

Aldous Huxley and mysticism

Autor(en): **Bonnard, Georges**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne**

Band (Jahr): **25 (1953-1954)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **26.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869948>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

ETUDES DE LETTRES

Bulletin de la Société des Etudes de Lettres N^o 90

ALDOUS HUXLEY AND MYSTICISM

Born in 1894, Aldous Huxley was 27 when, in 1921, he published his first novel "Crome Yellow," a light and entertaining satire on English society at the time when, in reaction to the strain of the war and as a consequence of the bitter disillusion that followed the peace, it was beginning to reverse all the values on which it had lived and prospered so long. The scene of the novel is the familiar country-house. Half a dozen people are the guests of Mr. Wimbush and his wife Priscilla who combines a passion for racing and betting with a belief in astrology and an interest in the occult. Among those she has invited for the week-end there is a writer of best-sellers on the Conduct of Life, Mr. Barbecue-Smith, who exploits the vague aspirations of people secretly sick of the emptiness and vanity of their lives towards some less unsatisfactory mode of living. "The Things that matter," he tells them for instance, "happen in the heart. Seen things are sweet, but those unseen are a thousand times more significant. It is the Unseen that counts in Life." Huxley brings him in for the sake merely of laughing, not at him only, but through him, at those who, like Priscilla, take him seriously and believe he has a message of comfort for them. He gives him a slight defect of speech: Mr. Barbecue-Smith is incapable of articulating an s before a p, with the result that, in his mouth, the word "spiritual" becomes ridiculous: "Optimism, he says, is the opening out of the soul towards the light; it is an expansion towards and into God, it is a h-piritual self-unificatiton with the Infinite."

To Denis, a young poet, he explains how he writes his books by what he calls inspiration, that is by "allowing the Infinite or the Universe to dictate to him through his subconscious": "Get into touch with the Sub-conscious," he advises him, "and you are in touch with the Universe." He has entitled the little book he has written on the subject "Pipe-Lines to the Infinite."

Mr. Barbecue-Smith's notions, at which Huxley invited us to laugh in 1921, are now, and have been for at least 15 years, Huxley's own favourite ideas. He now believes, and is never tired of repeating, that "the things that matter happen in the heart," that "it is the Unseen that counts in life"; he tells us that what we are all in need of is "a spiritual self-unification with the Infinite"; and in full seriousness he now repeats again and again the sentence he mockingly placed in Barbecue-Smith's mouth: "Get into touch with the subconscious and you are in touch with the Universe."

The episodic appearance of that figure of fun in "Crome Yellow" suffices, in the light of what its creator has now become, to prove Huxley's early interest in what we may roughly call the mystical attitude to life. That, for all he appeared a rationalistic mocker of the world around him, Huxley was, from the beginning of his literary career, genuinely interested in mysticism, might have been clear to his readers had they paid more attention than they did, first to his recognition, in some of the essays published in book form in 1923 (*On the Margin*), of mysticism as a mode of life which, though the very opposite of his own ideal at the time, was perhaps of some value in itself, and then to such characters as Gombriel's father in *Antic Hay* (1923), as Calamy in *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) who is aware of "other things" that "loom up enormously behind the distracting bustle of life," does not know what they are — "What is their form, their name, their meaning?" —, wants to persuade himself that "the only sensible thing to do is to go on in the usual way and ignore the things outside the world of noise," only to discover "that the things are still there... calmly and immutably there," "that mutely they claim attention," — and that "he can't at the same time lean out into the silence beyond the futile noise and bustle — into the mental silence that lies beyond the body — and himself partake in the tumult," and so resolves to lead a hermit's life up in the mountains, close to a shining peak —, or again to such a character as Spandrell in *Point Counter Point* (1928), who hates life because he is athirst for God.

