientiously calls for greater piety and a Christian reformation
in morals at least, if not in doctrine.

CHAPTER VII

JOHANN TAULER

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CHAPTER VII

JOHANN TAULER

Of much greater importance for our discussion is Suso's contemporary, Johann Tauler. Not much is known of the particulars of his life, however a few facts have been preserved. Johann Tauler was born in Strasbourg about the year 1290, and was educated at the Dominican convent in that city. From Strasbourg he went to the Dominican College at Cologne, where he may have imbibed the mystical teachings of Meister Eckhart. The greater part of his life was spent in these two centers of German mysticism, Strasbourg and Cologne. At some time in his life it is believed that Tauler visited Groenendael where he became acquainted with Ruysbroeck. It is thought that his visit caused his mystical tendencies to be patterned after Ruysbroeck. In the later years of his life, he became known as a powerful preacher, especially in Strasbourg. He spent his last years in Strasbourg, and there he died on the sixteenth of June, in the year 1361.¹

Doctrine

Tauler's theology is delineated almost exclusively in his sermons. In these, we see a decidedly new trend of thought from that of the former mystics. With Tauler, an evangelical note creeps into his speculation, which becomes increasingly influential in his sermons. Tauler was basically a mystic with his doctrine of man's originating from God, and

1. A. G. Rudelbach, Biographien von Zeugen der Christlichen Kirche, pp.199-237.

also longing to return to unity with Him. Thus the philosophic kernel of his theology was the old mysticism of Eckhart and Jan Ruysbroeck.¹ However, with his doctrine of the method in which man is to attain unity with God, there enters the evangelical note of his preaching. His preaching is Christocentric. His central theme is the incarnation of Christ, His revelation of God as the divine Word or Logos, His perfect life as the Godman, His suffering and death, His indwelling in the believer, Christ's person, His teaching and His work in the regeneration of the soul. The biblical, practical, evangelical note overtones the speculative one in most of his sermons.²

The great problem for Tauler was the attainment of the divine life in God. He regarded man as totally corrupted by original sin, and therefore alienated from God, and doomed to eternal damnation.

He (man) lost all the grace and all the powers and virtues that should lead him into the likeness and fellowship of God and the holy angels, and poisoned his originally pure and holy nature, inflicting deadly wounds on himself. Thus his understanding has become quite darkened, his will completely perverse and wicked, his natural appetite and desire wholly shameful, and his zeal and indignation against evil utterly weak and powerless. He is under the dominion of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and wholly impotent without God's grace to do the good. He is, indeed, capable of self-determination. In his fallen state he retains, in the inward ground of the soul, something of the divine image in spite of its defacement by sin.... But it is only in virtue of the divine grace, operating in the inward ground of the soul, that he can turn to God and free himself from the bonds of sin. Conversion, regeneration is wholly the work of God.³

1. C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.207-208.

2. J. Mackinnon, Luther and the Reformation, Vol.I, pp.221-223.

3. Tauler's Predigten, edited by Kunze and Biesenthal, Vol.I, Ser.3.

Quoted from J. Mackinnon, op. cit., p.223.

Furthermore, regeneration is not possible without the incarnation, life, suffering, and death of Christ, for through this work the image of God is restored to the human nature. Through Christ, the believer becomes a child of God and attains the true knowledge of God, and union with Him.¹ Christ is the Savior who, in His unspeakable grace and mercy seeks the sinner, and receives him who comes in a broken spirit. By His death He has saved man from sin and its guilt and the power of the devil, and rendered it possible for God in His grace to forgive sin.² "Our sins were ascribed to Him, and His works to us. For Christ has not otherwise made satisfaction for our sins than if He had Himself committed them, and what He has merited by His works, that we do not otherwise receive and enjoy than if we had merited it ourselves."³ The work of Christ makes the sinner realize the heinousness of sin; but it also arouses in him a firm faith in the ineffable grace and mercy of God in Christ and the sure hope of eternal life, which rests not on his own works or merits, but on this firm faith, manifesting itself in love.⁴ Faith is for Tauler not only the intellectual conviction of God, but it involves also trust in God's word and promise of forgiveness. "Nothing," he says, "is so certain as the word and promise of God, for has not the Lord said, 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word abides forever'."⁵ In connection with faith, Tauler stresses the inwardness of religion. The direct communion of the soul with God

