

The Precursors of the German Mystics

by W.R. Inge

The sermon explores the history and development of German mysticism, including its origins, key figures, and the dangers of its extreme forms.

Scripture: Matthew 7:15, 1 Corinthians 2:12, Colossians 2:8, 1 Timothy 4:1, 1 John 4:1

Topics: "Christian Mysticism", "Church History"

Description

W.R. Inge delves into the history of mysticism, highlighting the evolution of German mysticism from the era of Thomas a Kempis to the strong revival during the thirteenth century. He discusses the rise of charitable orders like the Beguines and Beghards, emphasizing their intense inward religion and the conflicts they faced with the secular clergy. Inge also explores the heretical mystical sects of the thirteenth century, showcasing the various dangers of mysticism, from extreme beliefs to anti-sacramentalism and determinism. He contrasts these sects with the orthodox mystical school represented by scholars like Richard of St. Victor and Bonaventura, who focused on the psychology of the contemplative life and the ascent to contemplation.

Transcript

TO most English readers the "Imitation of Christ" is the representative of mediaeval German mysticism. In reality, however, this beautiful little treatise belongs to a period when that movement had nearly spent itself. Thomas a Kempis, as Dr. Bigg has said,[1] was only a semi-mystic. He tones down the most characteristic doctrines of Eckhart, who is the great original thinker of the German mystical school, and seems in some ways to revert to an earlier type of devotional literature.

The "Imitation" may perhaps be described as an idealised picture of monastic piety, drawn at a time when the life of the cloister no longer filled a place of unchallenged usefulness in the social order of Europe. To find German mysticism at its strongest we must go back a full hundred years, and to understand its growth we must retrace our steps as far as the great awakening of the thirteenth century--the age of chivalry in religion--the age of St. Louis, of Francis and Dominic, of Bonaventura and Thomas Aquinas.

It was a vast revival, bearing fruit in a new ardour of pity and charity, as well as in a healthy freedom of thought. The Church, in recognising the new charitable orders of Francis and Dominic, and the Christianised Aristotelianism of the schoolmen, retained the loyalty and profited by the zeal of the more sober reformers, but was unable to prevent the diffusion of an independent critical spirit, in part provoked and justified by real abuses. Discontent was aroused, not only by the worldiness of the hierarchy, whose

greed and luxurious living were felt to be scandalous, but by the widespread economic distress which prevailed over Western Europe at this period.

The crusades periodically swept off a large proportion of the able-bodied men, of whom the majority never returned to their homes, and this helped to swell the number of indigent women, who, having no male protectors, were obliged to beg their bread. The better class of these female mendicants soon formed themselves into uncloistered charitable Orders, who were not forbidden to marry, and who devoted themselves chiefly to the care of the sick. These Beguines and the corresponding male associations of Beghards became very numerous in Germany.

Their religious views were of a definite type. Theirs was an intensely inward religion, based on the longing of the soul for immediate access to God. The more educated among them tended to embrace a vague idealistic Pantheism. Mechthild of Magdeburg (1212-1277), prophetess, poetess, Church reformer, quietist, was the ablest of the Beguines. Her writings prove to us that the technical terminology of German mysticism was in use before Eckhart,[2] and also that the followers of what the "Theologia Germanica" calls the False Light, who aspired to absorption in the Godhead, and despised the imitation of the incarnate Christ, were already throwing discredit on the movement.

Mechthild's independence, and her unsparing denunciations of corruption in high places, brought her into conflict with the secular clergy. They tried to burn her books--those religious love songs which had already endeared her to German popular sentiment. It was then that she seemed to hear a voice saying to her:

Lieb' meine, betrÿbe dich nicht zu sehr,

Die Wahrheit mag niemand verbrennen!

The rulers of the Church, unhappily, were not content with burning books. Their hostility towards the unrecognised Orders became more and more pronounced: the Beghards and Beguines were harried and persecuted till most of them were driven to join the Franciscans or Dominicans, carrying with them into those Orders the ferment of their speculative mysticism. The more stubborn "Brethren and Sisters of the Free Spirit" were burned in batches at Cologne and elsewhere. Their fate in those times did not excite much pity, for many of the victims were idle vagabonds of dissolute character, and the general public probably thought that the licensed begging friars were enough of a nuisance without the addition of these free lances.

The heretical mystical sects of the thirteenth century are very interesting as illustrating the chief dangers of mysticism. Some of these sectaries were Socialists or Communists of an extreme kind; others were Rationalists, who taught that Jesus Christ was the son of Joseph and a sinner like other men; others were Puritans, who said that Church music was "nothing but a hellish noise" (*nihil nisi clamor inferni*), and that the Pope was the magna meretrix of the Apocalypse. The majority were Anti-Sacramentalists and Determinists; and some were openly Antinomian, teaching that those who are led by the Spirit can do no wrong. The followers of Amalric of Bena[3] believed that the Holy Ghost had chosen their sect in which to become incarnate; His presence among them was a continual guarantee of sanctity and happiness. The "spiritual Franciscans" had dreams of a more apocalyptic kind. They adopted the idea of an "eternal Gospel," as expounded by Joachim of Floris, and believed that the "third kingdom," that of the Spirit, was about to begin among themselves. It was to abolish the secular Church and to inaugurate the reign of true Christianity--i.e. "poverty" and asceticism.

Such are some of the results of what our eighteenth-century ancestors knew and dreaded as "Enthusiasm"--that ferment of the spirit which in certain epochs spreads from soul to soul like an epidemic, breaking all the fetters of authority, despising tradition and rejecting discipline in its eagerness to get rid of formalism and unreality; a lawless, turbulent, unmanageable spirit, in which, notwithstanding, is a potentiality for good far higher than any to which the lukewarm "religion of all sensible men" can ever attain. For mysticism is the raw material of all religion; and it is easier to discipline the enthusiast than to breathe enthusiasm into the disciplinarian.

Meanwhile, the Church looked with favour upon the orthodox mystical school, of which Richard and Hugo of St. Victor, Bonaventura, and Albertus Magnus were among the greatest names. These men were working out in their own fashion the psychology of the contemplative life, showing how we may ascend through "cogitation, meditation, and speculation" to "contemplation," and how we may pass successively through *jubilus*, *ebrietas spiritus*, *spiritualis jucunditas*, and *liquefactio*, till we attain *raptus* or ecstasy. The writings of the scholastic mystics are so overweighted with this pseudo-science, with its wire-drawn distinctions and meaningless classifications, that very few readers have now the patience to dig out their numerous beauties. They are, however, still the classics of mystical theology in the Roman Church, so far as that science has not degenerated into mere miracle-mongering.

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