

## *The Three Lives*

[S]loth, idleness and vain rest that come of your flesh under colour of contemplation.

Walter Hylton

[A]nd if we work manually, what prevents us from raising our heart to heavenly things and retaining unceasingly the thought of eternal love?

Richard Rolle

[B]ut because all may not be men or women of religion, therefore of every degree in the world God has chosen servants.

Richard Rolle

**T**he harmony of Christian society, the great body of man, was traditionally held to depend on the balance of three functions, government, labour and prayer,<sup>1</sup> in conformity with the structure of human nature and the science of types. The scholastic thinkers of the thirteenth century, synthesising a tradition reaching back at least to Cassian and Dionysius the Areopagite, divided the spiritual life into three 'ways,' purgative, illuminative and unitive.<sup>2</sup> Religious literature dwelt on the correspondence between the three aspects of God and the three powers in the soul of man, His Image.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of the three lives, active, passive and reconciling, can be traced back to the amalgam of Greek thought and Christian teaching which emerged from the disintegration of the Roman Empire. It is probably much older. Through the work of Clement of Alexandria, Philo and Origen the Greek divisions of 'philosophy' became part of the traditional material of medieval thought. Augustine regarded Socrates as the exemplar of the active way of seeking truth through living, and Pythagoras of the contemplative, through the elucidation of natural causality.<sup>4</sup>

Although the opposites of 'action' and 'contemplation' dominated men's literal thinking, the rumour persisted of a third life, the way Christ Himself had

lived with the Apostles, reconciling all opposites. Worthy representatives of the reformed monasticism of the twelfth century, imbued with the ascetic writings of the Desert Fathers, claimed to embrace all three lives. The *vita apostolica* was the aspiration of the Military Orders and permeated the symbolic literature of the Grail quest; it inspired the lay guilds, informed the rise of the Mendicant Orders and was expressed in the lives of remarkable contemplatives like Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of Avalon and, later, Jean Gerson, who played an active part in the events of their time. In the later Middle Ages, the New Devotion and the *imitatio Christi* became its chief vehicle.<sup>5</sup>

Traditional ideas had been manipulated in the university schools at a cost. During the internal struggle, through which European culture passed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the yearning to return to a purer, older valuation at first disturbed and then—as supposed ancient canons in art, scholarship, literature and religion were rediscovered—began everywhere to upset the weight of prevailing custom. With the attention of the newly forming intelligentsia focused on their broader cultural heritage, medieval accretions were stripped away. Augustine's vision of 'a life' as a search for truth had been imperceptibly supplanted by 'a life' as a particular state of existence without specific meaning. The moral ascendancy of the monks during the 'Benedictine centuries' had sown a passive belief in the supremacy of 'the contemplative life,' with which the activities of existing monasteries were then identified. As the numbers of professional religious increased and the spiritual initiative passed elsewhere, this identification hardened and invited refutation.

'Holy poverty,' long associated with the contemplative life as an expression of its complete opposition to the values of 'the world,' was compared by Tudor propagandists to the poverty of social outcasts, and pronounced as such to be an offence to the commonweal. Robert Parkyn adds a fourth life to the traditional scheme, the "miserable living" of vagabonds who "shall have no mead or reward of God for their poverty."<sup>6</sup> As a codicil to a venerable legacy this is absurd, because 'selling all one has' and 'poverty of spirit' have nothing in common with vagrancy, but also fitting, because once the religious life had become indistinguishable from the life of society at large, it naturally became susceptible to the judgement of that society as to its usefulness.

The study of religious history must be generally this: the following of a descending movement, of the loss of truth through its inability to be lived. We are trying, however partially, to comprehend the reality of another history, which concerns the contrary movement of return and renewal. To gauge the scale of the question: what a distance separates the monk-as-tramp from the world of those Fathers of the Monastic Way who said, "if you have not first of all lived rightly with men, you will not be able to live rightly in solitude," and again, "if you want to go to the monastery, you must be careful about every encounter and everything you do, or you will not be able to do the work of the monastery; for you will

not have the right even to drink a single cup there," and again, "you cannot be a monk unless you become like a consuming fire."<sup>7</sup>

Although a shift in popular attitudes certainly took place during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and bulks large in the accessible records, the reorientation of religion began on a different level: practices belonging to what we can only call a teaching were being introduced into life, in accordance with changing needs and conditions. Most of our study must deal with the former shift, but in places the quality of our material bears on the latter movement.

Practices supporting 'the mixed life,' intentional spiritual exercises grounded in a coherent traditional psychology and verified in the experience of countless Christian contemplatives reaching back into the Egyptian desert and beyond, were passing into a stream of popular devotion which was to be of great significance for the next century and a half and which remained in many ways untouched by the upheavals of the Reformation:<sup>8</sup> a devotion 'new' but deeply traditional, eluding formal definition, colouring the surviving records but not identified with them.

*Mons Perfectionis* (1496), by the educational and social reformer, Bishop Alcock of Ely,<sup>9</sup> based on the enigmatic text from the story of the destruction of Sodom—"in the mountain make thyself safe"—was a late encomium of the monastic ideal addressed to the Carthusian order, widely regarded as still undeformed.<sup>10</sup>

He asserts, with a mixture of hope and wishful thinking, that the monasticism which had been under increasing attack since the twelfth century<sup>11</sup> was the way of life most concordant with Christ's precepts and the monk the highest type of man. Christ taught his disciples the secrets of love "on the mountain": this "signifies religion . . . a mountain in which God is well pleased."<sup>12</sup> On this "fertile mountain reigneth all perfection that should feed man's soul," the "roses" of charity, the "lilies" of chastity, the "violets" of obedient humility and the melancholy-curing herbs flowering in the "desert" of their life.<sup>13</sup> It was the dream of medieval culture, the relic of analogical thought during monastic *lectio divina*,<sup>14</sup> in origin anything but naive. The exhortation to "go up to the mountain of the Lord" refers to the development of the soul possible "in this world," for as Augustine said, "if heaven may be on earth, it is in the cloister or study."<sup>15</sup> The repetition of twelfth-century sentiments on fourth-century authority at the end of the fifteenth century was to be challenged within a generation by reformers who, claiming a genuine relationship with history, proceeded to destroy what was left.