1. K. and B., Vol.I, Ser. 2,3,8,9,10. Taken from Ibid., p.225.

2. K. and B., Vol.I, Ser. 4, loc. cit.

3. K. and B., Vol.I, Ser. 17, loc. cit.

4. K. and B., Vol.I, Ser. 28, Ibid., p.226.

5. K. and B., Vol.II, Ser. 42, Ibid., p.227.

is emphasized in opposition to external works. While he reverences the teachings, sacraments, ordinances, and customs of the Church, the central element in religion is the inner operation of God's spirit in the heart. The revelation of God is not restricted to the written word but is also transmitted through the inner light, taught directly by God. This inner light is the great source and nurse of spiritual life.¹ The Kingdom of God is within you, he repeatedly emphasizes, and he who would find God must seek Him not in external things, but in the depth of his own soul and conscience. Hence the recurring stress on the inner disposition rather than on the outward form or act. "The churches," he tells the people of Cologne, "do not make you holy; but pious, God fearing people make the churches holy."²

This, highly condensed, is a brief summary of Tauler's doctrine. It is enough, however, to show us the evangelical trend which his doctrine took in opposition to ecclesiastical formalism.

Influence

This practical mysticism of Tauler exerted a powerful influence on the Reformation in both ways. Not only did it prepare the minds of the common people, but it was an influence on Luther himself. From several references which Luther, in his writings, makes to Tauler, we know that he was well acquainted with this mystic's teachings, and must have read his sermons extensively. In a letter to his friend John Lange, Luther urges him, "to keep to Tauler".³ Also in a letter to Spalatin on the fourteenth of December, in the year 1516, Luther writes:

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1. K. and B., Vol.I, Ser. 8,17, Ibid., p.228.
 2. K. and B., Vol.II, Ser. 61, Ibid., p.229.
 3. Briefwechsel, E. L. Enders, Vol.Ic., p.55.

If it will gratify you to become acquainted with a solid theology in the German tongue, perfectly resembling that of the ancients, procure for yourself Johann Tauler's sermons, for neither in Latin nor in our own language, have I seen a theology more sound, or more in accordance with the Gospel. Taste and see how gracious is the Lord, if you have previously tasted and seen how bitter is all that we are in ourselves.¹

He likewise acknowledges his appreciation in his Commentary on Romans, in one of his early sermons², and in one of his early controversial writings. In this last work, Luther says, "Although John Tauler is ignored and held in contempt in the theological schools, I have found in him more solid and true theology than is to be, or can be found in all the scholastic doctors of the universities."³ Considering the stage of Luther's development when he wrote these commendations of Tauler's doctrine, we can understand why Luther appreciated him so much.

In view of his long spiritual conflict in the quest for a gracious God, the ever-recurring emphasis on the Cross, suffering as the normal experience of the soul in its ascent to higher life, seems to have appealed to him with special force.⁴

These excerpts from Luther have been used to prove that Tauler exerted a great influence on Luther's doctrinal development. However, the mere reading of these quotations will substantiate that Luther did not derive his doctrines from Tauler's sermons; but rather that he found in Tauler doctrines which he thought were similar to his. He used Tauler to substantiate doctrines of his own, which he had derived directly from the Word of God. In fact, it is probable that Luther himself gave Tauler

1. Briefwechsel, E. L. Enders, Vol.1c., p.75.

2. Werke, Weimar Edition, Vol.1, p.137.

3. Ibid., p.557.

4. J. Mackinnon, op. cit., pp.232-233.

more credit than was due.

It is questionable whether he did not read into these sermons more of his own apprehension of the Gospel than they really contained, and whether in making use of these mystic ideas and terms he did not impart to them a different significance from that of Tauler.¹

To be sure, there are points of similarity between the theology of Luther and Tauler; for instance, both emphasize self-negation in the quest for God, the absolute submission of man's will to the Divine will, the elimination of the thought of merit and reward in performing works, the dependence of the soul's salvation on the exercise of God's mercy and grace, its purely receptive attitude in the experience of God's grace and mercy, humility as the indispensable condition of this reception, the experience of salvation as a present reality and not merely as a thing of hope. Tauler, however, does not develop the Pauline antitheses of faith and works. He does not define the doctrine of justification as it is found in Paul's writings, and as Luther understood it and presented it in his Commentary on Romans. For Tauler, the idea is rather absorption in God by faith, than justification by faith. From his sermons, Luther would hardly have been led back to the true doctrine of Paul. It is certain that he came to this doctrine independently of Tauler. Again the emphasis in Tauler is on the inner Word as the most authoritative norm for the mystic Christian, whereas Luther's authority was the Holy Scriptures inspired by God.²

Thus while Tauler exerted some influence on Luther's development, Luther did not derive his doctrines from the sermons of this mystic.

