CHAPTER XII

Religious Thought Crystallizing into Images

Towards the end of the Middle Ages two factors dominate religious life: the extreme saturation of the religious atmosphere, and a marked tendency of thought to embody itself in images.

Individual and social life, in all their manifestations, are imbued with the conceptions of faith. There is not an object nor an action, however trivial, that is not constantly correlated with Christ or salvation. All thinking tends to religious interpretation of individual things; there is an enormous unfolding of religion in daily life. This spiritual wakefulness, however, results in a dangerous state of tension, for the presupposed transcendental feelings are sometimes dormant, and whenever this is the case, all that is meant to stimulate spiritual consciousness is reduced to appalling commonplace profanity, to a startling worldliness in other-worldly guise. Only saints are capable of an attitude of mind in which the transcendental faculties are never in abeyance.

The spirit of the Middle Ages, still plastic and naive, longs to give concrete shape to every conception. Every thought seeks expression in an image, but in this image it solidifies and becomes rigid. By this tendency to embodiment in visible forms all holy concepts are constantly exposed to the danger of hardening into mere externalism. For in assuming a definite figurative shape thought loses its ethereal and vague qualities, and pious feeling is apt to resolve itself in the image.

Even in the case of a sublime mystic, like Henry Suso, the craving for hallowing every action of daily life verges in our eyes on the ridiculous. He is sublime when, following the usages of profane love, he celebrates New Year’s Day and May Day by offering a wreath and a song to his betrothed, Eternal Wisdom, or when, out of reverence for the Holy Virgin, he renders homage to all womankind and walks in the
mud to let a beggar woman pass. But what are we to think of what follows? At table Suso eats three-quarters of an apple in the name of the Trinity and the remaining quarter in commemoration of 'the love with which the heavenly Mother gave her tender child Jesus an apple to eat'; and for this reason he eats the last quarter with the paring, as little boys do not peel their apples. After Christmas he does not eat it, for then the infant Jesus was too young to eat apples. He drinks in five draughts because of the five wounds of the Lord, but as blood and water flowed from the side of Christ, he takes his last draught twice. This is, indeed, pushing the sanctification of life to extremes.

In so far as it concerns individual piety, this tendency to apply religious conceptions to all things and at all times is a deep source of saintly life. As a cultural phenomenon this same tendency harbours grave dangers. Religion penetrating all relations in life means a constant blending of the spheres of holy and of profane thought. Holy things will become too common to be deeply felt. The endless growth of observances, images, religious interpretations, signifies an augmentation in quantity at which serious divines grew alarmed, as they feared the quality would deteriorate proportionately. The warning which we find recurring in all reformist writings of the time of the schism and of the councils is – the Church is being overloaded.

Pierre d’Ailly, in condemning the novelties which were incessantly introduced into the liturgy and the sphere of belief, is less concerned about the piety of their character than about the steady increase itself. The signs of the ever-ready divine grace multiplied endlessly; a host of special benedictions sprang up side by side with the sacraments; in addition to relics we find amulets; the bizarre gallery of saints became ever more numerous and variegated. However emphatically divines insisted upon the difference between sacraments and sacramentalia, the people would still confound them. Gerson tells how he met a man at Auxerre, who maintained that All Fools’ Day was as sacred as the day of the Virgin’s Conception. Nicolas de Cleemanges wrote a treatise, De novis festivitatibus.
non instituendis, in which he denounced the apocryphal nature of some among these new institutions. Pierre d’Ailly, in De Reformacióne, deplores the ever-increasing number of churches, of festivals, of saints, of holy-days; he protests against the multitude of images and paintings, the prolixity of the service, against the introduction of new hymns and prayers, against the augmentation of vigils and fasts. In short, what alarms him is the evil of superfluity.

There are too many religious orders, says d’Ailly, and this leads to a diversity of usages, to exclusiveness and rivalry, to pride and vanity. In particular he desired to impose restrictions on the mendicant orders, whose social utility he questions: they live to the detriment of the inmates of leper houses and hospitals, and other really poor and wretched people, who are truly entitled to beg (ac alius vere pauperibus et miserabilibus indigentibus quibus convenit jus et verus titulus mendicandi). Let the sellers of indulgences be banished from the Church, which they soil with their lies and make ridiculous. Convents are built on all sides, but sufficient funds are lacking. Where is this to lead?

Pierre d’Ailly does not question the holy and pious character of all these practices in themselves, he only deplores their endless multiplication; he sees the Church weighed down under the load of particulars.

Religious customs tended to multiply in an almost mechanical way. A special office was instituted for every detail of the worship of the Virgin Mary. There were particular masses, afterwards abolished by the Church, in honour of the piety of Mary, of her seven sorrows, of all her festivals taken collectively, of her sisters – the two other Marys – of the arch-angel Gabriel, of all the saints of our Lord’s genealogy. A curious example of this spontaneous accretion of religious usage is found in the weekly observance of Innocents’ Day. The 28th of December, the day of the massacre at Bethlehem, was taken to be ill-omened. This belief was the origin of a custom, widely spread during the fifteenth century, of considering as a black-letter day, all the year through, the day of the week on which the preceding Innocents’ Day fell.
Consequently, there was one day in every week on which people abstained from setting out upon a journey and beginning a new task, and this day was called Innocents’ Day, like the festival itself. Louis XI observed this usage scrupulously. The coronation of Edward IV of England was repeated, as it had taken place on a Sunday, because the 28th of December of the previous year had been a Sunday too. René de Lorraine had to give up his plan of fighting a battle on the 17th of October, 1476, as his lansquenets refused to encounter the enemy ‘on Innocents’ Day’.

This belief, of which we find some traces appearing in England as late as the eighteenth century, called forth a treatise from Gerson against superstition in general. His penetrating mind had realized some of the danger with which these excrescences of the creed menaced the purity of religious thought. He was aware of their psychological basis; according to him, these beliefs proceed ex sola hominum phantasiatione et melancholica imagination; it is a disorder of the imagination caused by some lesion of the brain, which in its turn is due to diabolical illusions.

The Church was constantly on her guard lest dogmatic truth should be confounded with this mass of facile beliefs, and lest the exuberance of popular fancy should degrade God. But was she able to stand against this strong need of giving a concrete form to all the emotions accompanying religious thought? It was an irresistible tendency to reduce the infinite to the finite, to disintegrate all mystery. The highest mysteries of the creed became covered with a crust of superficial piety. Even the profound faith in the eucharist expands into childish beliefs – for instance, that one cannot go blind or have a stroke of apoplexy on a day on which one has heard mass, or that one does not grow older during the time spent in attending mass. While herself offering so much food to the popular imagination, the Church could not claim to keep that imagination within the limits of a healthy and vigorous piety.

In this respect the case of Gerson is characteristic. He composed a treatise, Contra vanam curiositatem, by which he means the spirit of research which desires to scrutinize the
secrets of nature. But whilst protesting against it, he himself becomes guilty of a curiosity which to us seems out of place and deplorable. Gerson was the great promoter of the adoration of Saint Joseph. His veneration for this saint makes him desirous of learning all that concerns him. He routs out all particulars of the married life of Joseph: his continence, his age, the way in which he learned of the Virgin’s pregnancy. He is indignant at the caricature of a drudging and ridiculous Joseph, which the arts were inclined to make of him. In another passage Gerson indulges in a speculation on the bodily constitution of Saint John the Baptist: *Semen igitur materiale ex qua corpus compaginandum erat, nec durum nimis nec rursus fluidum abundantius fuit.*

Whether the Virgin had taken an active part in the supernatural conception, or, again, whether the body of Christ would have decomposed, if it had not been for the resurrection, were what the popular preacher Olivier Maillard called ‘beautiful theological questions’ to discuss before his auditors. The mixture of theological and embryological speculation to which the controversy about the immaculate conception of the Virgin gave rise shocked the minds of that period so little that grave divines did not scruple to treat the subject from the pulpit.

This familiarity with sacred things is, on the one hand, a sign of deep and ingenuous faith; on the other, it entails irreverence whenever mental contact with the infinite fails. Curiosity, ingenuous though it be, leads to profanation. In the fifteenth century people used to keep statuettes of the Virgin, of which the body opened and showed the Trinity within. The inventory of the treasure of the dukes of Burgundy makes mention of one made of gold inlaid with gems, Gerson saw one in the Carmelite monastery at Paris; he blames the brethren for it, not, however, because such a coarse picture of the miracle shocked him as irreverent, but because of the heresy of representing the Trinity as the fruit of Mary.

All life was saturated with religion to such an extent that the people were in constant danger of losing sight of the
distinction between things spiritual and things temporal. If, on the one hand, all details of ordinary life may be raised to a sacred level, on the other hand, all that is holy sinks to the commonplace, by the fact of being blended with everyday life. In the Middle Ages the demarcation of the sphere of religious thought and that of worldly concerns was nearly obliterated. It occasionally happened that indulgences figured among the prizes of a lottery. When a prince was making a solemn entry, the altars at the corners of the streets, loaded with the precious reliquaries of the town and served by prelates, might be seen alternating with dumb shows of pagan goddesses or comic allegories.

Nothing is more characteristic in this respect than the fact of there being hardly any difference between the musical character of profane and sacred melodies. Till late in the sixteenth century profane melodies might be used indiscriminately for sacred use, and sacred for profane. It is notorious that Guillaume Dufay and others composed masses to the theme of love-songs, such as 'Tant je me déduis',¹ 'Se la face ay pale',² 'L'homme armé'.³

There was a constant interchange of religious and profane terms. No one felt offended by hearing the Day of Judgement compared to a settling of accounts, as in the verses formerly written over the door of the audit office at Lille.

Lors ouvrira, au son de buysine
Sa générale et grant chambre des comptes.⁴

A tournament, on the other hand, is called 'des armes grantdisime pardon' (the great indulgence conferred by arms) as if it were a pilgrimage. By a chance coincidence the words *mysterium* and *munisterium* were blended in French into the form 'mistère', and this homonymy must have helped to efface the true sense of the word 'mystery' in everyday parlance, because even the most commonplace things might be called 'mistère'.

¹ So much I enjoy myself
² If my face is pale.
³ The armed man.
⁴ Then to the sound of the trumpet God shall open His general and grand audit office.
While religious symbolism represented the realities of nature and history as symbols or emblems of salvation, on the other hand religious metaphors were borrowed to express profane sentiments. People in the Middle Ages, standing in awe of royalty, do not shrink from using the language of adoration in praising princes. In the lawsuit about the murder of Louis of Orleans, the counsel for the defence makes the shade of the duke say to his son: ‘Look at my wounds and observe that five of them are particularly cruel and mortal.’ The bishop of Chalons, Jean Germain, in his Liber de virtutibus Philippo ducis Burgundiae, in his turn does not scruple to compare the victim of Montereau to the Lamb. The Emperor Frederick III, when sending his son Maximilian to the Low Countries to marry Mary of Burgundy, is compared by Molinet to God the Father. The same author makes the people of Brussels say, when they wept with tenderness on seeing the emperor entering their town with Maximilian and Philip le Beau: ‘Behold the image of the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.’ He offers a wreath of flowers to Mary of Burgundy, a worthy image of Our Lady, ‘sceulus la virginit’.¹ ‘Non point que je veuille déflier les princes!’² Molinet adds.

Although we may consider such formulas of adulation empty phrases, they show none the less the depreciation of sacred imagery resulting from its hackneyed use. We can hardly blame a court poet, when Gerson himself ascribes to the royal auditors of his sermons guardian angels of a higher rank in the celestial hierarchy than those of other men.

The step from familiarity to irreverence is taken when religious terms are applied to erotic relations. The subject has been dealt with above. The author of the Quinze Joyes de Mariage chose his title to accord with the joys of the Virgin. The defender of the Roman de la Rose used sacred terms to designate the partes corporis inbocestas et peccata immunda atque tulpia. No instance of this dangerous association of religious with amatory sentiments could be more striking than the

¹ Save the virginity
² Not that I want to defile princes.
Madonna ascribed to Foucquet, making part of a diptych which was formerly preserved at Melun and is now partly at Antwerp and partly at Berlin; Antwerp possessing the Madonna and Berlin the panel representing the donor, Étienne Chevalier, the king’s treasurer, together with Saint Stephen. In the seventeenth century Denis Godefroy noted down a tradition, then already old, according to which the Madonna had the features of Agnès Sorel, the royal mistress, for whom Chevalier felt a passion that he did not trouble to conceal. However this may be, the Madonna is, in fact, represented here according to the canons of contemporary fashion: there is the bulging shaven forehead, the rounded breasts, placed high and wide apart, the high and slender waist. The bizarre inscrutable expression of the Madonna’s face, the red and blue cherubim surrounding her, all contribute to give this painting an air of decadent impiety in spite of the stalwart figure of the donor. Godefroy observed on the large frame of blue velvet E’s done in pearls linked by love-knots of gold and silver thread. There is a flavour of blasphemous boldness about the whole, unsurpassed by any artist of the Renaissance.

The irreverence of daily religious practice was almost unbounded. Choristers, when chanting mass, did not scruple to sing the words of the profane songs that had served as a theme for the composition: baiser-moi, rouges nez.¹

A startling piece of impudence is recorded of the father of the Frisian humanist Rodolph Agricola, who received the news that his concubine had given birth to a son on the very day when he was elected abbot. ‘To-day I have twice become a father. God’s blessing on it!’ said he.

At the end of the fourteenth century people took the increasing irreverence to be an evil of recent date, which, indeed, is a common phenomenon at all times. Deschamps depletes it in the following lines:

On souloit estre ou temps passé
En l’église benignement,

1. ‘Kiss me,’ ‘Red noses’.
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A genoux en humilité
Delez l'autel moult closement,
Tout nu le chiefpiteusement,
Maiz au jour d'uy, si come beste,
On vient à l'autel bien souvent
Chaperon et chapel en teste.¹

On festal days, says Nicolas de Clemanges, few people go to mass. They do not stay till the end, and are content with touching the holy water, bowing before Our Lady, or kissing the image of some saint. If they wait for the elevation of the Host, they pride themselves upon it, as if they had conferred a benefit on Christ. At matins and vespers the priest and his assistant are the only persons present. The squire of the village makes the priest wait to begin mass till he and his wife have risen and dressed. The most sacred festivals, even Christmas night, says Gerson, are passed in debauchery, playing at cards, swearing and blaspheming. When the people are admonished, they plead the example of the nobility and the clergy, who behave in like manner with impunity. Vigils likewise, says Clemanges, are kept with lascivious songs and dances, even in church; priests set the example by diceing as they watch. It may be said that moralists paint things in too dark colours; but in the accounts of Strasbourg we find a yearly gift of 1,100 litres of wine granted by the council to those who ‘watched in prayer’ in church during the night of Saint Adolphus.

Denis the Carthusian wrote a treatise, De modo agendi processiones, at the request of an alderman, who asked him how one might remedy the dissoluteness and debauchery to which the annual procession, in which a greatly venerated relic was borne, gave rise. ‘How are we to put a stop to this?’ asks the alderman. ‘You may be sure that the town council will not easily be persuaded to abolish it, for the procession brings large profits to the town, because of all the people who have

¹ In bygone times people used to be Gentle in church, On their knees in humility Close beside the altar, With meekly uncovered head, But at present, like beasts, They too often come to the altar With hood and hat on their heads.

