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ANGLICAN SPIRITUALITY I

“Monks and Mystics”

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Course Description: This session provides an introduction to the history and development of Anglican Spirituality in the Pre-reformation period.

Objectives: in alignment with the TEAC goals students will gain familiarity with a historical perspective of Anglican spirituality to support their own formation for service as lay ministers, priests and deacons. (See TEAC – C.2, K.3)

What is Anglican Spirituality? Gordon Wakefield raises the question, “When does Anglicanism begin?” He defines the *Ecclesia Anglicana* as the branch of the Christian Church, rooted in previous ages, but bringing forth its peculiar flower and fruit in consequence of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century” (*Christian Spirituality,* Vol. III, p. 257). Andrew Louth in his writing “unites theology and spirituality with liturgy at the center” (p. 288).

Certainly, Anglicanism has its roots in Celtic Christianity and there are some who want to claim that English and Anglican Spirituality are the same. In his book, *English Spirituality,* Martin Thornton begins not with the Celts or the Anglo-Saxons, but with St. Augustine and then moves to St. Benedict. He writes,

If St. Augustine and St. Benedict are the founders of the Catholic spirituality, and if we have briefly traced the more remote ancestry of English spirituality from them, we must now look more closely at the English school in its final form. There is a certain interest in the Celtic Church, especially in its penitential system, and in pre-conquest Benedictinism. But our own father-founder, in whom English spirituality is first plainly embodied, the first of the pure breed as it were, appears in the person of St. Anselm (47).

He then asserts that there are two major entities of the English schools, first in the 14th century and then in the 17th century. Of course, Anglican Spirituality has its roots in the apostolic age and the monastic tradition which followed. After the arrival of St. Augustine of Canterbury monastic orders were founded throughout the British Isles and eventually the Celtic churches lost their distinct identity. By the 15th century monastic houses owned approximately a third of the land in the British Isles.

The largest of the orders were Benedictines and Cistercians, but Carthusians, Franciscans and Dominicans were also present.

Each order had its own distinct approach to spirituality as applied to their Rule of Life and the teachers which emerged from these orders can be identified by their schools of thought. For example, William of Occam is a Franciscan whereas Anselm is Benedictine. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* may have been a Carthusian and Richard Rolle may have never been in an order before he became a hermit (solitary). One of the best-known English spiritual writers, Aelred, was a Cistercian and was often called Bernard of the North after the famous Bernard of Clairvaux.

Who then were the English mystics? What happened in the 14th century that produced this flowering of spiritual devotional writings? The 14th century in Europe and England was an anxious age overshadowed with wars, plagues, financial disasters and schism in the church. (Nuth 26, 27)

What is the definition of mysticism? The Greek work, *mystikos,* referred to that which was hidden, but revealed. Also, the word, *mysterion*, is found in the New Testament and applied to the truth revealed in Christ. In its Christian usage in the early centuries of the church, ‘the mystical’ usually meant encountering Christ in the Scriptures and the Sacraments (Park 6).

The mystic is one who has been raised to a high degree of contemplative prayer. The mystical experience consists in a conscious, deep and intimate union of the soul with God who has taken the initiative thereof, while the soul on its part, has prepared itself, normally according to the accepted pattern of asceticism (Wolters 25).

A. Spirituality is normally divided into ‘ascetical’ and ‘mystical’ theology.

1. Pseudo-Dionysius–apophatic and kataphatic theology

2. Spiritual stages: purgative, illuminative and unitive.

B. Five English Mystics:

1. Anonymous author of *the Cloud of Unknowing*

2. Walter Hilton (1340-96)

3. Richard Rolle (1300-49)

4. Julian of Norwich (1342-1423?)

5. Margery Kempe (1373-1440)

1. ***The Cloud of Unknowing***waswritten by anonymous author who was probably a Carthusian monk.