1. Ibid., p.233.

2. Ibid., pp.222-234.

Luther, it is evident, was mistaken in assuming that 'his theology', as he was beginning to describe his evangelical views in opposition to the schoolmen, was a replica of that of Tauler. The mistake is quite explicable in view of his belief that what he himself taught was in accord with what the Church believed and proclaimed. Like Tauler, he too, at this stage was a pious and devoted monk, conscientious in his observance of the rule of his Order and the usages of the Church, unconscious of any radical divergence in doctrine or practice from use or wont, still an ardent believer in the virtue of obedience to ecclesiastical authority and in the heinous sin of heresy.¹

Tauler exerted a much greater influence on the people of his day, who flocked to hear his sermons. Mysticism like Tauler's, with its emphasis on inner religion and direct communication with God, was the great antidote to religious externalism and ecclesiasticism. Preached in the language of the people, it brought them closer to God, and made them conscious of their responsibilities toward God. In addition, in his sermons, Tauler repeatedly inveighed against the moral degradation of the Church and the world. He denounced the degenerate condition of the high, low, secular, and regular clergy. He strongly protested against letting innocent people die under the ban of the interdict or excommunication. He exhorted the priests to administer the sacraments to the innocent people anyway. For this he himself was excommunicated, and was ordered to be burned by Bishop John of Strasbourg. But undaunted by this, he only worked with greater zeal, "and produced such an effect, that the people died content, and were no longer much afraid of excommunication; whereas, previously thousands of them had expired without absolution, and in great despair".²

1. *Ibid.*, p.235.

2. Specklin's *Collectanea*, quoted in C. Ullman, *op. cit.*, p.211.

Other evidences which show the reformatory character of this mystic are statements such as this:

Magistracy is an estate instituted by God, in temporal matters, all must obey it, even the clergy, be they who they may. The Emperor is supreme magistrate, and therefore obedience is due to him before all. If he govern wrong, he is responsible to God for his conduct, and not to poor men.... For these reasons, none who hold the true Christian faith, and only sin against the person of the Pope, are heretics, but those are heretics who, in spite of remonstrance, obstinately act contrary to God's word and refuse to amend.¹

Such statements, distributed and discussed among the common people, together with the unquestionable evangelical element in Tauler's sermons, undoubtedly prepared the minds of the German people, for the great Reformation which was to have its genesis on that very soil.

1. Ibid., p.212.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GERMAN THEOLOGY

The next representative of medieval mysticism, which we wish to discuss, is the little treatise which bears the name of Ein Deutsch Theologia, The German Theology. This treatise first became prominent when a portion of it was published by Luther in 1516 under the title Ein Geistlich Edles Buchlein. Later, in the spring of 1518, he published the complete work under the title Ein deutsch Theologia.¹ Just who is the author of this profound treatise is not positively known. Conjectures have ascribed its authorship to an unknown man, the physician Gratalorus, which supposition is without sufficient foundation. Others have suggested Johann Tauler as the author, however, he belonged to a preceding age, and his entire character is quite different from that of the book. The best evidence which we seem to have is that found in the preface of the manuscript of 1497,² and also to the preface of Luther's edition of the work which he published in 1516. Both of these editions agree that the author was a Teutonic Knight in priests orders, who held the position of warden of the Teutonic Knights at Frankfurt.³ Seventeen editions of the book as Luther published it appeared in his lifetime, and up to the year 1929 there had been in Germany no less than ninety

1. Theologia Deutsch, edited by H. Mandel. As published in Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Protestantismus, No. 7, edited by J. Kunze and C. Stange, pp.1-11.

2. J. Mackinnon, op. cit., p.213.

3. C. Ullman, op. cit., p.213.

editions of it.¹ An indication of its evangelical tendency is the fact that in 1621 the Roman Church placed the Theologia Germanica on the Index.²

Doctrine

The doctrine set forth in the German Theology is a theology of the heart rather than the intellect. It is based on the inner light rather than on reason. The mystic utterances of Christ in the Fourth Gospel and of Paul are the chief subjects of its discussion. Dionysius, Boethius, and Tauler are the only writers that are quoted by name outside of the New Testament.³

The author starts with a speculative conception of God as the perfect Being and the chief Good. He distinguished between God and Godhead and again between God in and of Himself, and God incarnate. The Godhead is His abstract generality, of which man is not able to comprehend, speak, or think anything. God is this same Being revealing Himself, and existing in three different persons. God incarnate is still this same God, but operating outwardly and on others. Since God is the perfect, all-comprehensive Being, all things have their true substance or essence only in God. The practical problem of how man is to attain communion with God is the central subject of the treatise. Man, by nature, is not capable of knowing God, for he is self-centered. All sin consists in apostatizing from God and in making his self the object of his attentions and love. It was because of arrogation of self that Adam first fell, and consequently all mankind. The restoration of man to God is

