

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEM OF THE GRADUAL ASCENT TO CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Throughout ascetic and mystic literature there are to be found ‘divisions’ of the way of the spiritual life, all of which amounts to an attempt to describe and distinguish from each other the stages through which man must pass on the way to Christian perfection. Thus, when about to speak here of the ‘gradual ascent to Christian perfection’, it might be expected that this would necessarily involve us in a description (in their material content) of the individual stages of this way to Christian perfection and that it would consequently be necessary for us to indicate in detail the norm according to which – by gradual ascent through these stages – the Christian eventually can be said to arrive at that point which represents the goal of his supernatural moral and religious life, i.e. the attainment of perfection in becoming more and more like Christ, and thus arriving at the reflection of the perfection of the Father in heaven, according to the command given us in the Sermon on the Mount. Yet, in actual fact, our reflections will be confined to the ‘problematic nature’ of this gradual ascent. We are not going to put forward some old or even a new division of the stages of the spiritual road; we intend merely to ask how and where such a division can be found, given that it wants to be able to claim that it corresponds sufficiently to the actual course of the spiritual life so that, conversely, it can also be normative for such a course.

First of all, then, it has to be asked whether there is in fact such a thing as a ‘way’ to Christian perfection. Is there really a gradual ascent to perfection? Or, to put it even more precisely, can one attain holiness as it were bit by bit by a continued, methodically planned effort, in such a way that at the end of this ‘road’ one really ‘possesses’ it – analogously to the way in which one gradually becomes rich by continued work and [4] ever new material gains – till eventually there remains at most the task of making sure that one does not lose this wealth again? This is no doubt more or less explicitly and consciously the kind of dominant conception normally had when one speaks in the usual sense of the way to Christian holiness. Of course, we do not mean to question even theoretically that there is a grain of truth in such a conception, that somehow it also sees and means something quite correct. Yet, as will become clear in the course of our reflections on this matter from the most varying viewpoints, this conception is not as self-evident and free of problems as would allow us to use it without difficulty and danger as the basic conceptual framework for the real question (not treated here), viz. the question as to how and in what ways the Christian becomes holy. The critique of this basic framework – which thus becomes the real subject of our reflections – may perhaps prove to be more than just a superfluous subtlety but rather a way of coming to closer grips, in one respect or another, with the question of what exactly Christian perfection consists in and what are the real ‘steps’ and ‘ways’ by which it is to be attained.

Is there in any sense a ‘way’, a stage-by-stage step-like ascent to holiness? This, and this alone, is the simple and yet difficult question we have posed ourselves here. It has already been said that we do not really mean to dispute or question the statement that there is growth in Christian piety or that there is an increase, a slow and gradual attainment of Christian perfection. Yet it will do no harm to make sure for ourselves from the positive sources of theology of the correctness of this statement in some sense or other, since a glance at these sources may serve to lead us into the whole problematic nature of this statement.

Scripture undoubtedly knows of a conversion, a *metanoia* (Mt. 3:2; Mk 1:15; Lk 5:32,

etc.), the decision to follow Christ, the yes to his call to become his disciple, the basic will to fulfil the conditions laid down by Christ for the one who asks how one can become perfect, the *pistis* or whatever other name may be given in the New Testament to that decisive experience of return and of being born again. Yet in all this the New Testament patently presupposes that this decisive act of conversion is not something absolutely final, that the life which follows this act is not simply a merely uniform and unchanging activation of this basic attitude adopted once and for all, but that this attitude also grows and matures, advances and increases. For the New Testament recognizes that there are GREEK (1 Co 3:1; Eph 4:14; Heb 5:12,13) who at first cannot [5] stomach anything but milk and cannot yet stand solid food, and – in contrast to these immature beginners – the *teleioi* (1 Co 2:6; 14:20; Ph 3:15; Col 4:12; Heb 5:14), who are in the fullest sense *pneumatikoi* (1 Co 2:13,15; 3:1; 14:37; Ga 6:1) and who also possess *gnosis*. St Paul speaks of a growth in knowledge and in Christian life in general (2 Co 10:15, Eph 4:15; Col 1:10, 1 P 2:2; 2 P 3:18), of an ‘attaining of the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph 4:13); he is aware of a striving for gifts of grace which are not of the same importance and perfection, of ways of the Christian life of varying perfection (1 Co 12-14). Ideas like building, with materials of varying value, on the foundations of faith, the concept of differences in merit, of the distinction between works of absolute duty and acts of voluntary charity, etc., all presuppose equally that the life of the man endowed with *pneuma* is capable of growth and progress.

