

# Life of the Spirit

Volume II

AUGUST 1947

Number 14

## WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

By THE EDITOR



INTEREST in mystical topics remains as keen in the post-war world as was its revival during the anxious waiting on air raids and the distress following on bomb and blast. This interest may still be tinged with the desire to escape harsh realities in a sweet and hazy haven of beautiful ideas. Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* or Warner Allen's *Timeless Moment* are not free from a desire for a common mystical experience which will transcend all wars, particularly religious wars, seeking for a way out of the *impasse* in which mankind is now involved. And these two books are no more than recent pointers to a popular concern with things other than sensory or physical.

It is therefore of importance in a journal dedicated to the study of such subjects to make certain what is meant by *Mysticism* and what part, if any, it plays in the spiritual growth of the soul. THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT has indeed referred frequently to the lives and writings of men and women whom it has become customary to call mystics. People like St Catherine of Siena, writings like the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and doubtful figures like Margery Kempe have all been placed under this one category. Later the review will have occasion to consider the works of men who had not the faith of Christ in them and yet have been brought under the same heading. Indeed the *Perennial Philosophy* includes all such writings as of one and the same spirit. It is not, however, an unwarranted inversion to have studied the teaching of individual mystical writers and their lives before deciding on the nature of mysticism. In general, perhaps, it would be less deceptive to avoid the title and call them 'Spiritual Writers' and place them in the wider category of men concerned with the divine. But it is useful to have some idea of the life and teaching of those whom men call 'mystics' before attempting to set down a definition of mysticism. After reading their works we are in a position to ask what they have in common.

At first sight it might seem that the mystics have holiness in common and that the study of mysticism is a study of types and ways of holiness. This is particularly misleading for those who embrace the fundamentally sound teaching that the mystic heights are the culmin-

ation of the normal way of sanctity, open to all to ascend, as all are called to be saints. If it is a high degree of love and union with God which makes the mystic, then we should surely all aspire to be mystics. And yet, following the general use of the term, we do not gather St John Bosco nor even the Little Flower under this title, or at least only in a derived sense. On the other hand, there are many among the lists of mystical writers who have never been raised to the altars of the Church. Holy they certainly must have been, but the Church has not recognised in them the final marks of heroic virtue. It may be an accident due to the Reformation that none of the English mystics is honoured by a feast day nor even by mention in the martyrology. But the Continent provides even greater evidence in the persons of Eckhart, Tauler, Gerard de Groote and à Kempis. Sanctity is a matter of the union—perhaps hidden from the knowledge of all—between a soul and God. The saint has overcome sin and self-delusion which hinder him on his way; he has practised the virtues of asceticism to an heroic degree and in this way has assisted in preparing himself for the full flowering of grace when he may live the same life as the Trinity. We must insist on this continuity of asceticism with mysticism, but we must qualify the obvious conclusion from this which would make every man who had progressed beyond the realms of simple asceticism into a mystic.

We ought to say rather that the man who is thus raised to the closest union with God is given the elements or ingredients of the mystic life but not the right to be called a mystic. It would be dangerous to identify mysticism in its proper sense with the highest forms of the spiritual life. For the word, preserving as it does the notion of a hidden truth, has come to be associated properly with the experience of divine truths, the seeing of visions, the suffering of ecstasies and the like. Mother Julian saw and considered her revelations and St Catherine did likewise; but there is an undeniable difference between these two women of the fourteenth century in the way grace unfolded in their souls and led them to the union of love. They may vie with one another as mystics, but, though both are holy, sanctity differs profoundly in each. In *The Timeless Moment* Warner Allen says that the greatest spiritual phenomena are those of visions and ecstasies and he quotes St Teresa in his support. But any Catholic reader knows that visions and ecstasies are accidental to the essence of the spiritual life; they are not to be expected nor even sought; they are charismata, extraordinary graces from God granted to souls without respect to merit. In other words, the *experience* of God's grace is not essential to the spiritual life at any stage except the last, while some such experience is necessary

for the just attribution of the title mystic. A writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* approached this truth when he defined mysticism as 'an adherence of the inmost spirit to God, through the will, accompanied by a profound intuition of that union'. (January 11th, 1947, p. 20.) It may thus be clearly distinguished from *Theology* in its modern usage, though this distinction is not so clear in its earlier sense of theology as a *loving* knowledge of God as used in the title *Theologia Germanica* and by St John of the Cross in his references to mystical theology. The knowledge of divine mysteries is not derived from human powers of reasoning. A mystic knows the divine mystery because he feels it, not because he argues about it, and he can feel the mystery of union with God at different stages of spiritual growth. It would seem therefore that the element of experimental knowledge plays the *formal* part in mysticism, while the love of God, which is the formal element in holiness, is the *material*, the two together completing the essential nature of mysticism. This would account for the fact of there being many saints who are not mystics, and many mystics who are perhaps only at the beginning of sanctity.

Accepting this conclusion we might ask whether a mysticism were possible in which sanctity was not present at all. Could there be a criminal mystic? And where can the pagan mystic be fitted, for he has not the faith? Experimental knowledge of divine things without grace would seem a contradiction; experimental knowledge without faith would seem to be an established fact. These are subsequent questions with which we hope to deal in future numbers of this review.