

## THE RETURN TO MYSTICISM\*

**T**HERE is a ferment in the minds of some British people that indicates to me the possibility of a great change in the economic and political systems of western civilization. It would be scarcely worth heeding if it were not for the caliber of several of the men who have contributed books and articles dealing with this strange, eventful idea. For us, deeply immersed in the turmoil of war effort, it seems absurd—nay ridiculous—to think of writers in England advocating a return to mysticism as the only hope for man after the war.

However, it is a tendency of great significance because it comes without organization. It springs simultaneously from the minds of different individuals, who do not seem to be associated in any way in the promulgation of their ideas. Moreover, it foreshadows a complete change of mind as to the future of the state and the social

concepts that have dominated the purposes of our administrators for many generations.

The first work containing a message of startling importance that came to my notice was *Grey Eminence*, written by Aldous Huxley.<sup>1</sup> In it the biographer presents Father Joseph, the Capuchin monk who was Richelieu's secretary. The narrative of the religious and political life of this extraordinary friar is told so vividly and with such depth and force that it reads like a fascinating drama, gripping and elevating, notwithstanding its unreality. The story is a revelation of mystical power and stands alone as an exposition of the impossibility of combining in one person the ideals of the *religieux* with those of the statesman.

Huxley says:

... Thanks to a certain kind of intellectual "progress," the rulers of the modern world no longer believe that they will be tortured everlastingly, if they are wicked. The eschatological sanction, which was one of the principal weapons in the hands of the prophets of past times, has disappeared. This would not matter, if moral had kept pace with intellectual "progress." But it has not. Twentieth-century rulers behave just as vilely and ruthlessly as did rulers in the seventeenth or any other century. But unlike their predecessors, they do not lie awake at nights wondering whether they are damned. . . .<sup>2</sup>

It is strange that we have no single work which describes particularly the amazing revolutions that took place in the thought and conduct of the men who for three hundred years (from the middle of the twelfth century until the close of the fourteenth) sought the monastic life in preference to that of the politician and the soldier. In that period is to be found a remarkable story, and interest in it should be revived now because we are passing through crises far worse than those which drove men to the cell.

Further on, Huxley tells us that "by the end of the seventeenth century, mysticism has lost its old significance in Christianity and is more than half dead."

Then he puts these startling questions with a reply that will be a revelation to many:

"Well, what of it?" it may be asked. "Why shouldn't it die? What use is it when it's alive?"

The answer to these questions is that where there is no vision, the people perish; and that, if those who are the salt of the earth lose their savour, there is nothing to keep that earth disinfected, nothing to prevent it from falling into complete decay. The mystics are channels through which a little knowledge of reality filters down into our human universe of ignorance and illusion. A totally unmystical world would be a world totally blind and insane. From the beginnings of the eighteenth century on-

wards, the sources of mystical knowledge have been steadily diminishing in number, all over the planet. We are dangerously far advanced into the darkness. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The most remarkable book that I have seen in recent years, dealing with the subject of mysticism, is *Diagnosis of Man*, written by Kenneth Walker.<sup>4</sup> The author is a London surgeon, who has received the highest honors bestowed by the societies of his profession—a person of exceptional culture. This treatise by a practical scientist, a man of medicine and chemistry, lays before us in contrast a revelation of the wide gulf between eastern and western thought and, at the same time, presents a picture of the unity of true mystical experience, wherever it has been stated and at whatever time. This part of Kenneth Walker's work is invaluable for confirming the idea of similarity of experience expressed, on the one hand, by the European mystics and, on the other, by the Hindu mystics in the Vedānta. Walker says:

It has been pointed out that the Vedānta is eminently practical, and does not condemn these views as illusory in the sense that they have no utility for everyday purposes. A man must live his life and discharge his obligations to his fellows and for such purposes these ideas are sufficient. "All this uni-

verse," says Samkara, "is for a man's edification and to help him to attain self realization." But he must go further than these ideas if he is to reach his goal. There are two paths, *pravritti* and *nivritti*, the one leading to the external world and the other to self-knowledge; the one providing the worldly experience necessary for a useful life, the other leading to philosophical and spiritual enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

The thoughtful reader will find in *Diagnosis of Man* a thorough analysis of mysticism in all its forms and, after a careful reading of the book, he should have no doubt remaining as to what is, or is not, mysticism.

