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Medieval Spirituality

THE QUEST for holiness was one of the most important aspects of medieval life and thought. To compress the variety of its spiritual experience within the compass of a few thousand words is not only difficult; it can be misleading. All too easily a specific example can pass to a sweeping generalisation, and before long an utterly distorted portraiture emerges of spiritual life in the Middle Ages. Let it be recognised from the start that this article cannot hope to deal with every aspect of medieval piety. Pourrat described the spirituality of the Middle Ages as "a vast forest, full of life but exceedingly dense". He went on to say: "It is, therefore, of first importance to cut out a path which will enable us to pass through without too great labour, and will serve as a landmark in exploring its depths".¹ It will serve our immediate purpose, therefore, if we draw attention to some of the leading ideas in the minds of outstanding Christian writers during the period of one thousand years, and comment briefly in conclusion on the merits and defects of their doctrine of sanctification.

I

Any account of the concept of sanctity in the Middle Ages must take note of its monastic focus. The desire for holiness of life in the patristic period was given forceful expression and practical satisfaction in monasticism. Outstanding leaders in this movement produced literary propaganda which was to influence the lives of earnest Christians for centuries, e.g. Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, the ascetical works of Basil of Caesarea and the writings of John Cassian. But no writing was to have more potent influence in the medieval period than the famous Rule of St. Benedict. Written in the middle of the sixth century, when civil society appeared to be disintegrating, it pointed to a new kind of life which consisted largely in withdrawal from the world. Its leading idea is that of *obedience*. The first words of the Rule announce its central theme. It is written so that those who follow it may "by the labour of obedience" return to God "whom they have abandoned by the sloth of disobedience". These words establish the monastic pattern of life; it is to be a life of strenuous activity, and the object of this activity is to encourage obedience. The obedience is of various kinds. There is the obedience of heart and body to the precepts of spiritual counsel extracted from the Gospels; there is obedience to the Rule itself, and there is a recurrent emphasis on obedience to the abbot. He is the vicar of Christ within the community; his word is to be obeyed as the voice of God Himself. He both teaches and commands: "the abbot's command and teaching sprinkle the leaven of divine justice in the minds of His disciples".²

The Rule became one of the most important religious documents ever to be written. Gregory the Great was deeply influenced by it, enhancing its popularity by his *Dialogues* which preserved some highly interesting biographical reminiscences of Benedict and some of his conversations. Gregory's advocacy of the Rule resulted in its becoming the monastic code of Western Europe. The fact that it was read each day in monastic houses, and that the entire content was thus heard three times a year, gave it an enormous influence in medieval thought, and also ensured that the message of Scripture was heard regularly in these communities, for Benedict quotes extensively from both Old and New Testaments. Benedict is careful to cite firm biblical authority for most of his injunctions. A careful study of the Rule indicates that most of the seeds of medieval piety begin to germinate here. It has a number of most attractive features, but it also helps to develop the idea of "particularity" which became such an outstanding and unfortunate feature of the medieval idea of sanctification. In other words, the holy life was not for the majority, but for a spiritual elite who could withdraw from society and enter the life of a community in the hope that their ambition for a sanctified life might thereby be realised. To focus, however, on the negative aspects of Benedictine monasticism would be unprofitable and unfair. There are many features of its spirituality which are important for Christians of all kinds. The Rule is intensely practical. It pays attention to a whole series of down-to-earth details and refuses to foster the kind of piety which does not issue in kindness and compassion. Its austere and rigorous elements cannot be denied (like 2 a.m. rising, and also that the boys who produce discordant notes during the singing must be whipped for their faults) but it does not encourage immoderate severity. Benedict obviously believed in the importance of education in that either Cassian's *Conferences* or the lives of the Fathers are to be read each day after supper, library books are to be loaned during Lent for individual study, some time on every Sunday is to be devoted to reading, and this is all in addition to the daily lessons from Scripture. The Rule is also attractive because of its Christocentric features. The monk is told that if he wishes to "follow Christ" he must practise self-denial,³ and also that immediate obedience is becoming for "those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ".⁴ The monk is urged "to prefer nothing to the love of Christ".⁵ Christ is actually served when we are helping others. He is worshipped through our hospitality.⁶ The love of Christ is also a practical factor of great importance in the time of temptation; "evil thoughts must be dashed to pieces on the rock that is Christ".⁷ Moreover, Benedict emphasises the immense spiritual impact of a man of God in a position of wise, exemplary and compassionate leadership. Its precise and illuminating instruction to the Abbot (the fact that his deeds are more important than his words, and that he must be sensitively, firmly, and yet graciously adaptable) present a concept of spiritual leadership which is still of immense value. In this respect, one has to remember that the

spirituality of early medieval monasticism collapsed in many places because of poor abbots whose godliness was supplanted by greed.

We have spent some time on this important document because, possibly more than any other item of spiritual literature, it passed into the main stream of medieval religious life, and its insistence on obedience, humility and love for Christ is still relevant.

