

## Reginald Somerset-Ward

by  
Richard Somerset-Ward

*Lord, help us to forget ourselves and to know Thee.*

This was my grandfather's favourite prayer, one that he used constantly throughout his long life. It sums up the epic struggle of his own life, and much of his teaching as well. I want to tell you about him, partly because I had the great good fortune to know him as grandfather and friend for the first twenty years of my life, partly because I believe that he was one of the great Anglican mystics and teachers of this century. But I am neither a theologian nor a very profound human being, so the only way I know how to tell you about him is by describing the man I knew, and the man I have subsequently come to know through his writings.

Reginald Somerset-Ward was a big man in every sense: bald, heavy, kindly, and very funny. That was how a grandson saw him, and I knew him fairly well. In my teenage years I went to boarding school less than a mile from his home, and would often bicycle to his house. He was an old man by then, a widower, well into his seventies, but still very active. My favourite venue for our conversations was the carpentry shop – for he was a virtuoso carpenter, and a very skilful bookbinder as well. There was always something new being created: a huge dolls' house for my sisters, complete with running water and electricity, including a lift that really worked; and a puppet theatre for me, again with electric lighting, and complete with plays he wrote for it. Most of all there were the games. I remember especially a wonderfully violent game called 'Good and Evil'. It featured a rifle, a sort of popgun loaded with nothing more lethal than corks, which was mounted on a swivel at one end of a range. At the other end beautifully carved biblical characters appeared automatically, always in twos, one good, one evil: Cain and Abel, David and Goliath, and so on. The person in control of the rifle had to identify which was which in an instant and shoot the evil character. There were immense penalties for knocking down a good character. My grandfather's attempts to play the game – his aim was

good but his identifications sometimes erratic – were accompanied by the only oath I ever heard him use, 'Smell of Abraham!'

It would probably come as a great surprise to those who knew him only as a teacher and director, but he was a wonderfully mischievous man in his old age. His doctors had imposed a strict regime on him. They never got him to give up smoking his pipe, but they did make a determined effort to ban alcohol, which for him meant wine, of which he was a connoisseur. For some reason which escaped us, he could not wait for me and my older sister to get our driving licences, but when we did, all was revealed. He evinced a sudden desire to visit the great cathedrals of southern England, one more time. That was a bit odd, because few members of the Church of England had as little use for bricks and mortar and ecclesiastical hardware as he did. Nevertheless, we set out on a series of journeys, driving him to Chichester and Winchester and Salisbury and Bath and points west. These were perilous journeys, because it soon became clear that seeing cathedrals was not the most important objective, which was lunch. This was taken at a hostelry of his choice, which invariably meant one with a first-class wine cellar. Sometime in the late afternoon we would stagger into a cathedral and sit in a pew for purposes of contemplation, which meant sleep. The return journey, in a sort of sclerotic mist, seemed a thing of chance, except I do not doubt that the Holy Spirit was never further away than the back seat.

In a very important way that was the story of his life, his complete faith in the presence of the Holy Spirit. I have painted him in the way I knew him, as a grandfather and a wonderful companion. But there was much more to him than that, and I only began to find this out after his death, when I set about the task of gathering together his papers.

I should say first that his ministry, a hugely important one, was a hidden, and in some ways a secret one. It lasted almost sixty years as a priest in the Church of England, yet for the last forty-seven of those years he had no parish, no job within the Anglican Church, no private income, and no visible means of support. It was based on a gigantic act of faith with a curious history.

As a teenager in the 1890's, he contracted rheumatic fever. He was taken away from school and his mother, a widow whose husband had been a clergyman in the Midlands, took him on doctor's orders to Switzerland. This was the normal prescription at that time if the doctor had run out of other ideas. He spent three glorious years of freedom among the lakes and mountains, being tutored and, more important, tutoring himself in mathematics for

the Cambridge matriculation. He arrived at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in the autumn of 1900, having never been to a theatre or a dance, played cards, nor touched a drop of alcohol. This deplorable condition was swiftly put to rights. After a year he changed from Maths to History and gained his Honours Degree in two years. History was to be a lifelong passion. His obsession with it derived from his interest in people. He loved to read history in the form of biography, and he was later, in the 1930s, to make a notable contribution himself with a fine biography of Robespierre, a leader of the French Revolution. When I arrived in Cambridge in 1960 it was still on the recommended reading list for the Modern History Tripos. Its full title tells you a lot about the author: *Maximilien Robespierre, A Study in the Deterioration of a Soul*. The last paragraph of the book reads as follows:

The diseases of the soul, made possible by the decrease in its vitality, take the form of an abnormal increase in the selfish components of a man's character. Self-esteem, self-deception, and self-absorption, eat into his soul. In consequence his spiritual life is decreased and debased, and its energy is expended on morbid activities. In the end he who has excluded God and his fellow man from his view in order to gaze at himself has brought the life of his soul to naught. This is the tragedy of Maximilien Robespierre.

Since the age of seven he had wanted to be a priest. At Cambridge the wish became a conviction. It was no ordinary call, and it took him by no ordinary path. He never went to theological college. Instead, he went to work in a mission run by his college in the slums of south London. On one occasion, disguised as a tramp (not much of a disguise, in his case), he wandered through those grisly slums, getting to know their inhabitants and the awful stories which had led them there. He ate with them at the Salvation Army kitchens, and not the least of the skills he learned there was a technique for stealing watches. This was taught him by an elderly tramp one night beside Blackfriars Bridge. I'm not aware that he made much use of it in later life – though he was always very punctual.