But, of course, if readers and critics paid practically no attention to that aspect of Huxley's work, it was because he himself laid all the emphasis on what, in his essay on Wren, he had called "the golden mean of reasonableness and decency," because in book after book what he was clearly defending was reason, order, restraint, dignity, that is the very virtues that the 1920ies were intent on discarding, and what he was up against was not only vulgarity and showiness and pretence, but extravagance and excess of all kinds. Still in those years already Huxley was far from merely being the "clearheaded objective intellectual" that people took him for, that some people still insist on seeing in him. Rampion rather than Spandrell was supposed to voice his personal views on life, Rampion who roundly declares that «the only absolute man can ever really know is the absolute of perfect balance," the balance of a tight-rope walker poised between "mind and consciousness and spirit at one end of his balancing pole and body and instinct at the other," and who proclaims "a damned lie — and an idiotic lie at that — all this pretending to be more than human." And other passages in the same novel were overlooked, such as this for instance on "the beauty (in spite of squalor and stupidity), the profound goodness (in spite of all the evil), the oneness (in spite of such bewildering diversity) of the world. It is a beauty, a goodness, a unity that no intellectual research can discover, that analysis dispels, but of whose reality the spirit is from time to time suddenly and overwhelmingly convinced... Is it illusion or the revelation of profoundest truth? Who knows?"

Who knows? For many years to come yet, Huxley did not know whether such moments were sheer illusion or the revelation of profoundest truth. But he was bent on making up his mind about it and went on doggedly reading whatever could shed light on the problem, the philosophers and sacred writings of East and West, lives of sages and saints, books of religious meditation, and above all what the mystics of all times and places have left us. In one of the essays collected in 1932 under the title of *Texts and Pretexts*, he tells us, for instance, how in middle life — he was 38 then — he discovered the religious poets of 17th century England, Herbert and Vaughan in particular, and what new insight they gave him into mystical states. Two years later he had gone far enough in his studies to be in a position to assert that "most of the great philosophical systems of Indian and European antiquity" agreed in the doctrine "that time is somehow an illusion and eternity the only reality." But

whether such a doctrine was the expression of the truth, he did not know. All he could say was: "Personally I should like it to be true."

Of course the trend of human affairs in the 1930ies was for him a source of too profound an anxiety to allow him to concentrate on the metaphysical problem he wanted to solve for himself. From about 1930, as a direct and natural consequence of the suffering due to an unparalleled economic crisis, the most genuinely alive in the younger generation, who were too young to have fought in the war, turned away in disgust from the general scepticism, the antisocial immorality, the hedonistic egoticism and the aimlessness induced in their elders by bitter disappointment, and devoted themselves heart and soul to the solution of the social problems on communistic, or at least socialistic, lines. This gave Huxley the gravest concern and he wrote his formidable indictment of the sort of world his younger contemporaries were trying to bring about. Then the rise of Hitlerism in Germany and the consequent growth and spread in England of a warlike spirit, with its denunciation of the prevalent pacifism, and the prospect of a new war which it opened, moved him to enter the lists on the side of the pacifists with *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936). What horrified him in the *Brave New World* was its complete negation of the spiritual side of our human nature, its recognition of nothing beyond the satisfaction of the purely animal needs of man. Likewise what he loathed in the warmongers was their advocacy of separateness, that is of evil, when what was demanded of men, what men finally came to demand of themselves, was "the realization of union" among them, and "the actualization of goodness." Antony, the protagonist in *Eyeless in Gaza*, turns from a cynically detached view of the world to active pacifism, to a purposeful life. He wishes to do his bit in the noble work of improving man and man's fate. But the task of the pacifist is one of tremendous difficulty: he can achieve nothing unless he can replace hatred and evil in the hearts of men by love and goodness, for, as Antony writes in his diary, "Nations won't change their national policies unless and until people change their private policies."

