

The German Mystics as Guides to Holiness

by W.R. Inge

The German mystics offer a guide to holiness and a deeper understanding of God's nature and our relationship with Him.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, John 1:1, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 2:5, Colossians 1:17

Topics: "Christian Mysticism", "Inner Sanctification"

Description

W.R. Inge delves into the teachings of mystics like Eckhart, Luther, and Jacob Böhme, emphasizing the importance of seeking Christ in the innermost sanctuary of our personal life. The mystics highlight the need for Christ to be not just given for us, but given into us, requiring a reenactment of the process of redemption in the inner life of every Christian. They stress the significance of emptying oneself of self-seeking and self-will to allow God to reign in the soul, ultimately leading to divine immanence and a foretaste of heaven on earth.

Transcript

THIS little volume is a contribution to a "Library of Devotion," and in the body of the work the reader will be seldom troubled by any abstruse philosophising. I have thought it necessary to give, in this Introduction, a short account of Eckhart's system, but the extracts which follow are taken mainly from his successors, in whom the speculative tendency is weaker and less original, while the religious element is stronger and more attractive. It is, after all, as guides to holiness that these mystics are chiefly important to us.

This side of their life's work can never be out of date, for the deeper currents of human nature change but little; the language of the heart is readily understood everywhere and at all times. The differences between Catholic and Protestant are hardly felt in the keen air of these high summits. It was Luther himself who discovered the "Theologia Germanica" and said of it that, "next to the Bible and St Augustine, no book hath ever come into my hands whence I have learnt or would wish to learn more of what God and Christ and man and all things are.

I thank God that I have heard and found my God in the German tongue, as I have not yet found Him in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew." The theology of these mystics takes us straight back to the Johannine doctrine of Christ as the all-pervading Word of God, by whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together. He is not far from any one of us if we will but seek Him where He is to be found--in the innermost sanctuary of our personal life. In personal religion this means that no part of revelation is to be regarded as past, isolated, or external.

"We should mark and know of a very truth," says the author of the "Theologia Germanica," "that all manner of virtue and goodness, and even the eternal Good which is God Himself, can never make a man virtuous, good, or happy, so long as it is outside the soul." In the same spirit Jacob Böhme, 250 years later, says: "If the sacrifice of Christ is to avail for me, it must be wrought in me." Or, as his English admirer, William Law, puts it: "Christ given for us is neither more nor less than Christ given into us."

He is in no other sense our full, perfect, and sufficient Atonement than as His nature and spirit are born and formed in us." The whole process of redemption must in a sense be reenacted in the inner life of every Christian. And as Christ emptied Himself for our sakes, so must we empty ourselves of all self-seeking. "When the creature claimeth for its own anything good, such as life, knowledge, or power, and in short whatever we commonly call good, as if it were that, or possessed that--it goeth astray."

Sin is nothing else but self-assertion, self-will. "Be assured," says the "Theologia Germanica," "that he who helpeth a man to his own will, helpeth him to the worst that he can." He, therefore, who is "simply and wholly bereft of self" is delivered from sin, and God alone reigns in his inmost soul. Concerning the highest part or faculty of the soul, the author of this little treatise follows Eckhart, but cautiously. "The True Light," he says, is that eternal Light which is God; or else it is a created light, but yet Divine, which is called grace."

In either case, "where God dwells in a godly man, in such a man somewhat appertaineth to God which is His own, and belongs to Him only and not to the creature." This doctrine of divine immanence, for which there is ample warrant in the New Testament, is the real kernel of German mysticism. It is a doctrine which, when rightly used, may make this world a foretaste of heaven, but alas! the "False Light" is always trying to counterfeit the true. In the imitation of the suffering life of Christ lies the only means of escaping the deceptions of the Evil One. "The False Light dreameth itself to be God, and sinless"; but "none is without sin; if any is without consciousness of sin, he must be either Christ or the Evil Spirit."

Very characteristic is the teaching of all these writers about rewards and punishments. Without in any way impugning the Church doctrine of future retribution, they yet agree with Benjamin Whichcote, the Cambridge Platonist, that "heaven is first a temper, then a place"; while of hell there is much to recall the noble sentence of Juliana of Norwich, the fourteenth-century visionary, "to me was showed no harder hell than sin." "Nothing burneth in hell but self-will," is a saying in the "Theologia Germanica." [24] They insist that the difference between heaven and hell is not that one is a place of enjoyment, the other of torment; it is that in the one we are with Christ, in the other without Him. "The Christlike life is not chosen," to quote the "Theologia Germanica" once more, "in order to serve any end, or to get anything by it, but for love of its nobleness, and because God loveth and esteemeth it so highly. He who doth not take it up for love, hath none of it at all; he may dream indeed that he hath put it on, but he is deceived. Christ did not lead such a life as this for the sake of reward, but out of love, and love maketh such a life light, and taketh away all its hardships, so that it becometh sweet and is gladly endured." The truly religious man is always more concerned about what God will do in him than what He will do to him; in his intense desire for the purification of his motives he almost wishes that heaven and hell were blotted out, that he might serve God for Himself alone.

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