If the virtues enjoined by Christ are perfected in the monastic life, it becomes the mark for all Christians.<sup>16</sup> This claim haunted the last days of the medieval monk like an old memory. The fifteenth-century Bridgettine manual, *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, pictured the saints of the Bible using the monastic *horarium* in their devotions,<sup>17</sup> and it was said of Abbot Feckenham when defending the Marian houses in 1559, that he "to exalt the authority of his own profession . . . placed Nazirites, prophets, nay even Christ Himself and His Apostles in the

monastic orders.”<sup>18</sup> Thus Alcock glosses the strange words of Jesus from St. John, “I said, Ye are gods,” with “this is to say: Ye true and faithful religious men, living according to your religion, I say unto you, ye are gods.”<sup>19</sup> Protestants were wont to call the monks “perverters of Scripture.”<sup>20</sup>

Alcock’s thought was coloured by contemporary trends. He quotes Jerome and Chrysostom, Fathers whose limpid style, broad classical learning, ethical bias and penetration of religious pretence had made them humanist oracles.<sup>21</sup> Nor was he untouched by the contemporary movement for ‘Observant’ monastic reform. The second half of his tract exhorts observance of the Biblical bases of the Rule: “therefore every man principally should take heed what precious thing is committed unto him; and what vow he hath made before God and all His Angels, that he would truly perform it.”<sup>22</sup> Like the Bridgettines Whytford and Bonde, he believed renewal could come from reexamining an existing commitment and nowhere calls the universal validity of the Monastic Way into doubt: he represents one pole of the situation we wish to examine.

More penetrating minds were trying to confront the situation. Replying to a zealous Dominican, who had asserted at the Council of Constance that lay attempts to pursue the evangelical counsels of perfection were unmeritorious and even sinful unless they joined a religious order,<sup>23</sup> John Gerson arrived at the following reevaluation of the monastic ideal by reasoning:

[T]he religious orders, created by men, are improperly enough and by an abuse of language and somewhat pretentiously called ‘states of perfection’ . . . there are . . . as everyone knows, people far from perfect among the professed. . . . the said expression is very badly chosen . . . it does not mean that the religious possess or have acquired perfection . . . but only that they ought to acquire it. It is clear that perfection to be acquired is a very different thing from perfection that has already been acquired. Furthermore, religious profession would be better named if it were called the way and the means of perfection or the habit tending thereto rather than the state of perfection. And, verily, if the religious state helps and leads a certain number of people in a more perfect manner, it turns aside and ruins many others who would have gained their salvation much better in the world. For ‘an unfaithful and foolish promise displeaseth God,’ a promise rashly made and not kept.<sup>24</sup>

Gerson’s six sisters had intended to enter religion, but he advised them to live differently without leaving the family home.<sup>25</sup> At this Council he had also defended the Brotherhood of the Common Life against charges of heresy, whose founder Gerard Groote had written:

If devout women separate themselves from the world, and try to serve God in the privacy of their own homes, without taking monastic vows, they are

just as religious as nuns in their convents. To love God and worship Him is religion, not the taking of special vows.<sup>26</sup>

It was this religion—in the world but not of it—sought by the Brotherhood, which came to be known as ‘the New Devotion,’ a prepared bridge between medieval forms and those of the sixteenth century, both Catholic and Protestant. The Brothers of Zwolle declared in 1415: “We have decided to live in cities, in order that we may be able to give advice and instruction to clerks and other persons who wish to serve the Lord.”<sup>27</sup> The growth of a specifically urban culture heightened the relevance of ‘the mixed life’;<sup>28</sup> hence Erasmus, trained at a house of canons influenced by the New Devotion, was to say at the beginning of the sixteenth century, “I pray you, what thing else is a city but a great monastery.”<sup>29</sup> Luther was an admirer of *De Imitatione Christi* and of Gerson, particularly for his views on monasticism.<sup>30</sup> Gerson, like Gerard,<sup>31</sup> had allowed that the Orders could help in some cases, even if “created by men,” an unbearable conjunction for the Protestant reformers.

The crescendo of antimonastic criticism and resentment during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was obviously significant in the formation of Reformation thought and sentiment. English historians have tended to focus on the academic Wycliffite heresy, popular Lollardy and the ground swell of social discontent and satire—‘the Piers Plowman tradition’<sup>32</sup>—as harbingers of the theological controversies, fierce anticlericalism and declamatory Erastianism of the sixteenth century. The public capital of the monks had been subject to a steady process of attrition by these movements, which explain negatively the fate of the monastic ideal, but the possibility that the fundamentally orthodox tradition of late medieval vernacular devotion, informed by the experience of the mystics, and much more influential, widespread and rooted than Wycliffite views, could have had a positive bearing in turning men towards a different understanding rather than merely away from monasticism, has been less widely canvassed. Its writings are neither theologically reformist nor intellectually sensational and have tended to be monopolised by students of English literature and spirituality. Their researches have demonstrated the important influence of writers like Rolle (c. 1300–49) and Hylton (c. 1330–96), magnified by the new printing presses, on the piety of literate, non-Latinate laymen in the early fifteen hundreds. The expanding genre of devotional guides continued to bear new directions after the Reformation, as we shall see later;<sup>33</sup> but it is with the balanced, clear sighted outlooks of Rolle and Hylton, a tangible result of their respective searches, that the remainder of this chapter will be concerned, for in their thought the foundations of “the mixed life” can be discerned. Rolle’s writings tangentially and Hylton’s directly, show some of the ways in which the monastic ideal was being positively transformed during the century before the Dissolution: they were antennae for the coming age.