But how can a change in people's "private policies," in their behaviour towards one another, be brought about? That was the question with which Huxley was now faced. And it was at this point that his increasing preoccupation with his metaphysical problem and his deep concern for man's destiny, for man threatened by degeneration into an ant-like or bee-hive society and by war, joined hands, as it were, and that he saw

a hope for man, a possible way out of his evil destiny, in the metaphysical assertions towards which he had been groping for years. The result of this conjunction was his *Ends and Means* of 1937: We all desire peace among nations and a better society; these are our common ends; but they can only be achieved by a radical change in our human hearts where humility must take the place of pride and self-assertiveness, where selfishness and self-seekingness must yield to love for our fellow-beings; but such a change of heart is only possible to those who, aiming at a unitive experience of God, sedulously cultivate in themselves the virtues without which such knowledge can not be obtained. The primary condition, however, of such self-education is a conviction that there is a Godhead, that this Godhead or Ground of our being as well as of all existences, is at once essentially different from, incommensurable with, us, that is transcendent, and present in us, immanent; that it is possible for us, human beings, to love, to get to know in a manner, and eventually to identify ourselves with, It; that this unitive knowledge of It is the final end and purpose of human existence. Those that cherish such beliefs feel that there is no possible rest for them, no real happiness, apart from that mystical union with the Ground of their being. They realize that the chief obstacle in the road to such an achievement is the self: "The more there is of self, the less there is of the Godhead." The way they must follow therefore is the way of humility and love, love for the Godhead and self-annihilation. If men were to follow that way, the great human ends of peace and a better society would be achieved. And there is no other way in which they can be achieved.

Such is the solution which Huxley, in 1937, proposed as the answer to both his metaphysical and his social anxieties. From it he has never departed, so far as I know. Rather, in book after book, he has reasserted it. This solution is of course anything but original. It probably is as old as civilisation itself. Far from claiming originality for it, Huxley has maintained that in fact it is the essence of all the higher religions, of all the greater philosophies, the actual practice of all the best representatives of mankind, of all those who may be said to have done something to better the lot of man on earth. In *Vedanta and the West* (1944), he shows how the teaching of the old sages of India may help our Western civilization to realize that what matters to it is the unadulterated teaching of Jesus and of all its true mystics, from Dionysius to St John of the Cross. In *The Perennial Philosophy* of 1946, he has given a systematic exposition

of his beliefs, meant to be accessible to every one, based on, and illustrated by, ample quotations from the sacred scriptures, from the writings of religious and philosophical mystics, of East and West, of older and newer times.

For many years now Huxley has been living in Los Angeles, which is not merely the home of cinema stars, but a hotbed of mystical research, life and experience. With Isherwood and Heard, and their Eastern teachers, he has apparently tried to follow the way, to achieve the unitive knowledge of the Godhead. Whether he has succeeded or not, we do not know. At any rate he has nowhere referred to any such personal experience. His interest in mysticism remains that of an outsider, an observer, a student of others' experiences. One might therefore have expected from him, besides the theoretical expositions and disquisitions he has given us, essays on Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Christian mysticism, whole-length portraits of true mystics and Saints, for which his reading and meditations over thirty years seemed to have prepared him so well. Instead, he has given us three novels in which his disgust at unregenerate man finds expression with a bitterness unrelieved by the comic spirit of his early fiction — and the two historical studies we are now to consider, *Grey Eminence* and *The Devils of Loudun*.

Though separated by more than ten years — *Grey Eminence* was published in 1941 and *The Devils of Loudun* last year (1952) — those two books are very closely connected in subject, method, and purpose. They both deal with France in the first half of the 17th century. *Grey Eminence* is a biography of the Capuchin Father Joseph who, from 1622 to his death in 1638, was Richelieu's friend, adviser and chief agent in his home and foreign policy. *The Devils of Loudun* is the history of the celebrated case of Urbain Grandier who was burnt at the stake in 1634 on a charge of causing devils to enter the bodies of the nuns of an Ursuline convent at Loudun, a small town in the West of France. The hero of *Grey Eminence* is a man who was of considerable influence in shaping the most important events of his time: the curbing the nobility of France, the downfall of the Protestants as a State within the State, the ruin of the Empire, the gradual achievement by France of her European supremacy. In *The Devils of Loudun* Huxley gives an elaborate analysis, a most vivid evocation of the common mentality of those days, especially in its more sinister aspects. In both books he writes as a conscientious historian who claims the freedom of a novelist and regards it as his chief

