

ANGELUS SILESIUS

THE religious development of Angelus Silesius (Johannes Scheffler) is one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the religious life. Usually coupled with Meister Eckhart, he became a text-book example for the Protestant theory that the Catholic Church kills the inner life—Meister Eckhart she condemned (though, in fact, only a few of his more extreme statements), but Angelus Silesius she broke.

The time into which Johannes Scheffler was born was not unlike our own. The greater part of the continent was in a state of material and spiritual upheaval; the 'Thirty Years' War devastated Central Europe, Reformation and Counter-Reformation were fighting for the souls of men; peasants and soldiers sang that awful ballad, 'There is a reaper called Death, Hath power from the great God'—not knowing whether they should eat and drink for to-morrow they would die, or follow the call to sackcloth and ashes of men like the great popular preacher Abraham a Santa Clara.

Outside the Catholic Church the religious life had broken up into two main streams: the orthodox Lutheranism (or Calvinism) of the established territorial churches on the one hand, and a number of small groups and sects experimenting in a pseudo-mystic religion on the other. Two provinces of the Holy Roman Empire were especially affected by this revival: Silesia, where Scheffler was born, and Holland, where he spent part of his university years. It was, therefore, almost inevitable that the passionate young man should have made contact with these circles, 'conventicles' as they were usually called, in the hope of finding in them the fulfilment of the yearnings of his deeply religious nature.

The 'mysticism' of these seventeenth century sects was a strange mixture. Its chief ingredient was the teaching of Meister Eckhart, that most misunderstood of Dominicans, who was a great scholastic and disciple of St. Thomas as well as an eloquent preacher of the *Unio Mystica*, but who, alas! was destined to be claimed as the ancestor of all false mysticism from Luther to Alfred Rosenberg. Beside him, St. Gertrude and Ruysbroek, Jacob Boehme and St. John of the Cross, Molina and St. Ignatius of Loyola were equally esteemed among young Scheffler's friends—a combination of names sufficiently indicative of their confusion of thought.

It is in this atmosphere that Angelus Silesius, as he called himself later, had his first religious experiences. It is here that the

foundations were laid of the work that was to make him famous both as a poet and as a mystic: *The Cherubic Wanderer*. It is almost pathetic to see how here a man gropes his way, dazzled by the Light Inaccessible, without a guiding hand to teach him what is truth and what error.

‘That God should be so blessed and live without desire
He has as much from me as I from Him received.’

This is one of the typical instances of the hopeless confusion of ideas which so often passes for ‘mysticism’ outside the Church, and which is characteristic of this period of Scheffler’s development. For the very notion of God’s self-sufficiency, so clearly expressed in the first line, excludes the idea of His having received anything from the creature. The distich contains a contradiction in terms—a thing impossible even for God. Another absurdity is expressed in the famous verse:

‘I know that without me God cannot live a moment,
If I be dead He must give up the ghost for pain.’

Attempts have been made again and again to interpret this in a sense consistent with Christian teaching, the latest perhaps in a review of Dr. Laird’s *Mind and Deity* in *The Tablet* (Sept. 13th, 1941). ‘Professor Laird,’ writes the reviewer, ‘can even appeal to Angelus Silesius as teaching that God cannot exist without His creature, though Angelus is careful to point out that this is true only of the ideal existence of the creature in God. Obviously the distinction is of the first importance.’ There are two objections to this interpretation. In the first place, the modification was made only in the preface of the book, which was written in circumstances which will be discussed later. Secondly, even if Angelus Silesius really meant ‘the ideal existence of the creature in God,’ the verse would still be theologically unsound, since the Beatitude of the Blessed Trinity is independent of the ideas of creatures in the Mind of the Creator.

Nor are these isolated instances. The pantheistic tendency permeates the whole book, and the emphasis on God’s dependence on his creatures becomes actually blasphemous in a verse like this:

‘God needeth me as much as I need Him. His Being
I help Him to sustain, as He sustaineth mine.’

Here the very essence of the Godhead is denied, for if there is no difference in the order of Being between Creator and creature the very term ‘God’ loses the meaning it has even in Natural Theology and becomes just another pantheistic expression, such as World-soul or Life-Force.