“It is a specialist document, addressed to a young man pursuing the contemplative life under monastic obedience” (McGinn 199). In many ways, *the Cloud* is difficult to read as it speaks about the way of forgetting or unknowing. One has to reach the stage in the spiritual life of not relying upon familiar images, words or symbols in prayer or meditation. The metaphor comes from the story of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:1ff) when a cloud envelops the disciples. In this cloud, they hear the voice of God saying, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.” See the passage - “The Cloud of Forgetting” (Park 61).

**2. Walter Hilton’s** *Scale (Ladder) of Perfection* is his principle work

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| THE SOUL |  | GOD |
| Mind (memoria) | Power (potentia) | Father |
| Reason (intellengtia) | Wisdom (sapientia) | Son |
| Will (voluntas) | Goodness (bonitas) | Holy Spirit |

Outline of *the Scale of Perfection*

Book I: Chapters 1-14 The end for which we are striving is union with God

15-41 Knowing God

42-45 The transformation that must be brought about before union with God can be attained, i.e. the reforming image of God in us.

46-54 The means of bringing this about: seek Jesus

55-92 To obtain knowledge of the roots of sin within us and to destroy them.

Book II: Chapters 1-20 Comparison between the state of ordinary Christians and

contemplatives

21-32 The Contemplative Life

33-41 The Nature of Contemplation

42-46 The effects of Contemplation (Thornton 199-200)

Hilton provides a structured scheme in order to strive for a contemplative union with God. He bases his understanding of the nature of humankind on the Augustinian doctrine of the Trinity. God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in our nature as mind, reason and will. There is also the three-fold pattern of power, wisdom and goodness. The key to the union comes through Christ. Our understanding of spirituality may differ from Hilton’s in that we don’t resonate with such a structure or believe that spiritual growth has to develop along clearly defined stages or levels of growth. Do we believe that perfection is possible? Only insofar as perfection represents maturity in the spiritual life can there be harmonious union with God in Christ.

**3. Richard Rolle** is the most prolific of the English mystics; his writings are voluminous and exist in hundreds of manuscripts. He was the most widely read English author of the late Middle Ages, and his popularity continued well into the 16th century (Nuth 36). He died in 1349 probably from the plague. He left his theological studies in Oxford before he completed his master’s degree and returned to his home in Yorkshire where he became a hermit (solitary). He is also the most poetic of the English mystics. His most famous book is *The Fire of Love*. Here is an example of his poetry. Notice the similarities with John of the Cross. He writes that there are three aspects to the spiritual life that are important: warmth, song and love.

*His is the soul that says,*

*tell my Beloved I am pining for love*

*I wanting to die;*

*I long to pass away;*

*I am burning to pass over.*

*See I am dying through love!*

*Come down Lord.*

*Come, Beloved, and ease my Longing.*

*See how I love, I sing, I glow, I burn.*

*Spare a thought for this poor wretch:*

*order me to be brought before you* (tr. Wolters 78, 79).

Unlike Hilton, Rolle writes with passionate intensity of his emotions. God’s presence and love must be felt. Nuth identifies the similarities with a 12th century tract written by an Augustinian canon called *The Four Degrees of Violent Charity* with his writings. They are: insuperable love, binding or inseparable love, languishing or singular love and insatiable love. Nuth writes, “In Richards’s scheme, as in that of the majority of Christian mystics, mystical union is not meant for oneself alone, but is meant to bear fruit for the sake of community” (43). However, one wonders if Rolle’s emphasis on intense feeling isn’t somewhat self-centered. How does a hermit share these experiences except through his writing?

**4. Julian of Norwich** was an anchorite living next to the parish church in Norwich. The word, ‘anchorite’ comes from the Greek word, *anachorein*, meaning to go apart. In the late Middle Ages, we see a mistrust of scholastic theology in the form of spiritual writings and mystical experiences. Some of the writers, particularly women begin to use the vernacular and reach a wider audience that the theologians of the schools. The *Ancrene Riwle* of the 13th century provides a rule for women solitaries. The male hermits, such as Rolle, were solitaries who traveled around from place to place, but were not attached to any particular monastic cell (Thornton 168).

