

For the earlier part of the book makes really awkward reading. It flows ill, nor is there relief for us from illustration, anecdote or personality. Fortunately the atmosphere lightens in the second half and the writing is much more consecutive. Only further blocks of quotation from St John of the Cross and St Teresa remain to stub the mind as it presses on. Apart from these the Bible is the only authority cited, but unfortunately with its concreteness and imagery siphoned off. Abstraction prevails, the greatest defect of the work.

Yet one finishes and puts it down with real gain. It is honest, inspired, intolerant of pusillanimity, undistracted from its divine goal. The very clumsiness of delivery gives earnest of prophetic summons, Amos in the fields, the beloved disciple stumbling out his Apocalypse, John Vianney pleading from his rural pulpit.

There are sharp enunciations of truth: love is frustrate unless Trinitarian; in Christ the Father himself loves us; our life exists that our desire for God may grow; to have trust is to let God make our plans; renunciation is not cutting off, but looking in a new way at our surroundings; a soul possessed by grace is a source of grace to souls; to respond to grace helps to redeem the world; we must beware of turning our brethren down as the Pharisees did Christ; if we are finding joy in God we shall delight in making others happy; and so on.

And there are wise counsels about perseverance and prayer and renunciation and regard for others and many other aspects of the Christian life. Some of this material is evidently the fruit of experience. But sometimes one wonders whether the experience should be generalized. Perhaps no 'spiritual' writer wholly avoids this mistake, though it would seem to be a great one. May not God perhaps treat with each of us uniquely? After all he created each of us a unique personality. Too many people tell us what should be going on between each of us and his creator. But it would be wrong to end with this complaint. On the subject of God's love Dom Lefebvre is both helpful and energizing.

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THE WISDOM OF THE DESERT, extracts from the *Verba Seniorum*, introduced and translated by Thomas Merton; Hollis and Carter, 16s.

We are *initiated* into the Christian life and not simply taught *about* it, any formulation always pre-supposing the Christian experience itself. The call we are hearing to make a return to sources is to enable us to discover our way back to God by seeing what is essential in our faith and what is more or less external, and this because so often we seem to have the style while the vigour and meaning have been lost. Nor is this re-sourcfulness only scriptural—though it must always be principally this—but a return to the *Via Regia*, the whole Western ascetical tradition from Cassian to Charles de Foucauld. Professor Chadwick, in the introduction to his translation of parts of the *Verba*, Cassian's *Conferences* and St Benedict's *Rule*, which comprises his volume 'Western Asceticism', justifies—

what may at first sight seem surprising—the amount of space he gives to the Egyptian Fathers, by showing that they were one of the most important influences on the *Rule* and consequently on Western Christianity; 'It is one of the most significant and rewarding of all sources since it contains so much of the "raw material" of history.' What are the *Verba*? From the middle of the fifth century, and probably from the late fourth, collections of the sayings of the hermits began to be gathered together, St Anthony, St Pachomius and Abbot Moses 'that great gentle negro' among them. The question is asked, how am I to find God? and in return the seeker receives a 'word', goes to his cell, meditates, puts it into practice, takes it to Church with him and exchanges sayings with his brother hermits, and in this way the sayings grew. Nor are they all moralizing and *diablerie*, but show a quite special wisdom not to be acquired by merely human knowledge. As a monk of the twentieth century Fr Merton has availed himself of the privilege enjoyed by monks of earlier days in making this selection, freely translated, so that 'those who need and enjoy such apothegms may be encouraged, by the taste of clear water, to follow the brook to its source'. A long and forceful introduction points out that the Fathers have much to teach us, having preoccupations and living in a situation not at all unlike our own. He speaks of their uncompromising personal decision to follow 'an uncharted way' in a 'life continued in compunction', 'shaped by solitude', for 'our time is in desperate need of this kind of simplicity (and) the word to emphasize is *experience*'. These men spent a good deal of their time simply awaiting the re-appearance of the risen Lord, and the *Verba* only make sense in this light, whereas our own eschatological sense has been dulled; yet it is only if we really believe that he will come again and learn to be expectant that we can practice their detachment and find purity of heart. It is a pity, therefore, that such a price for so small a book (81 pp.) will prevent many people buying it, especially when a book of the value of Professor Chadwick's is available for only 35s.

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THE MYSTICAL LIFE, by J. H. M. Whiteman; Faber and Faber, 30s.

Since God is utterly transcendent of his creatures and the order of pure spirit remote from the embodied spirit of man on earth, human understanding of communion with God and above all its imaginative expression is liable to distortions and illusions. Even when Catholic faith safeguards a mystic from unorthodox doctrines, in other respects the form and fashion of his experience may be defective in the extreme. This has been sufficiently shewn by Fr Thurston's studies of the by-products of Catholic mysticism. *A fortiori* when, as is Dr Whiteman's case, the seeker for God has no guide other than his personal experience and his interpretation of other evidence in the light of that experience, it is not surprising that his experience of God should be invested, one must