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to be fed and lodged. Besides, custom will have it so.' 'Alas, yes,' sighs Denis; 'he knows too well how processions were disgraced by ribaldry, mockery, and drinking.' A most vivid picture of this evil is found in Chastellain's description of the degradation into which the procession of the citizens of Ghent, with the shrine of Saint Liévin, to Houthem, had fallen. Formerly, he says, the notabilities were in the habit of carrying the holy body 'with great and deep solemnity and reverence'; at present there is only 'a mob of roughs, and boys of bad character'; they carry it singing and yelling, 'with a hundred thousand gibes, and all are drunk.' They are armed, 'and commit many offences where they pass, as if they were let loose and unchained; that day everything appears to be given up to them under the pretext of the body they carry.'

We have already mentioned how much disturbance was caused during church services by people vying with each other in politeness. The usage of making a trysting-place of the church by young men and young women was so universal that only moralists were scandalized by it. The virtuous Christine de Pisan makes a lover say in all simplicity:

Se souvent vais ou moustier,
C'est tout pour veoir la belle
Fresche comme rose nouvelle.¹

The Church suffered more serious profanation than the little love services of a young man who offered his fair one the 'pax', or knelt by her side. According to the preacher Menot, prostitutes had the effrontery to come there in search of customers. Gerson tells that even in the churches and on festival days obscene pictures were sold tanquam idola Belphegor, which corrupted the young, while sermons were ineffective to remedy this evil.

As to pilgrimages, moralists and satirists are of one mind; people often go 'pour folle plaisance'. The Chevalier de la Tour Landry naively classes them with profane pleasures, and

¹. If I often go to church, It is all to see the fair one Fresh as a new-blown rose.
he entitled one of his chapters, ‘Of those who are fond of
going to jousts and on pilgrimages.’

On festal days, exclaims Nicolas de Clemanges, people go
to visit distant churches, not so much to redeem a pledge of
pilgrimage as to give themselves up to pleasure. Pilgrimages
are the occasions of all kinds of debauchery; procuresses are
always found there, people come for amorous purposes. It is
a common incident in the Quinze Joyes de Mariage; the young
wife, who wants a change, makes her husband believe that the
baby is ill, because she has not yet accomplished her vow of
pilgrimage, made during her confinement. The marriage of
Charles VI with Isabella of Bavaria was preceded by a pil-
grimage. It is far from surprising that the serious followers
of the devotio moderna called the utility of pilgrimages in
question. Those who often go on pilgrimages, says Thomas à
Kempis, rarely become saints. One of his friends, Frederick
of Heilo, wrote a special treatise, Contra peregrinantes.

The excesses and abuses resulting from an extreme fami-
liarity with things holy, as well as the insolent mingling of
pleasure with religion, are generally characteristic of periods
of unshaken faith and of a deeply religious culture. The same
people who in their daily life mechanically follow the routine
of a rather degraded sort of worship will be capable of rising
suddenly, at the ardent word of a preaching monk, to un-
paralleled heights of religious emotion. Even the stupid sin
of blasphemy has its roots in a profound faith. It is a sort of
perverted act of faith, affirming the omnipresence of God and
His intervention in the minutest concerns. Only the idea of
really daring Heaven gives blasphemy its sinful charm. As
soon as an oath loses its character of an invocation of God,
the habit of swearing changes its nature and becomes mere
coarseness. At the end of the Middle Ages blasphemy is still
a sort of daring diversion which belongs to the nobility.
‘What!’ says the nobleman to the peasant in a treatise by
Gerson, ‘you give your soul to the devil, you deny God
without being noble?’ Deschamps, on his part, notices that
the habit of swearing tends to descend to people of low
estate.
Si chétif n'y a qui ne die:
Je renie Dieu et sa mère.¹

People make a pastime of coining new and ingenious oaths, says Gerson: he who excels in this impious art is honoured as a master. Deschamps tells us that all France swore first after the Gascon and the English fashion, next after the Breton, and finally after the Burgundian. He composed two ballads in succession made up of all the oaths then in vogue strung together, and ended with a pious phrase. The Burgundian oath was the worst of all. It was, Je renie Dieu (I deny God), which was softened down to Je renie de bottes (boots). The Burgundians had the reputation of being abominable swearers; for the rest, says Gerson, the whole of France, for all her Christianity, suffers more than any other country from the effects of this horrible sin, which causes pestilence, war and famine. Even monks were guilty of mild swearing. Gerson and d’Ailly expressly call upon the authorities to combat the evil by renewing the strict regulations everywhere, but imposing light penalties which may be really exacted. And a royal decree of 1397, in fact, re-established the old ones of 1269 and 1347, but unfortunately also renewed the old penalties of lip-slitting and cutting out of tongues, which bore witness, it is true, to a holy horror of blasphemy, but which it was not possible to enforce. In the margin of the register containing the ordinance, someone has noted: ‘At present, 1411, all these oaths are in general use throughout the kingdom without being punished.’

Gerson, with his long experience as a confessor, knew the psychological nature of the sin of blasphemy very well. On the one hand, he says, there are the habitual swearers, who, though culpable, are not perjurers, as it is not their intention to take an oath. On the other, we find young men of a pure and simple nature who are irresistibly tempted to blaspheme and to deny God. Their case reminds us of John Bunyan’s, whose disease took the form of ‘a propensity to utter blasphemy, and especially to renounce his share in the benefits of

¹. There is none so mean but says, I deny God and His mother.
the redemption.' Gerson counsels these young men to give themselves up less to the contemplation of God and the saints, as they lack the mental strength required.

It is impossible to draw the line of demarcation between an ingenuous familiarity and conscious infidelity. As early as the fifteenth century people liked to show themselves esprits forts and to deride piety in others. The word 'papelard', meaning a hypocrite, was in frequent use with lay writers of the time. 'De jeune angelot vieux diable' (a young saint makes an old devil), said the proverb, or, in solemn Latin metre, Angelicus juvenis senibus sathanizat in annis. 'It is by such sayings,' Gerson exclaims, 'that youth is perverted. A brazen face, scurrilous language and curses, immodest looks and gestures, are praised in children. Well, what is to be expected in old age of a sathanizing youth?'

The people, he says, do not know how to steer a middle course between overt unbelief and the foolish credulity of which the clergy themselves set the example. They give credence to all revelations and prophecies, which are often but fancies of diseased people or lunatics, and yet when a serious divine, who has been honoured by genuine revelations, is occasionally mistaken, he is called impostor and 'papelard', and the people henceforth refuse to listen to any divine because all are considered hypocrites.

We not infrequently find individual expressions of avowed unbelief. 'Beaux seigneurs,' says Captain Bétisac to his comrades when about to die, 'I have attended to my spiritual concerns and, in my conscience, I believe I have greatly angered God, having for a long time already erred against the faith, and I cannot believe a word about the Trinity, or that the Son of God has humbled Himself to such an extent as to come down from Heaven into the carnal body of a woman; and I believe and say that when we die there is no such thing as a soul. . . . I have held this opinion ever since I became self-conscious, and I shall hold it till the end.' The provost of Paris, Hugues Aubriot, is a violent hater of the clergy; he does not believe in the sacrament of the altar, he makes a mock of it; he does not keep Easter, he does not go to confession.
Jacques du Clercq relates that several noblemen, in full possession of their faculties, refused extreme union. Perhaps we should regard these isolated cases of unbelief less as wilful heresy than as a spontaneous reaction against the incessant and pressing call of the faith, arising from a culture overcharged with religious images and concepts. In any case, they should not be confounded either with the literary and superficial paganism of the Renaissance, or with the prudent epicureanism of some aristocratic circles from the thirteenth century downward, or, above all, with the passionate negation of ignorant heretics who had passed the boundary-line between mysticism and pantheism.

The naive religious conscience of the multitude had no need of intellectual proofs in matters of faith. The mere presence of a visible image of things holy sufficed to establish their truth. No doubts intervened between the sight of all those pictures and statues – the persons of the Trinity, the flames of hell, the innumerable saints – and belief in their reality. All these conceptions became matters of faith in the most direct manner; they passed straight from the state of images to that of convictions, taking root in the mind as pictures clearly outlined and vividly coloured, possessing all the reality claimed for them by the Church, and even a little more.

Now, when faith is too directly connected with a pictured representation of doctrine, it runs the risk of no longer making qualitative distinctions between the nature and the degree of sanctity of the different elements of religion. The image by itself does not teach the faithful that one should adore God and only venerate the saints. Its psychological function is limited to creating a deep conviction of reality and a lively feeling of respect. It therefore became the task of the Church to warn incessantly against want of discrimination in this respect, and to preserve the purity of doctrine by explaining precisely what the image stood for. In no other sphere was the danger of luxuriance of religious thought caused by a vivid imagination more obvious.
Now, the Church did not fail to teach that all honours rendered to the saints, to relics, to holy places, should have God for their object. Although the prohibition of images in the second commandment of the Decalogue was abrogated by the new law, or limited to God the Father alone, the Church purposed, nevertheless, to maintain intact the principle of non adorabis ea neque coles: Images were only meant to show simple-minded people what to believe. They are the books of the illiterate, says Clemanges; a thought which Villon has expressed in the touching lines which he puts into his mother's mouth:

Femme je suis povrette et ancienne,
Qui riens ne sçai; onques lettre ne luiz;
Au moustier voy dont suis paroissienne
Paradis paint, où sont harpés et luz,
L'ung enfer où dampez sont bouluiz;
L'ung me fait paour, l'autre joye et lisse . . .

The medieval Church was, however, rather heedless of the danger of a deterioration of the faith caused by the popular imagination roaming unchecked in the sphere of hagiology. An abundance of pictorial fancy, after all, furnished to the simple mind quite as much matter for deviating from pure doctrine as any personal interpretation of Holy Scripture. It is remarkable that the Church, so scrupulous in dogmatic matters, should have been so confiding and indulgent towards those who, sinning out of ignorance, rendered more homage to images than was lawful. It suffices, says Gerson, that they meant to do as the Church requires.

Thus towards the end of the Middle Ages an ultra-realistic conception of all that related to the saints may be noticed in the popular faith. The saints had become so real and such familiar characters of current religion that they became bound up with all the more superficial religious impulses. While profound devotion still centred on Christ and His mother,

1. I am a poor old woman who knows nothing, I never could read. In my parish church I see Paradise painted, where are harps and lutes, And a hell, where the damned are boiled. The one frightens me, the other brings joy and mirth.
The Waning of the Middle Ages

quite a host of artless beliefs and fancies clustered about the saints. Everything contributed to make them familiar and life-like. They were dressed like the people themselves. Every day one met ‘Messires’ Saint Roch and Saint James in the persons of living plague patients and pilgrims. Down to the Renaissance the costume of the saints always followed the fashion of the times. Only then did Sacred Art, by arraying the saints in classical draperies, withdraw them from the popular imagination and place them in a sphere where the fancy of the multitude could no longer contaminate the doctrine in its purity.

The distinctly corporeal conception of the saints was accentuated by the veneration of their relics, not only permitted by the Church but forming an integral part of religion. It was inevitable that this pious attachment to material things should draw all hagiolatry into a sphere of crude and primitive ideas, and lead to surprising extremes. In the matter of relics the deep and straightforward faith of the Middle Ages was never afraid of disillusionment or profanation through handling holy things coarsely. The spirit of the fifteenth century did not differ much from that of the Umbrian peasants, who, about the year 1000, wished to kill Saint Romuald, the hermit, in order to make sure of his precious bones; or of the monks of Fossanuova, who, after Saint Thomas Aquinas had died in their monastery, in their fear of losing the relic, did not shrink from decapitating, boiling, and preserving the body. During the lying in state of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, in 1231, a crowd of worshippers came and cut or tore strips of the linen enveloping her face; they cut off the hair, the nails, even the nipples. In 1392, King Charles VI of France, on the occasion of a solemn feast, was seen to distribute ribs of his ancestor, Saint Louis; to Pierre d’Ailly and to his uncles Berry and Burgundy he gave entire ribs; to the prelates one bone to divide between them, which they proceeded to do after the meal.

It may well be that this too corporeal and familiar aspect, this too clearly outlined shape, of the saints has been the very reason why they occupy so little space in the sphere of visions
and supernatural experience. The whole domain of ghost-
seeing, signs, spectres and apparitions, so crowded in the
Middle Ages, lies mainly apart from the veneration of the
saints. Of course, there are exceptions, such as Saint Michael,
Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret appearing to Joan of Arc;
and other instances might be added. But, generally speaking,
popular phantasmagoria is full of angels, devils, shades of the
dead, white women, but not of saints. Stories of apparitions
of particular saints are, as a rule, suspect of having already
undergone some ecclesiastical or literary interpretation. To
the agitated beholder a phantom has no name and hardly a
shape. In the famous vision of Frankenthal, in 1446, the young
shepherd sees fourteen cherubim, all alike, who tell him they
are the fourteen ‘Holy Martyrs’, to whom Christian icono-
graphy attributed such distinct and marked appearances.
Where a primitive superstition does attach to the veneration
of some saint, it retains something of the vague and formless
character that is essential to superstition, as in the case of
Saint Bertulph at Ghent, who can be heard tapping the sides
of his coffin in Saint Peter’s abbey ‘moult dru et moult fort’
(very frequently and very loudly) as a warning of impending
calamity.

The saint, with his clearly outlined figure, his well-known
attributes and features as they were painted or carved in the
churches, was wholly lacking in mystery. He did not inspire
terror as do vague phantoms and the haunting unknown. The
dread of the supernatural is due to the undefined character of
its phenomena. As soon as they assume a clear-cut shape they
are no longer horrible. The familiar figures of the saints pro-
duced the same sort of reassuring effect as the sight of a police-
man in a foreign city. The complex of ideas connected with
the saints constituted, so to say, a neutral zone of calm and
domestic piety, between the ecstasy of contemplation and of
the love of Christ on the one hand, and the horrors of demon-
mania on the other. It is perhaps not too bold to assert that
the veneration of the saints, by draining off an overflow of
religious effusion and of holy fear, acted on the exuberant
piety of the Middle Ages as a salutary sedative.
The veneration of the saints has its place among the more outward manifestations of faith. It is subject to the influences of popular fancy rather than of theology, and they sometimes deprive it of its dignity. The special cult of Saint Joseph towards the end of the Middle Ages is characteristic in this respect. It may be looked upon as the counterpart of the passionate adoration of the Virgin. The curiosity with which Joseph was regarded is a sort of reaction from the fervent cult of Mary. The figure of the Virgin is exalted more and more and that of Joseph becomes more and more of a caricature. Art portrays him as a clown dressed in rags; as such he appears in the diptych by Melchior Broederlam at Dijon. Literature, which is always more explicit than the graphic arts, achieves the feat of making him altogether ridiculous. Instead of admiring Joseph as the man most highly favoured of all, Deschamps represents him as the type of the drudging husband.

Vous qui servez a femme et a enfans
Aiez Joseph toudis en remembrance,
L'femme servit toujours tristes, dolans,
Ist Jhesu Crist garda en son enfance;
A piè trotoit, son fardeau sur sa lance,
En plusieurs lieux est figuré ainsi,
Lez un mulet, pour leur faire plaisance,
Et si n'ot oncë feste en ce monde ci.¹

And again, still more grossly:

Qu'ot Joseph de povreté
De durté
De maleurté
Quant Dieux nasquil
Maintefois l'a comporté
Ist monté
Par bonté

¹. You who serve a wife and children Always bear Joseph in mind; He served his wife, gloomily and mournfully, And he guarded Jesus Christ in his infancy; He went on foot with his bundle slung on his staff; In several places he is pictured thus, Beside a mule to give them pleasure, And so he had never any amusement in this world.
Religious Thought Crystallizing into Images

Avec sa mère autressi,
Sur sa mule les ravi:
Je le vi
Paint ainsi;
En l'Égypte en est alé.