task to account for events in terms of human psychology. And it is the psychological interest which is of supreme importance in *The Devils of Loudun* as well as in *Grey Eminence*. What matters is the peculiar characters which stand at the center of each picture: Father Joseph, Sœur Jeanne des Anges, the Superior of the Loudun convent; her chief exorcist and spiritual director, the Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin. Those three possess in common two main characteristics: they are all mystics or at least would be mystics, and they are all responsible for much evil. Thus Huxley who ever since 1937 has, we may say, preached the gospel of mysticism as the only way to salvation for individual men and for society as a whole, here appears anxious to bring out the evil for man and society that may attend the practice of mysticism. What does he mean? Let us look more closely at each book in turn.

François Leclerc, known in religion as Father Joseph, was a devoted single-minded servant of his Order and of his Church in all the earlier part of his life, from 1599 when, at the age of 21, he became a Capuchin to 1615 when quite unexpectedly he had to assume political responsibilities. Scrupulously following the very harsh rule of his Order, he was sent by his superiors as a missionary among protestants and libertines, as well as among the poor godless peasantry of such parts of France as, owing to the civil wars, had long been deprived of all spiritual guidance. He also had to act as a preacher, a professor of theology, the reformer of a convent, the founder and director of another. In all he did he displayed an extraordinary energy and exceptional talents, acquitting himself successfully of all his tasks. For Huxley the secret source of the strength that enabled him to do all he did was his steady practice of a mystical approach to the Divine. From a child he had been religiously-minded, but his decision to enter one of the Franciscan Orders was due to his coming under the direct influence of two famous mystics, Mme Acarie and Father Benet of Canfield, who taught him how to train himself for a life of union with God's will, how to follow the path that might eventually lead him to the beatific vision. So far as is known he does not appear ever to have experienced that complete absorption in God which is the ultimate aim and the reward of the greater mystics, of the true Saints. Whether, had his life continued as it had begun, he would have reached the goal is an idle question. At any rate he had already gone far, and even enjoyed moments of illumination which sufficed to keep him unwaveringly to his spiritual exercises when, in obedience to

what he thought, not merely a call of duty, but God's will, he allowed himself to be diverted from an exclusively religious life to politics.

So far Father Joseph's activity may be said to have been altogether beneficial to his fellow-beings and to himself. Theoretically it is surely not inconceivable that a godly man, trained to a strictly selfless activity, inspired by an ardent love of his God and his like, should, if he enters politics, be a source of great good to men. And that was no doubt Father Joseph's noble ambition when, in 1615, he found himself called upon to act as a peacemaker between the Crown and a rebellion of the nobility. In these negotiations he evinced such remarkable understanding of the situation, such intellectual resources, such political tact, so skilful a use of every circumstance that the rulers of the country could not allow his diplomatic talents to lie unused.

Nine years earlier, being engaged in the difficult task of reforming an abbey in the diocese of Luçon he had sought the advice of the young bishop. Their acquaintance was now renewed, for Richelieu was at the time intriguing to secure some influential situation at Court, and guessed that the Capuchin might be a useful ally. He took him into his confidence, won his friendship, and was soon discussing with him his plans for the greatness of France. He found Father Joseph ready to believe that it was God's own will that mankind should be saved through the agency of France, ready to admit that she could not assume that rôle so long as she was weak, torn by civil dissensions and surrounded by inveterate enemies bent on her destruction. The Bishop and the Capuchin agreed that their duty as true servants of God was clear: they must, to begin with, realize the spiritual and political unity of the nation by compelling nobles and protestants to become loyal subjects of their sovereign; then they must do their utmost to break the power of the Empire.