If we now take a closer look at these hints given by Scripture, two things will no doubt strike us in particular. Firstly, these scriptural indications remain characteristic of the whole history of the doctrine of the different steps in the spiritual life, although they are really anything but self-evident: for one thing, this doctrine of growth and progress does not in any way go beyond generalities even in the New Testament. Looked at as a whole, nothing more is really stated than the fact that there is such a growth and maturing process, and the command that the Christian must become more perfect in this way. There is a complete absence of any more exact definition of the stages of this ascent; no attempt whatsoever is made to give any real description of the characteristic properties of the individual stages or to arrange them one after the other in any determined order of sequence. Secondly, what also strikes us particularly is the fact that in St Paul this ascent, if we may put it this way, is orientated – even though not exclusively, yet at least predominantly – towards a ‘gnostic’ goal: the perfect man differs from the less perfect by his greater *sophia* and *gnosis*. This is noticeable both in the first Epistle to the Corinthians and in the Epistle to the Hebrews. True, with all its ‘gnosis’ colouring, the schema of spiritual ascent presented there undoubtedly does not envisage something merely rational and intellectualistic; the higher knowledge is a gift effected by the Holy Spirit. It is equally important to observe in this connection that it is precisely in the first Epistle to the Corinthians that love appears as ultimately the decisive factor and the only valid criterion for the ascent of the Christian in the mind of St [6] Paul. It is equally important to notice that the ‘gnosis’ colouring of the schema of ascent is imposed on the Apostle by the actual current of thought in this congregation for whom *gnosis* was the sought-after goal, independently of the mind of St Paul, so that this orientation of the way of perfection towards a more or less mystic *gnosis* must not be simply taken as the most central point for St Paul himself. Yet it nevertheless remains true to say that the directly tangible elements in St Paul point very strongly towards conceiving the way of ascent to perfection as an ascent to ever greater knowledge and experience of the secrets of God.

As already mentioned above, these two characteristics of what can be explicitly grasped in the New Testament concerning our question has also to a greater or lesser extent remained characteristic in the history of ascetics and mysticism. It naturally cannot be the intention of a short essay like ours to give a detailed account of the history of this theory concerning the divisions and steps of the spiritual life. We will merely draw attention to a few unconnected

facts as an illustration of the sort of thing already observed in the Scriptures and this as a preparation for the objective problems which we will discover in the theory of the steps of the spiritual life.

In the history of this doctrine, too, there is to be found the same twofold characteristic: either the steps of the spiritual life are orientated towards and aimed at a mystical ideal of knowledge, or this doctrine never really gets beyond certain very formal divisions. The first time such a doctrine of the way of the Christian life was attempted in the patristic writings, viz. by Clement of Alexandria,¹ the goal of this ascent is the gnostic (once more in direct contrast to the ideals of the heretical gnosticism of the second and third centuries, an antitype meant to combat these ideals and to overcome them, and one which for this very reason has taken over the ultimate viewpoints of the whole conception from the opponents against whom it has to fight). The gnostic is the perfect man. This gnostic to whom Clement ascribes something bordering on a kind of omniscience, which can be conceived only with great difficulty as in any way reconcilable with the obscurity of faith, is distinguished in an almost extreme way from the simple believer. Virtue appears here almost as a mere presupposition and radiation of *gnosis*, and *gnosis* is *the* desired end to such an extent that the gnostic would prefer *gnosis* to salvation if, [7] *per absurdum*, he had to choose between the two. The ‘way of works’ (which later on came to be called the *vita activa*) is the necessary presupposition for the ‘way of *gnosis*’ (which later on came to be called the *vita contemplativa*), and really nothing more. In Origen² and even more clearly, unequivocally and rigidly in the Origenism of Evagrius Ponticus,³ we then encounter the completion of this basic scheme of Christian life aimed at *gnosis*, a scheme which leans heavily on the ancient divisions of science and the first signs of which were already present in Clement: the spiritual life runs its course in two great stages, viz. practice and *gnosis*. The life of virtue as found in practical life is seen more or less clearly as a preparation for and as a ‘gateway’ to mystical contemplation. It is really conceived merely as the psychological training ground for *gnosis* (a training naturally based anthropologically on a metaphysics and theology), as a schooling for *apatheia*, as the process of divesting oneself of all passion, as a simplification and concentration of man until he comes to the point where he can contemplate God almost in an experience of identification of the *Nous* (freed from images and modes) with the divine Proto-monad which is the substantial *Gnosis* itself. Even love in this conception is at most the climax of the *praktiké* (almost reduced to another word for *apatheia*) but not really the summit of the *whole* spiritual life.

There is no need to go into the details of the division of the gnostic part of the way. Even the often subtle division of the *praktiké* is ultimately merely a division according to a more or less logical scheme of virtues, without giving the impression that this division provides a real reflection of a psychologically genetic sequence in the development of the spiritual man. In as far as it is possible to discover any theory of the steps of the spiritual life in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa,⁴ it is again merely [8] a question really of the steps of the mystical ascent:

¹ Cf. Viller-Rahner, *Ascese und Mystik in der Väterzeit* (Freiburg 1939), pp. 63-71, 75 *sqq.* Also on this: W. Völker.

² Cf. Viller-Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 76 *sqq.*

³ Cf. Viller-Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 *sqq.* Beyond this and very much deeper and more accurate: H. U. v. Balthasar, ‘Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Ponticus’, *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik* XIV (1939), pp. 31-47; and by the same author: ‘Die Hiera des Evagrius’, *ZKT* LXIII (1939), pp. 86106; 181-206. Here, pp. 95 *sqq.*, the ancient schemata of the sciences, which are at the root of these divisions.

