

POSTLUDE

(X)

We have come to the end of the sequence. We have done what we said we would do. We have provided an introduction to contemplative religion in the western world. We have traced the development of a tradition. We have supplied brief but lucid representative samplings of the writings of some of the foremost authors within the tradition. And we have made several attempts to correlate this vast subject with more specific current interests. In short, we have finished our intended project. What is more, we have been sympathetic to our subject, positive, approving. In fact, if the truth ^{be} were known, this is a subject that has humbled us.

Having done what we set out to do, we should feel gratified and relieved ^o now. Thus, we should be clearing the desks, cleaning the typewriters, putting the boxes of notes on the shelves and ^{the} reference cards ~~into~~ the files, ~~awaiting the next stages in the publication process,~~ tending to the many matters that get shunted aside when a book is in process, then looking ahead to the grand day when the idea comes for a sequel volume or another writing venture. This is what we might be expected to be doing. But we aren't. We are not because we cannot.

When we began, we had several clearly cut objectives in mind. Our strategy was simple, nearly automatic. And we prided ourselves not on the intricacies of the strategy, for its lines are quite mechanical, but ~~up~~ upon our good sense

in having thought it through early, before the subject had become a trend. We had assumed that the most difficult part would be to be certain that our interpretations were accurate. We recognized that we would be covering so much in so little space and in such sweeping terms that our portrayal would be vulnerable from many sides. We anticipated that some reviewer somewhere ^{would} ~~will~~ judge the book to be uneven, ^{would} and ~~will~~ raise questions about the judgment we exercised in making selections. Someone somewhere ^{would} ~~will~~ call attention to ~~an~~ omissions ~~or two~~, ^{and} might even refer to ^{them} ~~it~~ as "glaring". This is standard criticism of anthologies. And, if criticized on these grounds, we will concede, though we believe that failures of this sort belong in part to the nature of the genre with which we are working.

The real problem is that though we have come to the end of the book, we seem to have come only to the beginning of the most intriguing subject of all. It is true, of course, that recent exposure to Asian forms of spirituality has stimulated new interest in western contemplative religion. It is also true that the new openness to contemplative religion is genuine, and probably neither fickle, fleeting, nor ~~of~~ temporary ~~duration~~. It is true, too, that the west is facing the west after having sojourned in the east for a time. And it is no doubt true that conditions are ripe for a revival of contemplative religion in the west. All signs are positive that western contemplative religion can experience a significant renaissance.

But we also recognize now that the relations between

these various assumptions and guiding organizational principles cannot be established simple-mindedly. There are no guarantees that mere exposure to the classical and medieval tradition will establish appropriate connections with the modern era. And it may not be true at all that the reasons such connections have been absent or ineffective is that knowledge of the tradition is minimal in the society. Indeed, it is possible that greater exposure now will simply reinforce the prevailing opinion. It may be that the contemplative tradition will continue to seem remote, strange, quite out of touch with the preoccupations of the modern age. Perhaps the reason that it has gone under-recognized is that it should be, or, maybe, that it chooses to be. Except for those willing to pay the price of entry, it makes no pretense of being effective. The wisdom it offers was never distributed according to democratic processes. It never advanced itself as public enlightenment. And even now, its insights may turn out to be nearly inaccessible, so far removed both by history and the accumulation of special circumstances that they cannot be reached. Perhaps it has always been the way: the tradition has served as a corrective, an alternative to the more dominant way of life. It may have offered a better way, but that way was never the dominant way; it always stood in contrast to majority opinion, and could never be institutionalized except on its own terms.

This observation simply reiterates that the ^{contemplative} vision we ^{to which} have sketched adheres to a specific supporting environment. ^{we have}

It is a monastic vision fundamentally, ~~a monastic vision~~ ^{refer}

incorporated within a larger religious context where it is supported by a specific philosophical trajectory with its own "otherworldly" aspirations. Only with rarest dedication, it seems, can a non-monastic take the same set of injunctions, allow them to direct his daily affairs, and have sufficient personal resourcefulness to compensate its penchant for self-denial.

It may be unfair to ask about the remainder. After all, an orientation doesn't deserve to be judged by cases it makes no claims to cover. But we can ask about the religion. If the dominant pattern of spirituality to which the Christian religion gives credence is essentially a monastic pattern, the religion itself, at least in its contemplative aspects, must also be a counter movement, an alternative, and/or a complement to the dominant way.

This is permissible, of course. A religion can be whatever it sets out to be. But we wonder how persons can relate to a pattern whose nurturing circumstances are not their own. What portions of the vision can they apprehend? And, further, does the orientation admit to partial applicability and piecemeal resonance? Can it be parcelled out this way except under the compulsions of the problem-solving mentality, a mentality, as we have indicated, to which the contemplative vision seems dispositionally opposed.

