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“The Mysticism of St. Bernard”

Toshihiko Izutsu

St. Bernard (1090-1153), abbot of Clairvaux, is a colossal figure in the history of Western thought in terms of broad philosophies which have now become classic. What must not be overlooked in order to understand his philosophy which lays special emphasis on the mystical attitude of Man versus God, are his personality, his varied background and interests, his public office and the multitude of his writings. His character, especially, full of charm and vivacity, reflects his philosophy to such an extent as one might find the embodiments of “Love (Eros) mysticism” in this graceful hermit.

This, however, is not enough of him. The more profound is his love, the more fiery is his passion. It is surprising how poignant is his tongue when he reprehends the moral injustice. He is not in the least reluctant even to expose the evils inside of the Church to which he belongs. Placed in front of the church decorated with shining gold and ornaments his fury bursts out in torrents. This is more than usual cynicism against the church, but the crying of a desperate soul. Man of passion! One cannot find a more suitable phrase to express the real character of St. Bernard. However passionate he is, he is never swept away by the emotion; instead he elevates himself to one corner of Heaven above. This harmony of various conflicting powers is nothing but the love which St. Bernard feels to God, the Absolute Unity.

It may be noticed that the saint is severe in punishing the sins of himself, as well as of others. To him being born a man is simply a sin. But the existence of a man, “the image of God,” even if it is primarily evil, cannot be a sin to the ultimate. In other words St. Bernard denies (or rather insults) the human-being only to be affirmative in the end. The way, started from the denial of Man to reach the affirmation of Man, is what the mysticism of St. Bernard should naturally follow. Its process, at the same time, involves various problems of the human thought in the course of its development.