⁴ Cf. Viller-Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-145. The literature mentioned here should be compared with: A. Lieske, ‘Zur Theologie der Christus-Mystik Gregors von Nyssa’, *Scholastik* XIV (1939), pp. 485-514; H. U. v. Balthasar, ‘La philosophie religieuse de S. Grégoire de Nysse’, *RSR* XXIX (1939), pp. 513-549, and by the same author: *Gregor von Nyssa, Der versiegelte Quell. Auslegung des Hohen Liedes* (Salzburg 1939); and *Présence et Pensée, Etude sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris 1943). Furthermore: H. C.

the vision of God in the mirror of the clear soul, direct experience of God in the obscurity of boundless yearning. When after that there appears for the first time a scheme in the Pseudo-Denis⁵ which competes with the scheme of Evagrius, the anonymous universal master of Graeco-Byzantine mysticism, the three ways which he teaches are the *via purgativa*, *illuminativa* and *unitiva* (*catharsis*, *photismos*, *teleiosis-henosis*; the term ‘way’ is not yet used by him). Yet even here – in spite of the essential difference between the mysticism of Evagrius and the Areopagite – the spiritual life in its growth is orientated just as clearly as before towards mystical *gnosis*. Any stages of the spiritual life which can really be distinguished in the concrete are found here also at most in so far as it is a question of growth in the mystical experience of God. The neo-platonic St Augustine⁶ may be very far from a scholastic systematization such as is found in Evagrius and in the Areopagite: yet when he describes man’s ascent to perfection, then he too uses as his basic scheme the neo-platonic ascent of the spirit proceeding from the manifold variety of the world to the luminous and yet unutterable transcendence of God. Or – foreshadowing another scheme which was then more fully developed during the Middle Ages – he looks at love, tries to describe its course of development, and then (in so far as there is any real systematization) he does not really get any further than making a purely formal division: initial, progressing, great and then perfect love, or love born, nourished, strengthened, and finally perfected. The treatment given by Gregory the Great,⁷ the disciple of the even greater Augustine, is not much different.

During the Middle Ages,⁸ a different division came into vogue, a division which no longer had this mystical orientation: *incipientes*, *proficientes*, *perfecti* (St Thomas, II-II, q.24 a.9; q.183 a.4). From the thirteenth century onwards, this threefold division of steps came then to be treated as running parallel to the threefold division of the Areopagite scheme. This is already clear in St Bonaventure.⁹ This procedure can either mean that the *perfecti* are understood to be the mystics (viz. when the Areopagite [9] scheme predominates) or – when the other scheme predominates – that even the *via unitiva* is no longer taken in a truly mystical sense but becomes more an expression used to designate a high degree of union with God through grace and love. In 1687, Innocent XI safeguarded the Areopagite division against the Quietist Molinos (*Denz.* 1246). Since then frequent attempts have been made to deduce from this that the identification of these two divisions was thereby given ecclesiastical sanction. Yet as is stressed by Hertling,¹⁰ for instance, no positive teaching can be drawn from this purely negative rebuttal of a vulgar attack by Quietism against the three ways of the Areopagite scheme (‘. . . *absurdum maximum, quod dictum fuerit in mystica* . . .’). The Church’s intention in this was merely to protect traditional ascetics against the temerarious attacks of the Quietists, without wishing thereby to teach positively that, for instance, the ‘beginner’ must necessarily be in the purgative way. Thus, as Hertling states explicitly, it is possible to maintain without fear of ecclesiastical censure that the parallelism between these two divisions is artificial in so far as it does not always correspond to experience.

We have traditionally, therefore, two different and separate divisions or stages. Of these, one is problematical because it takes it in varying degrees too much for granted that the goal of the spiritual life consists in a mystic state of union with God and because it moreover

Puech, ‘La ténèbre mystique chez Gregoire de Nysse’, *Etudes Carmélitaines* XXIII 11(1938), pp. 49-52.

⁵ Cf. Viller-Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 234 *sq.*

⁶ Cf. Viller-Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 255 *sqq.*

⁷ Cf. Viller-Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 270 *sqq.*

⁸ Cf. for what follows: O. Zimmermann, *Lehrbuch der Aszetik* (Freiburg 1929), pp. 66 *sqq.*

⁹ Cf. Zimmermann, *loc. cit.*, p. 67, who refers to St Bonaventure, *De triplici via*. Differently Hertling, *Lehrbuch der aszetischen Theologie* (Innsbruck 1930), p. 148.

¹⁰ L. v. Herding, *Theologiae asceticae cursus brevior* (Rome 1939), pp. 100 and 208. In his *Lehrbuch de aszetischen Theologie*, pp. 146 *sqq.*, Herding had still defended a somewhat different opinion.

considers this mystical state to be predominantly (at least fundamentally) a higher *knowledge*. The other division is no less problematical, for it really means precious little due to the fact of its being so formal and hence empty.

Of course, this is not meant to say that the division into ‘beginners’, ‘those who have progressed’ and ‘the perfect’ remains in this empty, formal state in ascetic literature. On the contrary, great efforts have been made to give these formal concepts a material content. We will have to say more about this in a moment when we come to the objectively problematical nature of our question.

The Spanish mysticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – especially in St Teresa of Jesus and St John of the Cross – provides us with extraordinarily subtle and psychologically acute divisions, of great importance for mystical theology. Yet these divisions are really relevant only for the stages within the mystic way; they are a series of steps [10] within infused contemplation. The ‘beginner’, as he appears in St John of the Cross, is the person who psychologically and in the sphere of grace stands at the threshold of infused contemplation. This division, therefore, does not concern us directly in the present context.