There are several other works which, although not wholly devoted to this subject, deal with the mystical life. Some of these have not yet reached our shores, owing to the difficulties of importation. Yet, from the reviews I have seen in British magazines, I am led to believe that there is a demand for books of their nature. Moreover, for many years in England, the ground has been well sown by Evelyn Underhill's beautiful volumes on mysticism,<sup>6</sup> and perhaps the public interested in these works is already a fairly large one.

Later than the publication of these books came a series of articles by Professor C. E. M. Joad in *The New Statesman and Nation* (London).

In dealing with "The Prospect for Religion," he finds:

. . . The churches are at the parting of the ways. Either they will fade altogether from the national life, and become wholly, what many are in large part already, empty shells, or they may come once again to assume importance in the lives of men.

His review of the problem is not entirely pessimistic, for he notices symptoms of a recrudescence pointing in the direction of what Spengler would call "a second religiousness." Joad says: "Whether it be 'escapism' or true Christianity, this strain in the Christian religion has always come to the fore in times of the breaking of civilisations."

He mentions a new revival of mysticism, and refers to the works of Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard which are now being read by many:

. . . Despairing of our civilisation which they regard as beyond redemption, the new mystics would withdraw from it, in order to develop man's other-worldly connection by the deliberate cultivation of the psychological techniques of mysticism. . . .

He goes on:

At the same time, following the precedent of the monasteries, their withdrawn communities would seek to keep alive something of the old learning and

the old culture, thus serving as a bridge between the civilisation that is dying and the civilisation that is yet to be born. . . .

The second article closes with the following:

. . . But if, as I say, the worst comes to the worst, then it is in the monkish element and the other worldly strain in the High Anglicanism that men will increasingly seek consolation and refuge.<sup>7</sup>

These articles from the pen of Professor Joad are to my mind a far greater surprise than that Aldous Huxley should write *Grey Eminence* for, unless I am mistaken, Joad has been a thorough-going Socialist and a convinced atheist. I gather this from his writings and speeches. Therefore, if he, of all people, can turn to mysticism, there is hope even for some of our statesmen who are so busy with the practical affairs of the day.

Professor Joad's articles should be published in a form that will be widely circulated, for his analysis of the position of the church today is worth the consideration of all people whose minds are now turned to the conditions that will exist when the war is over. Perhaps he may think it desirable to write a book on the subject, and, if he does, I hope he will explain what he means by the term "escapism," for it seems to me that it should not be used to characterize

the desire for a monastic life. To my mind "escapism" connotes a flight from present danger, not a move toward a definite place of safety. Surely escapism implies panic—something like a mad rush from a room in flames to any exit, no matter where it leads, or what new danger lies in wait for those in flight.

There will undoubtedly be millions of people in Europe, and perhaps in this country, who will seek almost any means of shunning the evils that have caused so much suffering. But for those who will long for a return to a refuge of strength and surety, a definite notion of direction will actuate their movement.

The question may be put by those who know something of the mystical life: What would a return to it mean? Herein lies the strange, revolutionary idea which, if it became widespread might undermine the economic and political systems that have been responsible for the world chaos. A return to mysticism, or the monastic life, would mean a severance of all state ties and a departure from the industrial system that goes by the name of capitalism. For what interest could a monk have in statecraft and town life? These and their concomitants are the rocks upon which monasticism was wrecked. Even abundance led to laziness and

debauchery in many of the abbeys, and the monastic records of the Middle Ages reveal over and over again the necessity for practicing prayer, abstinence, poverty, and obedience. The rigors of such a discipline might easily frighten those reared under a political system, which aims to bring the sheer materialism of an abundant life to the people. Alas, mysticism is a refuge for the few and a nightmare for the many.

Still, it would be most unwise to leave out of consideration what people might be driven to through despair. Hungry, distraught men might do tomorrow what they have done in the past. There is no sound reason for thinking that the amazing changes in the life of Anglo-Saxon pirates and Norman bandits, which took place from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, are so completely events of the past that they cannot appear again. Men will always be men, and what they have done before may recur in the future. Their acts—good or evil—are with them still, and the same possibilities of spiritual revolution, though dormant for so long, might very probably, in the aftermath of this war, stir them with a burning desire to find surcease from evil and a safe refuge for their souls.

