

## GLOOMY HOPE

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I can't take credit for the **hope** I have, for 'tis a gift of God through Jesus Christ my Lord; but I take credit for my **gloom**, for it is my own doing, the fruit of my own reflection on the human condition, a confused mix of narcissism, benevolence, and malevolence. Thus the oxymoron, "gloomy hope."....When we feel the present & future pressing too tight upon us, we can gain distance two ways, viz, prayer & "history" (ie, reflection on some other period if not also place). This Thinksheet sniffs out, for illuminating similarities & differences, Britain's **Victorian Age**, roughly the years of Victoria, 1837-1901....I can see the face & hear the voice of Greatgrandmother Brenner, who was born three years before Queen Victoria--so the Victorian Age isn't really long ago. And I had a brief conversation with the last of the great Victorians, W(m.) R(alph) Inge (1860-1954). Last week, in culling out of my library 731 vols. to give to seminary libraries, I came again upon his 1922 Bampton Lecture, "The Victorian Age" (Cambridge/22; the lecture so instantly famous that my copy, bought that year in Oxford, is of the third impression). Recalling the call-number of his **CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM** (1899; my copy, Scrib/33), I reviewed that also--which, below, is referred to as **CM**, as the Bampton Lecture is referred to as **VA**. Himself below is, of course, Inge, who was not for nought named "the gloomy dean" (of St. Paul's, London), whose gloom as it were throws light on mine.

1. Inge could bear his gloom without depression because of the *lux aeterna*, the Eternal Light, God's Presence in his soul--more real to his Platonist mind than was the outer world, as were "the Ideas" to Plato. All mystics believe in the superior reality of whom/what they experience within: the Platonic & Neoplatonic (&, in Indic religion, the upanishadic) traditions provide intellectual architectonics for enabling the ineffable (lit., "un-speakable") to be spoken of & the transrational to be reasoned about and so "understood."

2. Inge was a contrarian. His father was a provost of Oxford U.--so he went to Cambridge U. He lived in an increasingly rationalistic age--so his life study was the polar opposite, viz, mysticism. In the 1932 "Preface to Seventh Edition" of **CM**, he indicates that in the 33 intervening years, interest in mysticism has been increasing as (1) evolutionism has weakened the cosmological argument (from design to the divine Mind) and (2) "the time-honored proofs from miracle and prophecy have lost their cogency, not only because our age demands a closer scrutiny of the evidence, but because, however well the abnormal facts may be established, they do not prove what the religious mind wishes to believe. And so the defenders of religion have been led to lay more stress on the inspiration of the individual." The fact that "the alleged knowledge of the mystics is not transferable" must not be used as an argument against the validity of this knowledge: "a genius for religious experience is like other exceptional endowments; it can be acquired or perfected only by arduous discipline; and in all other branches of human effort the average man is content to sit at the feet of the masters of an art or science....But that God has spoken to them they know, and in general their accounts of their journey up the hill of the Lord agree very closely....Such is their testimony, and it is not wise to disregard it." Or to psychologize it into mere subjectivity: "Psychology is the study of states of consciousness as such. While it confines itself to its own domain [as it should] it does not inquire whether there is any objective reality behind mystical experience." When psychologists--Wm. James, eg--yield to the temptation to invalid metaphysical extensions from their field, they wander away from the mystics, who "care nothing about states of consciousness" but rather only about [my words] the One who/that meets & greets them from beyond, yet within, themselves. Further, psychologists looking at the mystical experience tend [again, my words] to skew toward their prejudice, which is to "find" the abnormal & pathological. ("James, for example, has no study of Christ, who even among non-Christians holds a supreme place in the roll of religious genius.")...."The mystical state in its purest form--is just *prayer*, 'the elevation of the mind to God.' Let anyone who has felt God near him when on his knees think what a perfect prayer would be like. It need not be vocal; it is probably not petitional; it is an act of worship, receptiveness, and self-surrender, to the Author of our being. This is the only proper way to approach the subject" of mysticism....Inge closes the preface by pointing to his life-study, "the intellectual basis of mysticism," "the philosophy of mysticism, and especially the greatest of all philosophical mystics, the Neoplatonist Plotinus." He then honors those who have given themselves to "the study of the Christian mystics"--Evelyn Underhill, Baron von Hugel, Rufus Jones (& other Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic).