This pagan conception of a Deity dependent on its creatures is the more staggering as side by side with it we meet statements of unimpeachable orthodoxy. Nothing, for example, could be more in accordance with Christian teaching than this affirmation of God's perfect rest and fruition in himself :

' Not tiring of Himself does God enjoy Himself,
Since His contentment resteth in Himself alone.'

This is only one of the many expressions of God's transcendence belonging to the same period as the pantheistic poetry. It seems impossible that the same person should have held both these contradictory views at the same time. The problem is not so very difficult to solve, though, for it is psychological rather than logical. Angelus Silesius, in his search for stability in a world falling to pieces around him, had opened his mind to every influence that appealed to him. Pantheistic and orthodox mystics alike seemed to offer food for his religious longings. So he tried them all, and reproduced them all, without troubling to think out the implications of these various doctrines.

But this did not make him a mystic. The deplorably loose use of the term 'mysticism' has come to cover—and not only in popular literature—every conceivable religious or semi-religious experience, preferably tinged with a good deal of emotionalism. But if there is one element absolutely essential for the formation of the mystic properly so called, it is discipline. Discipline both of mind and of body, and to a degree beyond the imaginative powers of most of our contemporaries who throw up their hands in horror at the asceticism of a *Curé d'Arts* as well as at the 'dry' logic of the schoolmen. Yet we may take what mystic we like—be it St. Bernard or St. Catherine of Siena, St. Theresa or St. John of the Cross—they were all not only ascetics on the grand scale, but also masters of Christian doctrine. For the mystic life may be likened to a Gothic Cathedral which is built very high, leaving the ordinary dwelling houses far beneath it. But the higher the building, the deeper must be its foundations, or the ambitious temple will fall to pieces long before it is finished. So the mystic life, aspiring to ever higher forms of sanctifying grace until it rests in the transforming Union, must be erected on a solid structure of both doctrine and asceticism. The rapturous flight of the *Via Unitiva* will only be granted to those who have passed through the thorny *Via Purgativa* and the light-giving *Via Illuminativa*.

If this be taken as the criterion of Angelus Silesius' religious position it becomes abundantly clear that he was no mystic at all. He

had neither concerned himself with doctrine, nor was he an ascetic. On the contrary, from all our information it seems that in those days he still shared the favourite vice of his time and was a heavy drinker.

At a later stage he described his state in this so-called mystic period as *anmutige Innigkeit*, an untranslatable expression, perhaps best paraphrased as 'tender delight.' The very words imply that what is generally taken to be his 'mysticism' was actually but a pleasant basking in feelings of devotion, a devotion which, as has been shown, was nourished on the writings of both orthodox and heterodox authors and, at times, lost all sense of difference between Creator and creature in a great wave of pantheistic emotion.

Yet, as truly as the mystic life fulfils all the longings of the religious mind as perfectly as is possible in this world, does the mere cult of beautiful feelings leave a deeper nature unsatisfied.

Angelus Silesius was craving for more solid food, and Divine Providence found a way to impart it. At about the same time as *The Cherubic Wanderer* took shape in his mind, the poet made a collection of mystic prayers from the works of St. Gertrude, Louis de Blois and others with a view to publication. But the Lutheran pastor who held an all-powerful position in the small principality where Scheffler was court physician disapproved of the young doctor's 'enthusiasm' and prevented the printing. No more was needed to show Scheffler how far from Protestantism he had already travelled. After this he felt it impossible to stay on in the Lutheran Church, and the Catholic mystics he loved so much seemed to point the way he should go. In a statement drawn up a fortnight after his reception into the Church he wrote that his main reason for becoming a Catholic was the Lutheran antagonism against asceticism and mysticism.

The Church, which was then carrying on a vigorous counter-reformation, especially in Silesia, welcomed the new convert with open arms. *The Cherubic Wanderer* was then probably already a first draft, to be enlarged and worked over while the old heterodox notions and emotions still lingered on. Three years after his conversion the book was published with a Preface in which Angelus Silesius tried to interpret the most flagrant passages in an orthodox way.

It may be asked why the Church, apparently so relentless in the case of Meister Eckhart, quietly tolerated the very questionable religious poetry of Angelus Silesius. But the Church has a disconcerting way of becoming, like her Master and his Apostles, all things to all men in her desire to bring souls to God. So it is but fitting that she should mete out different treatment to the Dominican Provincial whose utterances might be identified with the teaching

of the Church and the poetic effusions of a recent convert which would not necessarily compromise her.