II

We have already noted that monastic codes began to sponsor the idea of the exclusive character of such piety. Before long the quest for holiness became so closely identified with the monastic life that the ordinary believer could hardly hope to attain it. Gregory the Great distinguishes between the active and the contemplative life. He says:

“. . . the active life consists in giving bread to the hungry, in teaching wisdom to him who knows it not, in bringing the wanderer back to the right way, in recalling one's neighbour to the path of humility from that of pride, in giving to each what he needs, in providing for those who are committed to our care. In the contemplative life, however, while maintaining with his whole heart the love of God and his neighbour, a man is at rest (*quiescere*) from exterior works, cleaving by desire to his Maker alone, so that, having no wish for action and treading underfoot all preoccupations, his soul is on fire with longing to see the face of his Creator”.⁸

Gregory in no sense insists that the contemplative life is reserved specially for monks, but he does admit that only a few people can attain it: “the active life is that of the many, the contemplative of the few”.⁹ It was inevitable that as time went on, later writers would come to understand the *vita contemplativa* in terms of withdrawal from society. Bede recognises that contemplation “is an exceptional way, not to be achieved, or even desired by most Christians”.¹⁰ It is obvious that for Bede the life of the monk is certainly the more sure road to sanctity. He said that the life of the abbess Hilda “fell into two equal parts: for she spent thirty years most nobly in secular occupations, and dedicated the ensuing thirty-three years even more nobly to the Lord in the monastic life”. He says that “she decided to abandon the secular life and serve God alone”.¹¹ In this, Bede is giving expression to a commonly held belief in the early middle ages that holiness was a rather exclusive virtue or quality of life reserved for men and women who could withdraw from the clamant demands and more sinister temptations of everyday life and experience.

III

Within these communities and beyond them the ascetical emphasis became a major preoccupation in the quest for sanctity. In many parts of the Christian Church monasticism appeared as a substitute for martyrdom. Now that the imperial enemy is no longer harassing the Church, the fighting must assume some other form; the

conflict now moves either into the exterior arena of fierce struggle with marauding demons in the desert, or to an equally intensive fight with the enemy within. The power of the flesh must be conquered, and there is a subtle change in the early medieval period from the awareness of need for inward purification to practices of external mortification. Some European saints in the sixth century tried to imitate the Syrian pillar-saints. Inadequately clothed, the deacon Walfroy perched himself on such a pillar in an unfriendly region near Trier with its totally unsuitable climate for such an activity. The Syrian sunshine was far away. The saint was told by the more mundane local bishops that he was foolish not to have "taken into consideration what kind of a country this is"¹²

It was quickly recognised that rigorous mortification in the West would have to assume another form in such entirely different climatic conditions. The passions of the flesh must be fought in some other way. Self-inflicted pain and physical discomfort came to be regarded as "a way of holiness". Isidore of Seville gave this kind of mortification an eschatological significance: "It is most true that the just man judges himself in this life that he may not be condemned by God to an eternal punishment. A man judges himself when he punishes his evil deeds by doing penance"¹³ Peter Damian wrote a number of works to justify a harsh physical rigorism which included the merciless beating of the human body. He linked this distressing type of painful mortification with the earlier Christian phenomenon of martyrdom:

"When with my own hands in the presence of God I strike myself, I prove my devotion to suffering and what I would wish and would will to suffer if the torturer were there. Since in spite of my longing I have not the opportunity of martyrdom, by riddling myself with blows I at least show how fervently I desire it"¹⁴

To the practice of physical scourging there was quickly added the wearing of heavy breastplates or iron rings, all intended to exhaust the wearer and, it was hoped, at the same time increase his sanctification. Thus by the eleventh century the religious soul "then came to concentrate on the cross, no longer as an instrument of our liberation or as a testimony of love, but as a particularly impressive example of suffering deliberately accepted, even sought out"¹⁵ One of the most obvious defects of such excruciating piety is that it cultivates a particularly unfortunate and unbiblical understanding of "the flesh"—admittedly "the base of operations" for so much sin, but not inherently evil in the New Testament tradition.

IV

One of the more attractive features of medieval spirituality is found in its intense concentration on the Person and Work of Christ. We have already drawn attention to Benedict's Christological motivation, and this rich concept emerges in one form or another in almost every century throughout our period. Gregory the Great turned to the

Passion of Christ, believing that meditation on the love of God in Christ both stimulates our own love and enriches our worship.¹⁶ Meditation on the Passion became an outstanding feature of twelfth-century Benedictine spirituality,¹⁷ and it is given special prominence in the life and thought of those two outstanding medieval saints, Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi. Daniel-Rops says of Bernard that his "extraordinarily keen mystic sensitiveness places him at the very source of the tide that carried medieval faith to a devotion to Christ's humanity." He cites Bernard's conviction: "He who is filled with the love of God is easily moved by everything connected with the Word and the Flesh. When he prays the holy image of the God-man is before him; he sees Him being born, growing up, teaching, dying, rising from the dead, and ascending into heaven".¹⁸ Daniel-Rops observes that such phrases "sum up perfectly the motive and the import of that devotion which was so characteristic of the middle ages". His meditation on the Son of God is designed to elicit our adoration and remind us of the inestimable cost of our redemption. The sense of unpayable debt and immense gratitude is an essential aspect of the sanctified life. "How does it happen that you are worthy to be united with Him whom it is the joy of angels to contemplate? Whence comes that joy of knowing Him whose beauty the sun and moon venerate, at whose nod all obey?"¹⁹