3. In my personal index to **CM** (penned during my first reading on the

flyleaves) I wrote this from p.332: "Every truth...is but the husk of a deeper truth." This well states what the mystic longs for and the project-program of the philosopher of mysticism. It's Inge's angle of vision in both CM & VA.

4. I find these strands both in the Victorian age & in ours: traditionalism, rationalism, romanticism, mysticism, optimism (more in their age), & pessimism (more in ours). That age (VA) "cannot be divested of making our own inevitable," in good & evil. Victorian evangelical-charismatic-ecstatic-pentecostal-"born again" mysticism was little different from our own, as was their spiritualism (eg, Conan Doyle in his late years). And Darwin-embattled Protestant Victorian fundamentalism was little different from our own. (In Sinclair Lewis' ELMER GANTY [HB/27, Signet/67, p.17], the college president confronts a freethinker student: "Do you believe with us not only in the plenary inspiration of the Bible but also in its verbal inspiration?")

5. I must note an internal contradiction in Inge's life-study project: the philosophy (rational) of mysticism (transrational): the hand cannot reach the apple, nor stop trying to. Only a few months before he died at 94, he gave an interview to London's DAILY EXPRESS (reported 27 July 53, with gloomy photo, in our TIME). A few quotes: "Perhaps it will be said of me that as I grew older I became a better Christian and a worse churchman." ("I have never been happy about the Church of England.") "I don't think the world is a better place for having had me in it....It is the same....But don't call me the Gloomy Dean. I never deserved that. I have tried only to face reality, to be honest and refused to be [as he saw his fellow Victorians as being] foolishly optimistic." "I do not love the human race. I have loved just a few of them. The rest are a pretty mixed lot." "I have failed" to solve the "fundamental" problems of eternity, personality, & evil. "I believe no one ever will solve them." But "I have done my best, and I hope I haven't entirely wasted my life." "I must wait and see" "what I shall find" in the afterlife. "I have no vision of 'heaven' or a 'welcoming God.'" (TIME, implying Cicero's great essay "On Old Age," titles its article "De Senectute.") As a young man, Inge taught that reason could not penetrate the mystical way of knowing: as an old man, his conclusions proved the proposition as he (TIME) "ruminated glumly on his own life." We must not overread one newspaper interview of a nonagenarian near death, but I get the feeling that the frustrated old philosopher never was himself what he centrally studied, never was a mystic, never knew intimacy with God, always had his nose pressed against the window of heaven looking in, an alien to the strange land he nevertheless insisted was home, a modern man who knew that (Victorian, industrial-revolution, worship-of-progress) modernity is not home, yet the last of the great Victorians. He was only 39 when he delivered VA, yet hear his last sentence: "My younger hearers, we old Victorians will [soon] have made room for you by quitting a world to which, as I am sure you think, we no longer belong."

6. Inge's prescience, in VA, is astonishing. Britain & the Atlantic would decline, America & the Pacific was the wave of the future. The "key to history" is that "every idea or institution passes into its opposite." Nationalisms would become more fanatic. Consumerism would demote quality in favor of quantity, (p.50) "and by quantitative standards the higher values cannot be measured." Industrialism "vulgarized" & British imperial expansionism "brutalized" & encouraged the Germans to dream of empire. Civilization "might be poisoned by the noxious by-products of its own activities" after "turning human beings into mere cogs in machines." 53f: "I have no doubt that the Elizabethan and the Victorian Ages will appear to the historian of the future as the twin peaks in which English civilisation culminated. The twentieth century will doubtless be full of interest, and may even develop some elements of greatness." But Britain's greatness "is probably nearing its end," yielding greatness to America....Those words are now 66 years old. Is America, now, yielding its greatness? If so, to whom/what? Or is the concept of partisan greatness now dysfunctional to humanity & the biosphere (as I think)? Are we once again (43) "in the dark ages without their faith and hope"? Has the pendulum swung too far from aristocracy into egalitarian democracy, which (Toqueville & Inge) yields to tyranny? Will (43) "universal war" ensue from "the pressure of over-population"?

7. Whence Inge's lifelong pressing of his inner nose against the window of the Unknown if not from the Unknown (Acts 1723)? A postmodern man in two prior ages!