It was some time before Richelieu was in a position to begin implementing his policy. In the meantime he helped his friend to acquire first-hand knowledge of European politics by abetting him in his pet scheme of a crusade against the Turks, a scheme which demanded the active support of the Pope, Spain and the Empire. With the approval of his superiors, Father Joseph spent the following years in travelling all over Europe, paying long visits to Rome, Madrid and many other places. Everywhere his zeal, his persuasive eloquence received due praise, but they were not enough to bring about a union of the Pope and the Catholic princes against the Turks, and the scheme came to nothing. But

in urging it on hesitant or reluctant sovereigns, he got to know the secret reasons of their rivalries and so unwittingly prepared himself for his future work as head of Richelieu's foreign office. At the same time his influence at Court was steadily rising and he used it tactfully and unremittingly to bring his friend to power.

In 1622 at last Richelieu became prime minister and at once sent for Father Joseph who, for the next 16 years, until his death in 1638, was responsible, even more than Richelieu himself, for the complete success of his taskmaster's home and foreign policy. When he died, nobles and protestants had been effectually crushed and France was in a fair way of becoming Europe's supreme power. God's will, he could tell himself, had been realized or at least was being realized. But was it really God's will? In the process of that realization, as he must know, untold sufferings had been inflicted on his fellow-creatures, and he had turned himself into the very opposite of what in his youth he had ambitioned to be. It was due to him, to his ruthlessness, his single-minded devotion to what he regarded as God's will, his unswerving firmness of purpose, that at La Rochelle and many other places Frenchmen had died in their thousands, slaughtered by the King's soldiery or starved out of existence, that the war in Germany had been prevented from coming to an end, was being reopened year after year at the price of the total ruin of the country, the liquidation of two thirds of its innocent population amid unimaginable horrors. And thus his activity throughout the latter part of his life had been the direct cause of terrific evil to those men he professed to love. And, in the pursuance of his and Richelieu's plans, he had, apparently with a good conscience, used all the most machiavellian arts of the thorough-bred politician, intent on success at all cost, regardless of the most elementary morality: he had lied right and left, he had promised and broken his pledge, he had been a master of double-dealing, acted as a spy, set on foot an efficient secret service, fomented rivalries and quarrels, made himself the most detested man in all Europe.

A mystic, however, Father Joseph still was and never ceased to be. Day after day, whatever else he had to do, he would go through his devotions, his spiritual exercises, doing his best to approach God in silent prayer, successfully suppressing all thought of self, endeavouring to annihilate his deeds. In the midst of his incessant political activity he never forgot that he was by profession a spiritual guide, a saver of souls, and he went on hearing confession, preaching and teaching. He might com-

plain of the increasing difficulty he felt in concentrating, of a sense of separateness, of a growing estrangement of God. But this he would ascribe to the pressure of business, never to a deterioration of his soul.

The sketch I have given of Father Joseph's career is a mere summary of Huxley's elaborate biography, for whose facts and their interpretation I leave all responsibility to him. He sees an obvious relation between his hero's unbreakable strength of purpose, his ruthlessness which turned Europe into a sea of blood and his practices as a mystic or a would-be mystic which enabled him to draw on those tremendous sources of spiritual power that lie beyond our consciousness. For Huxley, therefore, Richelieu's Grey Eminence is a problem. Granted that seekers after God, because, if they want to find Him, to achieve unitive knowledge of Him, they must train themselves in the highest virtues of self-forgetfulness and love of others, are the true salt of the Earth, how are we to account for such mystics as Father Joseph, who of course is typical of a host of deeply religious people whose activity has likewise been mostly evil? How are we to account for them, and what does their very existence teach us?