1. R. Jones, op. cit., p.178.

2. P. Schaff, op. cit., p.295.

3. J. Mackinnon, op. cit., p.214.

effected in the incarnation of Christ. By Christ, in virtue of His perfect divine life, and by transfusing this life into men, the annihilation of self, obedience, and the union with God is effected.¹ "Through him the death of self-will, the old man, disobedience to God, has been accomplished, and the new man, the life of perfect obedience, has become a reality and has been made possible for his followers. Christ's human nature was so utterly bereft of self that it became the very house and habitation of God."² Man's obedience can never be as perfect as Christ's but it is possible for him to approach so near that he may be said to be divine or a partaker of the divine nature. However, man does not reach this perfection, nor attain to good through his own doing, but this is accomplished alone through the grace of God. Moreover, man must put on the life of Christ out of love for God, and not for the sake of reward. Of the Christian man, the author says,

In such a man must all thought of self, all self-seeking, self-love and all that pertains to self be lost and surrendered to God, to whom the self belongs, except in so far as personality requires its exercise. And whatever comes to pass in a God-like, deified man, whether in doing or in suffering, it is done in this light and in this love, from the same, through the same, unto the same again.³

Through union with God, man also becomes above the law. External regulations are not necessary for him. But while salvation does not depend on them, the Christian will submit to the laws, ordinances, and sacraments of the Church. For Christ also submitted Himself to the law in

1. Theologia Deutsch, edited by Grell. Taken from G. Ullman, op. cit., pp.219-224.

2. Theologia Deutsch, edited by H. Mandel. Quoted in J. Mackinnon, op. cit., p.216.

3. Theologia Deutsch. Quoted by J. Mackinnon, op. cit., p.217-218.

loving obedience. Thus the Christian is free from the law, but free in obedience. Man cannot become arrogant in his liberty nor averse to true obedience, for such freedom would be the freedom of the devil.¹

It is only towards the end of the treatise that the author speaks of the significance of faith for the Christian man. Faith in Christ must precede knowledge.

No doubt every Christian man, whether good or bad believes the articles of the Christian faith, and ought to believe them, even although he may know nothing of them, but as much of their truth as it is possible to know, must be believed, before it is known, and this is the faith which Christ intends.²

Just what faith is, or in what it consists, the author does not say, for his concern is rather with the divine life in the soul through Christ, he is not interested in a logical exposition or theological interpretation of this divine life.

Influence

We might dismiss this flower of medieval mysticism as having little or nothing to do with the Reformation, were it not for Luther's enthusiastic testimony affirming the influence of this little work. In the preface to the edition of 1516, Luther writes,

This excellent little work, poor and homely in language and human wisdom, although it be, is in the same and even greater proportion, rich and precious in the skill and divine wisdom with which it is written; and to boast like an old fool, which I am, next to the Bible and St. Augustine, from no book with which I have met, have I learned more of what God, Christ, man, and all things, are. And now for the first time I discover the truth of what certain great scholars

1. Theologia Deutsch. Taken from C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.227-229.
2. Theologia Deutsch, quoted in Ibid., p.217.

reproachfully say of us Wittenberg theologians, namely, that we have novelties in our heads, as if there had never been in former times and elsewhere any men like ourselves.... Let who so will read this little book and then say whether our theology is new or old, for this book is certainly not new.... I thank God that I thus hear and find my God in the German tongue as I, and they along with me, have not hitherto found either in the Latin, Greek, or Hebrew tongue.¹

Luther's enthusiasm for this booklet is explained partly from his own words and partly from the very nature of the book. In the first place, he was evidently attracted by the charm of the vernacular, German language; and secondly, he was attracted, as he says, because he found thoughts in it which were akin to his own. He was pleased at finding that his theology was not new, but old.

In this mood he was prone to find a fuller reflection of his teaching in any work that strongly moved him than the facts really warranted. The mystic strain in him responded enthusiastically to this discovery, and he undoubtedly assimilated some ideas from this mystic source.²

Some thoughts are very similar to Luther; so similar that Luther himself misunderstood the real significance of the mystic's theology. For both, sin is self-will, egoism; salvation from sin is the work of God alone. It is not attainable by human work or merit. It is made possible only by God in Christ. Man's self must be subordinated.³ On the other hand, there is a quietistic element in the German Theology which is not in accord with Luther's virile spirit. The monotonous emphasis on self-effacement leads finally to actual annihilation of man's will. What strikes one particularly, is the absence of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. The author seems to have