Rolle’s books were among the very first practical religious guides available in print in England. A modern editor of the extensive literature by, or attributable

to, him has said that, “at the time of the Reformation ‘Richard Hermit’s’ influence was as great, or greater than, that of any other medieval writer of devotional works.”<sup>34</sup> His views on monasticism, largely elicited in response to criticism by local Yorkshire orders, came to have a very wide currency. Rolle, whose individual search made him a figurehead for the contemporary movement towards personal asceticism and solitude,<sup>35</sup> affirmed the layman’s religious responsibility to be just in the place where he was (a fact deeply understood by a hermit), not by fleeing outwardly from the world, but by serving God inwardly while continuing to fulfil all his social duties. When the religious value of asceticism came to be seriously challenged,<sup>36</sup> Rolle’s views, taken from their context and reinforced by more radical denials of the monastic ideal and by the positive trends of lay piety, contributed to the final collapse of the established subjective division between ‘religion’ and ‘the world’ in the early sixteenth century.

I do not say that you should flee physically from the world or from worldly goods, for they are principal occasions, but I counsel you in heart and in will that you flee all such vanities. For though you be lord or lady, husbandman or wife, you may have as stable a heart or will as some of the religious that sit in the cloisters. True it is that the most certain way is to flee as the religious do, but because all may not be men or women of religion, therefore of every degree in the world God has chosen servants.<sup>37</sup>

This was first published in 1506 and reveals the breadth and potential cutting power of Rolle’s thought. The nature of his Tudor audience is suggested by the company his books kept. The influential Carthusian mystical compendium, *Speculum Spiritualium*, addressed both to pious layman and professional contemplative, reprinting in Paris in 1510 was bound with an enlarged version of Rolle’s *De Emendatione Vitae* at the expense of a certain William Bretton, citizen of London. Another fifteenth-century work, the *Abbaye of the Holy Ghoste*, treated of man’s inner life on the analogy of a monastery and its inhabitants:

Of the abbey of the Holy Spirit that is in a place that is called conscience. . . . I see that many would be in religion but they may not, either for poverty, or for dread of their kin, or for the bond of marriage, and for them I make here a book of the religion of the heart . . . that all those that may not be bodily in religion, may be spiritually . . . where may this abbey best be founded and this religion? Now certainly, nowhere so well as in a place that is called conscience; and who so will be busy to found this holy religion[?] That may every good Christian man and woman do, that will be busy thereabout.<sup>38</sup>

Scholars have rejected its attribution to Rolle, but its theme of the real possibility of leading a religious life in the world shows the position with which he was associated.

The old question of how God may be pleased raised for Rolle all that was most hidden in a man, his 'inner life.' What a man loved was more important than what he did: what he loved, he was.<sup>39</sup> If he beat his breast in church, but thought all the time of his business, what use were his devotions, his heart being far away? "The devil owns many whom we reckon good."<sup>40</sup> Rolle taught from experience that, through prayer, meditation and invocation of the Holy Name,<sup>41</sup> the heart might be freed from the world and stabilised on another level. To be able to love God was the essence of Christianity:

Different men on earth have different gifts and graces of God . . . the diversity of love makes the diversity of holiness and of reward. In heaven the angels which are most burning in love are nearest God: also men and women who have most love of God, whether they do penance or not, they shall be in the highest degree in heaven.<sup>42</sup>

The question of the quality of their emotional life could arise, whatever people did.

Although considered by many to have been an enemy of the monks, Rolle sometimes used the accents of the monastic reformer. He wrote to a nun:

If you have delight in the name of religion, look that you have more delight in the deed that falls to religion. Your habit says that you have forsaken the world, that you are given to God's service, that you delight yourself not in earthly things: look then that it be in your heart. For nothing may make you religious but virtues and cleanness of soul in charity. If your body be clad without as your order wills, look that your soul be not naked within—that your order forbids.<sup>43</sup>

Respect for the ideal is implicit, and to our knowledge Rolle nowhere contradicted its aims, but he did quarrel with the excesses and pretensions it fostered. In falling to the level of life in the world the monastic life became far worse, for, in so doing, it betrayed its place in God's scheme, the great world.<sup>44</sup> To relinquish everything and then to live only as if one was a monk, as if making an inward turning (conversion), was "the height of madness." And only too comprehensible: the little extra thing necessary was to be able "to direct the whole heart and all the affections of the mind and thoughts of the spirit to God," but Rolle was an independently motivated seeker and it is probable that the enabling knowledge of this inner movement was rare among the religious of his time. If, in his words, it has to be "better to remain torpid in the world, than to enter religion and not to have the fervour of love,"<sup>45</sup> it is not that he wished to empty the cloister, but that sincerely putting a question about the limits of choice, that is, the freedom of attention, he has to subvert the usual order for a moment. If profession in religion was neither an indispensable qualification for being able to love God, nor even necessarily a help, to be between stools was to have the worst of both worlds.