Francis is similarly enchanted. J. R. H. Moorman claims that the "most characteristic feature of the mysticism which stems from St. Francis, and owes much to his example, is its devotion to the Person of the Incarnate Christ and its self-identification with Him, especially in His sufferings. The climax of Francis' own spiritual pilgrimage, and the starting point for that of his disciples was the mountain-top of La Verna, when his whole being was wrapped in contemplation of the Passion of Christ, and his desire to share in it was rewarded by the imprint of the stigmata. Throughout his life the goal of Francis' endeavour was not only an outward imitation of Christ whereby men might see Him reflected in his faithful servant, but also a personal closeness to Jesus, the Son of Man, in His joys and in His sorrows, in which the soul of man can in some way share. To this end all the characteristics of Francis' own life—renunciation and poverty, humility and self-abasement, the complete conquest of self-love and self interest—were made to contribute. And those who came under his influence did the same, concentrating their contemplative love upon the historical facts of Christ's earthly life seen in terms of human feelings and emotions".²⁰ Thomas of Celano says of Francis that "above all things, the humility of the Incarnation and the love of the Passion so occupied his mind that he could scarcely think of anything else".²¹ The greatest of all Franciscan devotional writers, Bonaventura, continued to expound this typically Franciscan emphasis on the human life of Christ as one of the means whereby the soul is brought to a deeper apprehension of God. His *Itinerarium* asserts that "the adorable humanity of Christ is the royal road which leads to contemplation", and his *Letter*

to a *Poor Clare* says that this contemplation must certainly concentrate on the sufferings of Christ:

“Draw near dear handmaiden with loving feet to Jesus wounded, to Jesus crowned with thorns, to Jesus fastened to the gibbet of the cross; and be not content as the blessed apostle Thomas was, merely to see in His hands the print of the nails . . . but rather (be) transformed by most burning love for Christ, held by the nails of divine love, pierced by the lance of profound charity, and wounded by the sword of deep compassion, you will know no other wish or desire or hope of consolation except to die with Christ upon the cross, so that you can say with St. Paul: ‘I am crucified with Christ . . . I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me.’”²²

This concentration on the work of Christ is also found in English Spiritual theology; in Bede’s *Allegorical Exposition of the Canticles*, for example, he says:

“If, according to Saint Paul, *Christ was the rock*, what are the clefts of the rock but the wounds which Christ received for our salvation? The dove settles there and builds her nest when any one meek spirit, or the whole church confides her sole hope of salvation in Our Lord’s Passion”.²³

Similarly Aelred of Rievaulx meditates on Christ’s Passion in his *Mirror of Love*:

“While I wait let this sweet meditation fill my memory, lest forgetfulness darken it for me: While I wait, let me look upon myself as knowing nothing, except my Lord, and him crucified, lest empty error seduce my knowledge from the firm foundation of the Faith, let the delight of all my love be in You, lest I be taken up by any worldly desire”.²⁴

Aelred’s Rule contains a series of “Meditations on the mysteries of Christ” in which we are invited to reconstruct with the author’s help the stories described in the Gospel narratives (forcefully amplified by Aelred); the readers are expected to place themselves within the biblical events, almost as participants.²⁵ The thirteenth-century English *Ancrene Riwe* was almost a guide book to piety, written for the help of a recluse. It also asserts the importance of the Gospel narratives and in this work the “love of God is conceived chiefly as the response of the recluse, in her life of penance, to the suffering of Christ”.²⁶

The fourteenth-century mystics frequently returned to the Passion narrative in the exposition of their doctrine of sanctity. Richard Rolle composed one of the most famous meditations on the Passion in this period, well known for its literary beauty, but merely developing a central medieval spiritual theme, as in the *Ancrene Riwe*.²⁷ In his *I Sleep and my Heart Wakes* Rolle appeals to his reader:

“I wish you often to think upon the Passion, for that will kindle your heart to despise all the good things of this world and its joys, and to desire ardently to live with angels and saints in the light of heaven; and when your heart is completely disposed to

the service of God and when all worldly thoughts are expelled from it, then you will wish to steal away and be alone to think of Christ, to spend much time in prayer. For through devout meditations and holy prayers your heart shall be made ardent in the love of Jesus Christ".²⁸

For Walter Hilton this quest for Christ is an expulsive factor in spiritual experience:

"Then if you feel great desire in your heart for Jesus, either through the recollection of this name or by remembering and saying some word or some prayer, or through any act which you perform, and if this desire is so great that it expels, as it were by violence, every desire and remembrance of the world and of the flesh, so that they can find no place in your heart, then you are indeed seeking Jesus".²⁹

In *The Scale of Perfection* Hilton reminds his contemporaries that this quest for Christ is not only rewarding, but also unceasing: "for the better you find Him, the more you want Him. Then you will seek Him best and find Him best through whatever kind of prayer or meditation or occupation gives you the most desire for Him and the greatest feeling of Him . . . forget what you have found, and always long more and more for Jesus, wanting to find Him better, as if you had not found Him at all."³⁰

Possibly this aspect of medieval spirituality arrives at its finest expression in the *Devotio Moderna* and particularly in the work of its most representative writer, Thomas à Kempis. A member of the famous Brethren of the Common Life, Thomas insists that self denial and the bearing of the Cross are not irksome disciplines for the true lover of Christ. For such a believer sacrifice is an essentially supportive experience: "If thou bear thy cross cheerfully, it will bear thee, and lead thee to the desired end, to wit, where there shall be no more suffering . . . if thou bearest it unwillingly, thou makest thyself a load, and burdenest thyself the more."³¹