1. Theologia Deutsch, op. cit., p.iii.

2. J. Mackinnon, op. cit., p.219.

3. Ibid., pp.215-216.

very little interest in this aspect of man's salvation. While faith is for him an inward experience, yet he certainly did not comprehend this doctrine as presented in God's Word. The whole tone of the German Theology is decidedly moral, and it is this, together with the strengthening of the Reformer's own theological views, which so powerfully impressed Luther. Especially the confirmation of his central doctrine "that men must set their confidence upon nothing but Jesus Christ alone, neither upon works, nor their prayers and merits. For it is not by our running that we are saved, but by the mercy of God".¹

In conclusion, then, we may say that the German Theology definitely did influence the great Reformer. However, it was only because Luther misunderstood the real significance of the author's theology that he read into the author's words his own theological concepts. Thus it helped him to attain to conviction, and become confirmed in his doctrines. It was in this way that Luther could say that outside of the Bible and St. Augustine, this little treatise had taught him more than any other writing.²

1. Theologia Deutsch, Quoted in C. Ullman, op. cit., p.230.

CHAPTER IX

JOHN STAUPITZ

The final representative of medieval mysticism which we shall consider is a man, who, because of his close personal relationship with the immortal Reformer, was destined to exert a great influence on Martin Luther. This man was the practical Catholic mystic John Staupitz.

John Staupitz was born at Motterwitz near Leisnig about the year 1460. He was descended from an ancient noble family of Saxony. He studied at Leipzig until 1497, when he joined the Augustinian Order, probably at Munich. He then moved to Tübingen, where in 1498 he became prior, and acquired his degree of Doctor of Theology. In 1503 he was elected general Vicar by the Augustinian chapter at Eschwege; in 1511 he became provincial of Thuringia and Saxony; and in 1515, he was elected Vicar-General of the Augustinian Order over all Germany. He was the first dean of the theological faculty at the University of Wittenberg; holding that position from 1502 until 1512, when he resigned and moved to South Germany. In 1520 he resigned the office of Vicar-General, and received a dispensation to join the Benedictine Order. In 1522 we find him Abbot of the Benedictine Monastery of St. Peter at Salzburg. It was here that he died on the twenty-eighth of December in the year 1524.¹

1. "John Staupitz", The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XIV, p. 283.

Doctrine

Staupitz was basically a Thomist, yet he was also a practical mystic in the manner of the Brethren of the Common Life, and their disciples. "He belonged to the school of practical mysticism or Catholic pietism which is best represented by Tauler and Thomas à Kempis."¹ He was a student of Bernard of Clairvaux, Gerson, Tauler, and similar evangelical mystics.²

Staupitz, like so many Thomists, was a disciple of the so-called devotio moderna, or the later mysticism of the Netherlands. Like Thomas à Kempis, the best-known representative of this religious tendency, he is no longer seriously concerned about the ultimate goal of genuine mysticism, the union of the part of God enclosed in the soul with the undivided God-substance. On the contrary, he designates as the highest experience and foretaste of blessedness the mystical union of the soul with Christ, in which there is only a blending of the will and the feelings, but not a temporary suspension of the essential distinction between God and man. However, there is no contradiction between these mystical ideas and the vulgar-Thomistic ideas which Staupitz otherwise advocated. They rather complement each other and consequently do not exist in his mind as unconnected ideas, as is shown by the assertion that only the elect can share in the "pure, unalloyed grace" of saving love toward God.³

While Staupitz gives no systematic presentation of his theological views, these may be derived from sermons and treatises which he wrote. In the manner of all mystics, the basis for Staupitz's doctrine was love. God is perfect Love. This love, through the medium of Christ, is kindled in man. It is the highest love which includes all worship of God, all piety, and can only be learned through the Holy Spirit and Christ who shed this love in the hearts of men. When this love is shed

1. P. Schaff, op. cit., Vol.VI, p.118.

2. J. Mackinnon, op. cit., Vol.I, p.128.

3. H. Boehmer, Road to Reformation, p.100.

in man's heart, God takes up His abode in man's soul, and gives man power to do all things and to keep His commandments. Man's love for God is merely a reciprocal love of God's love for him. There are degrees of this love: the initiative, the growing, and the perfect love. In perfect love man adheres so closely to God that he is said to be one spirit with Him. All things work to the good of the elect, who are Christ's. Christ belongs to God without mediation, but man belongs to God through Christ. A true mark of love is obedience to God's will, for true love engenders a will to do God's will and to forsake sin.¹ Faith in Christ is essential to salvation. The promises of God are contained and guaranteed in Christ. Those who believe in Christ as the Son of God may be confident that they are predestinated to eternal life. Neither confession, nor penitence, but only faith in Christ can assure man of forgiveness of sins and justification. Faith in Christ unites all believers with one another, from whence arises the unity of the Church; and it also unites all believers with Christ, so that He becomes their one true Head. Finally, there is also a higher union, in which the believer and Christ are joined by God in marriage. This is the marriage of Paradise. Christ then takes up His dwelling within man.² Whoever is in Christ through faith, wants to imitate Christ, not only in His life, but also in His suffering and death. Death entered the world by sin. Christ has vanquished sin and death by His passion and death. Therefore, Staupitz says,