If it were possible for the ideas of mysticism to take hold of the people, there would be an

end to economic and political thralldom, for a mystic would require only the bare essentials of material existence. To produce enough and no more than is necessary for the immediate future would be the surest method of destroying parasitical systems. Indeed, it may be held that, where there are no taxes to be collected, there will be no politicians; and surely we have learned the lesson that involuntary poverty creates slums and raises a bureaucracy to cope (ineffectively) with the evils that arise from destitution. Therefore, to produce only the necessary requirements for individuals would deprive the state of its fiscal lifeblood and force political governments to die of starvation.

It may be that Professor Joad and Aldous Huxley are beginning to realize that the common man (even Ortega's mass man<sup>8</sup>) has no chance at all of surviving as a free creature so long as there is a bureaucracy to batten upon his labor. Perhaps they have learned, too, that the exercise of the franchise can merely change one set of politicians for another and that the temptations of power and emolument are hard for the best of them to withstand.

The fever of gross materialism had to run its course. For nearly four centuries the body politic has been cultivating all the social and industrial

diseases our flesh is heir to. And one reason why it has been so susceptible to the ills which have distressed it is that man somehow—perhaps about the time of the Black Plague—lost that sense of spiritual discipline which he exercised throughout the finest periods of the Middle Ages. This seems to be the consensus of those modern scholars who have devoted their lives to a thorough research of the history of the long-forgotten past.

It is hard to find an excuse for the neglect of the centuries when men struggled so valiantly out of the benighted labyrinths of ignorance and despair to the light of day, when the great monuments of their finest achievements were wrought. Even in their ruin today they inspire rhapsodies of admiration and hundreds of tomes in which our deepest thinkers have described their value and beauty to us. It has been said that the volumes of *The Cambridge Medieval History* refute the opinion and judgment of those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers who poured contempt upon the work of the men of the Middle Ages. Now that we have the knowledge that the quasi-rationalists did not possess, we find, after careful study of *The Cambridge Medieval History*, that (since the middle of the eighteenth century) most of us have been deluded

by writers whose purpose has been to present us only with the dark side of the decadence which brought forth Luther and destroyed the labors of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. What reason, then, is there for men who pretend to be scholars to ignore for another day the amazing work that has been done in our lifetime to revive and restore the wonders of the past? It is all set out in this history.

Surely it is a canon of wisdom for man to prepare himself for the future, not only spiritually but physically and mentally. He must know, if he exercise his faculties at all, what is likely to happen to him tomorrow. This concerns the motive of his life. As a thinking creature, he must busy himself with the legitimate desires and needs of his subsistence. If he has fallen upon evil times, he cannot help but ponder the problem of how in future to avoid the distress he has suffered. Therefore, to him thought of the morrow should be a fixed duty, for after all, down deep in his heart, there is a desire to live at peace with his neighbors and provide nourishment for himself and his dependents. This is putting it merely on a materialistic basis. Then, if this be the case, he might seek a way of life other than that which he has been pursuing and

explore the means of ridding himself of the iniquities which have brought him to despair.

He needs no great intellectual gifts to think the problem out. Indeed, perhaps an illiterate man is the readier to find a new way, for his mind is not cluttered up with the economic and political flotsam and jetsam of the modern school and, as he has nothing to lose in making a change from the misery in which he lives, he may decide that any fate is better than that which pursues him. Suppose, then, that he were to turn to the simplest form of rational existence, what would happen to the state and the kindred systems which have deprived him of the modicum of happiness he requires to live decently?

There is no immediate danger of the intellectuals of our day bringing about a revolution of thought, for seemingly they are so deeply inured to the present system that they might cling to the little they have and think a change not worth the risk. In this matter the revolution may be produced by the millions of common men who will seek a refuge safe from the systems that have been their undoing.

Fifty years ago, not a few statesmen were asking: What is Socialism? Less than ten years ago, intelligent politicians and business men were inquiring: What is totalitarianism? Before we

are much older, many people may be asking: What is mysticism? And I doubt not that many in England today, who are reading the books and articles referred to above, are already asking this question. For us, who as a people have no tradition that reaches back to the Middle Ages, it will be far easier to learn something about the subject by going directly to works devoted to it.