V

It is probably right for us now to consider the renunciatory element in medieval spirituality. From the earliest days Christians desiring to pursue the way of holiness came to regard possessions as a snare. Athanasius's *Life of Antony* begins with an account of Antony's response to the Rich Young Ruler narrative; he abandoned his money and personal belongings, and made his home in the desert. When threatened by the Emperor Valens, Basil of Caesarea replied, that "the confiscation of goods does not harm one who has nothing".³² The concept of poverty was an important aspect of Imitatio Christi in Franciscan piety, where it obviously needs to be seen against the background of that thirteenth century materialism which had invaded the church just as it had dominated secular society. J. R. H. Moorman says of Francis: "He had seen the scramble for money and the power which money can bring. And he had renounced it all. By humility he

had renounced the power; by poverty he renounced the money".³³

It is important to note that for Francis poverty was an ideal and also a "personality". It became the Lady Poverty to be wooed and won, and pursuing this higher gift, Francis despised money: "let dung and money be loved and valued alike".³⁴ The renunciation-theme is therefore a most important aspect in medieval piety. The whole of the first book of the *Imitation of Christ* is given up to the idea of renunciation, and here, as elsewhere in the spirituality of the middle ages, it is not merely the disavowal of monetary wealth and secular honours, but also a recognition of the limitations, if not the vanity of human knowledge. Stephanus Axters says of Thomas à Kempis: "It looks as if either he himself had put too much trust in such knowledge at the beginning of his religious life or he had had a close-up view of the excesses of certain teachers; in any case he was blaming the exaggerations of a degenerate scholasticism".³⁵ This assertion about the limited value of intellectual equipment in the quest for sanctity became a leading feature in late medieval piety. *The Book of Privy Counsel*, written by the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* gives forceful expression to this same theme. The man who would commune with God is told how to act and then is warned: "It will seem to your intelligence that what you do is useless, and this is merely because intelligence cannot judge it . . . there is no work which I can do, nothing which can be achieved by any labour of my intelligence or faculties which could bring me so close to God and so far from the world as this little naked feeling and offering up of my blind being would".³⁶ The famous "Via Negativa", characteristic of some exponents of late medieval piety, is yet another indication of their emphasis on the limitation of the human intellect; possibly the best exposition of this approach is in the fourteenth-century English work *The Cloud of Unknowing* where the reader is made to recognise that the way to God is "by acknowledging that the most which our fine human intellect can achieve is that we cannot know what He is Who is infinite".³⁷ In the previous century Stephen, the abbot of a Yorkshire Cistercian house, had written a short work, *Threefold Exercise*, in which he had asserted that the heart must be lifted up to the Creator "not seeking to understand by a laboured use of the intellect but to love by faith, giving thanks to Him for all His benefits".³⁸

There is little doubt that this negative or at best cautious approach to intellectual ability in the quest for sanctity is a reaction to the scholasticism of the preceding century or two. Many were weary with the learned abstractions and the fascination for dialectic and syllogisms. Those who believed in what Pourrat has described as "Speculative spirituality" appealed almost exclusively to reason: "Their end was to expound the principles of theology and spirituality in an abstract manner, in synthetic treatises, all the parts of which should be bound together and to each other according to the strict rules of logic".³⁹ Such speculative writers did not trouble themselves with matters regarding the practical consequences of their teaching. Fos-

tered in the twelfth century by Abelard, it became the preoccupation of the great scholastic theologians in the thirteenth century. It was a natural thing for later writers to react against such teaching and to long for an experience of God which was not "bookish" but immediate, emotional, personal and vital.

VI

We have referred to Pourrat's description of Speculative spirituality, and at this point some mention must be made of those writings which fall in the opposite category of affective piety. If it is true that the medieval doctrine of sanctity gathers many of its leading ideas around its doctrine of Christ, it must also be said that much of its teaching coheres around the biblical concept of the love of God. This is obviously not missing from earlier writers, but it comes to flower in the contribution of Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard insists that man is to love God for Himself "because of a twofold reason; nothing is more reasonable, nothing more profitable".⁴⁰ Daniel-Rops reminds us that Bernard "has clearly shown that no forms of devotion have any meaning unless attributed to God, that man's goal is not to love God for one's self but for Himself".⁴¹ Earlier writers had concentrated on the holiness, righteousness and justice of God. From the twelfth century onwards a new warmth entered man's religious thinking. R. W. Southern says: "In the early Middle Ages God had not appeared as a friend. By great labour and exertion, by crippling penances and gifts to the church, by turning from the world to the monastic life, men might avert God's anger: but of God as a friend they knew little or nothing. It was terribly difficult to approach Him. Then quite suddenly the terror faded and the sun shone".⁴² This emphasis on the love of God must also be seen against the background of medieval romantic literature of a secular kind, though one must not overlook the deep mistrust which many mystics had for secular literature and for the philosophy and the theology which seemed to reflect it.⁴³ Bernard deals with the sources, motives, measure, and degrees of love. As to its *sources*, Bernard explains that love is one of the four passions of man (the others being fear, joy and sorrow) and it is therefore natural and instinctive for man to love himself before all things. This kind of love is natural rather than spiritual or divine, and it can only be transformed into the love of God in the experience of trial and suffering. In these circumstances man may turn towards the Lord and find that, assisted by divine grace, he begins to believe in God and love Him for the benefits he receives. The *motives* which inspire man to love God are found in man's gratitude for the blessings and benefits of the material world in that all his bodily necessities are met; the Christian will be even more grateful for the work of Christ: "Christ has given us His merits, He keeps Himself for our reward; He gives Himself as food for holy souls, sacrifices Himself in order to redeem souls in captivity".⁴⁴ "In the creation, His first work, He gave me to myself; in the second He gave Himself to me."⁴⁵ Bernard's heart