1. J. Staupitz, Von der holdseligen Liebe Gottes. Taken from C. Ullman, op. cit., pp.246-247.

2. J. Staupitz, Von dem heiligen Glauben. Taken from Ibid., pp.247-248.

Die like Christ, and without doubt, you will die a good and blessed death.... He only it is, whom all men can follow, and in whom holy living, suffering, and dying, are prefigured to all, so that no one can act, or suffer, or die well, unless it be done conformable to him in whose death that of all others was swallowed up.¹

Influence

From this brief condensation of Staupitz's theology one can easily see in what respect he exerted an influence on Luther. It was not through his mystical tendencies; but rather through his evangelical doctrines, and his advice to study the Scriptures that he influenced Luther. But let us consider his influence a little more in detail.

Staupitz and Luther first became close friends about 1508 when Luther was transferred from the University of Erfurt to that of Wittenberg where Staupitz was dean of the theological faculty. It was at this time of spiritual trouble and affliction for Luther, that Staupitz exerted his influence, and helped Luther in his search for a gracious God. When Luther first told Staupitz of his anxiety as to whether he was among the elect or not, Staupitz replied, "If anyone wishes to dispute about predestination, then begin to speak of the wounds of Christ, who was predestined by God to suffer for sinners, and thus predestination will be solved."² He advised Luther to study the Bible, St. Augustine, and Tauler.³ Luther also says that he learned many other "comforting and salutary" words from Staupitz. For example Staupitz told him: "True repentance begins with the love of God." "These words," Luther says in 1518, "struck me like

1. J. Staupitz, Von der Nachfolgung des Willigen Sterbens Christi, Taken from Ibid., p.248-249.

2. H. Boenmer, op. cit., p.103.

3. T. M. Lindsay, "Luther", The Cambridge Modern History, Vol.II, p.115.

a thunderbolt from heaven and lodged in my soul like the arrow of a mighty man."¹ They led him to a Scriptural understanding of repentance and penance. However, the deepest impression was made by Staupitz's admonition: "One must contemplate that man who is called Christ." That is, one must believe that Christ died on the Cross for the sins of all men. This directed him to study and research in the Holy Scriptures, themselves, to an understanding of the significance of faith, love, and Christ's atonement. Thus it was that Luther in 1531 could say, "I have received everything from Staupitz."² Likewise, in 1523 he could write to Staupitz, "Even though I may have forfeited your good opinion and love, it does not become me to forget or be ungrateful to you, through whom the light of the Gospel first began to shine out of darkness in my heart."³ Thus Staupitz pointed out to Luther the message of a gracious God through Christ, and while he did not enter into systematic discussions of this doctrine, yet his replies drove Luther to "begin to compare his words with the words of Holy Scripture".⁴ It was in doing this that Luther really began formulating definite theological views without regard to theological tradition.⁵ As Luther himself says,

I look now and then to see what they (decrees of the popes, and books of the sophists) have done, or learn from them the history and thought of their time, but I do not study them, or feel myself bound to conform to them. I do not treat the Fathers and the Councils very differently. In this I follow the example of St. Augustine, who is one of the first, and almost the only one of them to subject himself to the Holy Scriptures alone, uninfluenced by the

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1. Works of Martin Luther, published by A. J. Holman, Vol.I, p.40.
 2. Tischreden, Vol. I, Nr.173.
 3. Briefwechsel, edited by E. L. Enders, Vol.IV, p.231.
 4. Works of Martin Luther, published by A. J. Holman, Vol.I, p.90.
 5. H. Boehmer, op. cit., p.105.

books of all the Fathers and the Saints.¹

Thus on the basis of Holy Scripture he finally became the doctrinal Reformer that he was. "I have learned my theology not all at once," Luther says, "I had to search deeper and deeper, and to this my trials brought me in the end."²

1. "Luther's Preface to the First Part of His German Works.", Works of Martin Luther, published by A. J. Holman, Vol.I, p.9.

2. Tischreden, Vol.I, p.146.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

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We have traced the important representatives of the late medieval mysticism down to the very inception of the Reformation. Like the Lutheran Reformation, this unique flowering of piety had its origin on German soil, but unlike the Reformation, it did not spread extensively beyond Germany and the Low Countries. Its chief centers were Strasbourg and Cologne.