In this respect we are singularly well blessed for, in recent years, several distinguished scholars have given to the public volumes which contain not only the lives of great mystics but their books and sermons, as well as the methods by which they enlightened their people. The first one to which I would draw the reader's attention is *The Flowering of Mysticism* by Dr. Rufus M. Jones,<sup>9</sup> Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Haverford College. In this work Dr. Jones presents a survey of the lives of the mystics, covering many centuries of testimony. He says:

The fourteenth century was marked by a unique flowering of the human spirit. There came in this period of a hundred years the most remarkable outburst of mystical religion that has occurred in the entire course of Christian history. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the secret is expressed by Dr. Jones in a single passage of remarkable understanding:

There is a hidden Deep in man which in some mysterious way touches the Divine Abyss and in the silence of all created things, in the hush which stills human passions and strivings, there comes a sudden union of the finite and the Infinite, the river and the sea.<sup>11</sup>

This book is a magnet, and it is hard to turn oneself from its fascinating pages, but I must hasten on to refer to two other works.

A few months ago Dr. George Bosworth Burch presented us with *The Steps of Humility, by Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux*.<sup>12</sup> In this study of the epistemology of Bernard's work, we find a scholarship second to none in the literature of our time. Dr. Burch says: "Bernard of Clairvaux, of all the mediaeval Doctors of the Church, best deserves to be called a Lover of Wisdom."<sup>13</sup>

When I read such a statement, I wonder whether any of my friends who say they appreciated Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* thought of turning back the pages of medieval history to learn something more about the Abbot of Clairvaux than Spengler gives them in his review of the Middle Ages. It seems to me that in such a crisis as this in which the world is engaged, an appreciation of the past is of equal importance with any knowledge produced by the physicists and chemists of our time. Dr. Burch says:



Bernard's essay on the *Steps of Humility* is an important work of mystical literature because it attempts to describe, not the undescrivable mystical experience, but the easily describable steps which lead to the possibility of this experience. . . .<sup>14</sup>

In these days when so many of our sociologists and philosophers are hard at work deriding the past and, particularly, the medievalists, they might be reminded of a saying of Bernard:

Just as our physical vision is obstructed either by an internal humor or by an intrusion of foreign matter; so also our spiritual intuition is disturbed sometimes by the lures of our own flesh, sometimes by worldly curiosity and ambition.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Burch points this by adding: "The reason is purified by humility; the will is purified by love. Thus the soul becomes capable of contemplating Truth in itself."<sup>16</sup>

Then, further on in his Introduction, Dr. Burch tells us:

Free choice, without the other kinds of freedom, is the natural condition of man. Free counsel is charity—but only in the sense of active charity and zeal for justice. Free enjoyment is found, in this life, only in mystical contemplation. While humility is not included as a kind of freedom, it is stated in this essay that non-voluntary "good thought" (i.e., cognitive humility) is preliminary to good will.<sup>17</sup>

The book is so beautiful, touching as it does all the great problems of our anxious life, that it is tempting to trace through these pages the wisdom of Bernard—wisdom, alas, so long absent from our minds. It is a strange experience looking through this work, for it seems like listening to a voice that spoke eight hundred years ago, one that understood the problems that will always face man, no matter how deeply he sinks through the weaknesses of his own flesh.

A final work I would bring to the notice of the reader is *Meister Eckhart* by Raymond Bernard Blakney of Williams College, Massachusetts.<sup>18</sup> Professor Blakney says:

Before I began to read Meister Eckhart, I shared a common prejudice against medieval thinkers and all their works. I disliked theology in the medieval idiom, regarding it as juiceless and static, and fortunately superseded by more vital modern religious thought. Then, at the behest of a learned friend, I began Eckhart, only to see that what he had to say was indeed like a treasure buried in a field, the more valuable because so rare—and so long neglected. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Here we have for the first time as complete a volume of the writings and sermons of Meister Eckhart as his most devoted disciple could desire. It contains the "Talks of Instruction," "The Book of Divine Comfort," "The Aristo-

crat," "About Disinterest," and twenty-eight sermons. The whole of "The Defense" is published in English for the first time. Professor Blakney gives us the living, practical mystic among the people, who performed his ecclesiastical duties as prior and vicar and entered the forums of Europe to debate the most momentous questions of the time with a zeal so startling that the author stamps its brilliance with the word "vividness."