In short, we can find ^{Bernard of Clairvaux} ~~St.~~ Bonaventura again, but will he speak? And if he could, would he say what he did before? And if he did, could we possibly hear him? We can discover Henry Suso, but will he ever become more for us than a

mystic who revelled in the powers of the imagination? We can bring John Tauler back from obscurity, but can we expect him to do anything else ^{except} than repeat his pre-Reformation sermons? We can reconstruct the entire western contemplative tradition, but will the reconstruction do more than enrich those who have already vowed to maintain, update, and keep it alive. Nothing shows conclusively yet that the reconstructive work has any wider range of applicability, any more comprehensive range of meaning. There is no evidence yet that monasticism will have direct influence upon the future course of other institutions ^{that} ~~which~~ lend formation to culture and carry responsibility for the perpetuation of civilization.

The problem may be that the expression of the contemplative impulse has been so dominated by sanctionative theological considerations in the west that its best products remain narrow and constricted. It may also be that the vitality contemplative religion seems to be exhibiting now is less ^a demonstration of newly acquired strength than an effort, out of centuries of desperation, to come to terms with a radically altered modern religious and cultural situation.

(C) We do not know. But we find ourselves experiencing some wistfulness, some nostalgia, and even some disappointment as we re^read the pages of the book. Despite efforts to establish correspondences, the subject matter of the book remains distant in places, and much of it seems conflicted. Frequently, the mystical tendency seems kept under such close scrutiny that

it never quite breaks free. Thus, much of the literature deals only indirectly with the contemplative impulse, being dominated instead by descriptions of other entities (canons of rationality, systems of theological reflection, conceptions of sexuality, ^{and the like}) ~~that~~ ~~etc.~~ which have been modified by exposure to it. The impulse itself seems to be acknowledged primarily by inference.

Maybe this is the best that can be. But one can't help ~~but~~ wonder ^{ing} if the second-stage renaissance in which this book has been immersed isn't preparation for ventures not yet undertaken. It isn't enough that the contemplative tradition be rediscovered in the present era. In addition, it will need to be reconceived and translated. We are not talking about placing it in a common parlance, and, in this way, of making it relevant; this would violate its integrity and sap its strength. We are referring to a translation of a more intricate sort.

Contemplative religion first appeared as a product of a particular mode of self-consciousness in league with a number of vital grammars of perception. As a consequence, its forms of expression were coordinant ^{te} ~~ant~~ with a host of creative, artistic, and reflective portrayals of human awareness. Through the centuries, however, the grammars of perception have been altered, amended, and, in some instances, dramatically transformed. Thousands of years of cultural history teach us that a mode of self-consciousness remains vital not simply by repeating its initial forms of

expression. It retains vitality when it reaches out to other grammars of perception and forms new alliances.

Contemplative religion in the west seems not yet to have reached out. It has not even passed through the psychoanalytic era, for example; it has not submitted its terminology to the challenges created by that large event in human self-awareness. Thus, the model of personality formation it offers, even when religiously compelling, remains, in many respects, psychologically naive. Only with rarest skill can it be made to fit a postpsychoanalytic sensitivities. Being naive in psychological respects, ~~it is understandable that~~ ^{understandably} it is also undernourished in literary terms. To be sure, some of the greatest literature produced in the west has come via the contemplative tradition; the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are vivid examples. But one can hardly find instances of the same occurrence since the seventeenth century in France. Many of the tradition's modern-day advocates have either restated medieval aspirations in medieval genre, or, like Merton frequently, have concentrated on modern-day advocacy. And even today, when there seems to be a possibility of a renaissance, there is joy in some monastic circles that the new situation will allow a return to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When translation is shunted in favor of recourse to the time of origins, the tradition runs the risk of becoming a mere period piece.

But alongside this critical challenge we want to place a word of encouragement. The evidence confirms that the contemplative mode represents a unique and extraordinary way of coming to terms with the world. It illumines realities that

no other orientation can reach. It sees and hears worlds that remain imperceptible and inaudible from any other stand^r point. And it gives both direction and voice to humanity's deepest ^{impulses} compulsions and aspirations. This is its perennial strength, and nothing has occurred to detract from it.

It is appropriate, therefore, that the tradition retain and safeguard its proper inaccessibility. Were the situation otherwise, the vitality would not remain. For the fundamental vision is both precious and magnificent. And it has been proposed not simply as religion, but as a form of human understanding, the deepest wisdom, the very best, the most compelling and fulfilling, to which human experience can aspire. ^{Given} With these ~~as~~ stakes, the custodians of the tradition must do all they ^{can} ~~know how~~ to make certain that the inaccessibility of the vision is well founded.

We end with this paradoxical theme, really without ending at all.

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