Le bonhomme est painturé
Tout lassé,
Et troussé
D'une cote et d'un barry:
Un baston au coul posé,
Vieil, usé
L'a rusé.
Feste n'a en ce monde cy,
Mais de lui
Va le cri:
C'est Joseph le rassoté.1

This shows how familiarity led to irreverence of thought. Saint Joseph remained a comic type, in spite of the very special reverence paid to him. Doctor Eck, Luther's adversary, had to insist that he should not be brought on the stage, or at least that he should not be made to cook the porridge, 'no ecclesia Dei irridentur'. The union of Joseph and Mary always remained the object of a deplorable curiosity, in which profane speculation mingled with sincere piety. The Chevalier de la Tour Landry, a man of prosaic mind, explains it to himself in the following manner: 'God wished that she should marry that saintly man Joseph, who was old and upright, for God wished to be born in wedlock, to comply with the current legal requirements, to avoid gossip.'

An unpublished work of the fifteenth century2 represents

1. What poverty Joseph suffered What hardships What misery When God was born! Many a time he has carried him, And placed him In his goodness With his mother, too On his mule, and took them with him: I saw him Painted thus, He went into Egypt.

The good man is painted Quite exhausted, And dressed in A frock and a striped garment, A stick across his shoulder, Old, spent And broken. For him there was no amusement in this world, But of him People say – That is Joseph, the fool.

the mystic marriage of the soul with the celestial spouse as if it were a middle-class wedding. ‘If it pleaseth you,’ says Jesus to the Father, ‘I shall marry and shall have a large bevy of children and relations.’ The Father fears a misalliance, but the Angel succeeds in persuading him that the betrothed-elect is worthy of the Son; on which the Father gives his consent in these terms:

Prends la, car elle est plaisant
Pour bien amer son doux amant;
Or prends de nos biens largement,
Et luy en donne habondamment. 1

There is no doubt of the seriously devout intention of this treatise. It is only an instance of the degree of triviality entailed by unbridled exuberance of fancy.

Every saint, by the possession of a distinct and vivid outward shape, had his own marked individuality, quite contrary to the angels, who, with the exception of the three famous archangels, acquired no definite appearance. This individual character of each saint was still more strongly accentuated by the special functions attributed to many of them. Now this specialization of the kind of aid given by the various saints was apt to introduce a mechanical element into the veneration paid to them. If, for instance, Saint Roch is specially invoked against the plague, almost inevitably too much stress came to be laid on his part in the healing, and the idea required by sound doctrine, that the saint wrought the cure only by means of his intercession with God, came in danger of being lost sight of. This was especially so in the case of the ‘Holy Martyrs’ (les saints auxiliaires), whose number is usually given as fourteen, and sometimes as five, eight, ten, fifteen. Their veneration arose and spread towards the end of the Middle Ages.

Ilz sont cinq sains, en la genealogie,
Et cinq sainctes, a qui Dieu octria
Benignement a la fin de leur vie,
Que quiconques de cuer les requerra

1. Take her, for she is pleasing and fit To love her sweet bridegroom; Now take plenty of our possessions, And give them to her in abundance.
The Church had sanctioned the popular belief expressed by
Deschamps in these verses by instituting an office of the Four-
teen Auxiliary Saints. The binding character of their inter-
cession is clearly there expressed: ‘O God, who hast distin-
guished Thy chosen saints, George, etc., etc., with special
privileges before all others, that all those who in their need
invoke their help, shall obtain the salutary fulfilment of their
prayer, according to the promise of Thy grace.’ So there had
been a formal delegation of divine omnipotence. The people
could, therefore not be blamed if with regard to these privi-
leged saints it forgot the pure doctrine a little. The instantane-
ous effect of prayer addressed to them contributed still more
to obscure their part as intercessors; they seemed to be
exercising divine power by virtue of a power of attorney.
Hence it is very natural that the Church abolished this special
office of the Fourteen Auxiliary Saints after the Council of
Trent. The extraordinary function attributed to them had
given rise to the grossest superstition, such as the belief that
it sufficed to have looked at a Saint Christopher, painted or
carved, to be protected for the rest of the day from a fatal
end. This explains the countless number of the saints’ images
at the entrances of churches.

As for the reason why this group was singled out among all
the saints, it should be noticed that the greater number of
them appear in art with some very striking attribute. Saint
Achatus wore a crown of thorns; Saint Giles was accom-
panied by a hind, Saint George by a dragon; Saint Christopher
was of gigantic stature; Saint Blaise was represented in a den
of wild beasts; Saint Cyriac with a chained devil; Saint Denis

1. There are five saints in the genealogy. And five female saints to
whom God granted Benignantly at the end of their lives, That whosoever
shall invoke their help with all his heart In all dangers, that He will hear
their prayers, In all disorders whatsoever. He therefore is wise who serves
these five, George, Denis, Christopher, Giles and Blaise.
carrying his head under his arm; Saint Erasmus being disembowelled by means of a windlass; Saint Eustace with a stag carrying a cross between its antlers; Saint Pantaleon with a lion; Saint Vitus in a cauldron; Saint Barbara with her tower; Saint Katherine with her wheel and sword; Saint Margaret with a dragon. It may well be that the special favour with which the Fourteen Auxiliary Saints were regarded was due, at least partially, to the very impressive character of their images.

The names of several saints were inseparably bound up with divers disorders, and even served to designate them. Thus various cutaneous diseases were called Saint Anthony’s evil. Gout went by the name of Saint Maur’s evil. The terrors of the plague called for more than one saintly protector; Saint Sebastian, Saint Roch, Saint Giles, Saint Christopher, Saint Valentine, Saint Adrian, were all honoured in this capacity by offices, processions and fraternities. Now here lurked another menace to the purity of the faith. As soon as the thought of the disease, charged with feelings of horror and fear, presented itself to the mind, the thought of the saint sprang up at the same instant. How easily, then, did the saint himself become the object of this fear, so that to him was ascribed the heavenly wrath that unchained the scourge. Instead of unfathomable divine justice, it was the anger of the saint which seemed the cause of the evil and required to be appeased. Since he healed the evil, why should he not be its author? On these lines the transition from Christian ethic to heathen magic was only too easy. The Church could not be held responsible, unless we are to blame her carelessness regarding the adulteration of the pure doctrine in the minds of the ignorant.

There are numerous testimonies to show that the people sometimes really regarded certain saints as the authors of disorders, though it would be hardly fair to consider as such those oaths which almost attributed to Saint Anthony the part of an evil fire-demon. ‘Que Saint Antoine me arde’ (May Saint Anthony burn me!), ‘Saint Antoine arde le tripot’, ‘Saint Antoine arde la monture’ (Saint Anthony burn the
brothel! Saint Anthony burn the beast!) – these are lines by Coquillart. So also Deschamps makes some poor fellow say:

Saint Antoine me vent trop chier
Son mal, le feu ou corps me boute;¹

and thus apostrophizes a gouty beggar: ‘You cannot walk? All the better, you save the toll: Saint Mor ne te fera fremir’ (Saint Maur will not make you tremble).

Robert Gaguin, who was not at all hostile to the veneration of the saints, in his *De validorum per Franciam mendicantium varia astucia*, describes beggars in these terms: ‘One falls on the ground expectorating malodorous spittle and attributes his condition to Saint John. Others are covered with ulcers through the fault of Saint Fiacre, the hermit. You, O Damian, prevent them from making water, Saint Anthony burns their joints, Saint Pius makes them lame and paralysed.’

In one of his *Colloques* Erasmus makes fun of this belief. One of the interlocutors asks whether in Heaven the saints are more malevolent than they were on earth. ‘Yes,’ answers the other, ‘in the glory of Paradise the saints do not choose to be insulted. Who was sweeter than Saint Cornelius, more compassionate than Saint Anthony, more patient than Saint John the Baptist, during their lives? And now what horrible maladies they send if they are not properly honoured!’ Rabelais states that the lower class of preachers themselves represented Saint Sebastian to their congregation as the author of the plague and Saint Eutropius of dropsy. Henri Estienne has written of the same superstitions in the like manner. That they existed is thus clearly established.

The emotional constituents of the veneration of the saints had fastened so firmly on the forms and colours of their images that mere aesthetic perception was constantly threatening to obliterate the religious element. The vivid impression presented by the aspect of the images with their pious or ecstatic looks, rich gilding, and sumptuous apparel, all admirably reproduced by a very realistic art, left hardly any

¹. Saint Anthony sells me his evil all too dear, He stokes the fire in my body.
room for doctrinal reflection. Effusions of piety went out ardently towards those glorious beings, without a thought being given to the limits fixed by the Church. In the popular imagination the saints were living and were as gods. There is nothing surprising, therefore, in the fact that strict pietists like the Brethren of the Common Life and the Windesheim canons saw a certain danger to popular piety in the development of the veneration of the saints. It is very remarkable, however, that the same idea occurs to a man like Eustache Deschamps, a superficial poet and a commonplace mind, and for that very reason so faithful a mirror of the general aspirations of his time.

Ne faites pas les dieux d’argent,
D’or, de fust, de pierre ou d’orain,
Qui font ydolater la gent.
Car l’ouvrage est forme plaisant;
Leur pianture dont je me plain,
La beauté de l’or reluisant,
Font croire à maint peuple incertain
Que ce soient dieu pour certain,
L’t servent par pensées folles
Telz ymages qui font caroles
Es moustiers ou trop en mettons;
C’est tresmal fait, a brief paroles,
Telz simulacres n’aourons.

Prince, un Dieu croions seulement
Et aourons parfaictement
Aux champs, partout, car c’est raisons,
Non pas faulz dieux, ser n’ayment,
Pierres qui n’ont entendement:
Telz simulacres n’aourons.¹

¹. Do not make gods of silver, Of gold, of wood, of stone or of bronze, That lead people to idolatry. ... Because the work has a pleasant shape; Their colouring of which I complain, The beauty of shining gold, Make many ignorant people believe That these are God for certain, And they serve by foolish thoughts Such images as stand about In churches where they place too many of them. That is very ill done; in short Let us not adore such counterfeits. ...
Perhaps we may consider the diligent propagation of the
cult of guardian angels towards the end of the Middle Ages
as a sort of unconscious reaction against the motley crowd of
popular hagiology. Too large a part of the living faith had
crystallized in the veneration of the saints, and thus there
arose a craving for something more spiritual as an object of
reverence and a source of protection. In addressing itself to
the angel, vaguely conceived and almost formless, piety
restored contact with the supernatural and with mystery.
Once more it is Jean Gerson, the indefatigable worker for the
purity of faith, whom we find perpetually recommending the
cult of the guardian angel. But here also he had to combat
unbridled curiosity, which threatened to submerge piety
under a mass of commonplace details. And it was just in
connection with this subject of angels, which was more or
less unbroken ground, that numbers of delicate questions
obtruded themselves. Do they never leave us? Do they
know beforehand whether we shall be saved or lost? Had
Christ a guardian angel? Will the Antichrist have one? Can
the angel speak to our soul without visions? Do the angels
lead us to good as devils lead us to evil? – Leave these subtle
speculations to divines, concludes Gerson; let the faithful
keep to simple and wholesome worship.

A hundred years after Gerson wrote, the Reformation
attacked the cult of the saints, and nowhere in the whole
contested area did it meet with less resistance. In strong
contrast with the belief in witchcraft and demonology, which
fully maintained their ground in Protestant countries, both
among the clergy and the laity, the saints fell without a blow
being struck in their defence. This was possibly due to the
fact that nearly everything connected with the saints had
become caput mortuum. Piety had depleted itself in the image,
the legend, the office. All its contents had been so completely
expressed that mystic awe had evaporated. The cult of the
saints was no longer rooted in the domain of the unimagi-

In the fields, everywhere, for this is right, No false gods, of iron or of
stone, Stones which have no understanding: Let us not adore such
counterfeits.
able. In the case of demonology, these roots remained as terribly strong as ever.

When, therefore, Catholic Reform had to re-establish the cult of the saints, its first task was to prune it; to cut down the whole luxuriant growth of medieval imagination and establish severer discipline, so as to prevent a reflorescence.
CHAPTER XIII

Types of Religious Life

In studying the history of religious life, we must beware of drawing the lines of demarcation too sharply. When we see side by side the most striking contrasts of passionate piety and mocking indifference, it is so easy to explain them by opposing, as if they made up distinct groups, the worldly to the devout, the intellectuals to the ignorant, the reformers to the conservatives. But, in so doing, we fail to take sufficient account of the marvellous complexity of the human soul and of the forms of culture. To explain the astonishing contrasts of religious life towards the end of the Middle Ages, we must start with the recognition of a general lack of balance in the religious temper, rendering both individuals and masses liable to violent contradictions and to sudden changes.

The general aspect presented by religious life in France towards the end of the Middle Ages is that of a very mechanical and frequently very lax practice, chequered by spasmodic effusions of ardent piety. France was a stranger to that special form of pietism which sequesters itself in small circles of fervent devotees, such as we find springing up in the Netherlands: the 'devotio moderna', dominated by the figure of Thomas à Kempis. Still, the religious needs which gave birth to this movement were not wanting in France, only the devotees did not form a special organization. They found a refuge in the existing orders, or they remained in secular life, without being distinguished from the mass of believers. Perhaps the Latin soul endures more easily than that of Northern peoples the conflicts with which life in the world confronts the pious.

Of all the contradictions which religious life of the period presents, perhaps the most insoluble is that of an avowed contempt of the clergy, a contempt seen as an undercurrent throughout the Middle Ages, side by side with the very great
respect shown for the sanctity of the sacerdotal office. The soul of the masses, not yet completely christianized, had never altogether forgotten the aversion felt by the savage for the man who may not fight and must remain chaste. The feudal pride of the knight, the champion of courage and of love, was at one, in this, with the primitive instinct of the people. The worldliness of the higher ranks of the clergy and the deterioration of the lower grades did the rest. Hence it was that nobles, burghers and villeins had for a long time past been feeding their hatred with spiteful jests at the expense of the incontinent monk and the guzzling priest. Hatred is the right word to use in this context, for hatred it was, latent, but general and persistent. The people never wearied of hearing the vices of the clergy arraigned. A preacher who inveighed against the ecclesiastical state was sure of being applauded. As soon as a homilist broaches this subject, says Bernardino of Siena, his hearers forget all the rest; there is no more effective means of reviving attention when the congregation is dropping off to sleep, or suffering from heat or cold. Everybody instantly becomes attentive and cheerful.

Contempt and gibes are levelled especially at the mendicant orders. The types of unworthy priests in the Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles, like the starving chaplain who reads mass for three doits, or the confessor pledged to absolve the family of everything every year, in return for his board and lodging, are all of them mendicant friars. In a series of New Year’s wishes Molinet rhymes thus:

Prions Dieu que les Jacobins
Puissent manger les Augustins,
Et les Carmes soient pendus
Des cordes des Frères Menus.¹

At the same time, the restoration of the mendicant orders caused a revival of popular preaching, which gave rise to those vehement outbursts of fervour and penitence which stamped so powerfully the religious life of the fifteenth century.