Rolle, by virtue of his own search and character, was disturbing, not least because he took a greater view. Because of our common helplessness, the monastic was “the most surest way,” but human beings had different qualities and possibilities, and nature requires many kinds of work. The paths on which God may be served were many, but Rolle’s words echo the unity of his vision:

[N]evertheless they come all to one end, that is to say to the life that ever shall last. And thither they are brought and led by diverse ways and by one charity, the which is more in one than in another.<sup>46</sup>

Although he himself finally became a hermit, declaring that “the special gift of those that lead solitary life, is for to love Jesu Christ,”<sup>47</sup> he viewed solitude as a condition of the heart which could be found also in the midst of worldly occupation. His question is at the heart of our subject:

And if we work manually, what prevents us from raising our heart to heavenly things and retaining unceasingly the thought of eternal love? And thus we shall be at all times of our life fervent and not stupefied, for otherwise our heart will not at all be withdrawn from sleep.<sup>48</sup>

Speaking of an inner awakening and activeness of the heart, he wrote, “this solitude is of greater merit than if one fled to a hermitage and was able to live there on roots and water.”<sup>49</sup>

The traditional injunction to turn from ‘the world’ towards God is restored to meaning as an inner turning, incomprehensible to the ordinary mind for ‘the world’ is also in the heart. Hence Rolle did not consider it particularly significant whether a man ‘did penance’ or not. In the struggle for one’s life the outer world could be a battlefield just as the cloister or cell: “get who get may, this world is wide enough and good enough to win heaven in; and it is rich enough and pleasant enough to win hell with, flee who flee may.”<sup>50</sup> A religious life was founded on an inner dedication to and relationship with God, in the absence of which either inside or outside the cloister was a hell.<sup>51</sup> The real hope of layman and monk depended on the same thing. Whether Rolle anticipated Protestantism<sup>52</sup> or not, he insisted always on the primacy of the love of God, his own essential and secret experience: without this inner sense of great scale, these questions are comprehensible, but relatively meaningless.

He is saying that men must find their own way, as he himself had done.<sup>53</sup> The Carthusian who said Rolle “made men judges of themselves,”<sup>54</sup> pre-echoed Luther’s critics. The quality of guidance to be gained from an institutional church, split by schism and weakened by national politics and internal corruption in Rolle’s day, may well have deteriorated further in the hundred and fifty years after his death, but this begs the question. Rolle’s ‘traditional’ certainty could never have been cheap: “The highest path goes to him that loves God most . . .



which love makes God to dwell in him and he in God . . . ” Man can do nothing of himself, only search for an active submission, ‘choose’ to be chosen:

[N]o man may by his own might set himself in any of these paths that go to heaven, but it behoves him to take that path meekly that God has chosen for him . . . for that is hid in a man’s true love that he has in his heart, that no man may know but God alone, for there is nothing that man may do outwardly to bring him to so high a path as true love of God.<sup>55</sup>

A native tradition strongly imbued with Rolle’s views was the stock on which the Reformation was grafted, a fact which has led some scholars to trace ‘the Puritan temper’ to medieval Yorkshire rather than Geneva<sup>56</sup> and which helps to explain the conservative nature of later sixteenth-century devotion.<sup>57</sup> Rolle’s practice of the internal prayer of the Holy Name fostered a cult and current expositions like Suso’s *Horologium Sapientiae* were translated by his followers and even attributed to him. This cult was characterised by a warmth of feeling for the person of Christ that had previously been reserved for the Virgin and the Saints, and persisted in various forms throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as the popularity of the *Jesus Psalter*, attributed to the Bridgettine Whytford, attests. The simplification of devotion occurring during the Reformation was eased by a tradition centring on Christ. Rolle wrote only one (adolescent) work in praise of the Virgin, and there is some evidence that her cult lapsed in Yorkshire during his lifetime.<sup>58</sup>

Rolle’s affirmation of the place of religion in the world may effectively have prepared for the Protestant doctrine of ‘godly vocation,’<sup>59</sup> his influence combining with the New Devotion to assist at the birth of “the true Christian man in this world” in the sixteenth century. The ‘personal’ aspiration to be consciously related to God, central to the vocation of hermit and mystic, passed into the Protestant and reformed Catholic mentality, although the loving familiarity with which Rolle addressed his Lord was replaced with a characteristic sense of awe and incomprehension—the experience of distance—as the pendulum swung away from medieval affective devotion. Rolle’s attacks on the emptiness of externally acquired scholastic learning in comparison with the wisdom taught by “the doctor within,”<sup>60</sup> also found echoes among the later reformers, as did his far-ranging use of the Bible against sinners.<sup>61</sup> The view of the English mystics that grace was given rather than deserved,<sup>62</sup> as popular belief held—and holds, is further evidence here: the last words of Hylton’s *Medylde lyfe*—“No man suddenly is made sovereign in grace, but from little he begins and by process waxes until he be perfect”<sup>63</sup>—have been underlined in the 1516 edition,

The works of the Augustinian canon Walter Hylton were, like Rolle’s, collected and studied not only among Carthusians and Bridgettines but by generations of laymen,<sup>64</sup> their influence extended by the early Tudor presses. His *Scala Perfectio-nis*, a classic formulation of medieval English spirituality, was written for an ancess and does not deal with the monastic life as such; bound with *Medylde lyfe*,

it was printed in 1494, and again in 1507, 1519, 1525 and 1533. *Medylde lyfe*, conveying "to a devout man in temporal estate how he should rule himself;" appeared also in 1516 in the company of works by Bridget and Bernard, and in 1530(?).<sup>65</sup> This little treatise sketches a spiritual attitude to life founded squarely within the tradition, yet of particular relevance to the needs of the early sixteenth century. Hylton's monastic works languished in abbey libraries until they were dispersed, unpublished because the literate public were more interested in ordering their daily lives on Christian principles than reading of the utility of monastic rules and the prerogatives of the religious orders.<sup>66</sup>