Huxley offers a twofold explanation: one in terms of the man's character and another which I will leave out until we have examined his later book. For him, then, the Capuchin embraced and pursued a political career because, by promoting Richelieu's policy and the greatness of France, he was — so he thought — serving God, doing His will. This persuasion arose out of a more fundamental conviction: the only true Church being the Roman Catholic, God could not but will its triumph over all others; this conviction being inextricably mixed up with another of a different, a patriotic, character, namely that France had been chosen by God to carry out His designs as to the ultimate triumph of his only true Church: *Gesta Dei per Francos*. If Father Joseph had not been an instinctive patriot, he would probably not have identified God's interests with his country's. Secondly, for all his carefully nurtured humility, he was at bottom an ambitious, power-loving person: his natural ambition, his inborn love of power he had subdued and was honestly trying altogether to suppress; but when circumstances were favourable they returned under the disguise of ambition and love of power on behalf of his Church and country. Acting under the delusion that he was serving them, in order to give effect to God's will, he could cherish and even foster the very vices which he had well under control so far as he himself was concerned. Huxley thus suggests that the self-sacrificing pursuit of

wordly interests by one who from his practice of mysticism derives enormous power of will is fraught with the gravest dangers. No mystic therefore who means to remain true to his sublime vocation should yield to the temptation of entering the active service of any church, sect or nation, that is of any group of worldly interests. But the question is: is it possible for a mystic who belongs to one particular religion, who is a believer in the tenets of his religion, not to be at the service of his church and therefore not to be untrue to his real vocation?

The answer to this question Huxley gives in *The Devils of Loudun*, to which book it is time to turn. *Grey Eminence* is a highly remarkable book. The vitality, the epic grandeur of its narrative, the careful picture of its background, the passionate denunciation of the evil that man can do to man, are properly enthralling; besides it possesses a single centre of interest, a natural unity, and the art displayed in its composition is of a very high order indeed. In comparison with it, *The Devils of Loudun* is inferior stuff. It suffers, I think, from three faults: the story of Urbain Grandier has nothing to do with mysticism and therefore bears practically no relation to the avowed purpose of the book, of which it fills the greater part; secondly it tells three distinct stories, and suffers as a consequence from a lack of unity: there is the story of the machinations which brought Grandier to the stake, then the story of the superior of the Ursuline convent who was made to believe herself possessed by devils when in fact she was merely suffering from a common kind of hysteria, lastly the story of her chief exorcist, the Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin. True it is that the title of the book fits its three elements, for it was the Devils who sent Grandier to his death, they who made of Sœur Jeanne a famous person, they who drove Surin mad; they symbolize what in certain circumstances almost inevitably attaches itself to the mystic to transform him or her into an agent of evil. But the part they thus play in the whole book is hardly apparent to the casual reader who is sure to feel his interest drop considerably after Grandier's execution and will pay little attention to Sœur Jeanne's and Surin's further fortunes, though these seem to have been Huxley's real subject. It appears probable that when he decided to write a second book on what we might call the distortions of mysticism, Huxley meant Grandier's story as a mere preamble. But that story was a wonderful subject for a novelist, and the novelist could not resist the temptation of fully elaborating it, all the less that it offered him — and that is its most grievous fault — repeated opportunities of yielding to his

sorry taste for the salacious and the obscene, a taste which, always more or less present with him, has grown with the oncoming of age, as the readers of his last novels can testify.

