

## INTRODUCTION

William Law holds an outstanding position among Protestant, and among English, mystics. His writings are therefore of considerable interest to students, and especially to English-speaking students, of mysticism. Among his works *The Spirit of Prayer* and *The Spirit of Love* are perhaps the finest and the most appealing. In the years when they were written (1749–54) his outlook received its fullest and most characteristic development, and his literary power was at its height. In these books he displays more fully than in any of his other writings the influence of Jacob Boehme, which affected his later thought so profoundly.

Law's relation to Boehme is apt to be misunderstood. It is sometimes supposed that it was Boehme's influence which was responsible for the entire mystical development which was the main feature of his later life. It is true that it was after he had begun to read Boehme's writings (about the year 1735, when he was 49) that the mystical aspect of his work came into evidence. His book on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, written in 1737 in reply to Bishop Hoadley, is often regarded as the first of his mystical writings. But Law himself makes it abundantly clear that he was influenced by many other mystics—especially by the so-called 'Rhineland mystics' of the fourteenth century (apart from Eckhart, the greatest of them, of whom he had no knowledge). He was familiar with the work of most noteworthy Christian mystics from the pseudo-Dionysius in the fifth century to Mme. Guyon in the seventeenth. In his literary career there is a blank of nine years—between *An Appeal to all that doubt the Truths of the Gospel* (1740) and the First Part of *The Spirit of Prayer* (1749). It seems to have been during this period that Law undertook the systematic study of Boehme.

Law was not at any time a mere mouthpiece of Boehme. His most fundamental conception is that of the universal divine presence in the human soul, and that is common ground among Christian mystics. It was this thought that led him to the universalism of his developed outlook. Seeing the divine Life in all, he rejoiced to see the manifestation of that Life, not only among Christians, but in non-Christian seers and saints. Here Law was far in advance of the orthodox standpoint of his time. Although he was utterly opposed to the Rationalism of the Deists, he shared the breadth of their outlook in recognising the universality of religion as rooted in the human soul. He was a pioneer of the larger vision which is emerging in our time. It is true that he prided himself on his rigid adherence to the orthodox

standards of the Church; he had as little sympathy with the Socinians and the Arians as he had with the Deists. But for him religion was far greater than any creed; it was the Life of the Spirit born within us.

Law went far in his opposition to the attitude which enthrones reason as man's highest faculty. Like Boehme, he emphasised the primacy of will. Yet his mysticism is in some aspects highly speculative. He claims that his conception of the origin of the material universe as a fall from the primary perfection and glory of 'Eternal Nature' represents the true meaning of Scripture, but it is in fact based on the philosophy of Boehme, which has in this aspect strong Gnostic affinities. In his conception of 'Eternal Nature' he gives expression to an aspect of the mystical tradition which has in recent years been widely neglected, although it has been emphasised in the writings of adherents of the Eastern Orthodox Church, like Soloviev, Berdyaev and S. L. Frank. It played a great part in the experience and teaching of William Blake (see *William Blake and Neoplatonism* by G. M. Harper), and its significance was reaffirmed in some of her books by Evelyn Underhill. Among other 'moderns' Max Plowman and Edward Carpenter have testified to its reality.

Law was at once orthodox and liberal in his outlook. His appeal was constantly to the Bible, and he naturally had no understanding of the historical origin and background of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. His thought is marked by certain outstanding contrasts. 'Christ' is for him both a historical person and a universal principle, the eternal Word, the source of all that is good in our Life made manifest, above all, in the true spirit of love wherever it is found. For Law therefore the Incarnation is not merely a particular divine event, as it is for the great majority of Christian theologians; it is also a universal process. He speaks explicitly of 'incarnation' in that sense. It is not surprising that he failed to unify his thought on this question, so that his teaching is lacking in complete consistency. His emphasis varies, in fact, from time to time. Sometimes he thinks of salvation in accordance with traditional orthodoxy as wholly dependent on the Cross of Calvary; but more typically he regards it as springing from the divine Life in man, and so as an experience common to all who share the 'spirit of prayer' to which that Life moves us. Again, while Law regarded the whole universe as an outgrowth of 'Eternal Nature', and not as a creation *ex nihilo*, his view is marked, in one aspect, by a thorough-going dualism. Physical Nature is for him a fallen world, and in all its phases, from the constitution of matter to the life of the animals and the unregenerate human self, it represents, not the manifestation, but rather the absence of the divine. To say that is not to deny that his view of the world contains an important element of truth. The principle of mechanism exhibited in Nature

underlies the regressive tendency which is the great obstacle to human progress; and it is from the exclusiveness of matter that the separateness which is the ground of conflict and evil appears to spring.

Law's view of the world as rooted in a primal Fall was naturally a sombre one. During the greater part of his life it was not merely sombre, but radically pessimistic, since he shared the belief in everlasting Hell almost universally held by Christians in his day. That belief is implied in some passages in both these books; but in *The Spirit of Love* it is finally replaced by the idea of Universal Restoration implied in other passages. Here Law's insight altogether surpassed that of Boehme. It is indeed a tribute to the humane and enlightened quality of his thinking that he was a pioneer of the 'larger hope'. His enlightenment found expression also in his thorough-going repudiation of the penal theory of the Atonement and his adoption of a 'moral' view. He transcended the limitations of Boehme's outlook in his complete rejection of the traditional idea of the wrath of God, although he felt justified in using the term in a sense of his own.

Law's mysticism is essentially related to his understanding of religion as an inward principle grounded in the deeper nature of the soul. The inmost centre of our being is for him the 'spark of the soul', which is divine and which moves us therefore to seek after union with God. Law cannot be counted among the greatest of the mystics, for there is no indication in his writings that he attained the height of their experience. His mysticism is essentially dynamic and creative. It cannot be summed up in terms of vision or knowledge; it is a matter of life—of willing rather than of knowing. The basic fact of mystical experience as he saw it is the abiding fact of divine inspiration—the Life of God working within us, the flame of divine love, 'the desire of the soul for God', which is the secret of union with God. It is the greatness of Law's written work—and especially of the two books here reprinted—that at its best it bears authentic testimony to that truth.

Among the more noteworthy and significant passages in these books are the following:

- The eternal Word in us, pp. 43–52
- Self-love and the love of God, pp. 57f.
- The way of salvation, pp. 39–42, 60–3, 290
- Knowledge and life, pp. 116–18
- The spirit of prayer, pp. 120, 131–8, 143–5
- Divine Love, pp. 124–6, 165–9
- The spirit of love, pp. 270f.
- The true nature of religion, pp. 126–8
- Inspiration and the Christian life, pp. 206f.
- The seed of Christ in the soul, p. 209
- Life is from within, pp. 210–13.