Hylton summarises the medieval teaching on the active and contemplative lives in this way:

Active life . . . belongs to worldly men and women the which are lewd in knowing of spiritual occupation, for they feel neither savour nor devotion by fervour of love as other men do, nor do they have any skill of it, and yet nevertheless they have dread of God and of the pain of hell, and therefore they flee sin and they have desire for to please God and for to come to heaven and a good will have to their fellow Christian: for these men it is needfull and advantageous to use the works of active life as busily as they may in the help of themselves and of their fellow Christians, for they cannot else do. Contemplative life belongs alone to such men and women that for the love of God forsake all open sins of the world and their flesh, and all business, charges and government of worldly goods, and make themselves poor and naked to the bare need of the bodily kind, and flee from sovereignty of all other men to the service of God: unto these men it belongs for to travail and occupy themselves inwardly for to get, through the grace of our Lord, cleanness in heart and peace in conscience by destroying of sin and receiving of virtues, and so for to come to contemplation, which cleanness may not be had without great exercise of body and continual travail of the spirit in devout prayers, fervent desires and spiritual meditations.<sup>67</sup>

Thus the tradition is on one level clear, even dogmatic, yet with an inner dimension, pregnant with the imperative to know one's place in order to be: it can only be understood 'in translation,' by being lived.

Christianity was the religion of love. For those who had not been touched by the love of God and did not "have any skill of it," the two commandments of the New Law<sup>68</sup> were their guide: that is all! If responsibility depends on the quality of experiencing, the level from which the tradition comes and at which it begins to be operative is clearly revealed. Those who had been so touched were called to contemplate, to a life of a certain kind of work, a continual quest:

[T]his work is not of one hour, nor of one day, but of many days and years, with much sweat and stinking of body and travail of the soul . . . cease not but seek busily.<sup>69</sup>

Their aim was the striving to clean their hearts and come to “peace in conscience by destroying of sin” through the practice of prayer and meditation, in which they were supported by the accumulated wisdom and transmitted techniques of the Christian spiritual tradition. In the teaching of the Desert, central to all that follows, ‘action’ and ‘contemplation’ refer to the dual nature of man, reciprocal aspects of a process of transformation which can take place, at this stage of the religious way, within the individual: contemplation denotes the reception of that force from Above with which vice could be ‘actively’ overcome.<sup>70</sup>

Hylton is restating what were to him objective truths, rather than passing judgement on his fellows: different degrees of religion being proper to different kinds of men,<sup>71</sup> it has no meaning to consider one ‘life’ better than another. Each has its place within a wholeness greater than we know. He neither extols contemplation unconditionally above other works,<sup>72</sup> nor makes it synonymous with the monastic life: it is a special and rare kind of activity for which a man can only prepare himself—if he is called. If the ‘desire for God’ is indeed more whole in contemplative prayer than in outward actions for one’s neighbour, only an unbalanced literal mind would find in this a reason to denigrate these actions rather than an important question. Hylton distinguishes between ‘bodily’ and ‘spiritual’ action, not between life in the world and the monastery. ‘Action’ and ‘contemplation’ are not only abstract concepts. Habitual outer devotion, which so infuriated the Protestant reformer, is merely characterised by Hylton as “uncunning.” If ignorant men believe they are not desiring God unless they continually speak His Name, they do not know themselves and beg the question. Pious formulae are good, formed in the heart or enunciated, for they can stir the dormant feelings, but a “clean thought” of God without words, is the only sign of “soothfast desire.”<sup>73</sup> Protestant thought was to cut across this view of temporal-active and spiritual-contemplative in the belief that just those who had not forsaken “all open sins of the world” could indeed be saved without having to make themselves “poor and naked.” In this they were in accord with the thought of the Italian Renaissance.

During the twelfth century the *vita apostolica*, hitherto seen in terms of their own experience by monastic commentators, began to be reinterpreted by increasingly influential orders of quasi-monastic canons with pastoral duties, the religious forebears of both Hylton and Luther. The appearance of the Mendicants in the thirteenth century parallels a shift in spirituality from monastic asceticism to devotion to the humanity of Christ, and eventually the *imitatio Christi*. The *vita apostolica* of ‘ambidextrous’ prelates like Bernard and Gerson seemed to unite action and contemplation (even East and West in the person of Francis, one of the few Western medieval saints to be honoured in the East), and “thus develops into a new vision of life which is in but not of this world and which is open to laymen as well as to clerics and monks.”<sup>74</sup> Whether such adjustments were providential or accidental, it is against this background that Hylton goes on to speak of the life of

ancient bishops, potent exemplars in the reform atmosphere of early Tudor England hungry for proofs of the *vita apostolica*, idealistic about primitive Christianity and ripe for more searching pastoral care:

[T]hese holy men left not utterly the administration, the looking after and the dispensation of worldly goods to give themselves wholly to contemplation with as much grace of contemplation as they had, but they left full often their own rest in contemplation when they had well rather have been still, for love of their fellow Christian, and engaged themselves with worldly business in helping of their subjects, and truly that was charity, for wisely and discreetly they parted their living in two: one time they fulfilled the lower part of charity by works of active life, for they were bound thereto by taking of their prelacy, and another time they fulfilled the higher part of charity in contemplation of God and of spiritual things by prayers and meditations, and so they had charity to God and to their fellow Christian, both in affection of soul within and also in showing of bodily deeds without.<sup>75</sup>

