

Mysticism and War

BY

EVELYN UNDERHILL

(Reprinted from "The Quest")

REVISED AND ENLARGED

PRICE THREEPENCE NET

LONDON:

JOHN M. WATKINS

21, CECIL COURT, CHARING CROSS ROAD, LONDON, W.C.
1915

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MYSTICISM AND WAR.

SUCH a title as "Mysticism and War" must seem to many people to imply nothing but the bringing together of two irreconcilable sets of ideas: the one beautiful, ideal, but somewhat indefinite, the other brutally real, intensely definite. The first, mysticism, was much discussed in the immediate past, but now perhaps is seldom thought of. The other, the fact of war, wholly monopolises the attention of the present hour. People think of the mystic, if they think of him at all, as a person whose interests are untouched by the tumults of the common life; who is absorbed in the quest of spiritual perfection, and in the contemplation of divine things. They think of Plotinus in ecstasy, and forget to ask how he behaved at other times. They consider Francis of Assisi receiving the ultimate seal of divine love, Richard Rolle in his hermitage or Teresa

in her cell, transported with joy by the companionship of God. They remember the mystical poets, with their songs of gladness, adoration and humility, their vision of a God-inhabited world. Then they think of the war, in its crude material horror: the suffering and degradation of the innocent, the wholesale and impersonal slaughter, the outburst of lawlessness, cynicism and cruelty, the reversion of great nations to primitive ideals and primitive strife, the cessation of so many beautiful and noble works, the stupendous exhibition of cunning destructiveness. These two worlds, they say, these two activities of man, are mutually destructive. If one be indeed of God, the other must be of the devil.

The consequence of this natural judgment has been, that for the time being the patent reality of war has obscured for many people the latent reality of the spiritual world—rather, the spiritual aspect of this world. They are brought up against a pair of opposites which they

cannot reconcile: and hence we hear statements about the "breakdown of Christianity," the "triumph of materialism," and so on. This mood of spiritual pessimism is responsible for some of the worst unhappiness of the present time. People feel that their universe has been rent asunder; and this destroys their faith and hope. If we could bring together those two aspects of life which are represented in their extreme forms by the mystic and the warrior, and show them to be real and valid parts of a greater whole, we might perhaps give to these bewildered ones a fresh motive for endurance, and a renewed spirit of courage and trust.

What are the difficulties which we have to meet in attempting this?

First, the outbreak of war and the immense change in the general consciousness which this has brought with it, seem to many people to involve the arrest of that growing tendency to a mystical view of life, an interest in mystical forms of religion, which has been strongly marked

in England during the last few years. Those who were favourable to this development now feel that their faith is shaken, since brute force rather than spirit appears in the last resort to rule the destinies of men: those who were hostile feel that their contempt or distrust is justified. We cannot deny that the eager patriot of the present moment looks out upon a world in which concrete action is plainly the first duty of every citizen; in which principles and things which even the most other-worldly know to be of capital value to human society must either be defended by, or perish by, the sword. Here, says common sense, there is no place for the dreamer and the contemplative: and we, accepting this judgment, are tempted to slacken our hold upon the spiritual world in order that we may clutch the rifle or the knitting needles more tightly.

Next, there is a wide-spread belief that the mystic is necessarily a pacifist at heart; or at least that he tends to stand aloof from the conflict as no concern of

his. The old complaint of the Romans, that Christians were an unpatriotic people, is often re-applied to him. The 'mystic' of popular imagination is not a fighting man. He is a secluded and anæmic creature, whose fidelity to certain ideal principles and concentration on invisible things is supposed to involve a certain passive disloyalty to the national group to which he belongs; or at the best a disheartening detachment from its warlike enthusiasms.

The alliance in pure Buddhism and Quakerism, and to a less extent in Tolstoi's thought, of the mystical and the pacifist view of life has much to do with this misconception. The two things, however, are really distinct; and except for these examples have seldom in history been found together. It is easy to give reasons for this. In the first place, the Christian pacifist founds his doctrine on a literal interpretation of the Gospel maxims—"Resist not evil" and the rest—which he regards as definite commandments,

