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PROTESTANT MYSTICISM AND PIETY

reformation to today.

although the spirit of protestanism was brewing in the years of the 14th and 15th centuries there was no overt break with the Roman Catholic church in either its institutional or sacramental aspects.

many events preceding Luther's radical break with Rome led to the Reformation. the manifest abuses in the Roman church including the sale of indulgences to gather funds to build St. Peter's was only the most glaring symbol.

evidences of moral decadence in the Church, rigid institutional control over the laity and the ignorance in which the latter were being kept. political and economic reasons were much interwoven as well.

the strongly humanistic note of the Renaissance stressed the importance of the individual person

the mood and setting shifts from a largely monastic, or at least intra-church, background to the Christian within the world.

it must be pointed out, however, that the protestant reformation was born with an anti-mystical bent from the beginning.

this is because of the Anabaptist movement. This is a general name covering several groups which arose in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries.

they were united by the practice of believers baptism and there was a strong mystical, pentacostal, strain in the movement. these people believed that those who listen to the Holy Spirit will experience mystical union.

there were uprisings taking place almost every decade, all of them more or less impregnated with crude religious beliefs because this was a movement basically of the common people.

they were part of the intellectual and moral atmosphere of the common person, whether town or country.

the reformation quickened and strengthened these influences simply because it set all things in motion.

the anabaptists were very individualistic and there were many groups all with their own views about what was right, including ideas of the end of the world.

at any rate, most moderate thinkers of the protestant reformation, including Luther and Calvin, rejected these views and gave the protestant thought a bias against mysticism from early in its inception and it is still there today.

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JACOB BOEHME (1575-1624)

son of a wealthy farmer, he became a shoemaker. at the age of 25 he had a mystical experience that influenced him the rest of his life.

in his first book Aurora he spoke of the experience as a resurrection from the dead! He experienced several of these 'illuminations' one of which was ~~xxx~~ stimulated by the simple sight of light playing on the surface of a pewter dish. The effect on him was often to make him write "like a downpour".

he wrote some 30 books and pamphlets before his death, even though the Lutheran pastor forbade him to write after his first book.

he has been called 'by far the greatest and most original of protestant mystics. his thought was rooted in his own deep piety, his devotion to the Lutheran church to which he remained faithful all his life and the Bible.

he was well versed in astronomy and in the writings of the alchemist Paracelsus and in the ideas and symbolism of alchemy and the Kabbalah, as well as from Meister Eckhart which stressed the need for faith in God and surrender to God.

Boehme believed, like most astronomers, till Kepler, that God dwelt in a remote place beyond the stars. this produced melancholy and he resolved to 'wrestle with the love and the mercy of God as Jacob in the Bible had

wrestled with the angel of God. the result of this spiritual wrestling was the ~~xx~~ experience of breaking thru 'the gates of hell, even into the innermost birth and ~~nature~~ ^{habitation} of the deity, and there I was embraced with love, as a bridegroom embraceth his dearly beloved bride.'

the problem that most oppressed Boehme was the power of evil in the world and the harsh doctrine of predestination, which appeared to leave no room for human free will.

he coped with this by recognizing the tension of opposites--good and evil, human freedom and the will of God--underlying all existence.

in humans only when they become self-centered is the balance of opposites upset for that cuts one off from God's will. then the forces within a person turn against each other in poisonous and frenzied conflict, and the divine essence 'is sick unto death, unless the will renounces self-centeredness and turns back to God.

he attempted to combine new knowledge about the universe with older cosmological and mystical traditions to understand more fully the world he lived in.

his framework was the belief that man is a miniature copy of the universe and of God.

THE WAY TO CHRIST

written in the last four years of his life, it is a collection of nine treatise on the spiritual life. these 9 treatise were collected and published under this title by his followers. it was intended to serve as a meditational guide and an aid to edification and consolation. it gives the breadth and depth of Boehme's thought in its final form.

Boehme believed that his writing had come from the Spirit and said it was from his ~~own~~ experience, not that of any other mind. it was intended to direct his fellow-believers back to the Spirit as he had been directed.