It is, of course, obvious and requires only to be mentioned in passing that other divisions have also been given in the history of ascetics. Thus, there is often mention (among others, in St Bonaventure) of a threefold (or fourfold) supernatural *habitus*: the infused virtues, the infused gifts of the Holy Ghost, the beatitudes also conceived as a *habitus* (and the fruits of the Holy Ghost). Following on this, the different activations of these three different and higher or lower groups of ‘habits’ gave rise to a particular arrangement of the steps of the spiritual life.¹¹ Yet such divisions were far too much the product of a formal-logical systematization of separate traditional data to be able to count on surviving for any length of time.

Hence, these rather primitive indications concerning the history of the doctrine about the steps of the spiritual life really leave us with the following simple facts. There is first of all the fact that in some sense or other, and in some form or other, there must be something like a way to Christian perfection, a way which is formed by or divisible into different stages; for unless this be presupposed, the continual and always renewed attempt to define these stages in greater detail – as found in the whole history of the Christian religion – becomes absolutely incomprehensible and absurd. The other provisional conclusion is the fact that these concrete attempts to give a more exact description of these ways have not turned out to be particularly convincing. This will become even clearer when we now turn directly to the objective problems involved.

We again start with the almost instinctive, unreflected conviction that the Christian ought to *become* holy, that he in some way or other becomes this slowly, that he can become ever *more perfect*, that he is capable of growing in holiness and love of God, and that he moves himself towards a definite goal in his religion and moral life, a goal which is not a simple question of a goal not attained or not yet attained, but a goal towards which he really moves by approaching nearer and nearer to it. Yet as soon as we ask what this means more exactly, then our difficulties really [11] start. One could, of course, make the question simpler for oneself to begin with by trying to give more precision to this doctrine in the light of dogmatic teaching on the increase of sanctifying grace. The supernatural holiness of a man, one might say, is measured by the degree of sanctifying grace possessed by him. This grace can increase. It grows, in fact, by every supernaturally good work done in the state of grace and by every fruitful reception of a sacrament. One could furthermore draw the nowadays more

¹¹ A relic of this is still contained even today in the usual doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Ghost, which conceives them as *habitus* to particularly perfect or even mystic acts.

or less common – although not dogmatically defined – teaching according to which even the sinner who returns to the state of grace is thereby also given back that degree of sanctifying grace which he possessed before his loss of grace.¹² In addition, one could also take into consideration the equally common view in contemporary dogmatic theology, according to which the measure of sanctifying grace cannot really be diminished by venial sins, etc. One could then draw the conclusion from these presuppositions that the stage-by-stage process of becoming holy and perfect is nothing other than the continual increase in sanctifying grace which occurs inevitably (if we may put it this way) in the life of every Christian and which in reality is only differentiated in each individual Christian according to the *'tempo'* and intensity of this growth.

Yet, even abstracting from the really shattering problems inherent in such a quantitative, impersonal conception of grace, such an explanation of growth in perfection would not really be to the point for what is meant *here*, even though obviously there is also the question as to what relationship there is between this growth in 'ontic' sanctity and the growth in 'moral' sanctity referred to here. The reason for the fact that what is meant by our question is not covered by the conception just outlined, is that, in the matter occupying us here, it is obviously a question of moral sanctity and perfection in the realm of what can be personally experienced. According to what was said above about grace, there ought to be a very significant increase in grace in the course of a long Christian life. Yet we will not say of every aged Christian on his death-bed that he has become holy or that he has really covered¹³ a great part of the way with which we are dealing here, and this in the realm of what we can experience, i.e. in a [12] 'pheno-typical' manner. Again, all this shows an at least apparent discrepancy between ontic and moral holiness at the end of a long life. This discrepancy is a real problem, for ultimately one surely cannot suppose such a discrepancy to be real, even on the supposition that man must still 'morally' catch up on his holiness in Purgatory (a holiness which endows him with his measure of grace) before he can enter into the enjoyment of the degree of beatitude given with this determined ontic holiness.

Let us illustrate this question once more as plastically as possible: an ideal seminarian or novice who makes the highest demands on himself develops in the course of his life into a very imperfect, embittered and loveless old parish priest or Religious, very much concerned with money matters and material enjoyment. He seems, therefore, to have become considerably 'less perfect'. We will suppose, however, that he has not lost sanctifying grace; this grace, therefore, must inevitably have greatly increased during the course of his life. From the point of view of grace, therefore, he seems to have become more holy. How are these two conclusions to be reconciled? It is not our intention to go into the solution of this question to any great length. But the solution is no doubt to be found in the fact that in a more personalistic and hence more correct conception of grace, the degree of increase of grace in our example must not be overrated, in spite of the many 'good works' and the frequency of the reception of the sacraments which must be assumed in such a life. On the other hand, a more careful examination will show that there is moral progress even in such a life. For even such an 'imperfect' old parish priest or Religious – by successfully passing the test of the situations of his life (a test not yet imposed on the young seminarian or novice), and passing it without losing grace – has reached a moral maturity which the young man, in spite of his idealism, did not and could not yet possess, even though this moral maturity is not as great as it might have been in such a life in the nature of things and which, therefore, appears as imperfection when measured by the standard of what the old man ought to be. But let us

¹² Cf. further on in the present volume the essay entitled 'The comfort of time', pp. 141-157.

¹³ Under quite a different aspect, this question is taken up once more in the essay: 'The comfort of time,' cf. pp. 141-157.

leave this particular problem for the moment and start at another point.