The result showed the wisdom of this tolerance at a time when Lutheranism had become more and more hardened. Already in the *Cherubic Wanderer* there are signs of the poet's great devotion to the Person of our Lord. In his second poetical work, *Die Heilige Seelenlust*, a 'Spiritual Pastoral of a Soul in Love with her Jesus,' Angelus Silesius seems to have forgotten that he had ever claimed to sing the Mystic Union between God and man. The whole book breathes the atmosphere of sensible devotion which is obviously nourished on the Canticle and St. Bernard. But what to the medieval mystic was but the expression in human language of supernatural love became to the modern poet an end in itself. The minute description of every detail of the Passion, the whole apparatus of the secular erotic literature of the time with its rosy cheeks, alabaster necks, sugary kisses, etc., which he applied to Christ make it clear that his spiritual food was still the 'milk of beginners,' full of consolation and sensible enjoyment; and it is characteristic that this book should have become one of the manuals of devotion not of the Church but of Pietism, that sect of Continental Protestantism which, rather like the early Methodists, sought a more personal relation to Christ than the established Protestant Churches could offer, without, however, submitting to the Catholic Church.

The more Angelus Silesius became imbued with the spirit of Catholicism, the clearer it became that the way of mystic contemplation was not for him. For in every soul called to it the life of prayer must necessarily grow under the influence of sanctifying grace in the Sacraments. There have been no great Christian mystics outside the Catholic Church, for the highest summits of the life of faith cannot be reached in separation from the main stream of supernatural life that flows through the mystical Body of Christ.

If, therefore, the spring of Angelus Silesius' 'mystic' poetry soon ran dry, this very fact is conclusive proof of its spuriousness. Indeed, as he himself expressed it, the love of Christ compelled him to abandon the *anmutige Innigkeit* of a semi-contemplative poetic existence and to plunge right into the battle that was being fought for the souls of his countrymen. The one-time court-physician and lyrical dreamer became a very militant priest. He spent himself in works of penance and charity, but his chief task was the defence of the Catholic Faith in innumerable pamphlets and booklets. It is true, he did not always observe the rules of prudence, and his blood-curdling descriptions of the variety of torments that await the unrepentant heretic in hell sound rather uncharitable to the modern

reader; yet we have to remember that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries religious controversy was carried on in a manner different from our own; and Luther especially had set the tone with his unrivalled vocabulary of rude and offensive expressions.

Yet Angelus Silesius kept his deepest indignation not for the Protestants who, after all, tried to serve God though in their own mistaken way, but for a new phenomenon that had just begun to make its appearance on the continent: the modern State of religious tolerance and indifference, founded no longer on the Creed of Christianity but on what he ingeniously called 'politicism.' This he regarded as the worst heresy, before which both Lutheranism and Calvinism paled . . . Had he seen in an hour of inspiration that the State divorced from God would one day set itself up as a god? Had he seen with his mind's eye Hegel's Prussia, and Hitler's Germany? We do not know. But he fought the good fight for the souls of his people—'for the love of Christ,' as he himself said, though perhaps not always in the spirit of Christ.

When he died it was found that nothing was left of his considerable fortune. He had given all he had to the poor, allowing himself but the bare necessities of life. All he left behind was a manuscript which, for the most part, is lost; but its last words, a prayer, are preserved: 'Jesus Christ, God and Man, Bridegroom and Brother, peace and joy, sweetness and delight, kindness and grace, light and life, protection and salvation, heaven and earth, eternity and time, my Love and my All, receive my soul.'

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THE PATHS OF ISRAEL.

THE Jewish problem has become one of the most ominous and terrible issues of contemporary consciousness, which is tested by new waves of terrifying anti-Semitism. It must, however, be said that this paves the way to a deeper realisation of the problem itself. It is raised to a new level, receives new definition and new illumination. Beneath the surface of the elemental outburst something far more essential, significant and decisive than all this sounding storm around the 'Jewish question' is taking place. Above all, it becomes clear that it is not enough to oppose moral or legal standards to anti-Semitism; that the answer to the whole tragedy of Israel must be sought in its mysterious bond with the destinies of world-history.

There are several ways of approaching the Jewish problem. For sociologists, economists, for historians of culture and for moralists,