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JOURNAL OF
THE TRANSACTIONS

OF

The Victoria Institute,

OR,

Philosophical Society of Great Britain.

VOL. LV.



LONDON:

(Published by the Institute, 1, Central Buildings, Westminster, S.W.1.)

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1923.

THE 647TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING,
HELD IN THE CONFERENCE HALL, CENTRAL HALL,
WESTMINSTER, S.W., ON DECEMBER 4TH, 1922,
AT 4.30 P.M.

THE REV. ERIC K. C. HAMILTON, M.A., IN THE CHAIR.

After the reading and signing of the Minutes of the previous Meeting, the HONORARY SECRETARY announced that the following had been Elected since our last Meeting :—

Members : Colonel H. Biddulph, C.M.G., D.S.O., R.E. ; Arthur S. Gerrard, Esq. ; F. T. Lewis, Esq. ; the Rev. F. D. Stammers, M.A. ; Miss G. Barbara Hoyland ; Prof. G. McCready Price, M.A.

Life Associate : Admiral T. P. Walker, D.S.O.

Associates : Rev. J. H. Taylor, D.D. ; Paul Hoehner, Esq. ; J. T. Golothan, Esq. ; T. Tweedale Edwards, Esq. ; G. Herbert Capron, Esq. ; the Rev. S. M. Abiodun, M.A., L.Th. ; Mrs. Herbert Norman ; James D. Johnson, Esq. ; Miss F. M. Reed ; Robert C. Young, Esq., B.A. ; Miss E. M. Nesbitt ; Rev. Principal J. McNicol, B.D. ; the Rev. J. N. Shields Boyd, M.A. ; Mrs. James M. Montgomery ; the Rev. A. H. Finn ; and the Rev. F. H. Lacy, M.A.

The CHAIRMAN then introduced the Rev. Charles Gardner, B.A., to deliver his lecture on " Romance and Mysticism."

ROMANCE AND MYSTICISM.

By the Rev. CHARLES GARDNER, B.A.

BEFORE speaking about mysticism, one ought to say what one means by the word. Dean Inge collected twenty-seven definitions. I shall use some such definition as this : The mystic is one who claims to have the immediate apprehension of absolute truth. He goes behind names and symbols. He is the opposite of the pragmatist. Whereas the pragmatist thinks truth to be relative, the mystic knows it to be absolute—it is for him the one reality.

Mysticism was in the world long before Christ. We may divide the subject into pre-Christian mysticism and Christian mysticism. There are many cults to-day that claim to be new, but we need not consider them this afternoon, since they are merely a revival of pre-Christian mysticism with new faces. Pre-Christian mysticism, which flourished especially in Egypt and India, affirmed that there was one only fundamental religion, and it assumed that there was one only life.

We are partial manifestations of the one life. There appears to be a wall of separation between soul and soul, between the soul and God; but the appearance is an illusion, maya, and salvation consists in overcoming the illusion and realizing essential union with God. The Oriental conception of union is different from the Christian, which we shall come to presently; it may be likened to the absorption of a drop into the ocean, or a flame leaping to its parent flame.

The Hindoo mystic often has a passionate love of Nature. He knows how bewitching she is, yet refuses to be bewitched, because he sees in her, not an end, but a means by which he may climb to God.

Wordsworth and some other nature mystics have said that man may pass from love of nature to love of man. Few do, I think, pass to man. They more often, like Wordsworth, stop at nature and succumb to her witchery. The Hindoo mystic makes no ultimate distinction between man, nature and God. When he looks forth on a flying cloud or the deep sea; when he hears the rustle of the leaves or the cry of an animal in pain, he longs to realize his oneness with the tumultuous life around; and when by means of his religious exercises he effects ecstasy, he is able for some rapturous moments to lose all sense of distinction, and to fly with the cloud, sigh with the leaves, wail with the dumb beast in labour, and exult with the advancing wave.

The mystic believes that there are seven planes. There are the physical, astral, mental, to which most men have access. Beyond are the higher mental and nirvanic to which the mystic climbs after stern discipline. Still beyond are the paranirvanic and the mahaparanirvanic, which transcend conception and are unattainable, at any rate, in this world. These are the cosmic planes. To become aware of them is to awaken the cosmic consciousness. None can attain in one lifetime. Therefore the soul returns again and again until it attains union, then it need go out no more, unless, impelled by self-sacrifice, it chooses to become incarnate for the sake of helping struggling mortals.

Such a soul has attained after hard disciplines, fastings, contemplation, and many lives. It has realized its essential holiness.

How shall we regard the Oriental Saint? Certainly he is a poet and an artist. He is infinitely patient, long-suffering,

gentle, non-resisting. He is serene, detached, inhuman. He is apt to be introspective, indifferent, immobile. He has, in truth, lost all sense of distinctions. He has nibbled away the sharp edges, he has lost the feeling of separateness between himself and God. He is all-knowing, all-present: he *is* God. Religion, romance, adventure have left him for ever. He is It, and therefore he cannot bind himself, and give himself, or worship, when there is no object outside of his own consciousness.