We have seen that this mystic spirit was born to fill a definite need in the spiritual lives of the people of that day.

At a time when the scholastic method was falling into disrepute and the scandals of the Avignon court and the papal schism were shaking men's faith in the foundations of the Church, a stream of pure pietism was watering the regions along the Rhine, from Basel to Cologne, and from Cologne to the North Sea. North of the Alps, voices issuing from convents and from the ranks of the laity called attention to the value of the inner religious life and God's immediate communications to the soul.¹

We have seen how this stream of pietism originating with the speculative, transcendental, and almost pantheistical mysticism of Meister Eckhart developed and refined itself into a doctrine of practical Charity; the speculative element still remained dominant in the doctrines of Suso, Tauler, and the German Theology; but the practical element found dominance with the Brethren of the Common Life and John Staupitz.

The mystics along the Rhine agreed with all genuine mystics in striving after the direct union of the soul with God....

1. P. Schaff, op. cit., pp.236-237.

With this aspiration after the complete apprehension of God, they combined a practical tendency. Their silent devotion and meditation were not final exercises. They were moved by warm human sympathies and looked with almost reverential regard upon the usual pursuits and toil of men.¹

Thus their mysticism took on an individuality all its own. If we were to characterize this movement, we might point out six distinguishing features. In the first place, the message of the mystics intended to bring God personally to all; it was addressed to laymen as well as the clergy. Secondly, the mystics emphasized instruction and preaching, and with the exception of Suso, withdrew the great emphasis from traditional ascetic regulations of the Church. Thirdly, they used the New Testament to a great extent, and the Old Testament to a lesser extent in their interpretation of the will of God. In contrast to the Schoolmen, they did not have the habit of referring back to human authorities and bulwarking every theological statement with quotations from Aristotle or the ancient fathers. The German Theology quotes very few passages which are not found in the New Testament, and the Imitation of Christ opens with the quotation of words spoken by Christ. Eckhart and Tauler dwell on passages of the New Testament; and Ruysbroeck's doctrine is chiefly based on the sixth verse of the twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew. Fourthly, in place of the Church, with its sacramental and sacerdotal pillars, is put Christ, as the mediator between the soul and God; and he is offered as within the reach of all. Fifthly, a pure life in humility is taught to be a necessary consequence and accompaniment of the supreme religious experience. And finally, their

1. Ibid., p.239.

use of the vernacular in their sermons and treatises is unique. The mystics are among the earliest masters of German and Dutch prose. Their practice was in plain opposition to the opinion of the German bishop who declared that the German language was too barbarous a tongue to be a proper vehicle of religious truth.¹

The historical significance of this new mysticism lies in the fact that it held up before Europe a higher type of a practical, personal Christianity than was either taught or practised at Avignon and generally throughout the Church; that it taught salvation by faith and a pure life without openly seeking to overthrow sacerdotalism; and that it produced within the Church, without making any objectionable attack on the Church, a genuine spiritual revival and reformation, which would either win over the Church to a realization of the necessity of such a change generally, or would help to produce the disruption which came two centuries later. One must have a short vision who cannot see the connection between this fourteenth century movement and the Protestant Revolt.²

Let us review in conclusion just what this connection was.

There have been some historians who have maintained that Luther and the Reformation was a product of medieval mysticism³

We have seen that it was possible for late medieval mysticism to exert its influence on the Lutheran Reformation in two ways. ^① Either it might have influenced the great Reformer himself, or it might have influenced the people among whom the Reformation was to be fostered. ^② It may have influenced Luther either in his mental or doctrinal development. And it may have influenced the common people through the teaching and activity of the Mystics in preparing the medieval mind for the ideals of the Reformation.

1. Ibid., pp.241-243.

2. A. C. Fleck, The Decline of the Medieval Church, Vol.I, pp.240-241.

3. H. Boehmer, Luther in the Light of Recent Research, p.86. Boehmer cites such men as Braun, Ficker, Buettner, and Mandel.

Looking first on Luther, we see that there are ample possibilities when the Mystics may have influenced him. His first contact with this movement probably came in 1497 when he attended school in Magdeburg, and was instructed by members of the Brethren of the Common Life. It has been supposed that this contact exercised a great influence on his subsequent religious development. However, since we have no actual testimony, the most we can say is that it probably tended to confirm him in the piety in which he had been nurtured. We know that he was acquainted with the writings of Gerhard Zerboldt, and his commendations of the Brethren as late as 1532 certainly show that he always held the Brethren in high esteem.