One might try – and this is the usual approach in modern ascetic literature – to identify the different stages of the spiritual life with the grades of moral significance, dignity and perfection of the individual classes of moral acts. One starts from the assuredly not incorrect assumption that the particular classes of moral acts are of different value, ‘meritoriousness’ [13] and thus also of different ‘perfection’. Avoidance of mortal sin as such will be achieved by acts (at least so one might think) which morally speaking are of little value, which (put in another way) realize a lesser degree of love of God than the acts and attitudes by which and out of which man also avoids venial sins as far as possible. The latter acts could again be thought to be surpassed in their turn by acts and attitudes by which man does what is only counselled: the free, more perfect acts – in short, works of supererogation. Presupposing all this, such and similar divisions of acts are then allocated in one way or another among the three aforementioned formal steps. Thus it might be conceived, for instance, that those in the grade of beginners (frequently identified with the ‘purgative way’) fight against (mortal or even already venial) sin by penance and mortification, and try to eradicate the roots of such sin which are concupiscence and pride; those in the grade of the more advanced try also to fight against venial sins, even the semi-voluntary ones, and seek to avoid imperfections; those in the grade of the perfect habitually carry out the counsels, always choose the more perfect and for love of Christ prefer the Cross, his renunciation and disgrace. According to this scheme, acts of prayer are then also frequently graded and divided among the three ways. Thus, discursive meditation is attributed to the first grade, affective prayer to the second, and the prayer of simplicity, acquired contemplation or in certain circumstances even infused contemplation to the third (*viz.* wherever mysticism proper is seen as a normal stage of development of the spiritual life).

It might seem that with this conception, which we have given merely in very rough outline and in a simplified form, the formal steps have now been given their proper content found lacking above. Yet, even conceding that the step-by-step way of the spiritual life sometimes or perhaps even often unfolds itself in the way indicated in this theory, it will nevertheless be basically undeniable that the identification of the stages of development of the spiritual life with the different objective values of the classes of moral acts is something artificial. To recognize the truth of this, it is necessary to reflect on the following: the stages of the spiritual life make sense (and the sense they are actually intended to make) only if it is presupposed that these steps in the development of the spiritual life are actually *separate from one another*, really follow *one after the other*, and that *those* phases which in this theory come *before* another, can also not be skipped over in practice . . . similarly to the way in which the [14] steps of the biological development of a living being follow one another in proper sequence, each clearly having its proper place in the total curve of life, and each later stage essentially presupposing the previous one. The phases of the spiritual life and the grades of perfection of the classes of moral acts are not the same. If this is kept in mind, then it will be seen to be artificial to apportion definite classes of moral acts according to their objective values to these stages of subjective development. For it is impossible to see, either in theory or in practice, why precisely the higher kind of acts should not be possible on the lower step of the spiritual life, and why an (actually or merely supposedly) lower type of act should no longer have basically that same decisive significance on a higher step of the spiritual life which it had on a lower step. Expressed in concrete terms, we would ask: why, for example, should not the ‘beginner’ in certain circumstances already accomplish the most heroic acts of pure love of God or perform the most outstanding works of supererogation? If he does this, is he still a beginner? If the answer is ‘no’, has he then simply jumped the grade of ‘beginner’, contrary to the laws of organic development, by a sudden heroic leap? If the answer is ‘yes’, why is he then still truly a beginner, when he does in fact practise heroic virtue – supposedly

the characteristic of the grade of the ‘perfect’?

This becomes a very real problem, for instance, in the case of ‘juvenile saints’, which term is not meant to refer to the sentimental figures of a pseudo-hagiography of most recent times, but to young people whose really heroic virtue has been acknowledged by the Church. Have such saints soared up more or less from the very start, and by a heroic flight, to the heights of heroic virtue, without really having first passed through the way of development signified by the steps of the spiritual life, and – presupposing the correctness of the view criticized here – have they thus soared up to the summit of this gradual way? Or have they nevertheless passed through this way of development in a more summary fashion which consequently is historically unverifiable or at least extremely difficult to grasp, so that this gradual passage has to be conceived as something more or less independent of the biological and personal graph of life? Or are they, in spite of their really heroic virtue, still beginners in the proper sense of the doctrine of the steps of the spiritual life, so that ‘perfection’ in the sense of this properly understood doctrine of the steps of the spiritual life cannot be identified with heroic virtue, as is in fact done by the view we are criticizing?

[15] In order to make some progress in solving these deep problems, we will – to begin with – introduce and to some extent explain a concept which seems to be important here, viz. the concept of ‘situation’. If there are steps in the spiritual life, each of them really distinct from the other and having its own peculiar structure – and if each of them may either be missed altogether, or may be passed either badly, well or even heroically – then these steps must differ from each other by something which is prior to the moral quality with which they are lived . . . and this precisely is what we would call ‘situation’. Life, it seems to us, is made up of a series of situations (in the main, dependent on one another up to a certain point), a series of tasks, each of which is different from the other with its own particular place in the course of life as a whole, each of them bringing with them a certain characteristic and ideal recipe as to how they ought to be mastered, and each of them being mastered in this or that way or not being fulfilled at all.