¹. Let us pray God that the Jacobins May eat the Augustinians, And that the Carmelites may be hanged With the cords of the Minorites.
Types of Religious Life

There is in this special hatred for the begging friars an indication of a most important change of ideas. The formal and dogmatic conception of poverty as extolled by Saint Francis of Assisi, and as observed by the mendicant orders, was no longer in harmony with the social sentiment which was just arising. People were beginning to regard poverty as a social evil instead of an apostolic virtue. Pierre d'Ailly opposed to the mendicant orders the 'true poor' - *vere pauperes*. England, which, earlier than other nations, became alive to the economic aspect of things, gave, towards the end of the fourteenth century, the first expression to the sentiment of the sanctity of productive labour in that strangely fantastic and touching poem, *The Vision of William concerning Piers Plowman*.

Still, this general abuse of priests and monks goes hand in hand with a profound veneration for their sacred function. Gislebert de Lannoy saw a priest at Rotterdam appease a tumult by raising the *Corpus Domini*.

The sudden transitions and the violent contrasts of the religious life of the ignorant masses reappear in that of cultured individuals. Often enlightenment comes like a thunderclap, as it did in the case of Saint Francis suddenly hearing the words of the Gospel as a compulsory command. A knight hears the baptismal ritual read: he has perhaps heard it twenty times before, but suddenly the miraculous virtue of these words pierces into his soul, and he promises himself henceforth to chase away the devil by the mere recollection of the baptism. Jean de Bueil is on the point of witnessing a duel, the adversaries are both going to swear to their good right on the Host. Suddenly the captain, seized by the thought that one of them must needs forswear himself and will be lost irrevocably, exclaims: 'Do not swear; only fight for a wager of 500 crowns, without taking an oath.'

As for the great lords, the basic unsoundness of their life of arrogant pomp and disordered enjoyment contributed to give a spasmodic character to their piety. They are devout by starts, for life is far too distracting. Charles V of France sometimes gives up the chase at the most exciting moments
to hear mass. Anne of Burgundy, the wife of Bedford, now scandalizes the Parisians by splashing a procession by her mad riding, now leaves a court fête at midnight to attend the matins of the Celestines. She brought upon herself a premature death by visiting the sick of the hôtel Dieu.

Among the princes and the lords of the fifteenth century, more than one presents the type of an almost inconceivable mixture of devotion and debauchery. Louis of Orleans, an insane lover of luxury and pleasure, addicted even to the sin of necromancy, has his cell in the common dormitory of the Celestines, where he shares the privations and duties of monastic life, rising at midnight and sometimes hearing five or six masses a day.

The coexistence in one person of devotion and worldliness is displayed in a striking fashion in Philip the Good. The duke, famous for his ‘moult belle compagnie’ of bastards, his extravagant feasts, his grasping policy, and for a pride not less violent than his temper, is at the same time strictly devout. He was in the habit of remaining in his oratory for a long time after mass, and living on bread and water four days a week, as well as on all the vigils of Our Lady and the apostles. He is often still fasting at four o’clock in the afternoon. He gives alms on a great scale and in secret. After the surprise of Luxemburg, he remains engrossed in his hours and special prayers of thanksgiving so long that his escort, awaiting him on horseback, grow impatient, for the fight was not yet quite over. On being warned of the danger, the duke replies: ‘If God has granted me victory, He will keep it for me.’

Gaston Phébus, count of Foix, King René, Charles of Orleans, represent so many different types of a very worldly and often frivolous temperament, coupled with a devotional spirit which one shrinks from stigmatizing as hypocrisy or bigotry. It has rather to be regarded as a kind of reconciliation, hardly conceivable to the modern mind, between two moral extremes. Its possibility in the Middle Ages depends on the absolute dualism of the two conceptions, which then dominated all thinking and living.

Men of the fifteenth century often couple with austere
devotion the love of bizarre splendour. The craving to
decorate faith with the magnificence of forms and colours is
displayed in other forms besides works of religious art; it
is sometimes found in the forms of spiritual life itself. When
Philippe de Mézières plans his Order of the Passion, which
was to save Christendom, he imagines a whole phantas-
magoria of colours. The knights, according to their ranks, will
be dressed in red, green, scarlet and azure, with red crosses
and hoods of the same colour. The grand-master will be all
in white. If he saw but little of this splendour, as his order
was never established, he was at least able to satisfy his
artistic taste in the monastery of the Celestines at Paris,
which was the refuge of his last years. If the rules of the
order, which he followed as a lay-brother, were very severe,
the convent-church, on the other hand, a mausoleum of the
princes of the time, was most sumptuous, all sparkling with
gold and precious stones; it was reputed the most beautiful
of Paris.

It is but a step from luxurious piety to theatrical displays
of hyperbolic humility. Olivier de la Marche remembered to
have seen in his youth the entry of Jacques de Bourbon, the
titular king of Naples, who had renounced the world because
of the exhortations of Saint Colette. The king, miserably
dressed, was carried in a sort of hand-barrow, 'not differing
from the barrows in which dung and ordure are usually
carried.' An elegant cortège followed closely. 'And I have
heard it recounted and said' — says La Marche — 'that in all
the towns where he came, he made similar entries out of
humility.'

The minute directions given by a number of saintly persons
concerning their burial bear witness to the same excessive
humility. The blessed Pierre Thomas, improving upon the
example of Saint Francis of Assisi, leaves orders to wrap him
up in a sack, with a cord round his neck, and so place him on
the ground to die. 'Bury me,' he says, 'at the entrance of the
choir, that every one may walk over my body, even dogs and
goats.' Philippe de Mézières, his disciple and friend, tries to
go even further in fantastic humility. In his dying hour a
heavy iron chain is to be placed round his neck. When he has given up the ghost, he is to be dragged by his feet, naked, into the choir, where he is to remain on the ground, his arms crossed, tied by three ropes to a plank. Thus ‘this fine treasure for the worms’ is to wait till people come to carry it to the grave. The plank is to take the place of the ‘sumptuous coffin, ornamented with his vain and worldly coat of arms, which would have been displayed at the interment of the unhappy pilgrim, if God had so much hated him that he had let him die at the court of princes of this world.’ Dragged along once more, his ‘carrion’ is to be thrown, quite naked, into the grave.

One is not surprised to hear that this lover of precise specification made several wills. In the later ones details of this kind are wanting; and at his death, which occurred in 1405, he was honourably buried in the frock of the Celestines, and two epitaphs, probably of his own composition, were carved on his tombstone.

The ideal of sanctity has always been incapable of much variation. The fifteenth century, in this respect, brings no new aspiration. Consequently, the Renaissance exercised hardly any influence on the conception of saintly life. The saint and the mystic remain almost wholly untouched by the changing times. The types of saints of the Counter-Reformation are still those of the later Middle Ages, who in their turn did not essentially differ from those of the preceding centuries. Both before and after the great turning of the tide, two types of saints stand out conspicuously: the men of fiery speech and energetic action, like Ignatius de Loyola, Francis Xavier, Charles Borromeo, who belong to the same class as Bernardino of Siena, John Capistrano and St Vincent Ferrer, in earlier times; and the men absorbed in tranquil rapture, or practising extravagant humility, the poor in spirit like Saint Francis of Paula and Blessed Peter of Luxembourg in the fifteenth century, and Aloysius Gonzaga in the sixteenth.

It would not be unreasonable to compare to the romanticism of chivalry, as an element of medieval thought, a
romanticism of saintliness, in the sense of a tendency to give the colours of fancy and the accents of enthusiasm to an ideal form of virtue and of duty. It is remarkable that this romanticism of saintliness always aims far more at miracles and excesses of humility and of asceticism, than at brilliant achievements in the service of religious policy. The Church has sometimes canonized the great men of action who have revived or purified religious culture, but popular imagination has been more impressed, in all ages, by the supernatural and by irrational excess.

It is not without interest to note some traits showing us the attitude of the aristocracy, refined and fastidious and engrossed in the chivalrous ideas, towards the ideal of saintly life. The princely families of France have produced later saints than Saint Louis. Charles of Blois, descended, by his mother, from the house of Valois, found himself charged, by his marriage with the heiress of Brittany, with a war of succession, which filled the greater part of his life. On marrying Jeanne de Penthièvre, he had promised to adopt the arms and the battle-cry of the duchy, which meant: to fight Jean de Montfort, the pretender supported by England. The count of Blois waged the war like the best of knights and captains of his time. He passed nine years in captivity in England, and perished at Aurai in 1364, battling side by side with Bertrand du Guesclin and Beaumanoir.

Now this prince, whose career was altogether military, had led, from his youth onward, the life of an ascetic. As a child he plunged into the study of edifying books, a taste which his father did his best to moderate, judging it unsuitable to a future warrior. Later he used to sleep on straw near the conjugal bed. After his death he was found to have worn a hair-shirt under his armour. He confessed every evening, saying that no Christian ought to go to sleep in the state of sin. As a prisoner in London he was in the habit of entering the cemeteries to kneel down and say the De profundis. The Breton squire whom he asked to say the responses refused, saying: ‘No; there lie those who have killed my parents and friends and have burnt their houses.’ On being released, he
resolved to undertake a pilgrimage, barefooted, in the snow, from La Roche-Derrien, where he had been captured, to the shrine of Saint Yves at Tréguier. The people, hearing this, covered the road with straw and blankets, but the count made a detour and hurt his feet, so that for weeks he was unable to walk.

Directly after his death his royal relations, especially his son-in-law, Louis d’Anjou, a son of the king, took steps to have him canonized. The proceedings, which took place at Angers in 1371, ended in his beatification.

If we are to trust Froissart, this Charles of Blois would seem to have had a bastard. ‘There was killed in good style the aforesaid Lord Charles of Blois, with his face to the enemy, and a bastard son of his called Jehans de Blois, and several other knights and squires of Brittany.’ Was Froissart mistaken? Or are we to suppose that the mingling of piety and sensuality, which is so evident in the figures of Louis of Orleans and of Philip the Good, reappears in him in a still more astonishing degree?

No such question arises in the case of Blessed Peter of Luxembourg, another ascetic sprung from court circles. This scion of the house of Luxembourg, which in its several branches held the imperial dignity and a preponderant place at the courts of France and Burgundy, is a striking representative of the type called by William James ‘the under-witted saint’, a narrow mind, which can only live in a carefully isolated sphere of devotion. He died in his eighteenth year, in 1387, having been loaded from his childhood with ecclesiastical dignities, being bishop of Metz at fifteen and a cardinal soon after. His personality as it disengages itself from the narratives of the witnesses in the proceedings for his canonization is almost pitiful. He is of a consumptive disposition and has overgrown his strength. Even as a child he was wholly given up to austerity and devotion. He reprimands his brother when he laughs, because the Gospel does tell us that the Lord wept, but not that he laughed. ‘Sweet, courteous, and debonair’ – says Froissart – ‘virgin as to the body, a very great giver of alms. The greater part of the day and the
night he spent in prayer. And in all his life there was nothing but humility.’ At first his noble parents tried to dissuade him from a life of religion. When he said he wished to go forth and preach, he was told: ‘You are much too tall, everybody would recognize you at once. You could not endure the cold, and as to preaching the crusade, how could you do that?’ ‘I see’, said Peter – and here the very recesses of his narrow mind seem lighted up for a moment – ‘I see very well, that you want to lead me from the right road to the bad; but assuredly, if I once enter on it, I shall do so much that the whole world will talk of me.’

When once his ascetic aspirations had overcome all attempts to extirpate them, his parents were clearly proud of having such a young saint in the family. Imagine, amidst the unbridled luxury of the courts of Berry and Burgundy, this sickly boy, horribly dirty and covered with vermin, as the witnesses attest. He is ever occupied with his sins and notes them down every day in a pocket-book. If he is prevented from doing this by a journey or some other reason, he makes up for this neglect by writing for hours. At night he is seen writing up or reading his pocket-books by the light of a candle. He rises at midnight and awakes the chaplains in order to confess; sometimes he knocks in vain – they turn a deaf ear to his nocturnal call. If he obtains a hearing, he reads out his lists of sins from his little scraps. Towards the end of his life, he is shriven twice a day and will not allow his confessor to leave him for a moment. After his death a whole chest was found filled with these little lists of sins.

The Luxembourgs and their friends immediately took steps to get him canonized. The request was made at Avignon by the king himself, and supported both by the University of Paris and the Chapter of Notre Dame. The greatest lords of France appeared as witnesses at the trial in 1389: André de Luxembourg, Louis de Bourbon, Enguerrand de Coucy. Though the canonization was not obtained because of the pope’s negligence (the beatification only took place in 1527), the veneration of Peter of Luxembourg was at once established, and miracles multiplied at Avignon, on the spot where
he lay buried. The king founded a Celestine monastery there after the model of the one at Paris, which was the favourite sanctuary of the high nobility, and which Peter had also frequented in his youth. The foundation-stone was laid by the dukes of Orleans, Berry and Burgundy.

There is another case which may serve to illustrate the intercourse of princes with saints: Saint Francis of Paula at the court of Louis XI. The very peculiar type of piety which this king presents is too well known to be described here at large. Louis XI, 'who bought the grace of God and of the Virgin Mary for more money than ever king did', displays all the qualities of the crudest fetishism. His passion for relics, pilgrimages and processions seems to us almost totally devoid of really pious sentiment, and even of respect. He used to handle the holy objects as if they were expensive medicines. At the approach of death he sent to all parts of the world for extraordinary relics. The pope sent him the corporal of Saint Peter. The Great Turk actually offered him a collection of relics which were still at Constantinople. On the table beside his bed was the 'Sainte Ampoule', the vase in which the holy oil for coronation was kept, and which had never left Reims before. According to Commines, the king wanted to try its miraculous virtue by having his whole body anointed. The cross of Saint Laud was specially sent for from Angers to take an oath upon, for Louis made a difference between oaths taken on one relic and on another. These are traits reminding us of the Merovingian times.

In him the fervent venerator of relics blends with the collector of curiosities. He corresponds with Lorenzo de Medici about the ring of Saint Zenobo and about an Agnus Dei, that is to say, one of these figures cut out of the fibrous trunk of an Asiatic fern, which were also called Agnus Scythicus, or Tartarian lamb, and to which rare medicinal virtues were attributed. At Plessis-lès-Tours the holy persons, summoned thither to say prayers for the king, rub shoulders with musicians of all sorts. 'At that time the king had a great number of players of deep-toned and sweet instruments brought to him, whom he lodged at Saint-Cosme, near Tours,
where they assembled, as many as a hundred and twenty, among whom there were many shepherds from the country of Poitou. Who often played before the king’s mansion (but they did not see him), that the king might enjoy the aforesaid instruments as a pleasure and pastime and to prevent him from sleeping. And, on the other hand, he also sent for a great number of male and female bigots and devout people like hermits and saintly creatures, to pray God incessantly to allow that he should not die and that He might let him live longer.’