As the story of Grandier has no bearing on the problem of mysticism and its value or dangers for men, a brief summary of it will suffice. Chiefly owing to his success with ladies, Urbain Grandier, *curé* of one of the Loudun churches from 1619 onwards, made a number of enemies who, for years, vainly tried to get rid of him, until the Superior of a little convent, who had also fallen in love with him and failed to persuade him to become the director of her small flock, became the prey of erotic dreams in which the *curé* was the chief actor. On confessing to a priest who happened to be one of Grandier's worst enemies, Sœur Jeanne was persuaded to believe and declare that he had lodged in various parts of her body devils who roused in her unavowable desires. Hysterics are very catching and soon most of the inmates of the convent were suffering from similar complaints and telling the same story. Charged with being a witch, Grandier was thrown into prison. The possibility of human beings being possessed by devils was an article of faith, and it was the duty of the Church to exorcize the possessed, for which a definite ritual had been composed. The nuns were duly exorcized, and in the course of these exorcisms repeated their accusations which were now taken to come from the mouths of the devils themselves who, under priestly compulsion, could not but tell the truth. Grandier's guilt was assumed to be proven and he was condemned to the stake in spite of his solemn protestations of innocence.

Now Sœur Jeanne, the superior, the person chiefly responsible for the *curé's* atrocious death, was or pretended to be a disciple of the great Spanish mystic, St Theresa of Avila. Though she was clearly aware of her responsibility in the burning of an innocent, though she even tried once or twice to deny the truth of her own allegations, she on the whole clearly accepted the version which the Church put upon her hysteria. She was a hysteric for years, the exorcisms to which she was submitted exasperating her nervous disorder. Long after her victim's death she was cured by one of her exorcists, the Jesuit Surin who, being a mystic himself, persuaded her to strive to renew her quest of God, and had the satisfaction of seeing her turn into a Saint, in receipt as he believed of special graces. He never doubted the genuineness of her sainthood. Nor did her contemporaries in general. But Huxley does not accept it. For

him she was a fraud, more particularly in the latter part of her life. He sees her as a woman whose ambition from first to last was to attract public attention, whose desire to become a saint was vitiated by that particular form of pride, a sin which in her case was fostered by the Church. For the Church was apparently intent on making use of her hysteria to prove the reality of possession and the necessity of fighting against witchcraft, and later on of her reputation for sainthood, of her miracles, faked miracles probably, to feed the devotions of the multitude. The part she was thus made to play accorded only too well with her secret desire of fame for her not to play it to the best of her abilities. But it was the ruin of her interior life. Her religion, so Huxley maintains, was all pretence.

Jean-Joseph's religion, on the other hand, was profoundly sincere. Born an authentic mystic, if ever there was one, he died a true saint. Illumination had come to him as a youth. Ever since, he had striven to achieve Christian perfection. The way he followed was that which he had learnt from the great Jesuit contemplative, Father Louis Lallemant. To intense devotion he added mortification pushed to the limits of human endurance. For with his master and the general consensus of Catholic theology he believed in the total depravity of fallen nature. Partly no doubt as a consequence of his mortifications he was already in very poor health when he was entrusted with the task of exorcising Sœur Jeanne. Credulous by nature, he would believe whatever he was told, especially if it could be construed into special favours from God. He never doubted that his patient was really and truly possessed by devils, and when she confided to him that a knife with which she was attempting to kill herself had been snatched out of her hand, he was certain she had been the object of a providential intervention. So he decided to supplement his exorcisms, which already demanded a tremendous outlay of spiritual energy and were bad enough for a sick man, by training her, as he himself had been trained, in the mystical life. This meant, at first at least, an even greater expenditure of mental energy, for she went into hysterics and convulsions, she laughed and blasphemed, whenever he broached the subject. Then, not content with exorcisms and his exertions as a director, he prayed that, as Christ had taken upon himself the sin of the world, he might take upon himself his patient's possession. Misled by notions which had nothing to do with his experiences as a mystic, which derived from his theological training, he was doing his best to drive himself mad.

And mad he soon became. It was his turn now to fall into hysterics, to feel himself haunted by devils, to be certain of eternal damnation. In his intervals of lucidity he went on with his task, not unsuccessfully as I have said, but after three years of such activity he broke down and had to give it up. He was recalled to his convent at Bordeaux.