The factors which in each particular case determine the individual situations of life would seem to be the following: firstly, the vital situation together with everything belonging to it (a man’s biological constitution, his particular biological phase of development: youth, maturity, senescence, illness and death); secondly, the external circumstances not completely under the control of the free decision of man, circumstances formed by the biological and historical environment of man (among which we may also include here God’s sovereign intervention by grace, etc.); thirdly, earlier situations preceding the present one which are obviously also constitutive of the present situation, since in the case of each event every situation is somehow – and especially in the realm of the spiritual, personal reality – co-determined by what went before. In our case, this is not merely valid with regard to the *manner* in which the test of the preceding situation had been passed in the moral sense, but also with regard to the simple fact that the person has already lived previously in this or that determined situation. Someone, for instance, who has already experienced a great love, an extreme danger of death, etc., is a different person in any succeeding situation; by this very fact, the concrete situation too has itself become different from what it would have been if these preceding situations had not occurred, even prescindingly from *the way in which* the person has passed through these preceding situations. Since, therefore, the preceding situations certainly always codetermine the next situation, the way in which this situation is to be [16] encountered – what is demanded of the person in this situation – is also co-determined by them. Thus, for instance (to go on immediately to the practical conclusion) someone who starts the spiritual life as a ‘beginner’ in old age, i.e. someone who decides to meet his situations in as perfect a way as possible, begins at quite a different point; his beginning is quite a different one from what it would be if he were to begin to be a ‘beginner’

in the spiritual life in his youth. He will at once and at the very beginning have to survive a situation at which the youthful beginner arrives only very much later on in his life.

If it were now to be possible – while taking into consideration the just-mentioned situational elements – to grasp and describe one or several typical ways in which these series of situations run their course in man's life, and if it were now possible to attribute the corresponding moral duties to each of the phases of such a series of situations, then we would have found the sequence or sequences of steps of the spiritual life for which we are looking. The simplest thing in all this – although even this has not yet been achieved sufficiently in ascetic literature – would be a differential psychology of the different age groups. Yet even this would have to be more than a merely biologically orientated differential psychology and would have to do more than just inquire into the reflex of the biological curve of life in the psychical life of man; it would have to be orientated also in a spiritual, personal direction, i.e. it would have to inquire whether there is not also a line of development through the different age-periods which, from a spiritual and personal point of view, is genuinely dependent on the difference of each person's experiences.

This differential psychology of age groups would be only one of the elements required for the construction of a typical line (or lines) of development necessary as a neutral substratum for the step-by-step development of the spiritual life. This element would be the easiest to determine because, compared with other elements, it is the most constant and uniform. The other elements (the typical course of external circumstances, the modification of every situation by what has gone before) are subject to much greater variations, even supposing that it is possible to work out types in their case. Thus it is obvious that it would be a very complicated and difficult task to work out a detailed account of such a typical course, a task which naturally cannot be accomplished here.

In order to provide a further clarification, we will look at the problems we have so far indicated from yet another point of view. The usual, [17] commonly accepted conception of the step-by-step development of the spiritual life presupposes that, in passing through this development, man grows in perfection, acquires an ever-increasing treasure of perfection and sanctity, and becomes 'more virtuous'. This conception is often expressed in such a way as to state that a person acquires many virtuous habits: the so-called 'acquired virtues'. This in its turn is explained as meaning that the person acquires a permanent inclination and facility in the further exercise of the particular acts of a virtue by frequent repetition of these acts. In such a conception, therefore, the process of becoming perfect consists in acquiring such virtuous habits. This seems also to explain how one can acquire perfection as a permanent possession: as a possession which one 'has' and which is always at one's disposal. Yet as soon as one asks oneself about how exactly the acquisition of such virtuous habits takes place and what is meant by it, the whole question becomes once more problematical.

There is indeed something like an inclination to and facility for certain ways of acting which has been acquired by the repetition of the corresponding acts. But such a facility and inclination must obviously be explained, at least to begin with, by the psychological laws of association, both in what concerns the intentional objectivity and the emotional reaction to this in such acts. To put it crudely and in general terms: the frequency of performance of a certain act leaves certain traces in the brain; the acquisition of such a habit, at least to begin with, is essentially auto-conditioning. This being presupposed, we should next pose the question, therefore, as to whether such firm associational complexes and trained reactions (no matter how useful they may be) cannot equally well be in themselves extremely harmful, to the extent in which they allow the originally genuine moral acts – which were truly a spontaneous and spiritual reaction to the moral value as such – to become a sub-personal instinctive reaction which no longer attains the proper moral nucleus of the object. The well-known picture of the old ascetic who has become 'hardened' in virtue, can properly be

brought forward as an illustration here: the picture of a person who engages in countless moral ways of acting by force of habit, without seeming to realize these moral values in the truly spiritual and personal or genuine and original way which was originally intended in such behaviours.

Even in view of this question alone it again becomes to a certain extent a problem to know whether the possession of such acquired virtues is [18] really possession of something already genuinely and originally moral in itself. This is not of course meant to dispute the fact that it is useful and indeed necessary to acquire such 'virtues'. Yet surely their primary meaning is that this self-training, which allows moral acts to become instinctive reactions, takes pressure off the spiritual personal life of man, so that he becomes free to occupy himself with other, more important moral tasks and efforts; it does not mean, however, that these 'acquired virtues' by themselves give man a greater perfection in the moral field as such. Regarded from this point of view, therefore, the acquiring of 'acquired virtues' would not really mean the acquiring of perfection itself but rather the acquiring of the *possibility* of greater perfection. It would still remain to be seen, therefore, whether a person actually makes full use of this possibility or whether he considers himself to be dispensed from such a utilization on account of these acquired virtues themselves.