LUCIFER, ADAM AND CHRIST

God created Adam to replace Lucifer, the archangel who had fallen because he tried to exalt himself against God. But because Adam sinned in eden, he also fell and was expelled from paradise.

but God was merciful and would not allow humans to remain fallen. He provided a way for him to become holy once again. the light of reason (philosophy) and of revelation (prophecy) were provided to guide them.

the light-love was finally and fully revealed in Christ who flowed with His ~~xx~~ light, love and water in all the principles in which man was created, and reestablished the balance.

in the new androgynous Adam (originally Adam was androgynous) Christ humans live again in harmony and in unity with the virgin sophia (wisdom)

"in sophia, wisdom, is revealed what God is in His depth. Wisdom is God's revelation and the Holy Spirit's corporeality; the body of the Holy Trinity" As the revelation of God, Sophia is related to all three persons of the Trinity.

"above all "she is the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. . .she is a mirror of the divinity, for each mirror is silent, and bears no likeness except the likeness it receives."

thus the virgin sophia is a mirror of divinity in which the Spirit of God beholds itself. . .and in Her the Spirit of God saw all the forms of creatures at the same time she is like the eye that sees."

She is the seeing as Holy Spirit, the mirror as Son and the eye as Father.

in her Adam reflected the Trinity in Paradise, but he fell asleep. He slept as one and woke as two. He slept to eternal being and woke to the elemental existence in which he came to know good and evil.

thus, the way to Christ is the way back to Paradise and union with the Virgin Sophia.

CREATION

God is the being of all beings, the Ground, the Abyss, and as the being of all Beings is neither good nor evil but the source of both.

The Ultimate knows itself in the Son and expresses itself in the Spirit. this is the way Boehme reconciles his mystical experience with Christian theology. The Godhead has two wills, love and wrath, one good and one evil.

from the tension between these arise the seven Spirits of Nature: the will to resist, the tendency to expand, the struggle between the two, the passage from inorganic to organic existence, vegetable life, animal life, humans.

We are thus involved in the conflict between good and evil, tho in the end good will triumph over evil, love over wrath.

Boehmes system sometimes seems pantheistic, but he was insistent that it was not: "I do not say that Nature is God. He Himself is all, and ~~communicates~~ communicates His power to all His works."

Boehme has had a powerful influence subsequently, influencing people as various as Isacc Newton, William Law, William Blake. His antithesis affected the dialectical thinking of Hegel, and so by an ironical quirk, Karl Marx.

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GEORGE FOX (1624-1691)

the son of a weaver, Fenny Drayton, was raised in a conventionally moral home but with minimal education, was a 'nobody' from the standpoint of any normal expectations.

yet he turned out to be one of the major religious geniuses of England whose influence is still widely and creatively felt in the Society of Friends, of which he was the founder.

His Journal is is only major piece of writings and is not only a fascinating autobiography but a devotional classic.

at the age of 19 he became greatly disturbed when being asked to drink at a fair by two professing Christians. Their hypocrisy precipitated in him an emotional shock and crisis so he left his family to become a solitary wanderer, seeking light from the scriptures and from "priests and preachers" who failed to give him any help. he puts it in these words:

I saw that there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to heap me, nor could I tell what to do; then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition"; and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. . . and this I know experimentally."

this was the turning point in Fox's life and he began to witness to any who would listen. He recounts various visions, chiefly of his own sinfulness and the Lord's refining fire.

Then in perplexity over the eternal problem of the evil in human hearts including his own, an illumination came to him which is one of the finest passages in the Journal and which explains much of his later power:

I cried to the Lord saying, "Why should I be thus, seeing I was never addicted to commit those evils?" and the Lord answered that it was needful I should have a sense of all conditions, and in this I saw the infinite love of God. I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God; and I had great openings.