Saint Francis of Paula, the Calabrian hermit, who surpassed the Minorite friars in humility by founding the order of the Minims, was literally a purchase of the royal collector. After having failed with the king of Naples, Louis’s diplomacy succeeded, by the pope’s intervention, in securing the miraculous man. A noble escort bore him from Italy, sorely against his will. His ferocious asceticism reminds us of the barbarous saints of the tenth century, Saint Nilus and Saint Romuald. He flies at the sight of a woman. Since his youth he has never touched a piece of money. He sleeps upright or in a leaning position; he lets his hair and beard grow. He does not eat animal food and accepts only roots. The king, who is already ill, took pains to procure the proper food for his rare saint. ‘Monsieur de Genas, I beg you to send me lemons and sweet oranges, and muscatel pears, and parsnips,¹ and it is for the holy man who eats neither flesh nor fish; and you will do me a very great pleasure.’ At court he was known only as ‘the holy man’, so that Commines appears not to have known his name, although he often saw him. The mockers and suspicious persons also called him ‘holy man.’ The king himself, at the instigation of Jacques Coitier, his physician, begun by setting spies on the man of God ‘and by putting him to the proof. Commines is prudently reserved about him. Although declaring that he had never seen a man ‘of such saintly life, nor one in whom the Holy Spirit seemed more to speak through his mouth’, he concludes: ‘He is still

¹. Perhaps the king wrote by mistake, *pastenargues* for *pasteques* = watermelons.
alive, so that he may well change, for the better or for the worse, so that I shall be silent, as many mocked at the arrival of this hermit, whom they called "holy man." It is noteworthy that learned theologians like Jan Standonck and Jean Quentin, having come from Paris to speak to him about the founding of a monastery of Minims at Paris, went back full of admiration.

It is a significant fact that the princes of the fifteenth century often ask the advice of great visionaries and extravagant ascetics in political matters. Thus Saint Colette is consulted by Philip the Good and by his mother, Marguerite of Bavaria, and acts as an intermediary in the controversies between the houses of France, Savoy and Burgundy. Her canonization was demanded with pious insistence by the house of Burgundy.

More important still was the public part played by Denis the Carthusian. He also was frequently in touch with the house of Burgundy. Obsessed by the fear of imminent catastrophes, such as the conquest of Rome by the Turks, he urges the duke to undertake a crusade. He dedicates to him a treatise on princely government. He advises the duke of Guelders in the conflict with his son. Numbers of noblemen, clerks and burghers come to consult him in his cell at Rue-monde, where he is constantly engaged in resolving doubts, difficulties and questions of conscience.

Denis the Carthusian, or of Rickel, is the most complete type of religious enthusiast at the end of the Middle Ages. His mental range and many-sided energy are hardly conceivable. To mystic transports, ferocious asceticism, continual visions and revelations he unites immense activity as a theological writer. His works fill forty-five quarto volumes. All medieval divinity meets in him as the rivers of a continent flow together in an estuary. *Qui Dionysium legit nihil non legit*,¹ said sixteenth-century theology. He sums up, he concludes, but he does not create. All that his great predecessors have thought is reproduced by him in a simple and easy style. He wrote all his books himself, and revised, corrected, sub-

¹. He who reads Denis reads everything.
divided and illuminated them. At the end of his life, he deliberately laid down his pen. *Ad securae taciturnitatis portum me transferre intendò.*

He never knew repose. Every day he recites the Psalter almost entirely, and, at any rate, half. He prays continually, while dressing or while engaged in any other occupation. When others go to sleep again after matins, he remains awake. Big and strong, he exposes his body with impunity to all kinds of privations. I have a head of iron, he would say, and a stomach of brass. He feeds, for choice, on tainted victuals.

The enormous amount of theological meditation and speculation which he achieved was not the fruit of a peaceful and balanced life of study; it was carried out in the midst of intense emotions and violent shocks. Visions and revelations are with him ordinary experiences. Ecstasies come to him on all sorts of occasions, especially when he hears music, sometimes in the midst of noble company, who are listening to his wise advice. As a child he rose when the moon was shining brightly, thinking it was time to go to school. He is a stammerer. He sees the room of a dying woman full of demons who knock the stick out of his hand. He constantly converses with the dead. When asked if he often sees apparitions of deceased persons, he answers: 'Yes, hundreds of times.' Although constantly occupied with his supernatural experiences, he does not like to speak about them, and is ashamed of the ecstasies which earned him among the laudatory surnames of the great theologians that of *Doctor ecstaticus*.

The great figure of Denis the Carthusian no more escaped suspicion and raillery than the miracle-worker of Louis XI. The slander and abuse of the world pursued him all his life. The mental attitude of the fifteenth century towards the highest religious manifestations of the age is made up equally of enthusiasm and distrust.

1. I am now going to enter the haven of secure taciturnity.
CHAPTER XIV

Religious Sensibility and Religious Imagination

Ever since the gentle mysticism of Saint Bernard, in the twelfth century, had started the strain of pathetic tenderness about the Passion of Christ, the religious sensibility or the medieval soul had been increasing. The mind was saturated with the concepts of Christ and the cross. In early childhood the image of the cross was implanted on the sensitive heart, so grand and forbidding as to overshadow all other affections by its gloom. When Jean Gerson was a child, his father one day stood with his back against a wall, his arms outspread, saying: ‘Thus, child, was your God crucified, who made and saved you.’ This image of his father, he tells us, remained engraved on his mind, expanding as he grew older, even in his old age, and he blessed his pious father for it, who had died on the day of the Exaltation of the Cross. Saint Colette, when four years old, every day heard her mother in prayer lament and weep about the Passion, sharing the pain of contumely, blows, and torments. This recollection fixed itself in the supersensitive heart of Colette with such intensity, that she felt, all her life through, the most severe oppression of heart every day at the hour of the crucifixion; and at the reading of the Passion she suffered more than a woman in childbed.

A preacher sometimes paused to stand in silence, with his arms extended in the form of the cross, for a quarter of an hour.

The soul is so imbued with the conception of the Passion that the most remote analogy suffices to make the chord of the memory of Christ vibrate. A poor nun carrying wood to the kitchen imagines she carries the cross; a blind woman doing the washing takes the tub for the manger and the washhouse for theable.

This extreme religious sensibility shows itself by copious
weeping. Devotion, says Denis the Carthusian, is a sort of tenderness of heart, which easily moves to tears of piety. We should pray God to have 'the daily baptism of tears.' They are the wings of prayer and, according to Saint Bernard, the wine of angels. We should give ourselves up to the grace of meritorious tears, get ready for them and let ourselves be carried away by them all the year round, but especially during Lent, so that we may say with the Psalmist: *Fuerunt mihi lacrimae meae panis die ac nocte.* ¹ Sometimes they come so easily, that we pray sobbing and groaning. If they do not come, we should not force them; we should then content ourselves with the tears of the heart. In the presence of others we should avoid these signs of extraordinary devotion.

Vincent Ferrer shed so many tears every time he consecrated the Host that the whole congregation also wept, insomuch that a general wailing was heard as if in the house of one dead.

Popular devotion in France did not take a special form as we notice in the Netherlands, where it was standardized, so to say, in the pietistic movement of the Brethren of the Common Life and the regular canons of the Congregation of Windesheim. This was the circle whence proceeded the *Imitation of Christ.* The regulations which the Dutch devout bound themselves to obey, gave their piety a conventional form and preserved them from dangerous excesses of fervour. French devotion, although very similar, kept more of its passionate and spasmodic character, and led more easily to fantastic aberrations, in those cases where it did not speedily wear itself out.

Nowhere do we notice its character better than in the writings of Gerson. The chancellor of the university was the great dogmatic and moral censor of his time. His prudent, scrupulous, slightly academic mind was admirably fitted to distinguish between true piety and exaggerated religious manifestations. This was, indeed, his favourite occupation. Benevolent, sincere and pure, he had that meticulous carefulness in point of good style and form which so often reminds

1. *My tears have been my meat day and night.*
us of his modest origin in the case of a man who has raised himself by his own talents from humble circumstances to an aristocratic mentality. He was a born psychologist and had a fine sense of style, which is near akin to the craving for orthodoxy.

At the Council of Constance, Gerson defended the Dutch Brethren of the Common Life against whom a Dominican of Groningen brought a charge of heresy. He was, nevertheless, fully aware of the dangers threatening the Church from a too exuberant popular devotion. It may therefore appear strange that he often disapproved of manifestations of piety in his own country, which reappear in that very ‘devotio moderna’ of the Netherlands, over which he threw the mantle of his authority. The explanation is that the devout in France had no safe sheepfold of organization and of discipline to keep them within the limits of what the Church could tolerate.

The world, said Gerson, is approaching its end, and, like an old dotard, is exposed to all sorts of fancies, dreams and illusions which lead many a one to stray outside the pathway of truth. Mysticism is brought into the streets. Many people take to it, without suitable direction, and indulge in too rigid fasts, too protracted vigils, and too abundant tears, all of which disturb their brains. In vain they are advised to be moderate and to take heed lest they fall into the devil’s snares. At Arras, he tells us, he visited a woman who won the admiration of the multitude by going completely without food during several consecutive days, against her husband’s wishes. He talked to her and only found in her a vain and arrogant obstinacy; for, after her fasts, she ate with insatiable voracity. Her face betrayed imminent insanity. He also cites the case of an epileptic woman who thought that each twinge of pain in her corns was a sign that a soul descended to hell.

Gerson set little store by visions and revelations which were recent and universally spoken of, including even those of Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. He had heard so many stories of this sort that he had lost all belief in them. Someone or other would always be asserting that it had been revealed to him that he would be pope. A certain man, in
particular, believed himself predestined, first, to become pope, then to be the Antichrist, so that he had thought of killing himself in order to save Christendom from such an evil.

There is nothing more dangerous, says Gerson, than ignorant devotion. The poor devout, learning that the heart of Mary exulted in her God, strain themselves to exult also; they call up all sorts of images without being able to distinguish between truth and delusion, and they take them all for miraculous proofs of their excellent devotion.

Contemplative life has great dangers, he continues; it has made numbers of people melancholy or mad. Gerson perceived the connexion between fasting and hallucinations, and had a glimpse of the rôle played by fasting in the practice of magic.

Now, where was a man of Gerson’s psychological subtlety to draw the line of demarcation in the manifestations of piety, between what is holy and laudable and what is inadmissible? The dogmatic point of view did not meet the case. It was easy for him, a theologian by profession, to point out deviations from dogma. But he felt that, as regards manifestations of piety, considerations of an ethical sort should guide our judgement, that it was a question of degree and of taste. There is no virtue, says Gerson, which is more neglected in these miserable times of schism than discretion.

The Church in the Middle Ages tolerated many religious extravagances, provided they did not lead up to novelties of a revolutionary sort, in morals or in doctrine. So long as it spent itself in hyperbolic fancies or in ecstasies, superabundant emotion was not a source of danger. Thus, many saints were conspicuous for their fanatical reverence for virginity, taking the form of a horror of all that relates to sex. Saint Colette is an instance of this. She is a typical representative of what has been called by William James the theopathic condition. Her supersensibility is extreme. She can endure neither the light nor the heat of fire, only the light of candles. She has an immoderate horror of flies, ants and slugs, and of all dirt and stenches of all kinds. Her abomination of sexual functions inspires her with repugnance for those saints who have passed
through the matrimonial state, and leads her to oppose the admission of non-virginal persons to her congregation. The Church has ever praised such a disposition, judging it to be edifying and meritorious.

On the other hand, the same sentiment became dangerous, as soon as the fanatics of chastity, not content with shutting themselves up in their own sphere of purity, wanted to apply their principles to ecclesiastical and social life. The Church was repeatedly obliged to disown the violent assailants of the validity of the sacraments administered by priests living in fornication, for the double reason that sound catholic doctrine has always separated the sacredness of the office from the personal dignity of the bearer, and that she knew herself to be not strong enough to uproot the evil. Jean de Varennes had been a learned divine and a celebrated preacher. Chaplain to the youthful Cardinal of Luxembourg at Avignon, he seemed destined for the highest ecclesiastical career, when he suddenly threw up all his benefices, with the exception of a canonry of Notre Dame of Reims, gave up the great style of his life and went to Saint Lié, his birthplace, where he began to lead a saintly life and to preach. 'And he was much visited by people who came to see him from all countries on account of the simple, very noble and most honest life he led.' Soon he is called 'the holy man of Saint Lié'; he is regarded as a future pope, a miraculous being, a messenger of God. All France talks of him.

Now, in the person of Jean de Varennes the passion of sexual purity assumes a revolutionary aspect. He reduces all the evils of the Church to the one evil of lust. His extremist programme for the re-establishment of chastity is not aimed only at the clergy. As to fornicating priests, he denies the efficacy of the sacraments they administer: an ancient and redoubtable thesis which the Church had encountered more than once. According to him, it was not permissible for a priest to live in the same house with his sister or with an elderly woman. Moreover, he attacks immorality in general. He ascribes twenty-three different sins to the matrimonial state. He demands that adultery shall be punished according to
the Ancient Law; Christ Himself would have ordered the stoning of the adulterous woman, if He had been sure of her fault. He asserts that no woman in France is chaste, and that no bastard can live a good life and be saved. In his vehement indignation he preaches resistance to the ecclesiastical authorities, to the archbishop of Reims in particular. 'A wolf, a wolf!' he cried to the people, who understood but too well who the wolf was, and repeated joyously: 'Hahay, aus leus, mes bones gens, aus leus.' The archbishop had Jean de Varennes locked up in a horrible prison.

This severity towards all revolutionary tendencies of a doctrinal kind contrasts with the indulgence shown by the Church for the extravagances of religious imagination, notably for ultrasensuous fancies about divine love. It required the psychological perspicacity of a Gerson to be aware that there also the Faith was menaced by a moral and doctrinal danger.

The spiritual state called dulcedo Dei, the sweetness of the delights of the love of Christ, was towards the end of the Middle Ages one of the most active elements of religious life. The followers of the 'devotio moderna' in the Netherlands had systematized it, and thereby made it more or less innocuous. Gerson, who distrusted it, has analysed it in his treatise, De diversis diaboli tentationibus, and elsewhere. 'The day,' he said, 'would be too short if I were to enumerate the innumerable follies of the loving, nay, the raving, amantium, imno et amentium.' He knew the peril by experience. For he can have only meant himself when he described the case of one of his acquaintances who had carried on a spiritual friendship with a nun, at first without any trace of carnal inclination, and without suspecting any sin, till a separation revealed to him the amorous nature of this relation. So that he drew the inference from it, Amor spiritualis facile labitur in nudum carnalem amorem, and considered himself warned.

The devil, he says, sometimes inspires us with feelings of immense and marvellous sweetness which is very like devotion, so that we make the quest of this delight our object and want to love God only to attain it. Many have deceived them-

1. Spiritual love easily falls into sheer carnal love.
selves by immoderately cultivating such feelings; they have
taken the mad excitement of their hearts for divine ardour,
and were thus miserably led astray. Others strive to attain
insensibility or complete passiveness, to become a perfect
tool for God.

It is this sensation of absolute annihilation of the indi-
vidual, tasted by the mystics of all times, which Gerson, as a
supporter of a moderate and prudent mysticism, could not
tolerate. A female visionary told him that in the contempla-
tion of God her mind had been annihilated, really annihilated, and
then created anew. ‘How do you know?’ he asked her. ‘I
experienced it,’ she had answered. The logical absurdity of
this reply had sufficed him to prove the reprehensible nature
of these fancies.

It was dangerous to let such sensations express themselves
by explicit formulas; the Church could only tolerate them in
the form of images. Catherine of Siena might say that her
heart had been changed into the heart of Christ. But Mar-
guerite Porete, an adherent of the sect of the Brethren of the
Free Spirit, who also believed that her soul had been anni-
hiliated in God, was burnt at Paris.