applicable to every time and place. He is still, in Pauline language, 'under the law.' But the Christian mystic is not 'under the law.' He is 'under grace,' and founds *his* doctrine partly on direct experience, partly on the interior meaning, the spiritual suggestions of those same evangelical maxims. For him "Blessed are the peacemakers" refers to a state of the soul as possible to the loyal soldier in the trenches as to the doctrinaire at the Hague: a state indubitably possessed by Joan of Arc, though her Voices led her to the battlefield. Attitude, motive, spiritual balance, the achievement of "the mind of Christ"—these are for him the great matter. Having won that true detachment which is the perfection of unselfishness, and harmonised his will with the movements of the spiritual world—achieving thus at least a measure of that "union with God" which is his goal—he knows that he may safely act as the pressure of the Spirit directs. When her judges tried to confuse Joan of Arc by

questioning the consistency of struggling for a victory which God had already assured, she replied "I leave all that to Him." There spoke the mystic; the living willing tool, not the careful critic of the Divine Will. Moreover, since the world as well as the Gospel is for him a manifestation of the Divine Reason, and the Eternal Christ is perpetually reborn therein, the mystic is inclined to accept the ever-present if incomprehensible fact of conflict as somehow part of the mysterious plan: and, called to take part in it, does his duty with simplicity.

Again, throughout the history of mysticism, we see two very distinct types of mystical character: the active, who feel that the Energetic Spirit of that God who is Pure Act calls them to be energetic too, and the passive, who carry the principle of non-resistance into the spiritual sphere, and "let God act alone." Now religion and history speak with no uncertain voice as to which of these represents the true path from man to God, the true reaction

of the soul to eternal things. The active mystic, the struggling, fighting soul whom the Early Christians called an "athlete of the Spirit," who grows by conflict, accepting his part in a world-order of which effort is the very heart—he has been acclaimed time after time by the mind of the Church as representing the true type. The quietist, who resists nothing, risks nothing, conquers nothing, has been condemned again and again. The mystic knows indeed the beauty, joy and holiness of peace; but the history of his own inner life teaches him that such peace is no easy gift to us. It is rather a supreme consummation, only won through struggle and pain; and will best be achieved by those who trust God indeed, but recognise with Cromwell that He expects the most Christian of warriors to keep their powder dry. The attempt, then, to identify mystical religion with pacifist ideas and with doctrines of non-resistance must break down when examined in the light of facts.

Another and a greater difficulty is that felt by those who see the war chiefly in its tragic aspect; who, filled with anguish by the destruction of beauty, the cruelty, hatred and suffering which it has loosed upon the world, feel unable to reconcile the beliefs and attitude fundamental to mysticism with the awful facts of the present crisis. The doctrines of the brotherhood and essential divinity of man, of the immanence of God in the temporal world, of beauty and goodness as ultimate realities; all these, in the sugared form in which they have assimilated them, seem to these gentle spirits incompatible with the history now being written in terrible characters upon the soil of Europe. They have built their sanctuary on insecure foundations; and the German howitzers have brought it crashing about their ears, to add its tithe to the general misery. These people have much sensibility, but little historical imagination; they forget that the careers of Attila and of Napoleon, in fact all wars of aggres-

sion since the world began, involve just the same problems for the religious mind as those evoked by the present onslaught of Teutonic culture. The question which forms the real subject matter of Blake's poem on "The Tyger"—how we are to regard the presence of cruelty and violence in a world created by divine love—brings the whole difficulty to a point. If this problem be insoluble on all planes, if these people have been right in their charming but effeminate view of mysticism, then the mystic's position is indeed incompatible with the actual circumstances of our time; and that position, of course, is thereby condemned once and for all. A spiritual religion cannot be a fair weather belief. It must stand the worst pressure of events, cope with the most violent disharmonies; must develop a faith, hope and love that inspire and support heroic action, and survive the worst shocks which man's passion and injustice can deal it.

That a true and virile mysticism can

do this, is proved by its history in the past. Many of the greatest mystics lived in periods of conflict and suffering at least comparable with that upon which we are entering now. The 14th century, one of the most warlike of periods, is thickly studded with their names. Many of them saw, on a smaller stage, horrors similar to those now being enacted in Belgium and France. They spent themselves gladly in the service of the sufferers, they were filled with a sorrow and compassion which we are not likely to exceed; yet they kept their vision unimpaired. Moreover, as a group they have not held pacifist doctrines. They have recognised strife with its attendant pain, as inherent in the temporal order, a necessary element of the struggle for perfection; and battle undertaken in just cause as a godly act. Perfection, to them, has never been made up of negative qualities and cloistered virtues; but has included those characters of endurance, courage, devotion, which are evoked by the clash of opposites.