An anchorite or frequently anchoress, lived permanently in a cell, often attached to a religious order or to a parish church like Julian’s in Norwich (Thornton 168).

*The Revelations of Divine Love* (also referred to as *Shewings*) consist of two texts, known as the short and long texts. The Long Text may have been written 20 years after the ‘revelations.’ The ‘revelations’ begin in May, 1373 when Julian was 30 years old. She asked the Lord for three graces: recollection of Christ’s passion, to see his suffering on the cross and to have a bodily sickness. She was granted all three, in fact, nearly died, but recovered to write about her revelations.

Julian’s writings reveal the simplicity, clarity and optimism of her experiences. There is an emphasis on the divine trinity as well as Christian charity. Chapters 84 and 86 are good examples of the importance of charity (love).

*You would know our Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was*

*meaning. Who showed it you? Love. What did he show you? Why did he show it?*

*Hold on to this and you will understand and love more and more* (211,212).

“All will be well’ is the repeated theme from Chapters 27-40. Julian recognizes the reality of sin, but firmly believes love is more powerful than sin and death. She also refers to God as our mother. Although this image resonates with many contemporary readers this concept is found in other devotional writings such as Anselm and Bernard.

Why have Julian’s writings become so popular today? The other English mystics are being read. Both Evelyn Underhill and T. S. Eliot rediscovered the English mystics and brought Julian’s Revelations to light once again. There are at least two reasons for her popularity. First, her writing is clear and simple. English as a language had returned to respectable usage in literature and business. (From the time of the Norman invasion, 1066 to the middle of the 14th century French dominated the educated classes). Second, although Julian’s reliance upon other theologians can be traced in her writings there is a remarkable freshness and originality about her writing. Her personality shines through her works as a genuine person longing for God in the depths of her being. There is also an optimism and promise that “all will be well” even in the midst of suffering and distress. Many women have found reassurance in her feminine images of God.

*I came to realize that there were three ways of looking at God’s motherhood:*

*the first is based on the fact that our nature is made; the second is found in*

*the assumption of that nature–there begins the motherhood of grace; the third*

*is the motherhood of work which flows out over all by that same grace–the length*

*and breadth and height and depth of it is everlasting. And so is his* (sic) *love.*

(Chapter 59-168)

**5. Margery Kempe** was truly a remarkable woman! She was a solitary who probably consulted Julian as a spiritual director (confessor). However, before she became an anchoress like Julian she was married and bore 14 children and had run the largest brewery in Lynn. After the death of her husband, she traveled to many places on pilgrimages such as Rome, Santiago de Compostela in Spain and the Holy Land (Skinner, Introduction, 2). Her book was rediscovered in 1934 in the library of an old Catholic family, the Butler-Bowdons. Margery could not write, but dictated her experiences to two scribes. The first book is a jumble of English and German, but the second is a much more readable account of her life and experiences. We don’t know how much reflects Margery’s own words. Did the priests who acted as scribes embellish her words and experiences?

Her work contains the same heart longing for the love of God, but there is an untamed spirit that is unlike the quiet contemplative presence of Julian. At times, she is led to tears due to her visions in publish. She prays, “And, good Lord, if you still wish me to cry, I pray that you give me this crying when I am alone in my room as much as ever you will spare me among the people, if it please you (Park 106).

**Conclusion:** Why are the English mystics so influential? Another way to ask the question is, what inspired these men and women to write extraordinary works in the14th century? As we have seen this century was filled with war, disease and anxiety. Perhaps the Lord inspired these individuals to bring assuring words of encouragement and hope to a desperate people. The other point that is important to note is that English as a language was coming into its own after the Norman invasion (1066) where French dominated the educated classes for almost three centuries.

Although Latin was still the language of the church, university and law, English became the language of the poets, playwrights and devotional writers. The first attempt at a translation of the entire Bible began at the end of the 14th century. A new spiritual world opened in a language that the people could understand and embrace.

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