Fox continued to have "great openings" and to witness in the power of the Holy Spirit, which he called the "inner light".

he was seldom welcome in the churches of his day but he spoke to small groups, and as they grew, to larger assemblies wherever they came to hear him.

these groups became the nucleus of the Society of Friends, sometimes in disparagement called the "Quakers" because of the great religious felling that was experienced and manifest thru the power of the Spirit.

These groups of Friends , banded together as Christ's followers w/o creed or sacrament and led by the Inner Light, had only a minor amount of visible organization, but powerful convictions.

they renounced war and every form of violence and would not take an oath, in fact it is this that landed Fox in jail many times since he believed that yes or no was sufficient if one told the truth.

they believed in the equality of all persons, women as well as men. They had no officially employed clergymen, each being free to speak, testify, or pray in meeting as the Spirit moved, but some were looked to as leaders and there were women preachers as well as males. In fact Fox married a woman preacher, Margaret Fell.

The sense of human equality led them to refuse to do homage to dignitaries.

they felt called to minister to human suffering wherever it was found, defended the rights of the poor, attempted to reform prisons, demanded justice for the oppressed.

in America, Fox's successor John Woolman was in the forefront of the anti-slavery movement.

the principle opposition to Fox came from the church of England that he called 'popish'. the Anglicans found such an unconventional form of protestanism very distasteful and they were behind much of his time in prison.

this is not to say Fox's character was perfect, for he took satisfaction in the "judgements" on people who persecuted him. Yet more than once he won the love and appreciation of his judges and jailors. On the whole, his life was exemplified by these words of advice he gave his followers.

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.

George Fox Song 5:38

WILLIAM LAW (1686-1761)

he is important for a number of reasons. His book A serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life is worth reading and he had considerable influence on John Wesley, founder of the Methodists.

he had an uneventful life, unlike many others considered. He was, however an independent spirit and a good writer.

born in King's Cliffe in Northhamptonshire, England, as the son of a prosperous merchant, he was a Puritan at heart.

Law's most lasting writings were produced in the 1720's, Christian Perfection in 1726 and A serious Call in 1728.

after writing these books he developed strongly mystical insights, mainly from reading Eckhart, Tauler, and Jacob Boehme. with insights gained here he wrote, in 1740, three more books.

the primary importance of these lies in the permeating sense of the need of a religious revival in what had become the conventional religiosity of England. Many years before Kierkegaard, he was eager to "put Christianity back into Christendom.

Law was very methodical in his prayer life. the devotional pattern which forms the main structure of the Serious Call runs like this:

upon rising EARLY--- Praise, adoration and thanksgiving
 at nine o'clock---Prayer for humility
 at Twelve o'clock---Prayer of universal love and intercession
 at three o'clock---Prayer of resignation and doing the will of God.
 at six o'clock---Prayer of self-examination, confession and repentance
 at bed time---Thoughts upon death and commitment to God

the greater part of the Serious Call consists of reflection upon these themes, with the suggestion of fruitful disciplines and emphasis on the centrality of these elements in the life of the Christian.

Law was a mystic but a practical one, believing that inner communion with God must be accompanied by deeds of service to any in need.

he established a school for girls in his home town, and later with his two associates a similar school for boys and a hospital for widows.

it is said that every day he could be seen distributing the milk from their four cows to the neighbors in need.

he wrote with keen psychological discernment, and with humor. In regard to the life of prayer he wrote:

How ignorant, therefore, are they of the nature of religion, of the nature of man, and the nature of God, who think a life of strict piety and devotion to God to be a dull uncomfortable state; when it is so plain and certain that there is neither comfort nor joy to be found in anything else!

Law and Wesley were friends and had a great deal in common, however after Law became a mystic, and especially after he fell under the spell of Boehme, Wesley could no longer approve his theology and each went his own way. yet there seems to be little question that Law left a permanent stamp on Wesley's thought, and thru him on his spiritual descendants.

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WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

an English poet, painter and visionary, he had visions, even in childhood.

at the age of 4 he saw God looking in thru the window. Five years later in Peckham Rye he saw a "tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars", and a little later angels walking in a harvest scene.

such visions remained with him all his life: he might witness a fairy's funeral, or see heaven in a wild flower, or find himself in the Good Shepherd's arms.