Let us now turn to Christian mysticism.

It is not easy to find a perfectly pure type. The Christian mystics have often drunk deeply from an alien source. Madame Guyon was introspective, exotic, impassive. Jacob Boehme had eyes within and without, but he was too much in the tradition of Fludd and Paracelsus. Our own William Law was deepened by his study of Boehme, but his writing was better than his thought. The Quaker mystics had the scent of the lily, but they were one-sided. The German mystics—Tauler, Suso, Tersteegen—were pure and devout, but not robust, and they were too much pre-occupied about death to self. Thomas à Kempis and Saint Theresa were mystics of the highest monastic kind. Still higher and more universally significant were St. Catherine of Siena and St. Francis of Assisi.

These last were not theologians. They felt and believed aright, and the beauty of holiness was revealed in their lives. It was St. Thomas Aquinas who not only felt, but also enunciated, the specific Christian theology of a pre-Christian temper of mind.

The great doctrine behind all mysticism is the immanence of God, and this is also the implicit assumption of our modern cults. Christianity found it already in the world; but inheriting the Hebrew doctrine of the transcendence of God, it completed through the Son of God that which was partly revealed by the prophets concerning the transcendent God, and by so doing gave a new start and a new life to those who believed in Christ.

The doctrine of transcendence insists without compromise on distinctions in the Godhead, and draws a sharp line between the Creator and the creature. It gives the promise of union with God through Christ, the one Mediator. Union is not absorption, but a conscious union based on an eternal difference. The nearest human revelation of divine union is that between husband and wife. They severally desire union but only while they may remain conscious of separation. They belong to the

same kind, yet the differences between them are the greatest possible without transgressing the limits of kind. So Christianity promises union with God, and carefully guards that the creature shall not be absorbed into the Creator by its doctrine of distinction in the Godhead revealed in the Holy Trinity, and its insistence that man can be united to God only through the Incarnate Son, Himself both God and Man.

Further in an immanent or pantheistic conception of the universe there is no place for sin. What is called sin is a mere negation. It is the denial of what *is*, and having no real substance requires no atonement.

The transcendent God reveals His will to His creatures, and sin is active rebellion against that will. Thus sin is more than a negation. It is real, and requires a real remedy. Hence the Christian doctrine of atonement. Instead of seeking to immortalize his subjective self, the sinner who has heard the call of Christ goes empty-handed to the Cross, takes his stand on his creaturely nothingness, believes in the atoning Blood of Christ, and passes—a forgiven man—with Christ into the resurrection life. Henceforth he lives, and he can say with St. Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me.”

Nor is that all. The mystic hopes to attain after much arduous discipline to the fifth or nirvanic plane. Apocalyptic Judaism also had its doctrine of seven heavens to which the elect might climb. When St. Paul was writing to the Ephesians and Colossians, there were a large number of Gnostic teachers prescribing the way of initiation on to the different planes or heavens. St. Paul did not contradict them. Contradiction is unmannerly. He told them of something far better. “For,” said he, “Christ who descended is the same also that ascended up far *above all heavens*”; and Christians who are seated with Christ begin their life in Christ where the initiate never hopes to attain.

This brings us to the Christian Saint.

A Christian Saint is always a partial revelation of God. He becomes like Christ, not by a process of imitation but by an inward transformation. He loves and therefore he knows; but his love is not a mild benevolence, it is a fire that leaps to righteousness and hates iniquity. He distinguishes between good and evil, and makes no compromise with the truth. He has learnt to know himself and his needs by going out of himself to look at Christ. He observes distinctions and likenesses,

comparing spiritual things with spiritual. His life is a romance. For in giving himself to Christ he gives himself to another, and Christ beckons him beyond servanthood, beyond sonship, to marriage union. As he responds to the Bridegroom, he learns in the secret places where he meets Christ that no good thing is withheld from him. God takes his delights with the sons of men, and His bounties are restrained by nothing but unbelief. The Saint forgets himself in Christ. Constrained by the love of Christ he goes forth to adventure in the world. He is a knight and carries a sword. The battle is hard, but he scorns to complain, for with Christ within him and his armour on; with his sword in his hand and God above, he perceives the wrong at hand that he must put right, and he pursues his adventurous way singing unto victory.

The Christian mystic Saint fulfils the dreams of his pre-Christian mystic ancestors, but he himself is awake, and his deeds partake of the noonday glory.

DISCUSSION.

Lt.-Col. BIDDULPH said : I was struck with the speaker's remark that whereas the Theosophist only expects to reach "the fifth plane" as his ultimate goal, after strenuous effort, yet the Christian who is joined to Christ by living faith *starts* far above this level. In these days when the tendency is to exalt any spurious religion above Christianity, it is well to let the outsider see what the claims of Christianity are when placed alongside other religious cults.

