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Professor Söderblom on Religion and Mysticism.

BY PRINCIPAL THE REV. J. G. TASKER, D.D., HANDSWORTH COLLEGE, BIRMINGHAM.

BARON FRIEDRICH VON HÜGEL'S *The Mystical Element of Religion* has found an appreciative and discriminating reader in Professor Nathan Söderblom of Upsala, who contributes to *Religion und Geisteskultur* for October last a deeply interesting article entitled 'Thoughts on Religion and Mysticism.' Full justice is done to the erudition, intellectual sincerity, and profoundly religious spirit of the Roman Catholic lay theologian. His book has powerfully impressed Dr. Söderblom, and has raised in his mind questions in regard to the mutual relations of evangelical religion and mysticism.

Historical reasons are given for the fact that in educated circles to-day there are many whose ideal of a sensible religion is a morally good and socially useful life. Kant gave classical expression to this ideal when, in 1793, he entitled one of his works *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason*. 'Subjectively considered,' he says, 'religion consists in understanding that all our duties are Divine commands.' Von Hügel has no difficulty in quoting *Protestant* authorities who hold that Kant has overlooked essential features of religion, as, e.g., the inwardness of communion with God.

Ritschl accepted Kant's view with modifications. Kant postulated God as a guarantee that the categorical imperative should be in harmony with reality, and that obedience to the dictates of conscience should not conflict with man's desire for happiness. Herrmann retained the categorical imperative, but taught that in the moral life eternal truth confronts man with its condemnations and terrors, but in Christ eternal truth approaches man with comforting and redeeming grace. Insistence on Christ's nearness to our thoughts as the condition of all communion with God involves the exclusion of mysticism. In Christ, not in our inward experience, Christ meets us; or in Herrmann's own words: 'In God Himself we find nothing besides Christ.' Von Hügel grants that Herrmann's reaction from subjectivity was justified, but not his insistence on an exclusive and impracticable objectivity; he also agrees with Herrmann in holding that the full revelation of God is given in Jesus Christ, but not in claiming for Christ prerogatives which are regarded as

implying that in the pre-Christian era neither Jews nor Gentiles attained to a true knowledge of God. Hence the complaint that Herrmann's teaching leans towards Pan-Christism.

Professor Söderblom begins his comments on Von Hügel's criticism of Protestant religious philosophy by acknowledging that Kant had an abnormal dread of the word 'mysticism.' But agreement is expressed with Hamann, who describes Kant himself as a mystic. The true nature of his religion is manifest not in his postulating of God and immortality whilst keeping within the limits of pure reason, but 'in his reverence, one might almost say his worship, of the unconditional majesty of conscience.' His interpretation of the moral law recognizes a higher order of reality than the rational. The mystical or super-rational element in Kant's conception of religion is found in his teaching concerning the claims of the moral reason or conscience. 'Kant's religion has also its mystery into which only the initiated have ever been privileged to gaze.' That mystery is involved in man's moral nature; his participation in a supernatural reality is revealed in the compunctions and consolations of conscience.

Dr. Söderblom calls attention to the changed attitude of the modern mind to which the word 'mysticism' is no longer an offence, but a glory. Publishers are glad to see it in the titles of books submitted for acceptance. But it is not because mysticism has a vogue to-day that an urgent plea is made for a higher appreciation among Protestants of the significance of mysticism. The appeal is from Kant and Ritschl and Herrmann to Luther and his doctrine of the *unio mystica*. 'The mystical union is neither an obsolete dogma, nor an accretion; it is a genuine constituent of evangelical Christianity, inasmuch as its mysticism is inseparably bound up with the essentials of every Christian life, that is to say, with the forgiveness of sins and with justification.'

Has Christianity a mystic secret of which an outsider, ignorant of it, cannot speak save as a blind man talks of colours? If it has, can it be that this secret is revealed only to those who have ability and leisure to study the subconscious

processes of their mental and spiritual life? In pressing these questions Dr. Söderblom has Von Hügel in mind, and he confesses himself convinced by the Romanist mystic that, in modern Protestantism, contemplation and ascetic discipline have been neglected. Nevertheless, he is of opinion that Von Hügel forgets or undervalues what is of much greater importance, namely, that Christianity has a mysticism of its own, depending not upon fluctuating emotions, but upon a central experience of the soul, even the forgiveness of sins. In the region of conscience a miracle is wrought; it is a secret experience transcending reason, but it becomes an abiding source of nourishment of a high and true mysticism.

If, therefore, mysticism signifies an immediate, that is to say, an unmediated perception of God, it is rejected alike by Herrmann, Von Hügel, and Söderblom. But another meaning has been given to the word in the Christian Church. Distinctions have been drawn between exoteric and esoteric doctrines; disciples of Christ have been divided into two classes according as they had or had not been taught the secret. But such a differentiation does not harmonize with the free invitation of Christ's gospel, which is good news for 'all that labour and are heavy laden.' Professor Söderblom reiterates his question: Is there not in the Gospel an objective mystery of which the true mystic has a reflection in his soul? and his reply is that the unique mystery of Christianity is Christ. He adds, however, that when St. Paul says it is the Cross, there is no contradiction. 'In Christ and in His Cross two lines meet along which can be traced the miracle of religion or the revelation of God, namely, *conscience* and *history*.'