Loyalty, the whole-hearted acquiescence of the individual in the acts and needs of the corporate life, his self-devotion in its interests, is a virtue which they all hold in high esteem. The stern discipline in obedience which forms such an important part of all ascetic education aims at its production. There is no evidence that the worst explosions of brute force have ever alarmed their faith; for the mystic is less apt than other idealists to make impossible demands of life. He is not deceived by the supposed 'triumphs' of civilisation, and other dogmas of the high-minded materialist. Hence when these things break down, when physical conflict again makes its appearance upon a national scale, he is less disconcerted than many of his neighbours. He knows that though the Kingdom is indeed within, greater changes must be wrought in the race than those effected by democratic institutions and free education, before it can be brought into manifestation upon the temporal plane. God is near us—he

never doubts that: but never doubts, either, that man as a race is still far from Him. Here, then, the mystic looks neither for a continuing city nor a continuing peace. The Utopias of spiritual politics are not for him.

Again, because of this characteristic sanity of outlook, the mystic does not demand of all men the same high level of spirituality, the same instinct for reality. Although he believes that the divine spark exists in every soul, in most, he knows, it burns with a stifled flame. That these, the bulk of men, should make their lives but a little more responsive to the demands of Spirit, is itself a great gain. And when men, because of the faith and love which they feel for their country and the cause for which she struggles, transcend the normal, natural desire for personal well-being and consecrate their lives to that common cause and ideal, such a spiritualisation of our common humanity does indeed take place.

The mystic, then, is able to accept the

fact of war. More than this, he does not feel it necessary to stand aside and refuse to take part in the strife of existence. The true mystic is not the person who forsakes the active life for the contemplative, but he who adds the one to the other, doing in a new spirit the common deeds of men; and military energies clearly form part of the active life of the race, constituting in themselves a school of virtue with which we cannot yet afford to dispense. So there is nothing really paradoxical in the fact that one of the most convinced and exultant schools of mysticism is that produced by Islam, the most martial of the great religions: and that all mystics make frequent use of the language of conflict, made familiar to them by their own perpetually renewed struggles against wrong desires and disordered loves. The spiritual energy of some of them—as for instance, Joan of Arc and General Gordon—has actually taken a military form. Florence Nightingale, who aspired, as her diary has shown

us, to a state of consciousness in which she should "see God in all things" was not shaken in her belief in the divinity of life by the horrors of Scutari. Her love for the British soldier had in it no taint of pity for the victim of a mistaken career.

Certainly, the proportion in which the mystic sees the facts of war, is not the proportion in which they appear to the noisier type of patriot. To him, the material victory matters, at bottom, very little. What does transcendently matter is the courage and endurance displayed in defence of the right; the decline in private passions, the growth of the national soul; the gentleness and justice with which the victors discharge their awful responsibility, the dignity and patience with which the vanquished accept their lot. Those who emerge from war with unstained souls, retaining their spiritual self-possession, undistorted by anger, hatred, or lust of vengeance—these are the happy warriors, even though history puts them on the losing side. To lose his life and save

his soul is the lot of many a soldier: and may be the lot of nations too.

That nations indeed have souls, and can be at once military and mystical in the highest degree, has been proved during the last six months by an example which the world will never forget. Look at Belgium, whose whole literature and art witnesses to the mystical yet practical temper of her people. It is the country which produced Van Eyck, Memlinc, Dierick Bouts, Ruysbroeck, and in our own day such characteristically Flemish writers as Maeterlinck, Rodenbach and Verhaeren, which has now set upon the European stage a drama of conflict and heroic sacrifice unsurpassed in history—a Passion Play upon a national scale. And this agony of Belgium, which cannot be dissociated from military ideals—from a willingness to fight, to kill, to die, in defence of the right—has a true redemptive value for the world. Its sublime exhibition of tragic suffering has reasserted ancient values, broken up our self-satis-

faction, our egotism and love of comfort: has both humbled and ennobled us. Belgium has showed on the battlefield, as she could nowhere else have shown, what the soul of a people is worth, and what the soul of a people can do.