For the next twenty-five years Surin was looked upon by his brethren as a lunatic and treated accordingly. But, mad as he was, his mind remained perfectly sound in one direction. Whenever he talked about the way to unitive knowledge of God, he talked sense. He could even dictate to a secretary. And thus he composed his celebrated *Spiritual Catechism*. His mysticism was his salvation. His obsessions gradually disappeared. His health was restored. And laying aside all notions that did not derive straight from his own direct experiences, he found rest and peace. As his last book, of which Huxley quotes in his final page a magnificent passage, makes clear, he was rewarded by an overflowing sense of the presence of God in his soul.



Father Joseph inflicted frightful sufferings on whole populations. Sœur Jeanne was the cause of the torture and death, in horrible circumstances, of an innocent. Jean-Joseph drove himself mad. Their activities resulted in evil for others and for themselves. But they possessed unquestionable gifts for the life of the spirit. So mysticism, the mystical temperament have their dangers. What are those dangers due to? In the case of Father Joseph, Huxley, as we have seen, ascribes his baneful influence to his mistaken confusion between the will of God and the interests of his Church and country. But his indifference to the sufferings of others, his callousness in the face of the calamities he engineered, Huxley explains by his adoration being directed, not to the Godhead, the Ground of our being, but to the god of the Christians, that god who accepted to be tortured and die on the Cross for the salvation of men. For Huxley, adoration of such a god is bound to result in indifference to sufferings inflicted for the triumph of that god's Church, that triumph being the only salvation for mankind. Thus Father Joseph's mysticism was warped by notions which Huxley regards as man-made and entirely foreign to the realities of mystical experience, in which there is no place

for any god besides God. Likewise, if their Church had not taught her adherents the mad notion of possession by devils, neither Grandier would have been burnt, nor would Sœur Jeanne have suffered for so long from hysteria, nor would Surin have gone mad. Besides Surin's lunacy would not have lasted for so many years, and been so painful for the poor man, had he not so cruelly ill-treated his body and prayed that Sœur Jeanne's possession might become his, doing so in obedience to ideas which had their source in theology, but not in mystical experience. The devils that prevent the mystic from doing any good are the man-made notions, the dogmas that his particular religion has taught him and in which he believes. In the Christian Church mysticism was a highly beneficent influence so long as it was centred on God, as it was from early times to the end of the 16th century, from the Areopagite to St John of the Cross. When it ceased to be theocentric, under the influence of theologians who gave the predominant place in their systems to Christ or the Virgin, it inevitably ceased to be of use to men, and gradually disappeared.

So, says Huxley, let the mystic keep to his experiences and not go beyond them: for him God is the essential reality, not because he has been told so, but because he knows from direct experience; he believes that we all partake in that essential reality, because, again from direct experience, he has felt that kinship with God in the depths of his soul; and, because in that awareness of God he has found perfect peace, he knows that the true end of man is the achieving that awareness. And he also knows that the way of humility, of self-annihilation is the only way we can follow to achieve that awareness, because he has found by direct and repeated experience that pride, self-assertion estrange God from him, or him from God. He therefore endeavours to follow that path, which means that he sedulously cultivates all the virtues that make for peace among men.

But, in order to confine himself to such beliefs grounded on experience, and to such practice, the mystic must not belong to any particular religion. All religions have their theologies, their mythologies, their rituals, their organisation. If a mystic believes, not only in what his personal experience teaches him, but also in what his Church or sect teaches him, if his practice is more or less directed by the ritualistic practices of his Church or sect, if he allows himself to play a part in their wordly concerns, he is all the more likely to be a cause of evil than his peculiar gifts endow him with great strength of character and consequently great authority.

Mystics are the salt of the earth, they alone can bring about that change of heart that eventually may save man from the horrors of war and totalitarianism, but on the condition that, true to the great mystical tradition, they serve God alone and not any particular religion. That is, if I have read them aright, the lesson that Huxley would like to impart to the readers of *Grey Eminence* and *The Devils of Loudun*.

GEORGES BONNARD.