What the Church dreaded above all in the idea of the anni-
hilation of the personality was the consequence, accepted by
the extremist mystics of all religions, that the soul absorbed
in God, and therefore, having no will, can no longer sin, even
in following its carnal appetites. How many poor ignorant
people had been dragged by such doctrines into the most
abominable licence! Every time Gerson touches the question
of the dangers of spiritual love, he remembers the excesses
of the Bégards and of the Turlupins; he fears a truly satanic
impurity, like that of the nobleman he mentions as having
confessed to a Carthusian that the sin of lust did not prevent
him from loving God; on the contrary, it inflamed him to
seek for and taste more eagerly the sweetness of divine love.

So long as the transports of mysticism were translated into
passionate imaginings of a symbolic nature, however vivid
their colours might be, they caused but a relative danger. On
becoming crystallized in images, they lost some of their
noxiousness. In this way the exuberant imagery of the time, to a certain extent, diverted the most dangerous tendencies of the religious life of the epoch, however bizarre it may appear to us. Jan Brugman, a popular Dutch preacher, might with impunity compare Jesus, taking human form, to a drunkard, who forgets himself, sees no danger, who gives away all he has. ‘Oh, was He not truly drunk, when love urged Him to descend from the highest heavens to this lowest valley of the earth?’ He sees Him in heaven, going about to pour out drinks for the prophets, ‘and they drank till they were fit to burst, and David with his harp, leaped before the table, just as if he were the Lord’s fool.’

Not only the grotesque Brugman, the serene Ruysbroeck, too, likes to represent divine love under the image of drunkenness. Hunger also served as a figure to express the relations of the soul with Christ. Ruysbroeck, in The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage, says: ‘Here begins an eternal hunger which is never appeased; it is an inner craving and hankering of the loving power and the created spirit for an uncreated good. . . . Those that experience it are the poorest of men; for they are eager and greedy and they have an insatiable hunger. Whatever they eat and drink, they never become satiated by it, for this hunger is eternal.’ The metaphor may be inverted, so that the hunger is Christ’s, as in The Mirror of Eternal Salvation. ‘His hunger is immensely great; He consumes us entirely to the bottom, for He is a greedy glutton with a voracious hunger; He devours even the marrow of our bones. . . . First He prepares His repast and in His love He burns up all our sins and our faults. Next, when we are purified and roasted by the fire of love, He opens his mouth like a voracious being who wishes to swallow all.’

A little insistence on the details of the metaphor will make it ridiculous. ‘You will eat Him,’ says Le Livre de Crainte Amoureuse of Jean Berthelem, in speaking of the Eucharist, ‘roasted at the fire, well baked, not at all overdone or burnt. For just as the Easter lamb was properly baked and roasted between two fires of wood or of charcoal, thus was gentle Jesus on Good Friday placed on the spit of the worthy cross,
and tied between the two fires of His very fearful death and passion, and of the very ardent charity and love which He felt for our souls and our salvation; He was, as it were, roasted and slowly baked to save us.'

The infusion of divine grace is described under the image of the absorption of food, and also of being bathed. A nun feels quite deluged in the blood of Christ and faints. All the red and warm blood of the five wounds flowed through the mouth of Blessed Henry Suso into his heart. Catherine of Siena drunk from the wound in His side. Others drunk of the Virgin's milk, like Saint Bernard, Henry Suso, Alain de la Roche.

The Breton, Alain de la Roche, a Dominican, born about 1428, is a very typical representative of this religious imagery, both ultra-concrete and ultra-fantastic. He was the zealous promoter of the use of the rosary, with a view to which he founded the Universal Brotherhood of the Psalter of Our Lady. The description of his numerous visions is characterized at the same time by an excess of sexual imagination and by the absence of all genuine emotion. The passionate tone which, in the grand mystics, makes these too sensuous images of hunger and thirst, of blood and voluptuousness, bearable, is altogether lacking. The symbolism of spiritual love has become with him a mere mechanical process. It is the decadence of the medieval spirit. We shall return to it shortly.

Now, whereas the celestial symbolism of Alain de la Roche seems artificial, his infernal visions are characterized by a hideous actuality. He sees the animals which represent the various sins equipped with horrible genitals, and emitting torrents of fire which obscure the earth with their smoke. He sees the prostitute of apostasy giving birth to apostates, now devouring them and vomiting them forth, now kissing them and petting them like a mother.

This is the reverse side of the suave fancies of spiritual love. Human imagination contained, as the inevitable complement of the sweetness of celestial visions, a black mass of demonological conceptions which also sought expression in language
of ardent sensuality. Alain de la Roche forms the link between the placid and gentle pietism of the ‘devotio moderna’ and the darkest horror produced by the medieval spirit on the wane: the delusion of witchcraft, at that time fully developed into a fatally consistent system of theological zeal and judicial severity. A faithful friend of the regulars of Windesheim and the Brethren of the Common Life, in whose house he died at Zwolle in 1475, he was at the same time the preceptor of Jacob Sprenger, a Dominican like himself, not only one of the two authors of the Malleus maleficarum, but also the propagator in Germany of the Brotherhood of the Rosary, founded by Alain.
CHAPTER XV

Symbolism in its Decline

Thus religious emotion always tended to be transmuted into images. Mystery seemed to become graspable by the mind when invested with a perceptible form. The need of adoring the ineffable in visible shapes was continually creating ever new figures. In the fourteenth century, the cross and the lamb no longer sufficed for the effusions of overflowing love offered to Jesus; to these is added the adoration of the name of Jesus, which occasionally threatens to eclipse even that of the cross. Henry Suso tattoos the name of Jesus over his heart and compares himself to the lover who wears the name of his beloved embroidered on his coat. Bernardino of Siena, at the end of a moving sermon, lights two candles and shows the multitude a board a yard in length, bearing on an azure ground the name Jesus in golden letters, surrounded by the sun's rays. The people filling the church kneel down and weep with emotion. The custom spreads, especially with the Franciscan preachers. Denis the Carthusian is represented in art holding such a board in his uplifted hands. The sun as a crest above the arms of Geneva is derived from this usage. The ecclesiastical authorities regarded the matter with suspicion; there was some talk of superstition and of idolatry; there were tumults for and against; Bernardino was summoned before the curia, and the usage was forbidden by Pope Martin V. About the same time a very similar form of adoring Christ under a visible sign was successfully introduced into the ritual, namely, that of the monstrance. To this also the Church objected at first; the use of the monstrance was originally forbidden except during the week of Corpus Christi. In taking, instead of the original form of a tower, that of a radiant sun, the monstrance became very like the board, bearing Jesus' name, of which the Church disapproved.

The abundance of images in which religious thought
Symbolism in its Decline

threatened to dissolve itself would have only produced a chaotic phantasmagoria, if symbolic conception had not worked it all into a vast system, where every figure had its place.

Of no great truth was the medieval mind more conscious than of Saint Paul’s phrase: *Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmatem, tunc autem facie ad faciem.* ¹ The Middle Ages never forgot that all things would be absurd, if their meaning were exhausted in their function and their place in the phenomenal world, if by their essence they did not reach into a world beyond this. This idea of a deeper significance in ordinary things is familiar to us as well, independently of religious convictions: as an indefinite feeling which may be called up at any moment, by the sound of raindrops on the leaves or by the lamplight on a table. Such sensations may take the form of a morbid oppression, so that all things seem to be charged with a menace or a riddle which we must solve at any cost. Or they may be experienced as a source of tranquillity and assurance, by filling us with the sense that our own life, too, is involved in this hidden meaning of the world. The more this perception converges upon the absolute One, whence all things emanate, the sooner it will tend to pass from the insight of a lucid moment to a permanent and formulated conviction. ‘By cultivating the continuous sense of our connexion with the power that made things as they are, we are tempered more towardly for their reception. The outward face of nature need not alter, but the expressions of meaning in it alter. It was dead and is alive again. It is like the difference between looking on a person without love, or upon the same person with love. . . . When we see all things in God, and refer all things to Him, we read in common matters superior expressions of meaning.’ ²

Here, then, is the psychological foundation from which symbolism arises. In God nothing is empty of sense: *nibil vacuum neque sine signo apud Deum,* said Saint Irenaeus. So the conviction of a transcendent meaning in all things seeks to

¹. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face.
formulate itself. About the figure of the Divinity a majestic system of correlated figures crystallizes, which all have reference to Him, because all things derive their meaning from Him. The world unfolds itself like a vast whole of symbols, like a cathedral of ideas. It is the most richly rhythmical conception of the world, a polyphonous expression of eternal harmony.

In the Middle Ages the symbolist attitude was much more in evidence than the causal or the genetic attitude. Not that this latter mode of conceiving the world, as a process of evolution, was wholly absent. Medieval thought, too, sought to understand things by means of their origin. But, destitute of experimental methods, and neglecting even observation and analysis, it was reduced, in order to state genetic relations, to abstract deduction. All notions of one thing proceeding from another took the naive form of procreation or ramification. The image of a tree or a pedigree sufficed to represent any relations of origin and cause. An *arbor de origine juris et legum*, for example, classified all law in the form of a tree with numerous branches. Owing to its primitive methods, the evolutionist thought of the Middle Ages was bound to remain schematic, arbitrary and sterile.

From the causal point of view, symbolism appears as a sort of short-circuit of thought. Instead of looking for the relation between two things by following the hidden detours of their causal connexions, thought makes a leap and discovers their relation, not in a connexion of cause or effects, but in a connexion of signification or finality. Such a connexion will at once appear convincing provided only that the two things have an essential quality in common which can be referred to a general value. Expressed in terms of experimental psychology: all mental association based on any casual similitude whatever will immediately set up the idea of an essential and mystic connexion. This may well seem a rather meagre mental function. Moreover, it reveals itself as a very primitive function, when envisaged from an ethnological point of view. Primitive thought is characterized by a general feebleness of perception of the exact demarcation between different concepts, so that it tends to incorporate into the notion of a
definite something all the notions connected with it by any relation or similitude whatsoever. With this tendency the symbolizing function is closely related.

It is, however, possible to view symbolism in a more favourable light by abandoning for a while the point of view of modern science. Symbolism will lose this appearance of arbitrariness and abortiveness when we take into account the fact that it is indissolubly linked up with the conception of the world which was called Realism in the Middle Ages, and which modern philosophy prefers to call, though less correctly, Platonic Idealism.

Symbolic assimilation founded on common properties presupposes the idea that these properties are essential to things. The vision of white and red roses blooming among thorns at once calls up a symbolic assimilation in the medieval mind: for example, that of virgins and martyrs, shining with glory, in the midst of their persecutors. The assimilation is produced because the attributes are the same: the beauty, the tenderness, the purity, the colours of the roses, are also those of the virgins, their red colour that of the blood of the martyrs. But this similarity will only have a mystic meaning if the middle-term connecting the two terms of the symbolic concept expresses an essentiality common to both; in other words, if redness and whiteness are something more than names for a physical difference based on quantity, if they are conceived as essences, as realities. The mind of the savage, of the child, and of the poet never sees them otherwise.

Now, beauty, tenderness, whiteness, being realities, are also entities; consequently all that is beautiful, tender or white must have a common essence, the same reason of existence, the same significance before God.

In pointing out these very strong links between symbolism and realism (in the scholastic sense), we should be careful not to think too much of the quarrel about the universals. We know very well that the realism which declared *universalia ante rem*, and attributed essentiality and pre-existence to general ideas, did not dominate medieval thought without a struggle. Undoubtedly there were also nominalists. But it does not
seem too bold to affirm that radical nominalism has never been anything but a reaction, an opposition, a counter-current vainly disputing the ground with the fundamental tendencies of the medieval spirit. As philosophical formulas, realism and nominalism had early made each other the necessary concessions. The new nominalism of the fourteenth century, that of the Occamists or Moderns, merely removed certain inconveniences of an extreme realism, which it left intact by relegating the domain of faith to a world beyond the philosophical speculations of reason.

Now, it is in the domain of faith that realism obtains, and here it is to be considered rather as the mental attitude of a whole age than as a philosophic opinion. In this larger sense it may be considered inherent in the civilization of the Middle Ages and as dominating all expressions of thought and of the imagination. Undoubtedly Neo-Platonism strongly influenced medieval theology, but it was not the sole cause of the general 'realist' trend of thought. Every primitive mind is realist, in the medieval sense, independently of all philosophic influence. To such a mentality everything that receives a name becomes an entity and takes a shape which projects itself on the heavens. This shape, in the majority of cases, will be the human shape.

All realism, in the medieval sense, leads to anthropomorphism. Having attributed a real existence to an idea, the mind wants to see this idea alive, and can only effect this by personifying it. In this way allegory is born. It is not the same thing as symbolism. Symbolism expresses a mysterious connexion between two ideas, allegory gives a visible form to the conception of such a connexion. Symbolism is a very profound function of the mind, allegory is a superficial one. It aids symbolic thought to express itself, but endangers it at the same time by substituting a figure for a living idea. The force of the symbol is easily lost in the allegory.

So allegory in itself implies from the outset normalizing, projecting on a surface, crystallizing. Moreover, medieval literature had taken it in as a waif of decadent Antiquity. Martianus Capella and Prudentius had been the models. Alle-
gory seldom loses an air of elderliness and pedantry. Still, the use of it supplied a very earnest craving of the medieval mind. How else can we explain the preference which this form enjoyed so long?

These three modes of thought together — realism, symbolism and personification — have illuminated the medieval mind with a flood of light. The ethical and aesthetic value of the symbolical interpretation of the world was inestimable. Embracing all nature and all history, symbolism gave a conception of the world, of a still more rigorous unity than that which modern science can offer. Symbolism's image of the world is distinguished by impeccable order, architectonic structure, hierarchic subordination. For each symbolic connexion implies a difference of rank or sanctity: two things of equal value are hardly capable of a symbolic relationship with each other, unless they are both connected with some third thing of a higher order.

Symbolist thought permits of an infinity of relations between things. Each thing may denote a number of distinct ideas by its different special qualities, and a quality may also have several symbolic meanings. The highest conceptions have symbols by the thousand. Nothing is too humble to represent and to glorify the sublime. The walnut signifies Christ; the sweet kernel is His divine nature, the green and pulpy outer peel is His humanity, the wooden shell between is the cross. Thus all things raise the thoughts to the eternal; being thought of as symbols of the highest, in a constant gradation, they are all transfused by the glory of divine majesty. Every precious stone, besides its natural splendour, sparkles with the brilliance of its symbolic values. The assimilation of roses and virginity is much more than a poetic comparison, for it reveals their common essence. As each notion arises in the mind the logic of symbolism creates a harmony of ideas. The special quality of each of them is lost in this ideal harmony and the rigour of rational conception is tempered by the presentment of some mystic unity.

A consistent concord reigns between all the spiritual do-
mains. The Old Testament is the prefiguration of the New, profane history reflects the one and the other. About each idea other ideas group themselves, forming symmetrical figures, as in a kaleidoscope. Eventually all symbols group themselves about the central mystery of the Eucharist; here there is more than symbolic similitude, there is identity: the Host is Christ and the priest in eating it becomes truly the sepulchre of the Lord.

The world, objectionable in itself, became acceptable by its symbolic purport. For every object, each common trade had a mystical relation with the most holy, which ennobled it. Bonaventura identified the handicrafts symbolically with the eternal generation and incarnation of the Word, and with the covenant between God and the soul. Even profane love is attached by symbolic connexion to divine love. In this way all individual suffering is but the shadow of divine suffering, and all virtue is as a partial realization of absolute goodness. Symbolism, in thus detaching personal suffering and virtue from the sphere of the individual in order to raise them to that of the universal, constituted a salutary counterpoise to the strong religious individualism, bent on personal salvation, which is characteristic of the Middle Ages.