overflows in gratitude: "My God, my Help, I will love thee because of thy mercy as much as I am able, not as much as I should, but at least as much as is in my power. I shall be able to love Thee more when Thou hast increased my love, but I shall never love Thee as much as thou deservest".⁴⁶ Bernard is quick to acknowledge that we cannot love God in our own strength. He must create within us the love with which we may love Him. As to the *measure* of our love, it must be as limitless as God Himself.⁴⁷ This love of God ought then to be developed in us unceasingly, and Bernard notices the phases in the development of love which he describes as its *degrees*. The first degree is the natural love man has for himself, the second degree is man's love for God, purely in return for the benefits he receives from God; the third degree is to love God for His own sake, rather than simply for what He gives, though it does not exclude the motive of loving for His gifts as well as for Himself. The fourth degree of love is to love God solely for Himself without any thought of self-interest at all.⁴⁸ Bernard finds it difficult to believe that anybody can perfectly arrive at this fourth degree: "If there be anyone who has experienced it, let him say so; for my part, I admit that it seems to me impossible. That will doubtless be brought about when the good and faithful servant shall have entered into the joy of his Lord, and shall have been inebriated with the abundance of the House of God".⁴⁹ In his famous *Sermons on the Canticles*, Bernard distinguishes between man's love for the human Christ which is sensible (*amor carnalis*) and man's love for God Himself, which is spiritual. It seems as though one progresses from the "lower" to the "higher" kind of love. R. Newton Flew believed that, for all its attractiveness, Bernard's doctrine of perfection is inadequate: "There must be something defective in this statement of the ideal, if perfect love can never be reached, even for a single moment in this life, by the grace of God. And partly owing to this scepticism, partly owing to his forsaking of the thought of the earthly life of our Lord at the climax of His attainment, the edifice of devotion reared by Bernard for the shelter of the faithful was not so homely and hospitable in its atmosphere as (Augustine) would have wished".⁵⁰

It is important to note, however, that although the affective note is frequently heard in medieval devotional literature, more than one writer finds it necessary to emphasise that the expression of a mere human emotional response is no guarantee of spirituality. It can be seen for example in Aelred of Rievaulx where in *The Mirror of Love* there is a discussion between Aelred and a novice who is surprised that in his experience of the monastic life thus far, he has only noticed a lessening of the emotional fervour he once knew. Aelred replies by observing that in his earlier days the novice's emotions were directed to all manner of objects: "It is too true", says the young man. "I can remember some times being moved to tears by some worldly tale or other about Arthur". In other words there is a distrust of carnal emotion even when it is clothed in religious language. A priest who professes to have received special revelations and emotional experi-

ences is rebuked by Walter Hilton in *The Scale of Perfection*: "You go to much trouble to tell me what you feel, how wonderful it all seems, how there is rarely anyone who can understand it . . . Whenever there spring up in you . . . impulses born of false exaltation, wilful eccentricity, conceit, or undue intellectual curiosity, to flourish as would barren weeds, cut them down with the sickle of self-knowledge and self-accusation".⁵¹

VII

A brief word is necessary at this stage regarding what might be described as the schematic presentation of holiness ideas in the Middle Ages. There is a marked tendency, on the part of medieval mystics especially, to attempt a classification of the various stages in man's quest for sanctity. This sometimes results in a highly artificial manipulation of biblical texts or narratives in order to interpret them as categories of sanctification. Historians of Christian Spirituality have noted that Gregory of Nyssa made use of some terms and ideas which were later to become common in spiritual theology. Gregory distinguished three stages: Purification, Illumination and Participation; these concepts were popularised by Pseudo-Dionysius, and thus passed into the vocabulary of Western Mysticism. We have already mentioned Bernard of Clairvaux's degrees of love, and Hugh of St. Victor in his *Didascalion* teaches that there are four steps or degrees which prepare the soul for future blessedness, all leading to a fifth which he calls Contemplation.

The various stages of contemplation are discussed by Walter Hilton in *The Scale of Perfection*. These ingenious categories tend to proliferate in different authors with the unfortunate result that sanctification is portrayed almost as a movement from one mystical crisis to the next, rather than in terms of intimate personal relationship with Christ or as a continuing experience of the transforming inward work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and life of the believer.

VIII

If, to use Pourrat's imagery, one is to trace the various paths through the luxurious forest of medieval spirituality, some mention must be made of that strange and bewildering track which deals with visions, ecstasies, visitations, levitations and other psychological phenomena. In this strange realm we are confronted with the medieval fascination for the miraculous and whether one is dealing with the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi, or the "showings" of Julian of Norwich, it is obvious that this aspect of the unusual played no mean part in the thinking and writing of some medieval mystics. On the other hand, it would be wrong to assume that these concepts always predominate for, although there are many who delight in visionary experiences, there are others who are highly suspicious of such phenomena and who recognise the dangers of pseudo-spirituality. Walter

Hilton believes that the phenomena may be good or evil, and in *The Scale of Perfection* is at pains to distinguish between them:

"This will show you partly why you ought not to allow your heart deliberately to rest or completely to delight in any physical sensation derived from spiritual consolations or sweetnesses, however good they may in themselves be. In your own estimation you should consider them as nothing or little in comparison with your spiritual aspirations, nor must you set your heart upon them, but forget them if you can".⁵²

The unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* has a similar warning:

"Sometimes God will inflame the body of some devout servant of His here in this life with very wonderful sweetness and consolations . . . We need not suspect such sweetness and consolations, nor, I think, need he who experiences it. But, I beg you, do not trust all the other consolations, melodies, rejoicings and sweetnesses that enter you suddenly from outside, from you have no idea where. They may be good, they may be evil."⁵³

In his work *Of Angels' Song* Walter Hilton puts it like this:

"When the soul is lifted and ravished beyond its powers of physical perception, and out of its recollection of all earthly things, it may, if our Lord pleases, in its great fervour of love for Him and light from Him hear and feel heavenly sounds which the angels make to the glory of God. But this song of the angels is not the soul's greatest joy . . . its greatest and its living joy is in God's love of Himself alone, and any vision of angels and spiritual beings, any communing with them, is a secondary delight".⁵⁴

IX

The most cursory survey of medieval spirituality will make any serious reader aware of a number of outstanding merits. Marked deficiencies will be evident to most readers, but there are also a number of conspicuous theological and spiritual achievements, some of which ought clearly to be acknowledged.

One applauds the intense concern of most writers to relate their teaching to the biblical tradition. There is a keen desire on the part of many mystical writers throughout this long period to portray their teaching in Scriptural categories, and to present their leading ideas with the aid of rich biblical narratives. Sometimes the pre-occupation with allegorical teaching leads them to wild and extravagant forms of interpretation. Many of them are particularly fond of Old Testament passages. Aelred of Rievaulx's *The Mirror of Love* illustrates the passion of his age for Hebrew studies, and for the spiritual reinterpretation of the Old Testament in the light of the new dispensation, and of spiritual experience. Richard of St. Victor, in his *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Major*, describes the journey of the soul towards contemplation with the aid of somewhat fanciful allegorical interpretation.

The children in patriarchal families are identified with mystical experiences and suitably classified. *The Book of Privy Counsel* by the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* has similar ideas:

"How often have you read and heard from so many authorities, holy and wise and trustworthy, that as soon as Benjamin was born his mother Rachel died? By Benjamin we understand contemplation, by Rachel reason."⁵⁵

We may not appreciate their allegorical flights of fancy, but it is at least encouraging to notice their desire to anchor their spiritual teaching in Scripture, though one must admit that they fell short of their ideal, and at times used Scripture merely as a series of pegs on which to hang their own notions or insights about the spiritual life.

Another feature of the medieval doctrine of sanctification worthy of special commendation is its intense concentration of interest on the Person and Work of Christ. We have already observed this repeated emphasis and one applauds its Christocentric passion. Unfortunately there are many writers who do not seem able to take their Christological interest beyond the aspect of exemplarism, though some make strenuous endeavours to expound the concept of Union with Christ.

A further aspect worthy of special mention is the realism with which these medieval writers expound their doctrine of man and sin. Obviously their message arises out of the background of their times; many of them were surrounded by cruelty, violence and greed. Their teaching therefore is not marred by a naive optimism or a superficial understanding of the power and grim effect of sin in the life of man. Far from it. Columbanus emphasises man's wretchedness in harsh terms and with this strong realism: "Woe to thee, human misery . . . wretched art thou, O man, unhappy creature who lovest things more than thine own self". He portrays man as stumbling blindly in this dark and uncertain life; any security it appears to give is purely illusory. God alone is our refuge, and man's whole dignity lies in his being made in the image of God.⁵⁶ There is no attempt here to gloss over the human predicament, or to believe that by occasional minor adjustments a man can attain the Christian ideal.

X

We conclude, however, by noting some defects in the medieval doctrine and experience of sanctity. The criticisms are by no means exhaustive, nor are they meant to imply that, because of such inadequacies, other aspects of medieval piety are without value.

The initial fault which strikes the reader is probably due to the medieval environment. These writers were obviously conditioned by the thought-forms of their time, in which emphasis was more on the corporate than on the personal aspect of sanctification. It is true that several medieval writers endeavoured to interpret the quest for sanctity in individualistic terms, but Powicke has reminded us that "the medieval Church was composed of societies rather than individuals . . . its organisation was inextricably involved with that of the com-

munity".⁵⁷ If one considers the story of the spread of Christianity from the Constantinian period onwards, it is clear that in many places church members were increased by the addition of masses of men rather than by the conversion of particular individuals. Naturally there were striking exceptions to this, but as Powicke observes: "The success of the great St. Boniface in the eighth, and of the Cistercian monk, Christian of Oliva, in the thirteenth century was mainly due to the adherence of the local magnates and to the backing of friendly or interested powers outside".⁵⁸ Interpretations of the ideal Christian life were manifestly coloured by the feudal outlook. The individual mattered little; the community was everything. In such a society what was the meaning of *personal* holiness? The idea of social hierarchy found its counterpart in a spiritual hierarchy. The serfs were of limited value; the "saints" were those who could withdraw from the lower orders of being, and make the ascent to fellowship with God. It was the Reformers of the sixteenth century who emphasised afresh the importance and dignity of the individual, without allowing their doctrine of salvation to degenerate into an unbiblical individualism.