The possession of such an acquired virtue as the goal of the gradual approach to sanctity is of a problematic nature from yet another point of view. If this acquired virtue consists at least to begin with (i.e. understood empirically) in such associational traces, then it can also be influenced, increased and decreased by causes lying outside the sphere of properly moral decisions. Something, for example, which is acquired in the form of a habit in this direction by repeated moral conduct in the sexual sphere can in certain circumstances be attained also – as far as its empirically tangible effect is concerned – by bromides. Or, acquired virtues – as far as their empirical effect is concerned (and this after all is the thing under discussion when it is a question of the facility and inclination for certain ways of acting) – are lost again by a *marasmus senilis*.

It can, of course, be objected (and to a certain extent, rightly) that behind this acquired virtue of the empirical ego – a virtue influenced by non-moral causes – there lies the acquired virtue of the intelligible ego which can be acquired only by moral behaviour and can be destroyed only by moral activity, and not by non-moral and non-personal causes. This may very well be correct.¹⁴ There may indeed be such metempirical [19] virtues which belong to the realm of the spontaneity and intangibility of the noumenal ego. Yet they do not really help us in our question here. For, after all, the usual conception of the step-by-step development of the spiritual life presupposes that there is a kind of growth and enrichment in the realm of the *empirical* ego and its experiences. This is, however, rather obviously dependent on the indicated non-moral causes and circumstances (to which of course belong also heredity, the basic vital and psychical constitution, the '*complexio*' of old people, and everything which influences these things in the course of one's life). This, however, gives rise to the question: can whatever is dependent on non-moral causes be itself called moral, moral perfection, etc.? And if the gradual development of the spiritual life is to lead to the height and richness in really possessed perfection and sanctity, then can this step-by-step ascent be explained as a way to these 'acquired virtues' in the empirical sense of the word? Hence, if we are unsuccessful in explaining in this way the growth in the spiritual life (which

¹⁴ It should be noted in passing that this whole problem was also seen by the medieval metaphysical psychology of the scholastics, when it was asked what the *species intelligibilis* is over and above the *species sensibilis* which is also necessary for the act of intellectual knowledge, and whether it continues to exist by itself and can remain significant for the intellectual life of man even when the *species sensibilis* is destroyed (at least by death). The same problem is envisaged in the question about the existence, extent and significance of a *memoria intellectiva* side by side with the *memoria sensitiva*.

is presupposed for the construction of a gradual ascent), must we then drop the idea of a growth in holiness as something inconceivable? Must we fall back again on the doctrine of the growth in *grace* in man, or must we construct the concept of a gradual development in the spiritual life exclusively on the typical chain of situations referred to above, to the exclusion of the concept of an ever-*increasing* possession of holiness, or is there still a third way out?

The question thus posed could also be formulated as follows: can a moral act increase in intensity? Is this possible in the sense that the greater intensity of an act depends on the fact of there having been certain preceding acts, without this in its turn having to be interpreted according to the conception of ‘acquired virtues’, a conception which we have just rejected as being insufficient? If we formulate the question in this way, we do not fall back into that interpretation of the gradual spiritual ascent already dropped as unworkable earlier on, which assigns the various classes of acts of objectively lower or higher levels to the different stages of the spiritual life. We are immediately a long way from the conception which sees things as if, for example, the beginner just manages to avoid mortal sin, whereas the perfect man fulfils the non-commanded Counsels, etc. We ask rather (to remain as close to our example as possible and to express it in this concrete form), whether the [20] perfect man performs the *same* moral act differently from the way the beginner performs it, really meaning by this not merely the same act in respect of the externally tangible performance but the same act also with regard to its formal moral object towards which a position is adopted. Thus, we are asking, for instance, whether the beginner’s act of pure, selfless love of God is different from that of the perfect man? We are not thinking here of a specific difference determined by those factors which distinguish the ‘beginner’ and the ‘perfect’ in accordance with the interpretation of the acquired virtues discussed above. If we may answer the thus understood question in the affirmative, then one could go on to ask about a law of stages according to which the increase in intensity of such acts takes place. Once this law has been discovered and has been combined with the previously postulated, typical scheme of sequence of situations, then this combination would at last give us the looked-for scheme of the way to perfection, which describes the *difference* of the single stages of the spiritual life in the chain of situations and which explains by the law of the increase of intensity how this spiritual way leads to ever greater *heights*.

The first question is, therefore, the following: can one and the same moral act – an act which is really the same in its objective intentional structure which is orientated towards a moral object as such – be of a different intensity subjectively? On the whole and going on their everyday experience, everyone would naturally answer this question in the affirmative. Yet it is of decisive importance to see *how* this difference in intensity is explained more in detail. For, wherever it is seen or experienced more or less explicitly as a difference in the ease with which the course of associations takes place – in what in the usual terminology of ascetics is called ‘sensible’ consolations or something similar – such a difference of degree would come to the same thing as the difference which we have just rejected as insufficient for explaining the possibility of growth. In actual fact we must distinguish between two quite different kinds of intensity in an act: an act or an experience can, for instance, be experienced as something very absorbing, something which occupies the whole of our consciousness, and yet at the same time it may be experienced as something very much on the surface compared with the central core of the person. Violent toothache is indeed experienced as a quite peripheral act which does not affect the core of the person, and yet it may greatly absorb the attention on this peripheral level. Hence we must distinguish [21] two quite different dimensions of intensity in the case of a human act: one of these is the measure of the greater or lesser personal depth of an act, while the other measures the intensity and density of the act on a particular personal level. The first of these dimensions – the dimension of the existential depth of an act – must not, of course, be mixed up with the objective dignity of a certain class

of acts. An act of selfless love of God is always of the highest objective dignity. But it is quite a different question when we come to determine the existential depth in which the act is actually performed in a concrete case. It is also obvious (without our wishing to enter into this here) that there are very important and complicated connections between the two dimensions mentioned in the first place, however carefully they must be distinguished from each other. We also cannot enter into a discussion of the fact that there is a stratification of experiences even in the pre-personal sphere of man.