This ideal for the secular clergy was interestingly restated by Chancellor Melton of York in his *Sermo exhortationis* (1509–10):

Every craftsman who uses his hands has, besides the stall for his wares outside, a workshop for his craft within, and if he does not work diligently in it for many days he will not easily earn for himself through his craft the necessities of life; similarly, besides the temples and shrines of God in which by daily prayer and psalms we, as it were, display our wares to passers by, we must make use of our inner workshop or study with sacred reading and teaching, that we may become rich in learning and have no lack of the necessities of life eternal. . . . Nor may we have any other source to expound to the people the holy consolation of God's word.<sup>76</sup>

Melton was a close friend of John Colet, the owner of a humanist library and one-time tutor of John Fisher. His younger contemporary Richard Whytford, a member of the same circle, was also to write of a religion blending action and contemplation in terms of the discipline of learning a craft:<sup>77</sup> this attitude was completely traditional.

The idea that being Christian 'in the world' needs to be based on the kind of special discipline, hitherto the exclusive property of the committed contemplative, underlies Hylton's account of 'the mixed life.' The ability to respond to both outer demand and inner call, in conformity with "the order of charity," must be learned, because for the most part it has been lost and will not be formed by itself. The 'mixed life' is not an ideal by default. One of the Desert Fathers said of the religious life, "what is the good of giving oneself to a trade without seeking to learn it."<sup>78</sup> Hylton declares:

[M]ixed life . . . belongs to some temporal men which have sovereignty with much favour of worldly goods, and have also as it were lordship over other men for to govern and sustain them, as a father has over his children, and a master over his servants and a lord over his tenants, the which men have also received of our Lord's gift grace of devotion, and in part savour of spiritual occupation. . . . if these men standing the charge and the bond they have taken will leave utterly the business of the world, the which ought skilfully to be used in fulfilling of their charge and wholly give themselves to contemplative life, they do not well, for they keep not the order of charity, for charity . . . lies both in love of god and of your fellow Christian, and therefore it is that he has that charity to use in working now to that one, and now to that other. . . . on the contrary wise whoso has so great regard to work of active life and to business of the world that for the love of his fellow Christian he leaves spiritual occupation utterly after that God has disposed him thereto, he fulfills not charity.<sup>79</sup>

This speaks of a 'new' possibility,<sup>80</sup> the acceptance of inevitable conditions of life just because there is no choice, and their skilful use for the fulfilment of our duties to man and God, rather than allowing them to become an excuse for our inevitable limitations: the possibility to stand up between the outer and inner worlds, to touch a depth of responsibility born of an awareness of the demands of the two opposing directions we bear by virtue of our humanity.

In a general way, the technique of the mixed life showed how the father, the squire, the magistrate and the merchant, among the most commanding types in sixteenth-century society and imagination, might become Christian realities. Hylton's challenge to the influential layman—"for what are all your works worth whether they be bodily or spiritual, but if they be done rightfully and reasonably to the worship of God and after His bidding: soothly right nought"<sup>81</sup>—prefigures the attempts of religious leaders in the fifteenth century to impose moral restraint on developing commercial interests,<sup>82</sup> which continued under the Tudors and became very marked in the 'godly guides' of the Elizabethan and Stuart Puritans. The mixed life, concerned not with imposing restraint at all costs but with the practical reconciliation of 'the world' and 'the spirit' in the sphere of the individual, with discharging the responsibilities of life without neglecting "spiritual occupation," was the enabling force of this movement. Nor can it be unconnected that, although the temper of the sixteenth century has been called "activist," its spirituality became increasingly centred upon the "intense cultivation of private prayer."<sup>83</sup> Within the new religious orders of the Counter-Reformation there was a corresponding development away from the exclusive performance of the liturgical *opus dei* and towards a more active involvement in 'the world' sustained by intensive and systematic spiritual exercises. These are questions of balance. Hylton's warning to the man of affairs not to allow piety to interfere with his obliga-

tions seems a little fantastic until we recall the contemplative excesses, eremitical fervour and apocalyptic expectations of the late fourteenth century.

Hylton can be said to anticipate the characteristic sixteenth-century sense of social conscience, but he is summoning a much older vision. . . . The responsibilities of the magistrate are viewed in relationship to 'the mystical body of Christ,' the traditional symbol of "holy church." Medieval thought was heir to powerful ancient teachings of unity concerning the correspondance between all the hierarchies of being, between microcosm and macrocosm 'as above-so below': men's action and inaction has consequences at all levels because the World is One.<sup>84</sup> For the sake of the deep human need to be conscious of the Whole, Hylton is asking whether the powerful thrust of earlier medieval religion towards the inner world, in the form in which it had entered popular culture, was a dangerously partial understanding: a living tradition is able to adjust itself through the integrity and sensitivity of its members. We may be beguiled by outer responsibilities, but when they are neglected for what is called worship, the head of this mystical body is beautified at the expense of its other parts:

[Y]ou leave His body with the feet ragged and rent and take no keep thereof and there you worship him not, for it is villainy and no worship for a man to be curiously arrayed upon his head with pearls and precious stones, and all his body naked and bare as it were a beggar: right so spiritually it is no worship to God to crown His head and leave His body bare. You shall understand that our Lord Jesu Christ as man is head of His spiritual body which is holy church, the members of His body are all christened men: some are arms, some are feet and some are other members after the sundry workings that they use in their living. . . . His feet are your children, your servants, your tenants and all your fellow Christians . . . you make yourself to kiss His mouth by devotion and spiritual prayer, but you tread upon His feet and defile them.<sup>85</sup>

Our sense of the different levels on which an authentic symbol calls to us, demanding to be understood, appears and is as soon lost, as we ponder this extraordinary passage. Of the source of this image—the Immaculate Being of Christ and the sacred mystery of the Last Supper—who can speak? But, having deferred, we must grasp tightly what we can. What, on our level, is this 'body'?