It is amazing to think that there are millions in the world today who have heard the name Einstein, but who have never heard the name Meister Eckhart; and yet, it would be a long, arduous task for a painstaking student to go through the volumes written and published in the nineteenth century, and tabulate the references to this amazing mystic. He has been called the greatest preacher of all time, but it would be a most extraordinary pastor, in a rare church, who could deliver to us such addresses as are to be found in the "Talks of Instruction." Take, for example, the following:

. . . Therefore I say that we must learn to look through every gift and every event to God and never be content with the thing itself. There is no stopping place in this life—no, nor was there ever one for any man, no matter how far along his way

he'd gone. This above all, then, be ready at all times for the gifts of God and always for new ones.

Let me tell an anecdote about someone who greatly desired something of our Lord. I told her that she was not ready for it and that if God gave it to her, while still she was not ready, it would hurt her. You ask: "Why was she not ready? Hadn't she goodwill? You say that, given the will, everything is possible and that everything, perfection included, depends on the will."

That is correct; but "will" must be understood in two senses. There is first the contingent and non-essential will and then there is the providential will, creative and habitual. The truth is that it is not enough that the heart of man shall have its detached moments, in which to seek union with God; but there must be a disciplined detachment which precedes and follows [the moment of union] and only in that way may man receive the great things of God and God himself in them. If, however, one is not ready for the gifts, they do harm and God in them. That is why God cannot always give us the things we ask for. The fault is not on his side; he is a thousand times more ready to give than we are to receive. It is we who do violence and wrong him by hindering his natural action with our unreadiness.<sup>20</sup>

Do we not find here the root of our unfitness, which has led to the present catastrophe? We have ignored the gifts of God and turned our minds to the gifts of man.

Here is another sample of his method of instruction:

Do you want to know what a really poor person is like?

To be poor in spirit is to get along without everything not necessary. That person who sat naked in his tub said to the mighty Alexander who had all the world under his feet: "I am a greater Lord than you are, for I have despised more than you have possessed. What you have felt so proud to own, I think too little even to despise."<sup>21</sup> He is far more blessed who gets along without things because he does not need them, than he who owns everything because he needs it all; but best of all is the person who can go without because he has no need. Those, therefore, who can dispense with more and scorn more will have denied themselves more. It looks like a great deed when, for God's sake, someone gives a thousand marks of gold to feed the poor and build convents and cloisters, but much more blessed is he who disdains that much stuff on account of God. A person really has the Kingdom of Heaven when he is wise enough to put off everything for the sake of God.<sup>22</sup>

If it be justice you wish to learn about, if you desire a fuller knowledge of what freedom means, then turn to Meister Eckhart. No one saw so clearly as he did what eternal justice is nor has anyone bequeathed such a sense of the blessedness of freedom as we find in his sermons.

These books give the answer to the question, what is mysticism. Now that the time is becoming ripe when man must do some thinking for himself, there is no better way for him to break loose from the shackles of statecraft that bind him, and the wage slavery entailed, than by turning his mind to the essential things such as are dealt with by Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart.<sup>23</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

\* *Amer. Jour. Econ. Sociol.*, II, No. 4 (July, 1943), 503-16.

<sup>1</sup> London: Chatto & Windus, 1941; American ed., 4th ed.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941.

<sup>2</sup> English ed., *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Fourth printing; London: Jonathan Cape, 1942.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> *The Essentials of Mysticism* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd.; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1920); *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-day* (4th printing; New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1922); *The Mystic Way*, first printed, 1913 (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd.; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., reprinted 1929).

<sup>7</sup> August 22 and 29, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (authorized trans., New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1932).

<sup>9</sup> New York: The Macmillan Company, first published in 1939; reprinted, 1940.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. Cf. Evelyn Underhill, "Medieval Mysticism," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, VII, chap. XXVI, 777-812: "This orthodox mysticism . . . has its golden age in the fourteenth century, and gradually recedes from the centre of the stage before the approach of the Renaissance."

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Second printing; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, p. v.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1941.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, p. ix.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> Diogenes, Greek cynic (412-323 B.C.).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the practical mystic, the reader may be interested in turning to my novel, *The Garden of Doctor Persuasion* (Appleton, Wis.: C. C. Nelson Publishing Company, 1942).

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# THE CLOISTER OR THE TOWN