This beginning which we have perhaps made by pointing out this distinction, also already marks the point at which we must stop. There would now arise the question as to how this existential depth of an act can grow; whether, and how, man slowly gains the chance in the course of his natural and moral life to increase the radical existential depth of his actions; whether and how he manages to bring himself into play in *one* act and this with the *whole* reality of his spiritual and personal being, whether he manages to fulfil his own being right down to its deepest depths in one free decision, and what are the causes and conditions making it possible for him to do this. Only when this question has been clarified, would it be possible to describe the typical course of growth in a person's capacity to commit himself existentially. Only then would we be in a position to combine the typical chain of the situations of human life with this typical course of growth in man's capacity to commit himself existentially. Only then could we bring out the (certainly real) interdependence of these two series and thus arrive at the desired goal, viz. the understanding of the typical course of the spiritual life in its continual development into different and higher forms.

Nevertheless, our discussions have helped us to reach a jumping-off point and one which encourages us to take another look at our subject from a completely different point of view. There is evidently a development of man's capacity for an ever more total self-commitment by ever deeper personal acts. The impossibility of being able to commit oneself totally at every moment – the impossibility of a totally making-of-oneself [22] in every moment what one wants to be – is, however, nothing more than what is called concupiscence in the strictly theological sense of the world¹⁵ (in contrast to the usual moral interpretation of this term). Hence, growth in this possibility is nothing other than growth in overcoming concupiscence. Thus our reflections lead us once more to the sporadic attempts¹⁶ made in the history of Christian spirituality – attempts which have, however, never really been carried to a proper conclusion – to build up the step-by-step development of the spiritual life in a strictly theological manner. Such attempts are at work wherever the goal of spiritual development is seen to consist in a 'return to paradise' or in the attaining of a condition similar to that of the angels, and what has been said at least points to the kernel of truth in such a conception.

A further conceivable construction from theological materials in the narrower sense would be that of becoming more and more like Christ, of coming to act in accordance with the inner laws of his life. But such a conception leads immediately to the question as to what is the inner structure of Christ's life and what is, if we may put it that way, the developmental formula of that life. Thus, this attempt too faces us with a task which cannot be undertaken here.

Before concluding, we would like to refer explicitly once more to a question which we seem to have treated as of little importance until now. We refer to that conception of the gradual development of the spiritual life which orientates this development towards *mystical* experience and which, even in its pre-mystical stages, constructs this way in reference to this.

¹⁵ Cf. K. Rahner, 'Zum theologischen Begriff der Konkupiszenz', *ZKT* LXV (1941), pp. 61-80, reprinted and enlarged in *Theological Investigations* I (London & Baltimore 1960), pp. 347-382.

¹⁶ Cf. A. Stolz, *Theologie der Mystik* (Salzburg) and by the same author: 'Das Mönchsideal der morgendländischen Kirche' in: *Ein Leib ein Geist. Einblicke in die Welt des christlichen Ostens* (published by the Abbey Gerleve, Münster), pp. 69-83.

We have left this conception to one side from the outset, as being an explanation which would lead us away from our real question and task. This procedure was indeed justified. For, seen from an empirical point of view, the spiritual life of the great majority of Christians does not end up in mysticism (at least if we take mysticism in the sense in which it was understood by the classical Spanish mystics) and, in general, the view adopted by the New Testament about the way and goal of the spiritual life (e.g. in the Sermon on the Mount) does not at least give explicit expression to such an orientation towards mysticism. [23] Yet all this was not meant to dispute the fact that even such a mystically orientated construction of the steps of the spiritual life contains a kernel of truth. Let us suppose that the notion of mysticism were to be purified of ideas which originated more from a neo-platonic spirituality than from a Christian one and which still find strong echoes in the concept of mysticism even today. Suppose furthermore that the immense intensification of the existential depth of acts of which man is capable, were to be sufficiently recognized, an intensification which is directed towards something which one could in fact call mystical experience. Suppose finally that all the lessons of psychical training contained in the usual mystical doctrine were then utilized in this direction. Under these presuppositions the greater part of what is contained in the mystically orientated theory of steps could no doubt be taken up and introduced at the right place into that doctrine of the gradual spiritual way which we have had in mind here without being able to work it Out completely.

Finally, it should be pointed out very briefly that what we have called the law of the existential deepening of acts corresponds to what the general history of religion calls the mystical factor in religion, and that what we have called the chain of situations comes to the same thing ultimately as what in the general history of religion is called the historico-eschatological factor. Thus, the defects which we have discovered in the theories of the gradual course of the spiritual life current up until now could also be formulated in the sense that in this gradual course the historico-eschatological element has been forgotten more or less completely, and that the mystical factor (the only governing factor in these theories) has been conceived in a too intellectualistic manner. In the ultimate analysis both these defects are
connected.