It is clearly, in some way, 'our' body, what we belong to, and yet, equally clearly, it is not ours for we do not know it: becoming aware of itself, and thus of its lawful allegiance, it belongs to a higher consciousness, but, as things have become and are, right order has been subverted. Fragmented, dispersed and our 'truth,' it is being called to an inconceivable re-remembering, to re-ligion: to receive, obey and serve the scale of energy which could act within it, to take its place in the greater world, it must become conscious of itself, become one. Therefore, Hylton says, we need to wash Christ's feet (His head is fair enough), to pay attention to

the lower—as even God must do—for the sake of the Whole. The conditions for this are provided, yet we turn away.

Hylton's vision needs to be related firstly and intensely to a level which we can, but at present do not, comprehend: if the World is One, this is possible, and if it is not, it is necessary! It is only through an opening of consciousness experienced fully in the body, that the transforming power of new understanding could begin to inform our outer behaviour. Becoming truly and unmistakably aware of ourselves, others appear: unity, however relatively experienced, leaves an imprint and a lawful question. Effective worship is the action of a man who is able, however momentarily, to live on two levels, to be open to the two differently directed currents of energy within himself, who, through this, begins to sense a greater whole, and, with that presence, suffers correspondingly for his sins, actively, that is, consciously.

Erasmus' early sixteenth-century vision of the mystical body as three circles of humanity centred on Christ, the fountain of everlasting fire, shared Hylton's sources. In the introduction to the *Enchiridion* he says that the common people, laymen, constitute the outer circle as the grossest part of the great world, although still belonging to the body of Christ: feet, legs and other parts have their proper work in relation to the Divine Presence at the centre, and, performing it, their honour and hope, for the foot may in time evolve into a higher part.<sup>86</sup>

These great images, cosmic in scale, were diminished into the Tudor "Commonwealth," an idea whose influence has reached the present day.

Protestant political thought supported the obligation of the magistrate by enhancing his dignity as the guardian of religious purity, but Hylton, for all his future relevance, never had such an intention. He was recalling them to responsibility, which, at the level of their own awareness, must be experienced as dual. 'Charity' calls us to face in two directions, knowingly: because their contact in us directly and urgently evokes the need for their proper relationship. For the sake of this, "You should do both works in diverse times and with as good will the one as the other, if you might." The outer demand might become a check on the inner state, "so shall you put away by grace of Our Lord, sloth, idleness and vain rest that come of your flesh under colour of contemplation."<sup>87</sup> Abstracted from its place in the inner drama—a living sense of which is always the first casualty—a more apt description of 'monasticism' in Protestant eyes would be hard to find.

There are further echoes. The association of pious layman and secular cleric in his exposition of the mixed life evokes the grand Lutheran ideal of 'the priesthood of all believers,' while the tradition that Christ Himself was its exemplar<sup>88</sup> could not fail but deeply impress a generation that had devoured Thomas a Kempis and were currently coming to terms with the *philosophia Christi* of Erasmus. But Hylton is again more subtle. He refers to Christ as an inner presence revealed through certain experiences, our unconsciousness and neglect of which constitutes the sum of all that is lacking in our lives: it is not exactly this presence which is absent:

“I mean not this word Jesu painted upon a wall, or written by letters on a book, or formed by lips in sound of the mouth, or feigned in your heart by travail of your mind, for in this manner wise may a man out of charity find Him.”<sup>89</sup> It may be that Hylton anticipated the fierce Protestant antipathy to religious externals, but that is not what this text is about.

All our sources recommend an intentional beginning to the day. Here is Hylton’s description of the morning exercise, referring perhaps to sunrise or earlier still, after monastic practice:

In nights after your sleep, if you will rise for to pray and serve your lord, you shall feel yourself first fleshly heavy, and sometimes lusty; then shall you dispose yourself for to pray or to think some good thought for to quicken your heart to God, and set all your business for to drawe up your thought from worldly vanities and from vain imagination that falls into your mind, that you may feel some devotion in your saying; or else if you will think on spiritual things . . . there are many manner of meditations.<sup>90</sup>

An invitation to question is always touching, however indirectly expressed, in material concerning faith. Conventional meditations and prayers are at hand, but how does a man find himself before them, are his emotions sluggish or preoccupied, his mind a hostage already to imaginings arising he knows not where or how, is he being governed from below, by the state of his body? Can he approach God like this? Can he even approach his day? Such questioning is not mental in the ordinary sense. Behind Hylton’s simple words lay worlds of possible experiencing.