Another defect lies in the intense concentration on the impedimenta of the religious life; at every corner one meets the medieval pre-occupation for relics and the fascination for spiritual transactions of a quasi-commercial character, such as indulgences. The quest for holiness becomes part of ecclesiastical mechanics, and issues in a highly developed penitential system closely related to the power of absolution. The rich qualities found in the lives of medieval saints come to be measured in almost quantitative terms, only to develop into the doctrine of "the Treasure of Merits", stored up in heaven by holy people, and benevolently placed at the disposal of lesser mortals through the indulgence system. Inevitably, the interest begins to move from practical sanctification in this world to purgatorial refinement in the next.⁵⁹ But it is not exclusively eschatological; the concept of transference, is also used to relieve an offender of a guilty conscience in *this* life. The idea develops so that the redemption of a satisfaction can be accomplished by encouraging others to fast on behalf of an offender. A tenth-century English work, *Canones Editi sub Edgardo*, explains how a rich man can accomplish a seven years' fast in three days by enlisting the services of a large number of people who will all fast for three days on bread, green herbs and water: "This is the relaxation of penance for a powerful man and one rich in friends. But a man without power cannot act thus; but must look after the matter with more zeal in his own person".⁶⁰ Almsgiving as well as fasting assumes sanctificatory value. The doctrine of sanctification is thus forced along a perilous route. It has been cogently argued that such instances of "transferred benefits" owe their origin to the system of compositions existing in the secular law of both the Irish and German peoples, but whatever its social and legal background it certainly moved its devotees further and further away from the New Testament doctrine of grace.

In the middle ages the idea of sanctification becomes more commonly associated with holy people of an exceptional and remote kind. The idea of a highly rarified spiritual hierarchy is given its most striking expression in the exaltation of Mary. A survey of the medieval concept of sanctification must take some account of Marian piety. The mother of Jesus is portrayed as an example for all who would attain the virginal or celibate life, and the ornate love-imagery of medieval spirituality becomes closely associated with her help.⁶¹ The fascination for the Virgin Mary and "the cult of Saints", intended presumably as a spur to holiness, was always in danger of becoming its substitute. It issued in pious journeys to venerated shrines rather than in the more exacting daily pursuit of a righteous and Christlike life.⁶² Moreover, although unintended, such concentration of interest on the holy figures of the past can deflect from the uniqueness of Christ and the insistence that man's justification and sanctification is dependent on God's grace alone.

There is little doubt, however, that one of the most unhelpful byways of medieval piety was its exaltation of monastic experience. The holy man or woman is the isolated and comparatively rare individual who can abandon the harsh realities of the secular world and withdraw into solitude or seclusion.⁶³ Pourrat has noticed the tendency: "There were not two 'spiritual lives', one for the ascetic, the other for ordinary Christians. There was only one; and that was monastic. From the birth of monasticism, Christians who proposed to take the quest for perfection seriously became monks—either by retiring to the desert or cloister or by practising domestic asceticism of the monastic kind . . . Hence, it is not surprising that spiritual writers should never have thought of addressing themselves to secular Christians; nor that their piety was monastic in character". Harnack has said: "The history of piety in the middle ages is the history of monachism".⁶⁴

From time to time devout writers endeavoured to present to their contemporaries a less exclusive and more universal concept of sanctity. Meister Eckhart insisted that "the soul's joys could be fulfilled in the world and in the market-place no less than in the church or in the cloister",⁶⁵ and in the early seventeenth century Francis de Sales wrote enthusiastically on perfection for "persons living in the world",⁶⁶ but such expositors were hardly common in the preceding centuries.

It is possible that the most unfortunate aspect of medieval piety lies in its intense concentration upon human effort to the detriment of the divine initiative. The earnest believer longing for sanctity is urged to bend every nerve and make all possible effort to attain it. Naturally, some writers emphasised man's utter reliance upon God's unmerited grace⁶⁷ but the main thrust of medieval perfectionism lay in its emphasis on relentless activism and the importance of strenuous human effort. One example must suffice, that of Walter Hilton in *The Scale of Perfection*. Hilton makes use of the Lucan parable of the Lost Coin and offers this highly significant explanation:

"And you will throw out of your heart all such sins, and sweep

your soul clean with the broom of the fear of God, and with the water from your eyes will wash it, and so you will find your drachma, which is Jesus. He is the drachma. He is the coin, and He is your inheritance. It is not so easy to find this drachma as it is to talk about it, for this is not the work of an hour or of a day, but it will take many days and many years, and the sweat and toil of your body and the travail of your soul: but do not give up, keep on seeking, with sorrow and deep sighs and silent lament bend down low and weep tears of anguish and pain, because you have lost your treasure Jesus".⁶⁸

Hilton's interpretation illustrates not only the intense moral seriousness of medieval perfectionism, all very commendable, but also its anthropocentric dangers. In the teaching of Jesus the parable was never intended to portray man's search for Christ but the Lord's astonishing and loving generosity in seeking us. No doctrine of sanctification can be adequate if it ignores human responsibility. Neither can it be satisfying and effective if it minimizes the grace available to all and by which alone men and women can become what, in their better moments, they genuinely long to be.

NOTES

- ¹ P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality in the Middle Ages* (London 1924), v.
- ² R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London 1970), 219.
- ³ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. J. McCann (London 1972), 4.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, Prologue and 4.
- ⁸ J. Leclercq, F. Vandenbroucke and L. Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 2; *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (London 1958), 10.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹⁰ E. Colledge, *The Medieval Mystics of England* (London 1962), 9.
- ¹¹ Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, ed. L. Sherley-Price (Penguin Classics; London 1955), 346; cf. J. Nelson, "Royal Saints and early medieval kingship" in *Studies in Church History*, ed. D. Baker, vol. 10 (Oxford 1973), 41: "In the hierarchy of early medieval values, sanctity was therefore not only superior to all other statuses including that of kingship, but it was available only to those who had withdrawn from the *ordo secularis*. Sanctity and secularity were, in effect, mutually exclusive".
- ¹² Leclercq, *History*, 60.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117-18.
- ¹⁵ L. Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality* (London 1961), 137, cf. also W. E. Sangster, *The Pure in Heart* (London 1954), 176-7 where Sangster mentions some of the self-inflicted tortures of the medieval saints.
- ¹⁶ Leclercq, *History*, 16.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184-5.
- ¹⁸ H. Daniel-Rops, *Bernard of Clairvaux* (New York 1964), 53.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ²⁰ J. R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order* (Oxford 1968), 256.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 256-7.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 260-1.
- ²³ Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 12.
- ²⁴ Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Love*, Book I, Chapter 5.