Religious symbolism offered one cultural advantage more. To the letter of formulated dogma, rigid and explicit in itself, the flowering imagery of symbols formed, as it were, a musical accompaniment, which by its perfect harmony allowed the mind to transcend the deficiencies of logical expression.

Symbolism opened up all the wealth of religious conceptions to art, to be expressed in forms full of colour and melody, and yet vague and implicit, so that by these the profoundest intuitions might soar towards the ineffable.

In the later Middle Ages the decline of this mode of thought had already long set in. The representation of the Universe in a grand system of symbolical relations had long been complete. Still, the symbolizing habit maintained itself, adding ever new figures that were like petrified flowers. Symbolism at all times shows a tendency to become mechanical. Once accepted as a principle, it becomes a product, not of poetical enthu-
siasm only, but of subtle reasoning as well, and as such it grows to be a parasite clinging to thought, causing it to degenerate.

Symbolic assimilation is often only based on an equality of number. An immense perspective of ideal series of relationships is opened up in this way, but they amount to nothing more than arithmetical exercises. Thus the twelve months signified the apostles, the four seasons the evangelists, the year Christ. A regular cluster was formed of systems of seven. With the seven virtues correspond the seven supplications of the Lord’s Prayer, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven beatitudes and the seven penitential psalms. All these groups of seven are again connected with the seven moments of the Passion and the seven sacraments. Each of them is opposed to one of the seven deadly sins, which are represented by seven animals and followed by seven diseases.

A director of consciences like Gerson, from whom these examples are borrowed, is inclined to lay the stress on the moral and practical value of these symbolisms. In a visionary like Alain de la Roche the aesthetic element prevails. His symbolic speculations are very highly elaborated and somewhat factitious. In order to obtain a system in which the numbers fifteen and ten enter, representing the cycles of 150 Aves and of 15 Paters, which he prescribed to his Brotherhood of the Rosary, he adds the eleven celestial spheres and the four elements and then multiplies by the ten categories (substance, quality, etc.). As the product he obtained 150 natural habits. In the same way the multiplication of the ten commandments by fifteen virtues gives 150 moral habits. To arrive at the figure of fifteen virtues, he counts, besides the three theological virtues and the four cardinal virtues, seven capital virtues, which makes fourteen; there remain two other virtues: religion and penitence; that makes sixteen, which is one too many; but as temperance of the cardinal series is identical with abstinence of the capital series, we finally obtain the number fifteen. Each of these fifteen virtues is a queen having her nuptial bed in one of the divisions of the Pater Noster. Each of the words of the Ave signifies one of the
fifteen perfections of the Virgin, and at the same time a precious stone, and is able to drive away a sin, or the animal which represents that sin. They represent other things as well: the branches of a tree which carries all the blessed ones; the steps of a staircase. To quote but two examples: the word Ave signifies the innocence of the Virgin and the diamond; it drives away pride, or the lion, which represents pride. The word Maria denotes her wisdom and the carbuncle; it drives away envy, symbolized by a black dog.

Sometimes Alain gets a little entangled in his very complicated system of symbolisms.

Symbolism was, in fact, played out. Finding symbols and allegories had become a meaningless intellectual pastime, shallow fancifulness resting on a single analogy. The sanctity of the object still gives it some small spiritual value. As soon as the craze of symbolism spreads to profane or simply moral matters, decadence is manifest. Froissart, in *Li Orloge amoureus*, compares all the details of love to the various parts of a tapestry. Chastellain and Molinet vie with each other in political symbolism. The three estates represent the qualities of the Virgin. The seven electors of the Empire signify the virtues; the five towns of Artois and Hainault, which in 1477 remained faithful to the house of Burgundy, are the five wise virgins. In reality this is symbolism turned upside down; it uses things of the higher order as symbols of things of the lower order, for these authors in effect raise terrestrial things to the higher level by employing sacred conceptions merely to adorn them.

The Donatus moralisatus, sometimes, but erroneously, ascribed to Gerson, mixed up Latin grammar with theology: the noun-substantive is the man, the pronoun means that he is a sinner. The lowest grade of this kind of mental activity is represented by works like *Le Parement et Triomphe des Dames* of Olivier de la Marche, in which each article of female costume symbolizes a virtue – a theme also developed by Coquillart.

De la pantoufle ne nous vient que santé
Et tout prouffit sans griefe maladie,
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Pour luy donner tiltre d’auctorité
Je luy donne le nom d’humilité.  

In the same way shoes mean care and diligence, stockings perseverance, the garter resolution, etc.

It is clear that to the men of the fifteenth century this genre did not appear so silly as it does to us, otherwise they would not have cultivated it with so much gusto. We are thus led to conclude that, to the mind of the declining Middle Ages, symbolism and allegory had not yet lost all their living significance. The tendency to symbolize and to personify was so spontaneous that nearly every thought, of itself, took a figurative shape. Every idea being considered as an entity, and every quality as an essence, they were at once invested by the imagination with a personal form. Denis the Carthusian, in his revelations, sees the Church in fully as personal a shape as when it was represented in an allegory on the stage. One of his revelations deals with the future reformation of the Church, such as fifteenth-century theology was hoping for: a Church cleansed from the evils that stained it. The spiritual beauty of this purified Church was revealed to his vision in the form of a superb and precious garment, with marvellous colours and ornaments. Another time he sees the persecuted Church: ugly, anaemic, enfeebled. God warns him that the Church is going to speak, and Denis then hears the inner voice as though it proceeded from the person of the Church quasi ex persona Ecclesiae. The figurative form that thinking assumes here is so direct and so sufficient to evoke the desired associations, that no need is felt to explain the allegory in detail. The idea of a splendid garment is fully adequate to express spiritual purity; thought here has resolved itself into an image, just as it can resolve itself into a melody.

Let us recall once more the allegorical personages of the Roman de la Rose. To us it requires an effort to picture to ourselves Bel-Accueil, Douce Mercy, Humble Requeste. To the men of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, these figures had a very vivid aesthetic and sentimental value, which put them

1. The slipper only gives us health And all profit without serious illness. To give it a title to authority I give it the name of humility.
almost on a level with those divinities which the Romans conceived out of abstractions, like Pavor and Pallor, Concordia, etc. To the minds of the declining Middle Ages, Doux Penser, Honte, Souvenirs, and the rest, were endowed with a quasi-divine existence. Otherwise the Roman de la Rose would have been unreadable. One of the figures passed even from its original meaning to still more concrete signification: Danger in amorous parlance meant the jealous husband.

Allegory is often called in to express a thought of particular importance. Thus the bishop of Chalons, wishing to address a very serious political remonstrance to Philip the Good, gives it an allegorical form and presents it to the duke at Hesdin on Saint Andrew’s Day, 1437. ‘Haultesse de Signourie’, chased out of the Empire, having first fled to France, next to the court of Burgundy, is inconsolable, and complains of being harrowed there, too, by ‘Carelessness of the prince, Feebleness of counsel, Envy of servants, Exaction of the subjects’, to drive away which it will be necessary to oppose ‘Vigilance of the prince’, etc., to them. In short, the whole political argument has taken the form of a tableau vivant instead of a newspaper leader, as it would take with us. Evidently this was the way to create an impression, and it follows that allegory still had a suggestive force which we find it very hard to realize.

The ‘Burgher of Paris’ in his diary is a prosaic man, who takes little trouble to ornament his style. Nevertheless, when he comes to the most horrible events he has to relate, that is to say, to the Burgundian murders in Paris, in June, 1418, he at once rises to allegory. ‘Then arose the goddess of Discord, who lived in the tower of Evil Counsel, and awoke Wrath, the mad woman, and Covetousness and Rage and Vengeance, and they took up arms of all sorts and cast out Reason, Justice, Remembrance of God and Moderation most shamefully.’ His narrative of the atrocities committed is entirely composed in the symbolic fashion. ‘Then Madness the enraged, and Murder and Slaughter killed, cut down, put to death, massacred all they found in the prisons ... and Covetousness tucked up her skirts into her belt with Rapine, her daughter, and Larceny, her son. ... Afterwards the aforesaid people went
by the guidance of their goddesses, that is to say, Wrath, Covetousness and Vengeance, who led them through all the public prisons of Paris, etc.

Why does the author use allegory here? To give his narrative a more solemn tone than the one he uses for the daily events which he generally notes down in his diary. He feels the necessity of regarding these atrocious events as something more than the crimes of a few individual malefactors; allegory is his way of expressing his sense of tragedy.

It is just when allegory chafes us most that it fully reveals its dominion over the medieval mind. We can bear it more or less in a tableau vivant where conventional figures are draped in a fantastical and unreal apparel. The fifteenth century dresses up its allegorical figures, as well as its saints, in the costume of the time and has the faculty of creating new personages for each thought it wants to express. To tell the moral tale of a giddy young man, who is led to ruin by the life at court, Charles de Rochefort, in L’Abusé en Court, invents a whole new series of personages, like those of the Rose, and these dim creations, Fol cuidier, Folle bombance (Foolish credulity, Foolish show), and the rest, are represented in the miniatures illustrating the work like noblemen of the age. Time himself does not require a beard or a scythe, and appears in doublets and hose. The very commonplace aspect of these allegories is precisely what shows their vitality.

We can understand that a human shape is ascribed to virtues or to sentiments, but the spirit of the Middle Ages does not hesitate to extend this process to notions which, to us, have nothing personal. The personification of Lent was a widely known type from 1300 onward. We find it in the poem, La Bataille de Karesme et de Charnage, a theme which Peter Breughel was to take up much later and illustrate with his mad fancy. A current proverb said: Quaresme fait ses flans la nuit de Pasques. In certain towns of North Germany a doll, called Lent, was suspended in the choir of the church and taken down during mass on the Wednesday before Easter.

Was there a difference between the idea which people
formed of saints and that of purely symbolic personages? Undoubtedly, the former were acknowledged by the Church, they had a historical character and statues of wood and stone, but the latter were in touch with living fancy, and, after all, we may ask ourselves if to popular imagination Bel-Accueil or Faux Semblant did not appear as real as Saint Barbara and Saint Christopher.

On the other hand, there is no real contrast between medie- val allegory and Renaissance mythology. There is rather a fusion. The mythological figures are older than the Renais- sance. Venus and Fortune, for instance, had never completely died, and allegory, on the other hand, kept its vogue for a long time after the fifteenth century, nowhere stronger than in English literature. In the poetry of Froissart, Doux Sem- blant, Refus, Dangier, and Escondit are seen contending, as it were, with mythological figures like Atropos, Clotho, Lachesis. At first the latter are less vivid and coloured than the allegories; they are dull and shadowy and there is nothing classic about them. Gradually Renaissance sentiment brings about a complete change. The Olympians and the nymphs get the better of the allegorical personages, who fade away, in proportion as the poetic glory of Antiquity is more intensely felt.

Symbolism, with its servant allegory, ultimately became an intellectual pastime. The symbolic mentality was an obstacle to the development of causal thought, as causal and genetic relations must needs look insignificant by the side of symbolic connexions. Thus the sacred symbolism of the two luminaries and the two swords for a long time barred the road to historic and juridical criticism of papal authority. For the symbolizing of Papacy and Empire as the Sun and the Moon, or as the two swords brought by the Disciples, was to the medieval mind far more than a striking comparison; it revealed the mystic foundation of the two powers, and established directly the precedence of Saint Peter. Dante, in order to investigate the historical foundation of the pope’s primacy, had first to deny the appropriateness of the symbolism.

The time was not distant when people were bound to awake
to the dangers of symbolism; when arbitrary and futile allegories would become distasteful and be rejected as trammels of thought. Luther branded them in an invective which is aimed at the greatest lights of scholastic theology: Bonaventura, Guillaume Durand, Gerson and Denis the Carthusian. ‘These allegorical studies,’ he exclaims, ‘are the work of people who have too much leisure. Do you think I should find it difficult to play at allegory-making about any created thing whatsoever? Who is so feeble-witted that he could not try his hand at it?’

Symbolism was a defective translation into images of secret connexions dimly felt, such as music reveals to us. *Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*. The human mind felt that it was face to face with an enigma, but none the less it kept on trying to discern the figures in the glass, explaining images by yet other images. Symbolism was like a second mirror held up to that of the phenomenal world itself.
CHAPTER XVI

The Effects of Realism

All that was thinkable had taken image-shape: conception had become almost entirely dependent on imagination. Now, a too systematic idealism (that is what realism meant in the Middle Ages) gives a certain rigidity to the conception of the world. Ideas, being conceived as entities and of importance only by virtue of their relation with the Absolute, easily range themselves as so many fixed stars in the firmament of thought. Once defined, they only lend themselves to classification, subdivision and distinction according to purely deductive norms. Apart from the rules of logic, there is never a corrective at hand to indicate a mistake in the classification, and this causes the mind to be deluded as to the value of its own operations and the certainty of the system.

If the medieval mind wants to know the nature or the reason of a thing, it neither looks into it, to analyse its structure, nor behind it, to inquire into its origin, but looks up to heaven, where it shines as an idea. Whether the question involved is political, social or moral, the first step taken is always to reduce it to its universal principle. Even quite trifling and ordinary things are regarded in this light. Thus a point is debated in the University of Paris: May examination fees be levied for intermediate degrees? The chancellor thinks so; Pierre d’Ailly intervenes to defend the opposite view. Now, he does not start from arguments based on law or tradition, but from an application of the text: Radix omnium malorum cupiditas,¹ and so he sets himself to prove by an entirely scholastic exposition that the aforesaid exaction is simoniacal, heretical, and contrary to natural and divine law. This is what so often disappoints and wearies us moderns in reading medieval demonstrations: they are directed heaven-

¹. The root of all evil is covetousness.
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wards, and lose themselves from the very start in moral generalities and Scriptural cases.

This profound and systematic idealism betrays itself everywhere. There is an ideal and clearly defined conception of every trade, dignity or estate, to which the individual who belongs to it has to conform as best he may. Denis the Carthusian, in a series of treatises, *De vita et regimine episcoporum, archidiaconorum, etc., etc.*, pointed out to all—bishops, canons, priests, scholars, princes, nobles, knights, merchants, husbands, widows, girls, friars—the ideal form of their professional duties, and the way to sanctify their calling or condition by living up to that ideal. His exposition of moral precepts, however, remains abstract and general; he never brings us into contact with the realities of the occupations or walks in life of which he speaks.

This tendency to reduce all things to a general type has been considered a fundamental weakness in the mentality of the Middle Ages, owing to which the power to discern and describe individual traits was never attained. Starting from this premise, the well-known summary of the Renaissance as the coming of individualism would be justified. But at bottom this antithesis is inexact and misleading. Whatever the faculty of seeing specific traits may have been in the Middle Ages, it must be noted that men disregarded the individual qualities and fine distinctions of things, deliberately and of set purpose, in order always to bring them under some general principle. This mental tendency is a result of their profound idealism. People feel an imperious need of always and especially seeing the general sense, the connexion with the absolute, the moral ideality, the ultimate significance of a thing. What is important is the impersonal. The mind is not in search of individual realities, but of models, examples, norms.