Blake's life follows typical mystical patterns; the innocence of childhood, the experience of adolescence, the new birth of his young manhood, the dark night of the soul, the attainment of his old age.

basic to understanding his mysticism is his doctrine of fourfold vision. single vision is spiritual blindness; it is the uninformed work of the eye;

it is the mechanical, material, Newtonian outlook.

Twofold vision is through the eye, not of the eye. It is the perception of a spiritual reality behind the material. A thistle reveals a frowning odd man, a grain of sand reveals infinity, the rising sun becomes "an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty."

threefold vision is associated with Beulah, Palestine blessed by God, Blake's name for the subconscious as the source of creative art.

fourfold vision he calls "my supreme delight"; it is the mystical ecstasy where God and man, and the whole world become one. But although selfhood must be annihilated, Blake believed in the sacredness, eternity and indestructibility of the individual.

Blake did not practise or advocate the way of negation. He believed in opening the senses, not closing them.

Blake is insistent on the Ultimate being revealed through everything:

to see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

He describes how he challenged the prophet Isaiah with daring to assert that God spoke to him. Isaiah answered: "I saw no God nor heard any in a finite organical perception, but my senses discovered the infinite in everything."

A series of aphorisms includes the propositions 'Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceived. . . therefore God becomes as we are that we may be as he is'.

Blake believed that in the vision that 'God is very man.' he writes:

each grain of sand
Every Stone on the Land,
each rock and each hill,
Each fountain and rill,
Each herb and each tree,

Mountain, hill earth & sea
Cloud, Meteor and star
are men seen afar.

Blake created a vast symbolic system of his own. He speaks of the four Zoas (four mighty ones are in every man"), each associated with a compass-point:

Tharmas (the physical body, the senses, corresponding to the Father)

Luvah (the emotions, especially Love, corresponding to the Son)

Urthona (the creative imagination, corresponding to the Holy Spirit, manifested in time as Los, creative art),

Urizen (reason, corresponding to Satan, the fallen part of the divine substance)

From the interaction of these four Blake builds a vast canvas of the drama of creation which is also the drama of the individual.

Within the individual he speaks correspondingly of Shadow, emanation, humanity and spectre.

In Blake's cosmic drama we must annihilate Selfhood.

one of his most vivid symbols is that of the sunflower, man's spiritual aspiration "weary of time".

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Tiger 3:56

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG (1688-1772)

I need to back up in time a notch to one who influenced Blake to some degree. Swedenborg was a Swedish visionary but unlike Blake, did not begin having visions until the age of 55. Before this time he was a scientist but turned increasingly to the study of the relationship of soul to body.

at 55 he began to see visions, develop clairvoyant faculties and claim the power of communication with 'discarnate souls'.

he asserted that his symbolic interpretation of scripture, The Word Explained, was dictated to him in automatic writing.

he developed a vast pantheistic theosophy which he expounded in the 8 volumes of Arcana Coelestia (1756) and other works, including Heaven and Hell

and the True Christian Religion.

according to him the scriptures must be understood in a spiritual or mystical sense, according to a law of correspondences, by which natural things are in a full and real way united to spiritual things.

The real world comprises three regions: the heavens, the Hells, and the world of spirits. it is in this last, our world, that judgement takes place.

his morality was in advance of his day: all acts were judged by intention. similarly, marriage is an inner, not an external, tie: "It is the life of our love which we live, and that life is of such quality as the love."

God is one in person and essence; there is a trinity of attributes__ Love (the Father), Wisdom (the Son), Energy (the spirit)

this trinity is found in Jesus Christ only, and he for Swedenborg is God; and much of his mysticism centres on him.