All this suggests that there is no inherent contradiction between the mystical outlook and the facts of war; and that it is our own fault if we fail to reconcile them. The cause, I think, of this failure and of much of the present mental distress, lies in the fact that we have been tempted by the mental and physical comfort of our long spell of peace to take too soft a view of life, and too narrow a view of the Divine Nature. We have come to look upon pain and grief, especially in their cruder forms, as something to be exterminated, or at least avoided. We have ignored their bracing and purging character; in traditional Christian language, we have "forgotten the Cross." Here the true mystics would certainly not agree with us. For them, suffering, effort, *cost*,

has ever been an essential part of life ; and they have sometimes sought it with a persistence which filled their easy-going critics with disgust. There has been within the last few years a great increase in that popular idealism which confuses the goodness of God with a sort of cosmic amiability, and is disinclined to look the facts of disease, degeneracy, cruelty, strife, and injustice squarely in the face. The spiritual optimist has been rudely awakened from his day-dream ; and now looks with horror upon facts which were always there, as any of the saints whom he admires could have told him, but which he is compelled for the first time to admit into his private picture of the universe. The nation as a whole has been forced to take up the cross of war : and he, as a part of the corporate life, suddenly feels its awful weight. If he can escape the tyranny of his too sensitive nerves, his too partial and alert imagination, he may yet be able to realise it as an instrument of salvation, to reconstruct his world

about it, and perceive that the vision on which he had staked his all, is enriched rather than destroyed. Gradually he may come to see, that war is but the intense expression—dreadful to us, because easily grasped—of the strife inherent in the natural order: and, as in all else belonging to the natural order, that a spiritual principle lies at its root. The mystics themselves will assure him that the clash of opposites is the best because most drastic test of Spirit; that the best emerge from it more heroic, less selfish, more apt to virtue and endurance, that the worst inevitably disclose themselves for that which they really are. His newspapers, if he knows how to read them, will provide daily illustrations of this law: enforcing the oft-expressed conviction of the great religious thinkers that the ideals of the camp as well as the ideals of the studfarm are included in God's thought for man, that the schooling of the race were incomplete without the bitter discipline of war.

Force must act against resistance if it is to develop its full strength: the phrase "contending with circumstances" indicates the true condition, perhaps the object, of our existence in this world. All progress, all discovery and vindication of the true and the best, is by and through conflict of opposites, whether on the physical, the mental or the spiritual plane. In the natural order—and to that order, in virtue of his physical constitution, the most spiritual of men still belongs—struggle never ceases; though in civilised communities its true character is often disguised. This law, which shocks us so deeply when it is exhibited in the deadly strife of nations, is operative over the whole course of our life. In races, the tendencies which it represents gather slowly to a crisis, and then explode with an awful force. Yet this explosion, even in the stupendous form in which we are now witnessing it, confirms rather than contradicts the world-process—is an episode in that secular struggle wherein

"the sword that rings out most loudly is the sword of His Name."

In those two forms of movement which we call growth and conflict, we may see the twin agents of life and of progress. One creative, the other selective, neither without the other can do its work. When we apply this to nations, we see that their growth, the increase fostering and nurture of new members, their attainment of domestic and social perfection, depends ultimately on love, personal and social: the emotion which draws men together, and makes them desire the well-being of their fellows and work for it. But their place in the struggle towards higher values depends upon their willingness to accept the cross of war in a righteous cause, their aptitude for defence. In the movements and achievements that are based on love it is not hard to discern the operations of Spirit: far harder to do so in the movements and achievements of strife. Yet, if we do not at least try to do this, we limit our view of God, we deny

that which Ruysbroeck so beautifully called "His loyalty to His whole creation," we introduce a terrible dualism into the world. One of the greatest of the mystics, Jacob Boehme, did not hesitate to call the spirit of strife and tension one of the Seven Fountain Spirits, or universal and eternal forces, which "together are God the Father," and are responsible for the form and constitution of the universe. With the clear vision of the true seer, he perceived that its workings could not be limited to mental and moral conflict alone, but must be operative throughout the whole of Creation, on each of the three great planes of Reality; and that no true picture of the Divine Order was possible which blinked this patent fact. Strife, or anguish, the "third universal principle," was born, he says, of the collision between the "first" and the "second" principles. The first is that contracting, disintegrating principle of egoistic desire which breaks Creation into opposing and definite entities, and is the

cause of all individualisation ; the second is the universalising, constructive principle of love, which breaks down separation and binds the discrete entities into ever larger groups, animated by harmonious desires. The contradiction and perpetual tension between these two principles inevitably results in the formation of opposing groups and in violent collision between them. Yet such corporate and personal struggles are the means by which the second principle—the “ love-light ”—tends at last to win its triumphs over the first: and in such a hard and painful triumph of love or self-giving over desire or self-seeking, true progress consists.