- ²⁵ Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 34.
- ²⁶ Leclercq, *History*, 276.
- ²⁷ D. Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London 1961), 63-4.
- ²⁸ Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 148, cf. 150-1.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 229-30. Bernard also emphasizes the expulsive force of love for Christ, cf. *Sermons on the Canticles XX*: "Let the Lord Jesus be to your heart sweet and pleasant, so as to destroy the false attractiveness of the carnal life; let his sweetness overcome the other, as one nail drives out another". *Late Medieval Mysticism* (Library of Christian Classics, vol. XIII, ed. R. C. Petry; London 1957), 69.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.
- ³¹ *The Imitation of Christ*, II. 12.
- ³² Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations*, 43, 49.
- ³³ J. R. H. Moorman, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (London 1963), 33.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ³⁵ S. Axters, *The Spirituality of the Old Low Countries* (London 1954), 72.
- ³⁶ Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 162.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ³⁹ Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*, 102.
- ⁴⁰ *De Diligendo Deo*, I.
- ⁴¹ Daniel-Rops, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, 56.
- ⁴² R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and other studies* (Oxford 1970), 35.
- ⁴³ Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 29.
- ⁴⁴ *De Diligendo Deo*, VII.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, V.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, VI.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII-X.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, XV.
- ⁵⁰ R. N. Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (Oxford 1934), 223-4.
- ⁵¹ Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 27-8, 68.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 208.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60-1.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 61-2.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.
- ⁵⁶ Leclercq, *History*, 36; cf. *Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. G. S. M. Walker (Dublin 1970), 77-9, 89, 91-3 et passim.
- ⁵⁷ F. M. Powicke, *The Christian Life in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1935), 5-6.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁵⁹ Some indication of the intensity of religious thought regarding purgatory can be seen in an illustration from 16th-century France. The town crier of Troyes walked through the streets from midnight to two in the morning, crying: "Wake up, wake up, you who sleep, and pray God for the souls of the dead, whom he wants to forgive". A. N. Galpern says: "His words conveyed the intense sense of concern of Christians for the souls agonizing in purgatory, as well as the great opportunity they sensed, and responsibility they felt, to abridge this suffering . . . Hucksters could make extravagant claims for the efficacy of their relics, in sixteenth-century Europe, only because laymen wanted very much to hear about and believe in the case of release from purgatory". Cf. A. N. Galpern, "Religion in 16th-century Champagne" in C. Trinkaus and H. A. Oberman, *The Pursuit of Holiness in late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (Leiden 1974), 148.
- ⁶⁰ R. S. Franks, *The Work of Christ* (London 1962), 115.
- ⁶¹ The role of Mary in medieval piety is discussed by Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*, and Leclercq, *History*. For a protestant view, cf. G. Miegge, *The Virgin Mary* (London 1955).

⁶² Walter Hilton tilts at pilgrimages in *The Scale of Perfection*: "You do not need to run off to Rome or to Jerusalem to look for Him there: turn your thoughts into your own soul, where He is hidden" (Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 234).

⁶³ This sentence is not meant to imply that all medieval mystics were unconcerned about the needs of their neighbours. There was a considerable sense of social responsibility amongst most groups, cf. R. C. Petry, "Social Responsibility and the late Medieval Mystics" in *Church History*, vol. XXI no. 1 (March 1952).

⁶⁴ K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God*, abridged ed. (London 1934), 146.

⁶⁵ Southern, *Medieval Humanism*, 25.

⁶⁶ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (London 1948).

⁶⁷ e.g. Bernard of Clairvaux: "... every soul among you that is seeking God should know that it has been anticipated by him, and has been sought by him before it began to seek him . . . What can be more wicked than the servant usurping to himself the glory which belongs to his Lord? . . . The soul seeks the Word, but it had been previously sought by the Word", *Sermons on the Canticles LXXXIV*, in *Late Medieval Mysticism*, 74-5.

⁶⁸ Colledge, *Medieval Mystics*, 233.

RAYMOND BROWN.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society will be held on Monday, 24th April, 1978, at 4 p.m. at Westminster Chapel, Buckingham Gate, London, S.W.1. The speaker will be Professor Keith Robbins, of the University College of North Wales, Bangor, and his subject will be "Free Churchmen and the Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939".

CORRECTION

In an article on "The Victoria History of the Counties of England", by Professor R. B. Pugh, Fleet Street Baptist Church, Swindon, was described as a General Baptist church (*Baptist Quarterly*, July 1977, pp. 114-15). The church was in fact Particular Baptist, committed, according to its deeds, to "moderate Calvinism". Stratton Green, from which its earliest members came, was also Particular Baptist. We are grateful to the Rev. C. Sidney Hall, a former pastor of the Swindon Baptist Tabernacle (the successor to the Fleet Street chapel), for his help in establishing the facts.