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SOME 20th CENTURY PROTESTANT MYSTICS

There have been several mystics this century but I will deal with only three:

FRANK C. LAUBACH (1884-1970)

called "an apostle to the illiterates" no one knows the number of persons who have been taught to read with his method "each one teach one" but it is well over 60 million people in over three hundred languages and dialects in more than one hundred countries of the world.

in 1915 Dr. Laubach and his wife went as missionaries to the Philippines where he taught at Union Theological seminary in Manila.

on the island of Mindanao lived some half million Moslem Moros, a wild and backward people who looked on the Christian Filipinos as their natural enemies.

Dr. Laubach asked to be transferred to this group. He went alone, w/o wife and son because of health considerations and became discouraged as he was not making much headway with the Moros.

then on a memorable night near Lake Lanao he had a mystical experience which changed the tenor of his life.

one aspect was tht he realized that he ~~did~~ not "really love those Moros. he says "In that terrible, wonderful hour on Signal Hill I became colorblind. ever since then I have been partial to tan=the more tan the better.

he came alive with a great love for the Moros.

the other aspect of the experience was his realization that he must try to think of God at every moment, and put his trust and his life completely in the hands of God.

in ensuing months he wrote letters which have been compiled in a small book Letters by a Modern Mystic which talks about his growth in prayer, sometimes joyously advancing, sometimes slipping a bit in one's resolution, but going forward again undaunted.

two months after he had begun his strenuous effort to keep God continually in his thought, he gives this self-analysis which sounds much like the witness of St. Teresa and some of the other great mystics.

This concentration upon God is strenuous, but everything else has ceased to be so. I think more clearly, I forget less frequently, Things which I did with a strain before, I now do easily and with no effort whatever. I worry about nothing, and lose no sleep. I walk on air a good part of the time. Even the mirror reveals a new light in my eyes and face. I no longer feel in a hurry about anything. Everything goes right. Each minute I meet calmly as though it were not important. Nothing can go wrong excepting one thing. That is that God may slip from my mind if I do not keep on my guard. If He is there, the universe is with me. My task is simple and clear."

How does one constantly keep God in mind, he was asked?

he answered: "It is perfectly possible to think of more than one matter at the same time. At this moment I am thinking of God, of you, of what we are talking about, and of what we have to do when I speak to your students this evening."

his book Prayer: the mightiest force in the world, pub. in 1946 has been reprinted numerous times. he discusses the many aspects of prayer and its need in the thermonuclear age, believing it is more powerful still.

TOYOHICO KAGAWA (1888-1960)

an unhappy childhood, tho his father was a prominent person in the Emperors council, he was the son of a concubine and thus held to be of inferior status.

both parents died when he was 4 and he was brought up in loneliness and rejection.

as an adolescent two missionaries came into his life and he learned to know love for the first time. thru them he found Christ, and this brought meaning and purpose to his life.

he made a decision to devote his life to the poor, whereupon his uncle, the head of the family, disinherited him.

he entered the Presbyterian college of Tokyo and later the theological seminary of Kobe in preparation for the Christian ministry.

before he was ordained, he went to live in the Shinkawa slums, where some 20,000 outcasts, paupers, criminals, beggars, prostitutes, and defectives lived like homeless dogs in human kennels of filth, vermin and disease.

he moved into a room about 6 feet square which he shared with one unfortunate person after another, some with communicable diseases.

it was here he contracted trachoma which followed him the rest of his life.

in the slum he washed their infected clothing, taught classes in reading and writing, and even adopted and nursed back to life a starving baby girl..

MYSTICISM

less is known about his life of prayer than of Dr. Laubachs, but for many years in the midst of his labors he spent an hour of each day, often in the middle of the night, in personal communion with God.

in 1901, from a description by him of this communion, clear evidence of his mystical spirit is found in his writing.

two poems from his book Songs of the Slums show his spirit:

"Discovery"

I cannot invent
new things,
like the airships
Which sail
On silvery wings;
But today
A wonderful thought
In the dawn was given,
And the stripes on my robe,
Shining from wear,
Were suddenly fair,
Bright with a light
Falling from Heaven---
Gold, and silver, and bronze
Lights from the windows of Heaven

And the thought
Was this:
That a secret plan
Is hid in my hand;
That my hand is big,
Big,
Because of this plan.