Every notion concerning the world or life had its fixed place in a vast hierarchic system of ideas, in which it is linked with ideas of a higher and more general order, on which it depends like a vassal on his lord. The proper business of the medieval mind is discrimination, displaying severally all concepts as if they were so many substantial things. Hence the
faculty of detaching a conception from the ideal complex to which it belongs in order to regard it as a thing by itself. When Foulques de Toulouse is blamed for giving an alms to an Albigensian woman, he answers: 'I do not give it to the heretic, but to the poor woman.' Margaret of Scotland, queen of France, having kissed Alain Chartier, the poet, whom she found asleep, exculpates herself in these terms: 'I did not kiss the man, but the precious mouth whence have issued and gone forth so many good words and virtuous sayings.' It is the same turn of mind which, in the field of high theological speculation, distinguishes in God between an antecedent will, desiring the salvation of all, and a consequent will, extending only to the elect.

Without the brake of empirical observation, the habit of always subordinating and subdividing becomes automatic and sterile, mere numbering, and nothing else. No subject lent itself better to it than the category of virtues and of sins. Every sin has its fixed number of causes, species, noxious effects. There are, according to Denis the Carthusian, twelve follies, deceiving the sinner; each of them is illustrated, fixed and represented by Scripture texts and by symbols, so that the whole argument displays itself like a church portal ornamented with sculptures. The enormity of sin should be considered from seven points of view: that of God, that of the sinner, of matter, of circumstances, of the intention, of the nature of the sin and of its consequences. Next, every one of these seven points is subdivided, in its turn, into eight, or into fourteen. There are six infirmities of the mind which incline us to sin, etc. This systematizing of morality has its striking analogies in the sacred books of Buddhism.

Now, this everlasting classification, this anatomy of sin, would be apt to weaken the consciousness of sin which it should enhance, if it were not attended with an effort of the imagination directed to the gravity of the fault and the horrors of the chastisements. All moral conceptions are exaggerated, overcharged to excess, because they are always placed in direct connexion with divine majesty. In every sin, even the least, the universe is concerned. No human soul can be fully
conscious of the enormity of sin. All the saints and the just, the celestial spheres, the elements, the lower creatures and inanimate objects, cry for vengeance on the sinner. Denis strives to over-stimulate the fear of sin and of hell by detailed descriptions and terrifying images. Dante has touched with beauty the darkness of hell: Farinata and Ugolino are heroic, and Lucifer is majestic. But this monk, devoid of all poetic grace, draws a picture of devouring torment and nothing more; his very dullness makes the horror of it. ‘Let us imagine,’ he says, ‘a white-hot oven, and in this oven a naked man, never to be released from such a torment. Does not the mere sight of it appear insupportable? How miserable this man would seem to us! Let us think how he would sprawl in the oven, how he would yell and roar: in short, how he would live, and what would be his agony and his sorrow when he understood that this unbearable punishment was never to end.’

The horrible cold, the loathsome worms, the stench, hunger and thirst, the darkness, the chains, the unspeakable filth, the endless cries, the sight of the demons, Denis calls up all this before us like a nightmare. Still more oppressive is the insistence on psychic suffering: the mourning, the fear, the empty feeling of everlasting separation from God, the inexpressible hatred of God, the envy of the bliss of the elect; the confusion of all sorts of errors and delusions in the brain. And the thought that this is to last for all eternity is by ingenious comparisons wrought up to the fever-point of horror.

The treatise *De quattor hominum novissimis*, from which these details are borrowed, was the customary reading during meal-time at the convent of Windesheim. A truly bitter condiment! But medieval man always preferred drastic treatment. He was like an invalid who has been treated too long with heroic medicines; only the most powerful simulants produced an effect on him. In order to make some virtue shine in all its splendour, the Middle Ages present it in an exaggerated form, which a sedater moralist would perhaps regard as a caricature. Saint Giles praying God not to allow his wound caused by an arrow to heal is their pattern of patience. Temperance
finds its models in saints who always mix ashes with their food, chastity in those who tested their virtue by sleeping beside a woman. If it is not some extravagant act, it is the extreme youth of the saint which marks him out as a model, Saint Nicholas refusing his mother’s milk on feast-days, or Saint Quiricus (a martyr, either three years or nine months old) refusing to be consoled by the prefect, and thrown into the abyss.

Here, again, it is the dominant idealism which makes people only relish the excellence of virtue in an extra strong dose. Virtue is conceived as an idea; its beauty shines more brightly in the hyperbolic perfection of its essence than in the imperfect practice of everyday life.

Nothing shows better the primitive character of the hyper-idealistic mentality, called realism in the Middle Ages, than the tendency to ascribe a sort of substantiality to abstract concepts. Though philosophic realism did never admit these materialist tendencies, and strove to avoid such consequences, it cannot be denied that medieval thought frequently yielded to the inclination to pass from pure idealism to a sort of magic ideal, in which the abstract tends to become concrete. Here the ties which bind the Middle Ages to a very remote cultural past are very clearly displayed.

It was about 1300 that the doctrine of the treasure of the works of supererogation of Christ and the saints took a fixed form. The idea itself of such a treasure, the common possession of all the faithful, in so far as they are members of the mystic body of Christ, which is the Church, was by that time very ancient. But the way in which it was applied, in the sense that the superabundant good works constitute an inexhaustible reserve, which the Church can dispose of by retail, does not appear before the thirteenth century. Alexander of Hales was the first to use the word thesaurus in the technical sense, which it has kept ever since. The doctrine did not fail to excite resistance. In the end, however, it prevailed and was officially formulated in 1343 in the bull Unigenitus of Clement VI. There the treasure has altogether the form of a capital confided by Christ to Saint Peter, and still increasing
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every day. For, in proportion as men are more drawn to justice by the distribution of this treasure, the merits, of which it is composed, will go on accumulating.

The material conception of ethical categories made itself felt more with regard to sin than to virtue. The Church, it is true, has always explicitly taught that sin is not a thing or an entity. But how could it have prevented the error, when everything concurred to insinuate it into men’s minds? The primitive instincts which see sins as stuff which soils or corrupts, which one should, therefore, wash away or destroy, was strengthened by the extreme systematizing of sins, by their figurative representation, and even by the penitentiary technique of the Church itself. In vain did Denis the Carthusian remind the people that it was but for the sake of comparison that he calls sin a fever, a cold and corrupted humour—popular thought undoubtedly lost sight of the restrictions of dogmatists. The terminology of the law, less anxious than theology as to doctrinal purity, did not hesitate, in England, to connect with felony the notion of a corruption of the blood: this is the realistic conception in its spontaneous form.

On one special point the dogma itself demanded this perfectly realist conception: that is to say, with regard to the blood of the Redeemer. The faithful are bound to conceive it as absolutely material. A drop of the precious blood, said Saint Bernard, would have sufficed to save the world, but it was shed abundantly, as Saint Thomas Aquinas expresses it in a hymn:

Pie Pelicane, Jesu domine,
Me immundum munda tuo sanguine,
Cuius una stilla salvum facere
Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.¹

¹. Pious pelican, Lord Jesus, cleanse me, impure one, by your blood, of which one drop can save all the world from all iniquity.

Compare Marlowe’s Faustus: ‘See, where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament! One drop of blood will save me.’
CHAPTER XVII

Religious Thought Beyond the Limits of Imagination

The imagination was continually striving, and in vain, to express the ineffable by giving it shape and figure. To call up the absolute, recourse is always had to the terminology of extension in space, and the effort always fails. From the pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite onward, mystic authors have piled up terms of immensity and infinity. It is always infinite extension which has to serve for rendering the eternal accessible to reason. Mystics exert themselves to find suggestive images. Imagine, says Denis the Carthusian, a mountain of sand, as large as the universe; that every hundred thousand years a grain be taken from it. The mountain will disappear at last. But after such an inconceivable space of time the sufferings of hell will not have diminished, and will not be nearer to the end than when the first grain was removed. And yet, if the damned knew that they would be set free when the mountain had disappeared, it would be a great consolation to them.

If, to inculcate fear and horror, the imagination disposed of resources of appalling wealth, the expression of celestial joys, on the other hand, always remained extremely primitive and monotonous. Human language cannot provide a vision of absolute bliss. It has at its disposal only inadequate superlatives, which can do nothing but strengthen the idea arithmetically. What was the use of producing terms of height, or extension, or the inexhaustible? People never could progress beyond imagery, the reduction of the infinite to the finite, and the consequent weakening of the feeling of the absolute. Every sensation in expressing itself lost a little of its immediate force, every attribute ascribed to God robbed Him of a little of His majesty.
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Thus begins the tremendous struggle of the spirit which yearns to rise above all imagery. It is the same at all epochs and with all races. Mystics, it has been said, have neither birthday nor native land. But the support of imagination cannot be given up all at once. The insufficiency of all modes of expression is gradually accepted. First the brilliant imagery of symbolism is abandoned, and the too concrete formulas of dogma are avoided. But still the contemplation of the absolute Being ever remains linked up with notions of extension or of light. Next these notions change into their negative opposites — silence, the void, obscurity. And as these latter formless conceptions, too, in their turn, prove insufficient, a constant joining of each to its contrary is tried. Finally, nothing remains to express the idea of divinity but pure negation.

Of course, these successive stages in the abandoning of imagery have not actually followed in strict chronological order. All had been reached already by Denis the Areopagite. In the following passage of Denis the Carthusian we find the greater number of these modes of expression united. In a revelation he hears the voice of God who is angry. ‘On hearing this answer the monk, collected within himself, and finding himself as transported into a region of immense light, most sweetly, in an intense tranquillity, by a secret call without external sound invoked the most secret and truly hidden, the incomprehensible God: O most over-lovable God, Thou in Thyself art the light and the region of light, in which Thy elect sweetly come to rest, repose, sleep. Thou art like a desert most over-vast, even and intraversable, where the truly pious heart, entirely purified of all individual affection, illumined from on high and inflamed by sacred ardour, deviates without erring and errs without deviating, happily fails and unfailingly convalesces.’

We here find first the image of light, next that of sleep, then that of the desert, and, lastly, the opposites which cancel one another. The mystic imagination found a very impressive concept in adding to the image of the desert, that is to say, extension of surface — that of the abyss, or exten-
sion of depth. The sensation of giddiness is added to the feeling of infinite space. The German mystics, as well as Ruysbroeck, have made a very plastic use of this striking image.

Master Eckhart spoke of 'the abyss without mode and without form of the silent and waste divinity.' The fruition of bliss, says Ruysbroeck, 'is so immense that God Himself is as swallowed up with all the blessed ... in an absence of modes, which is a not-knowing, and in an eternal loss of self.' And elsewhere: 'The seventh degree, which follows next ... is attained when, beyond all knowledge and all knowing, we discover in ourselves a bottomless not-knowing; when beyond all names given to God and to creatures, we come to expire and pass over in eternal namelessness, where we lose ourselves ... and when we contemplate all these blessed spirits which are essentially sunken away, merged and lost in their super-essence, in an unknown darkness without mode.'

Always the hopeless attempt to dispense with images and to attain 'the state of void, that is mere absence of images', which only God can give. 'He deprives us of all images and brings us back to the initial state where we find only wild and waste absoluteness, void of all form or image, for ever corresponding with eternity.'

The contemplation of God, says Denis the Carthusian, is more adequately rendered by negations than by affirmations. 'For, when I say: God is goodness, essence, life, I seem to indicate what God is, as if what He is had anything in common with, or any resemblance to, a creature, whereas it is certain, that He is incomprehensible and unknown, inscrutable and ineffable, and separated from all His works by an immeasurable and wholly incomparable difference and excellence.' It is for this reason that the 'uniting wisdom' was called by the Areopagite: unreasonable, insane and foolish.

But whether Denis or Ruysbroeck speak of light changed into darkness (a motif inspired by the Old Testament and which the pseudo-Areopagite had developed), or again of
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ignorance, forlornness or of death, they never get beyond images.

Without metaphors it is impossible to express a single thought. All effort to rise above images is doomed to fail. To speak of our most ardent aspirations only in negative terms does not satisfy the cravings of the heart, and where philosophy no longer finds expression, poetry comes in again. Mysticism has always rediscovered the road from the giddy heights of sublime contemplation to the flowery meadows of symbolism. The sweet lyricism of the older French mystics, Saint Bernard and the Victorines, will always come to the aid of the seer, when all the resources of expression have been exhausted. In the transports of ecstasy the colours and figures of allegory reappear. Henry Suso sees his betrothed, Eternal Wisdom: 'She soared high above him in a sky with clouds, she was bright like the morning star and shone like the radiant sun; her crown was eternity, her robe beatitude, her speech sweetness, her kiss absolute delight; she was remote and near, high aloft and below; she was present and yet hidden; she let herself be approached and yet no one could grasp her.'

The Church has always feared the excesses of mysticism, and with reason. For the fire of contemplative rapture, consuming all forms and images, must needs burn all formulas, concepts, dogmas, and sacraments too. However, the very nature of mystic transport implied a safeguard for the Church. To be uplifted to the clarity of ecstasy, to wander on the solitary heights of contemplation stripped of forms and images, tasting union with the only and absolute principle, was to the mystic never more than the rare grace of a single moment. He had to come down from the mountain-tops. The extremists, it is true, with their following of 'enfants perdus', did deviate into pantheism and eccentricities. The others, however – and it is among these that we find the great mystics – never lost their way back to the Church awaiting them with its wise and economic system of mysteries fixed in the liturgy. It offered to everybody the means to get into touch at a given moment with the divine principle in all security and without
danger of individual extravagances. It economized mystic
energy, and that is why it has always outlived unbridled
mysticism and the dangers it compassed.

‘Unitive wisdom is unreasonable, insane and foolish.’ The
path of the mystic leading into the infinite leads to uncon-
sciousness. By denying all positive connexion between the
Deity and all that has form and a name, the operation of
transcendency is really abolished: ‘All creatures’ — says
Eckhart — ‘are mere nothing; I do not say that they are little
or aught: they are nothing. That which has no entity, is not.
All creatures have no being, for their being depends on the
presence of God.’ Intensive mysticism signifies return to a
pre-intellectual mental life. All that is culture is obliterated
and annulled.

If, notwithstanding, mysticism has, at all times, borne
abundant fruit for civilization, it is because it always rises by
degrees, and because in its initial stages it is a powerful ele-
ment of spiritual development. Contemplation demands a
severe culture of moral perfection as a preparatory condition.
The gentleness, the curbing of desires, the simplicity, the
temperance, the laboriousness practised in mystical circles,
create about them an atmosphere of peace and of pious fer-
vour. All the great mystics have praised humble labour and
charity. In the Netherlands these concomitant features of
mysticism — moralism, piety — became the essence of a very
important spiritual movement. From the preparatory phases
of intensive mysticism of the few issued the extensive mysti-
cism of the ‘devotio moderna’ of the many. Instead of the
solitary ecstasy of the blessed moment comes a constant and
collective habit of earnestness and fervour, cultivated by
simple townspeople in the friendly intercourse of their Frater-
houses and Windesheim convents. Theirs was mysticism by
retail. They had ‘only received a spark’. But in their midst the
spirit lived which gave the world the work in which the soul
of the declining Middle Ages found its most fruitful expres-
sion for the times to come: *The Imitation of Christ*. Thomas
à Kempis was no theologian and no humanist, no philoso-
pher and no poet, and hardly even a true mystic. Yet he
wrote the book which was to console the ages. Perhaps here the abundant imagination of the medieval mind was conquered in the highest sense.

Thomas à Kempis leads us back to everyday life.