

# Suso

by W.R. Inge

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*The sermon explores the relationship between mysticism, neuroticism, and the value of the experiences of great saints, arguing that a simple, healthy, natural life is the most favourable for religious excellence.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:105, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 3:13, 1 Peter 5:10

**Topics:** "Christian Mysticism", "Spiritual Renewal"

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## Description

W.R. Inge discusses the life and writings of Henry Suso, a poet and saint born in 1295. Suso's autobiography portrays a vivid romance of saintship, showcasing his whole-hearted devotion to Divine Wisdom and the beauty of his visions. Despite some disturbing accounts of self-inflicted sufferings and erotic symbolism in his visions, Suso's work remains a delightful read. Inge addresses the debate on the pathological side of mysticism, emphasizing that the value of religious experiences should not be dismissed due to the personal struggles of religious figures. He concludes that despite Suso's challenges and imperfections, his writings have the power to deeply impact readers, stirring emotions of love, enlightenment, repentance, and spiritual renewal.

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## Transcript

Henry Suso was born in 1295 and died in 1365. His autobiography was published not long before his death. He is the poet of the band. The romance of saintship is depicted by him with a strange vividness which alternately attracts and repels, or even disgusts, the modern reader. The whole-hearted devotion of the "Servitor" to the "Divine Wisdom," the tender beauty of the visions and conversations, and the occasional naïveté of the narrative, which shows that the saint remained very human throughout, make Suso's books delightful reading; but the accounts of the horrible macerations to which he subjected himself for many years shock our moral sense almost as much as our sensibilities; we do not now believe that God takes pleasure in sufferings inflicted in His honour. Moreover, the erotic symbolism of the visions is occasionally unpleasant: we are no longer in the company of such sane and healthy people as Eckhart and Tauler. The half-sensuous pleasure of ecstasy was evidently a temptation to Suso, and the violent alternations of rapture and misery which he experienced suggest a neurotic and ill-balanced temperament.[26]

On this subject--the pathological side of mysticism--a few remarks will not be out of place, for there has been much discussion of it lately. A great deal of nonsense has been written on the connexion between religion and neuroticism. To quote Professor James' vigorous protest, "medical materialism finishes up St

Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out St Teresa as an hysteric, St Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate.

George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. Carlyle's organ-tones of misery it accounts for by a gastro-duodenal catarrh. All such mental over-tensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter, mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications most probably), due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover." [27] Now, even if it were true that most religious geniuses, like most other geniuses, have been "psychopaths" of one kind or another, this fact in no way disposes of the value of their intuitions and experiences.

Nearly all the great benefactors of humanity have been persons of one-sided, and therefore ill-balanced, characters. Even Maudsley admits that "Nature may find an incomplete mind a more suitable instrument for a particular purpose. It is the work that is done, and the quality in the worker by which it is done, that is alone of moment; and it may be no great matter from a cosmical standpoint, if in other qualities of character he (the genius) was singularly defective." [28] Except in the character of our Lord Himself, there are visible imperfections in the record of every great saint; but that is no reason for allowing such traces of human infirmity to discredit what is pure and good in their work.

More particularly, it would be a great pity to let our minds dwell on the favourite materialistic theory that saintliness, especially as cultivated and venerated by Catholicism, has its basis in "perverted sexuality." There is enough plausibility in the theory to make it mischievous. The allegorical interpretation of the Book of Canticles was in truth the source of, or at least the model for, a vast amount of unwholesome and repulsive pietism. Not a word need be said for such a paltry narrative of endearments and sickly compliments as the "Revelations of the Nun Gertrude," in the thirteenth century.

Nor are we concerned to deny that the artificially induced ecstasy, which is desired on account of the intense pleasure which is said to accompany it, nearly always contains elements the recognition of which would shock and distress the contemplatives themselves. [29] There are, however, other elements, of a less insidious kind, which make the ecstatic trance seem desirable. These are, according to Professor Leuba, the calming of the restless intellect by the concentration of the mind on one object; the longing for a support and comfort more perfect than man can give; and, thirdly, the consecration and strengthening of the will, which is often a permanent effect of the trance.

These are legitimate objects of desire, and in many of the mystics they are much more prominent than any tendencies which might be considered morbid. As regards the larger question, about the alleged pathological character of all distinctively religious exaltation, I believe that no greater mistake could be made than to suppose that the religious life flourishes best in unnatural circumstances. Religion, from a biological standpoint, I take to be the expression of the racial will to live; its function (from this point of view) is the preservation and development of humanity on the highest possible level.

If this is true, a simple, healthy, natural life must be the most favourable for religious excellence--and this I believe to be the case. Poor Suso certainly did not lead a healthy or natural life. But in his case, though the suppressed natural instincts obviously overflow into the religious consciousness and in part determine the forms which his devotion assumes, we can never forget that we are in the company of a poet and a saint who will lift us, if we can follow him, into a very high region of the spiritual life, an altitude which he has himself climbed with bleeding feet.

The simple confidence which at the end of the dialogue he expresses in the value of his work is, I think, amply justified. "Whoever will read these writings of mine in a right spirit, can hardly fail to be stirred to the depths of his soul, either to fervent love, or to new light, or to hunger and thirst for God, or to hatred and loathing for his sins, or to that spiritual aspiration by which the soul is renewed in grace."

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