That God,
Who dwells in my hand,
Knows this secret plan
Of the things He will do for the world
Using my hand!

"The Burden"

Take Thou the burden, Lord;
I am exhausted with this heavy load.
My tired hands tremble,
and I stumble, stumble
along the way.
Oh, lead with Thine unfailing arm
again today.

Unless Thou lead me, Lord,
The road I journey on is all too hard.
Through trust in Thee alone
can I go on.

My people's sorrows are the load I bear.
Lord, hear my prayer--

May Thy strong hand
strike off all chains
That load my well-loved land.
God, draw her close to Thee!

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DAG HAMMARSKJOLD (1905-1961)

is a very different type of mystic, in fact none knew he was a mystic until his journal was discovered after his death in 1961. He is best known from the fact that for the last 8 and a half years of his life he was the Secretary General of the UN.

before this time he was a civil servant with extensive training in both law and economics and held a number of important public offices in Sweden.

the diary, under the title of Markings had been kept for 36 years and contained his inmost thoughts and revelations over that period.

it is made up of largely disconnected jottings, yet with an inner consistency that when read in sequence makes it possible to reconstruct from it the author's spiritual pilgrimage.

It had always been well known that Hammarskjöld was not a very socialble person in the "hail fellow well met" sense, tho agreeable and friendly enough when the occasion called for it.

he never married, and lived at home when his public duties permitted until he was forty.

What the Markings revealed was that he had been a very lonely person, he felt alienated from God, from himself, and from other people.

the book says nothing of his public career, but this seems to have been his only antidote to loneliness.

we find him confessing "the anguish of loneliness. . .the same continual loneliness. . .the loneliness which is the final lot of all."

we find him wriing of "work as an anesthetic against loneliness, books as a subatitute for people. 1 "

This does not im ply he had no thoughts of God in i this period for he was eager to live his life constnuctively.

he undertook the study of Schweitzer's Quest for the Historical Jesus and this led to meditations on Jesus and the "road that might lead to the Cross."

the darker sentiments recorded in the years 1950 to 1952 seem to indicate he was passing through "the dark night of the soul."

Then something happened, though he did not say just when or how, but thereafter he was able to say Yes to God and to his own soul..

in a notation written in his diary of Whitsunday, 1961, we find these words:

I don't know Who--or what--put the question, I don't know when it was put? I don't ~~even~~ remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone--or Something--and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

Tho he attempts to give no day or hour, much less the year, of this change within him it has been estimated from other references that it probably occurred toward the end of 1952. In any case, on New Year's day, 1953 he was able to write in his diary some

words that have been quoted often, and have become a classic:

For all that has been--thanks

To all that shall be---Yes!

It is a Yes mood that predominates in his writing from then on. Furthermore he begins from that point to speak again and again of God--almost a hundred times of his being in the hands of God--or of "Not I, But God in Me."

In Markings he speaks of many of the medieval mystics that were influences on his life that showed him that self-surrender was the way to self-realization.

he speaks particularly of Meister Eckhardt, John of the Cross and Thomas a Kempis (imitation of Christ) and of Blaise Pascal and Martin Buber. as having taught him how to combine the active with the contemplative life.

Whatever his sources of inspiration, Jesus mattered most. A short time before his death he wrote, "As I continued along the Way, I learned, step by step, word by word, that behind every saying in the Gospels stands ~~ONE~~ ONE man and ONE man's experience."

Hammarskjöld was never a person to talk much about religion yet he never denied to any the validity and richness of their faith. One evidence is "a room for Quiet" which he insisted on having placed in the United Nations building so that all might have a place to worship according to whatever their faith might be.

It was Hammarskjöld who said that "the more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside. And only he who listens can speak."

That he did a great deal of effective speaking in his 8 years as secretary general is a matter of history. That he also listened to God and had a deep mystical sense of God's presence, seems hardly open to question.

at his death in an airplane crash in 1961, while trying to settle dispute in the Congo, he had with him the Imitation of Christ.