Luther's next contact with Mysticism, of which we know, is Luther's reading of Tauler's sermons and his publication of the German Theology which took place between the years 1516 and 1518. Luther's statements, which we have quoted previously, regarding these two sources, seem to indicate a great influence on Luther's development. However, we have seen that these statements were probably made only because, anxious as Luther was to find support for his doctrinal views, he unknowingly read into the writings of these Mystics his own theological concepts. From his notes on the Psalms and his lectures on Romans, we know that his doctrinal position was pretty well established by the year 1516. This position, furthermore, was not derived from mystical writings, but was the result of long, tedious research into God's Holy Scriptures. So while the Mystics did not influence his doctrinal development, they may have influenced his mental development. The fact remains that he did have a high regard for Tauler and the German Theology, and so they must

have attracted his mind in some way. This is understandable if we remember the trying spiritual conflicts which Luther experienced. In these mystics he found so much akin to his own experience. After reading Tauler and the German Theology, he came to a firm conviction that every person whom God saves must pass through the hell of pangs of conscience; he also found the assurance that man has no other alternative than to give himself up unconditionally to God for life and death and to wholly relinquish all idea of personal choice; furthermore, he saw that what he had experienced was the way of salvation, and that he had been safe in God while he was experiencing his hours of greatest inner tribulation; and finally, they brought God into a very personal relationship to him, a thought from which he formerly shrank.¹

The final influence, which Mysticism may have had on Luther, was through his father-confessor, John Staupitz. Just what influence was exerted by the close and personal contacts of this practical mystic is insurmisable. As we have seen, Luther spoke very highly of Staupitz, however it was not Staupitz's mystical tendencies which left their impressions on Luther; but rather it was the practical Christian suggestions of his friend that led Luther into a deeper and more thorough study of God's Word, and this Luther valued and gratefully remembered.

Thus we see that while the medieval mystics were important to Luther in developing and confirming certain mental concepts and ideas, we cannot say that Luther's theological views were merely a development of mysticism. As Boehmer points out,

1. J. Boehmer, op. cit., pp.105-106.

Any attempts to derive his views from any specific earlier doctrine or form of piety have always failed. For no matter how much his whole course of development seems to be conditioned by late medieval theology and philosophy, by Augustine and Mysticism, the final product is in no way the logical result of these educational factors, but is something new and original, something that had never existed before, for the explanation of which one must always again point to a wholly uncommensurable quantity: the personal peculiarity of the Reformer.¹

Which personal peculiarity, may we suggest, was that great principle of the Reformation, which was the grand criterion of all of Luther's doctrinal views, namely, the principle of Sola Scriptura; on which were based even the other two great principles of the Reformation: sola gratia and sola fidei.

We now come to the other sphere of influence in which medieval mysticism played an important role in preparing the way for the Reformation. The influence which the mystics exerted on the people among whom they labored and preached was probably far more important than their influence on Luther himself. As Philip Schaff writes, "It is certainly most significant that the Reformation broke out on the soil where the mystics lived and wrought, and their piety took deep root."²

Beginning with Meister Eckhart, the Father of German mysticism, this stream of pietism spread throughout Germany and the Low Countries. Through their example, first of all, and then by their preaching and teaching, they prepared people for the ideals that the Reformation was to effect. They prepared the basic bent of mind in which the ideals

1. Ibid., pp.109-118.

2. P. Schaff, op. cit., p.241.

of the Reformation could take hold. While all of them intended to be loyal sons of the Church, yet some of their preaching, teaching, and doctrines, by their very nature, were in opposition to the Church of that day.

By preaching, by writing and circulating devotional works, and especially by their own examples, they made known the secret and peace of the inner life. In the regions along the lower Rhine, the movement manifested itself also in schools for the education of the young. These schools proved to be preparatory for the German Reformation by training a body of men of wider outlook and larger sympathies than the medieval convent was adapted to rear.¹

They produced a body of men who stressed internalism, individuality, freedom, and opposed the hierarchy; a body of men who denounced scholasticism, formalism, and moral corruption of all kinds; a body of men who preached their religion in the vernacular, stressed piety, approached God without the intervention of the priests, and who later could accept these as principles of the Reformation without looking on them as sinful revolution. There can be no doubt that principles such as these, plus the excellent examples of the Mystics, plus the reading of the Scriptures in the vernacular among the laity, combined to exert an incalculable influence on the common people in preparation for the Reformation.

This, then, was Late Medieval Mysticism. While we cannot say to what extent, we can say that Mysticism had a definite influence on the Reformation. With its speculative internalism and practical Christianity, it began the tedious struggle with Roman formalism and ecclesiasticism. It prepared in a very real way for the ultimate death

1. Ibid., p.239.

struggle which was to free the world from the power of the Anti-Christ -
the death struggle from which emerged victorious, the Lutheran
Reformation.

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