‘Monastic knowledge,’ based on a tested spiritual psychology, concerned the ‘how,’ rather than the ‘why,’ of religion. The experience hitherto of committed contemplatives it was being shared during the century before the Dissolution, and intensively on the eve of the Reformation, passing more and more into general currency, for better or worse, through the agency of the presses. Even where the monastic life was not suppressed the same process can be observed. Fray Francisco de Osuna said of his *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, published in Spain in 1527, “the chief reason for which I wrote this book was to draw everyone’s attention to this exercise of recollection.” The monastic authorities had objected to his making such things available, but he believed that all who were able, including those with families, should have the possibility of trying in this way: the Devil might well lurk in these matters, but he also lived, it was said, behind the church door and this had never been made a reason for staying away!<sup>91</sup> The exercise of recollection was central to ‘the new devotion.’<sup>92</sup>

Hylton gives another example of special knowledge:

I tell you forsooth you may make of other men’s sins a precious ointment for to heal your own soul when you have mind on them with compassion and



sorrow for them; this ointment is precious though the spicery of it be not clean, for it is an antidote made of venom for to destroy venom; that is for to say, your own sins and other men's sins, if you beat them with sorrow of heart, pity and compassion, they turn into medicine which makes your soul whole from pride and envy and brings in love and charity to your fellow Christian. This thought is good sometime for to have.<sup>93</sup>

This is knowledge not in the sense of information for the mind but guidance and support for a certain kind of inner experiencing, perhaps more balanced, for new alchemical combinations of thought, sensation and particularly feeling. It is implied that to practice religion in 'the world' requires cunning, even a quality of slyness, not least towards oneself: learn to discriminate in the inner world, take nothing for granted, for 'good' and 'evil' are divided only by the fine line along which a man must find his own balancing and travel, listening to his own deepest promptings for guidance. Later we shall meet the idea that life, in the fullest sense, is the guide. The religious man in the world has much in common, paradoxically, with the hermit.

The 'mixed life' is clearly not for all, requiring both simplicity and slyness, even the qualities of the dove and the serpent:

[S]trive not too much with yourself for you might so lightly fall into more darkness unless you were more sly in your working, and therefore I hold it then most certain unto you for to say your Pater noster and your Ave, or else your Matins, or else for to read upon your Psalter, for that is evermore a certain standard that will not fail . . . and if you may by your prayer get devotion, look then if this devotion be only in affection, that is to say in great desire to God with spiritual delight; hold forth then your saying and break not lightly off, for often it falls that praying with the mouth gets and keeps devotion, and if a man cease of saying, devotion vanishes away. Nevertheless if devotion of prayers bring into your heart a devout thought of the manhood of our Lord . . . and this thought should be letted by your saying then may you cease of your saying, and occupy yourself with meditation till it pass away.<sup>94</sup>

Attending to what is taking place as if it mattered, willing to watch the darkness, thought is felt and feeling thought, and, however fleetingly, a finer sensitivity appears, indicating both a more genuine submission and the capacity for independent responsibility: the reestablishment, momentarily, of this connection with the inner life bears impressions of a forgotten language, whose wordlessness is its strength, a language replete with contradictions, their reversals and resolutions. A language forgotten twice over, because Hylton refers to the staple of a traditional Way, long since abandoned by our culture, and because we have

neglected to nurture its essence. ‘Devotion’ signifies, here and throughout, not what it has come to mean in our tired and involved vocabulary, but just that differently centred and precious quality of feeling resulting from the joining together in us of that which is usually sundered: it is the forecourt for the reception of that talismanic love to which these texts always hungrily return, the intelligence that is the consciousness of the heart as a cognitive organ, a consciousness lawfully able to illuminate its actual place in the physical body. Suddenly in possession of the reins, able to be, as it were, his own guide, he listens to what is happening in himself—as it is happening, not retrospectively—and receives the corresponding impression in order to become less irresponsible. “A truly devout man,” said John Ruysbroeck, “relies on himself,” and this, together with the practice of attentive self-observation while in a state of prayer, is absolutely in accordance with the inner tradition of Desert asceticism. Hylton’s words also recall the old proverb, often cited in late medieval spiritual writings, “better is art than evil strength.”<sup>95</sup> From where should the ‘art’ come, if not a kind of study, supported by the tradition? What are its tools?

Hylton’s significance for us lies not only in his exposition of the interrelationship of ‘the three lives’ and his later publication at a critical time, but in his lifting the veil on the inner life of the medieval ascetic and in the importance he gives to a certain “desire,” common to all men. If this desire did not exist, neither would this book, for there would have been no need at any time for men to have sought anything in themselves. This, the holy desire, is not the love of God, but the wish—however buried—to taste it: in the language of the time, “a great yearning for to be present to Him in His bliss, and fully for to be oned to Him in love.”<sup>96</sup> One of the fundamental ‘ideas’ of the New Devotion was that knowing—in the sense of living in the presence of—this desire, would in itself bring about a reorientation. It is always there, says Hylton, but men do not remember it, for they are seldom engaged in what he calls “thinking with intent.”<sup>97</sup> From the context it is clear that he refers to a special kind of working together of thought and feeling—our ‘intention,’ ‘wish’ and ‘attention’ being rightfully indissoluble, although rarely experienced as such.

[H]e that has this desire of the gift of God, if he sleeps or else thinks not on God, but on worldly things, yet he has this desire in heart . . . but anon as he thinks on God, or on cleanness of living or of joys of heaven, then works his desire to God as long as he keeps his thought and his intent to please God either in prayers, or in meditation, or in any other good deed of active life.<sup>98</sup>

Transliterated from a haphazard early sixteenth-century modernisation of Hylton’s rhythmically alliterative fourteenth-century English, these apparently ordinary words, ‘the soup of the soup,’ still indicate an extraordinary sort of experience, unconditioned by time, the erosion of language and everything else: being active, this “desire” can act in him, and he becomes able to receive. There-

fore, “all our business be for to stir this desire and use it by discretion now in one deed, now in another after he is disposed, and has grace thereto.”<sup>99</sup>

This is an excellent description of the ‘mixed life’ and must be borne in mind in all that follows, for what we are wishing to follow is just this process.