In expanding this statement the Scriptures are appealed to in support of the assertion that a living sense of God was enkindled in the souls of the prophets by the promptings of conscience. 'Conscience was the flint on which the spark was struck in whose light God and His ways were seen.' Alike in the prophets and in the Gospel it is in the ethical sphere that the wonders of the new creation are revealed; light increases as morals advance from negative to positive precepts, and from the fear of punishments to the accusations of conscience, until Jesus on His cross manifests the power of love and makes that cross the symbol of love. 'According to the evangelical conception of experience the entire marvel of

Christianity with all its mysticism may be summed up in a single word, an ethical word, a word of love, the central word of Christian ethics—forgiveness.' A *strictly* ethical and therefore a mystical word is 'forgiveness'; for, unlike love, it cannot be dragged down to the level of natural religion.

In the Christian view of the world, history has a mystical aspect. The Bible teaches men to find God in history. Hence the *a priori* idealist has a different conception of history from the Christian to whom 'all history is not of equal value as a Divine revelation' any more than all life is equally instructive to a biologist. In Christ the Divine element in history attains its climax; He is the Word of God to humanity. 'All history,' argues Dr. Söderblom, 'belongs to the Christian,' and the revelation of God which culminates in Christ emphasizes the manifestation of Divine grace in personal experience. The history of the individual Christian involves a mystery; it is the story of God's secret dealings with his soul. 'In theory the mysticism of conscience may be distinguished from the mysticism of history, but in reality they are most intimately connected. . . . Both reveal God.'

The mystical aspect of history also accounts for the consciousness of life as a calling. In his opposition to Herrmann's so-called Pan-Christism, Von Hügel mentions Plato, Plotinus, Epictetus, and others, whom he regards as pre-Christian mystics, but he makes no reference to Socrates. Yet Socrates may be styled a mystic, not because of strange psychological experiences, but because of his obedient response to the call which convinced him of a Divine guidance of his life. Dr. Söderblom insists on the essential mysticism of evangelical religion, because it makes forgiveness the condition of communion with God, and because forgiveness can be realized only in the fulfilment of the duties of the Christian calling in communion with men. Evangelical forgiveness cannot be egoistically conceived; 'as we also forgive,' in the Gospel as in experience, links the Christian with his fellows.

Towards the close of his illuminating article¹

¹ The ably edited quarterly in which Dr. Söderblom's article appears deserves to be better known in England. The subtitle of *Religion und Geisteskultur* is *Eine Zeitschrift zur Förderung der Religionsphilosophie und Religionspsychologie*. Its editor is Dozent Lic. Th. Steinmann of Gnadenfeld. Preis des Jahrgangs von 4 Heften, M.6. Verlag von Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in Göttingen.

Dr. Söderblom points out that in his opposition to Herrmann's 'one-sided objectivity' Von Hügel has been misled by some of Herrmann's expressions. The Ritschlian professor would not use the word 'mysticism' in Von Hügel's sense, but his religion is a genuine form of Christian mysticism. 'Von Hügel blames Herrmann for his positive objectivity which ascribes exclusive importance to external history. But he is rather open to the objection that in his conception of

piety he manifests a tendency to separate Christ from history, and to insist so energetically on His being eternally present that there is some danger lest Christianity should lose its characteristic of being an historical religion.' In Von Hügel's mysticism Dr. Söderblom thinks 'there is scarcely sufficient room for the full significance of Christ. . . . He has not the clear vision of the secret of the religious and moral significance of Jesus as a reality established by its historical actuality.'

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ST. JOHN.

JOHN VI. 35.

'I am the bread of life.'

1. 'I AM the bread of life.' The words sprang directly out of the circumstances under which they were spoken. About the time of the Passover, which perhaps He could not keep at Jerusalem, the Lord had fed five thousand men in the wilderness with five loaves and two small fishes. The multitude with hasty and undisciplined zeal fancied that they saw in this miracle the coming fulfilment of their own wild hopes, and sought to take Jesus by force to make Him a king. When they were foiled in this design, some still followed Him to Capernaum, but only to learn there that they had utterly mistaken the import of Christ's work.

'Ye seek me,' He said, 'not because ye saw signs'—not because ye perceived that the satisfying of the hunger of the body was an intelligible parable of the satisfying of the hunger of the soul—'but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled': because you looked to Me to satisfy mere bodily, earthly, temporal wants: because you brought down the meaning of that one typical work to the level of your own dull souls instead of using it as a help towards loftier efforts: because you still rest in the outward, the sensuous, the transitory, all of which I am come to reveal in their true character as symbols, pledges, sacraments of things spiritual and eternal.

True it is, such is the general force of the words which follow, if we may venture to paraphrase them, true it is that there is room for your labour even now: true it is, as you plead, that Moses

gave your fathers manna by the word of God not for one meal only, but for forty years in the wilderness. True it is, as you argue, that the greater Moses will give to his people bread from heaven, more copious and more enduring than that perishable food. But while this is so, you fatally misunderstand the work, the type, the food. The work—strange paradox—is faith: the type is the faint figure of a celestial pattern: the food is not for the passing relief of a chosen race, but for the abiding life of the world. You seek something *from Me*, but if you knew the gift of God, you would seek *Me*: 'I am the bread of life.'¹

2. There is no single figure which can be made to express all that Jesus Christ is in His relation to man. So diverse and so subtle are these relations, belonging as they do to the mysterious sphere of the spiritual, that many images are needed to present the truth in its fulness. Hence in the New Testament we find Christ calling Himself by many different titles, and using many figures to convey to men the sense of all He had come to be to them. Now He is the light of the world, and now the door of the sheep, and again the shepherd himself, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, the true vine, and here the bread of life. All these He is at once, and they each convey to us, according to our many-sided needs, truths which make Christ real and accessible.

3. The words, in the original Greek, come upon us with an extraordinary emphasis. Here is the declaration of a Divine fact. Jesus in His own

¹ B. F. Westcott, *The Revelation of the Father*, 33.