The later Jewish mystics when they speak of the “ travail of the Messiah ” the pain and convulsion that accompany the incarnation of the Divine Idea, are seeking expression for the same great truth. Strife in itself is neither good nor bad: it simply *is*. God is not found or lost by taking sides with war or with peace. He is “ hid between them ” as one old mystic

said of every pair of opposites; and will only be found by the true loving will of the heart. The special causes and results of war may be both good and evil, just and unjust—may partake, as Boehme would say, either of the “dark fire” or the “light”—since it is conditioned by the crooked wills of men. We may fight for the most selfish and evil, or for the most generous and heroic reasons. None will deny that many, perhaps most wars have their origin in wrongful claims and desires, and amongst their results evil, waste, and hideousness. Yet every activity amongst men is capable of being lifted from the dark to the light; and even war is no exception to this rule. It is the will, the motive, the vision that matters and endures: not the transitory violence of the action which results from its collision with an opposing tendency and will. It is not easy for man, immersed in the flux, to know what the eternal aspect of any one conflict may be: to discern in it the true proportion of

"fire" and of "light". But it is in his power to make his own struggle pure, by a steadfast loyalty to the group to which he belongs, a steadfast repudiation of the base motives of greed, anger and revenge. We, horrified by the external circumstances, the devastation, misery and evil, know little of the spiritual drama which is brought into being by the present war. But in so far as we accept the mystical position, we should accept also the mystic belief: that where there is suffering, difficulty and effort, and this is met by loyalty and courage, there is always hope.

The war, thus regarded, is a crucible for souls; and will effect in nearly everyone whom it touches some change of heart. Though it seem from one point of view a mere outburst of physical force, of ambition, hatred, cruelty and destructiveness; yet it has most surely its part in the light. Already from the anguish of conflict, the call upon endurance which it brings, good as well as evil has been born. Much dross has been burnt out,

much gold has been revealed. Noble virtues, which the ordered life of peace does not demand, have been brought into manifestation. The love-light has shone out in England more clearly than it has been seen for many years. The barrier of separation between man and man has been cast down. Already therefore it has vindicated anew the principle of the Cross; has proved itself an instrument of Spirit, a necessary if most terrible episode in that which the Indian mystics call the triumphant play of God.

If we look only at the blow administered to our rampant individualism, the quickened sense of corporate life, the loyalty, the collective thinking, willing and loving which inspire us now, we cannot any longer think of war as wholly ill. "Pilgrimage to the place of the wise, is to escape the flame of separation" says the Sūfi mystic: and even though that pilgrimage lead us across the battlefields of Europe, the goal is worth the price that we must pay. The achievement

of an intense national consciousness—balanced though it is for the moment by violent national hates, which assuredly belong to the “dark fire” rather than the “light”—this is one step towards the realisation of that universal consciousness in which, as the saints have believed, humanity shall at last enter into fruition of God. It is an education for heaven, stern and terrible in its methods. If we believe that the life of the soul is that which really matters, and that spirit is indeed an indestructible thing, we cannot be crushed by the wreckage of physical life which accompanies its purgation; by this new and awful demonstration of the unsolved mystery of pain. In the noise of conflict, surrounded by the perpetual demands of need and of grief, it may seem to us that the voices of beauty and wonder, the ‘Unstruck Music of the Infinite,’ which we heard in the days of peace, were an illusion. But that fugue of love and renunciation has not ceased; the steady rhythms of being still go on. Already new soft life is budding to take

the place of that which the war has seemed to sweep away. The angels who spoke to us in the past yet keep their ancient places: only the look which they bend on us is more solemn, less joyous than of old. The Eternal Powers watch, though their messages may not reach our bewildered ears; deafened as they are by other sounds.

When Joan of Arc stood before her judges, in an atmosphere of cruelty, mockery and injustice—faced too by apparent failure and imminent death—they said to her contemptuously: “Do you hear your Voices now?” “Not here,” she said, “but take me back to my woods again: there, I shall hear them well.” So too for us, those voices which we have heard, or at least believed in, are still there; not less real and clear than before. They will endure, though all else perish. They are waiting for us in the quiet places; and there we shall hear them again, when the time of discipline is over and the new leaves unfold.

EVELYN UNDERHILL.

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