Mr. W. E. LESLIE said : Perhaps the mystic experience can most fruitfully be studied by the comparative method : comparison of psychological types, philosophic, religious, æsthetic ; and cultural types, classical, western, oriental and savage. Many of the methods by which the state is induced, point strongly to a modification of "threshold" by auto-suggestion. From the Christian standpoint this is of great importance, for the Scriptures record numerous instances of contact between human personalities and spiritual entities external to them, both good and evil, which appear to have been accompanied by psychic phenomena. This is a profound subject demanding careful research—particularly in view of speculations such as those of F. W. H. Myers.

Mr. THEODORE ROBERTS congratulated the lecturer with having made clear the difference between Christian mysticism and that which was non-Christian. He thought the Apostle Paul was one of the best examples of the true mystic, but pointed out that the vision which led to his conversion was wholly objective, and thus unlike those of mystics which the lecturer had referred to. The Apostle was on a journey and therefore not likely to be fasting, and the vision had nothing in it of the Jewish elements already in his mind, but was so contrary to his previous experience as to change his whole outlook and turn him from a persecutor into one of the persecuted. It was in his after life that we found mysticism, such as his writing that Christ was his life, and he (Mr. Roberts) suggested that his account of his being caught up into the third heaven was true Christian mysticism. There was no egotism in it, as he appears to have kept it to himself for some 14 years; and when he came to mention it, he did not attempt to describe the indescribable, but, on the contrary, stated that the words he heard were unutterable.

Mr. Roberts considered that we needed to lay emphasis on mysticism as a true part of our lives, particularly having regard to the matter-of-fact character of our Western minds, and in days when work was made everything of. He considered that the transcendence of God is of the greatest importance, and would like to hear something from the Lecturer on the way in which the fact of His invisibility was resolved in two passages in the Apostle John's writings. In the Gospel (i. 18) we find, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only Begotten Son—(or as he believed the true reading was—God only begotten)—who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." In the Epistle we have the same difficulty resolved in this way: "If we love one another, God abideth in us, and His love is perfected in us" (iv. 12).

As the Lecturer had pointed out, there could be no full intercourse with God apart from His self-revelation in the person of the Son; but this produced a response and resulted in mutual appreciation such as we get in the figure of the Shepherd and the sheep, so that God being a Spirit, His true worshippers must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Lt.-Col. G. MACKINLAY said: Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen—As far as I can understand the paper now before us, it seems to me

that the non-Christian mystic is a very sad being. From our Lecturer's description he is a self-centred individual, given to abstraction, abstaining from animal food, and undergoing fasts, the result being insanity in many cases. Some he tells us think themselves to be persons of notoriety—a very common symptom of an unsound mind. Others are obsessed with one idea, another form of mental aberration; others again when fasting come under the influence of visions; in fact, the whole system presents a very unwholesome appearance. When I arrived in India rather more than fifty years ago, I thought to myself, one good feature arising from the aloofness of Englishmen and natives is, that the European has an aversion to adopting native habits, so I felt pretty sure that the Hindoo religion together with the "nirvana" of devotees would not be adopted by the more manly Englishman; that conclusion held good for many years, but of late, East and West have altered considerably in their attitude towards each other, and the old aversion of Westerns to Oriental philosophy and religion is not as strong as formerly.

With regard to Christian mysticism, I have not learnt much from our Lecturer, except that he states it differs materially from non-Christian mysticism. I fear, however, there is still much resemblance between the two, and that there is much of subtle danger in both of them. The list he gives us of prominent Christian people who were mystics in recent times, does not make me alter my opinion: for, good as they were, who should say that these men would not have been better still if they had not been mystics?

The Lecturer finished his paper splendidly. His dark beginning with his vivid description of the sad lives of non-Christian mystics found an admirable contrast in the solid blessings vouchsafed to us who enjoy the blessed salvation given to us as believers in the atoning merits of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mr. SIDNEY COLLETT expressed his cordial agreement with the Lecturer.

AUTHOR'S REPLY.

The Rev. CHARLES GARDNER, in reply, said: The great difference between the non-Christian and Christian mystic is, that the non-Christian builds his system on the immanence of God, and he believes

in transcendence only in the sense that the whole transcends the part. The Christian admits the truth of immanence, and insists that God is also transcendent; and because transcendent He can be known only by Revelation which He made in part by the prophets, fully by His Son.

Mr. Gardner did not wholly agree with Col. Mackinlay's depreciatory remarks on mysticism. The Gospel according to St. John is a supreme mystical document. The Spirit of Christ rejects nothing that He can use. Christianity took the mysticism that it already found, purified it, and transmuted it to its own purpose. The pure mystical spirit when present in a Christian is as enriching as a feeling for poetry, music or art; and it is in fact an added sense.