Switzerland, meanwhile, provided him with one final blessing. On a visit there during his last year at Cambridge he met Charlotte Kissam, his beloved Toddie, his wife for almost fifty years. She was an American lady from New Jersey. In the space of ten days he wooed and won her, proposing, she always maintained, beneath a wayside Calvary. They were married in Elizabeth,

New Jersey, in 1906. He took her off to the London slums where, by now, he was a priest serving his second curacy.

His first curacy in the Camberwell Road had been a learning experience. Years later he wrote about the first days of it with remembered horror:

I was first taken to my lodgings, two rooms in a nearby street, and the sitting-room wall was built against an archway over which the trains ran, which no doubt made the sermons I prepared rather bumpy and jolting. My first sermon, as is the case with many deacons, was mainly composed of the Athanasian Creed, and left my hearers as bewildered as it found me.

My grandmother Toddie, as well as being notably beautiful, was a saintly person, endowed with a great sense of humour. This was just as well, for the curacy to which he took her home was in another slum parish of London, this one adjacent to a prison. At fairly frequent intervals the cannon would sound to warn the local residents that a prisoner had escaped. This presented certain problems for a young lady from Elizabeth, New Jersey. What to do? Did one lock the doors, hide under the bed, and wait for the all-clear? Not Toddie. She had a better idea. The moment she heard the cannon she would run to open both the front and the back doors, on the very wise assumption that an escaping prisoner would probably want to run straight through.

She was relieved of these anxieties in 1908 when my grandfather accepted an invitation to become Secretary of the Church of England Sunday School Institute. In retrospect it seemed a most unlikely job for him because he loathed and distrusted institutions and bureaucracies like no man I have ever known. But he was unquestionably very good at it: an activist, a pamphleteer, a great reformer, perpetually travelling from one end of the country to the other. This he did for five years, until he handed in his notice, ordered the moving vans, and informed his secretary that he had given no destination to the moving vans because he had no idea what it would be. As moving day approached he and Toddie, who now had a daughter to care for as well, waited and watched, and one day the mail brought a letter from the Lord Chancellor inviting him to become Rector of the beautiful little village of Chiddingfold in Surrey. So Chiddingfold became the destination of the moving vans.

He was there for only two years from 1913 to 1915, because it was during this time that he became certain that his calling was not to be a pastor

in the normal sense, but to be a director of souls. He wrote to his bishop, Edward Talbot of Winchester, to explain. Talbot was sympathetic, but pointed out that the Church of England had no such position. Nevertheless, with a wife and two children by now, my father having been born in Chiddingfold, with no savings and no private resources at all, he resigned his living in the absolute faith that if he was doing the right thing – and he knew that he was – God would provide. And God did.

For the remaining forty-seven years of his life he never held another paid job. He and his family moved to a house called Ravenscroft in Farncombe, Surrey. From there he conducted his ministry, a life that was entirely governed by prayer, that was in a large part a mystical life, but which centred around this hidden ministry. It was a ministry that might be likened to that of a physician, in his case a physician of souls. Individuals came from all over the country to see him, and three times a year he undertook extensive tours, holding what would nowadays be called ‘clinics’ in fourteen towns up and down the country. To every individual, regardless of whether they were bishops or coal miners, dowager duchesses or school teachers, he gave half an hour. To some he acted as confessor, to others simply as counsellor. How they came to know of him I have no idea, but his fame grew very quickly, a lot of it engendered, no doubt, by the publication of a series of books in the 1920s and 1930s. The first of these books was called *The Way*. It was anonymous, and all subsequent volumes in the series were credited simply to ‘The Author of *The Way*’. *To Jerusalem*, in the Library of Anglican Spirituality, edited by Susan Howatch (SCM, 1994), is one of them. Yet an enormous number of people appeared to know who he was. When he died in 1962 two of his friends from the 1920s, Eric Abbot, the Dean of Westminster, and Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, organised a memorial service at Westminster Abbey. More than 3,000 people came. Who they all were we never knew, nor were we meant to know, but they were a testimony to a remarkable ministry.

One of the people to whom he was spiritual director recalled his first impressions of him thus:

My first sight of him was in the side chapel of All Saints’ Church, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in 1944. He was sitting well wrapped up, an overcoat beneath his surplice. There was no heating in the church. It was winter. His expression was serious, but kindly and welcoming. He was sturdily built and gave an impression of strength. His face in repose could look stern, and so it could

sometimes in action. But it would change in a flash to a twinkling, often puckish grin. Humour, gravity, lightness of touch, firmness – these qualities appeared and reappeared as the occasion drew them out. As I remember him, he struck me not as a judge ready to find fault, but more like a family doctor concerned to make you well, concerned for release from any kind of sickness, concerned for wholeness. And yet even this image of the doctor is not adequate to convey the person. For there was more ... There was about him the air, the look, of one whose conversation was in Heaven. So it was, for prayer was absolutely central to his life. It came before everything else. He was above all a man of God.

How he was supported through those years was really no mystery. A few weeks after he resigned his living at Chiddingfold he was told by a friend that he would be ‘looked after’. He never knew how, or by whom. He simply had faith that every time he went to the bank to cash a cheque, it would be honoured. He lived pretty frugally. His diaries of his holidays, which were almost always walking tours in England or France, detailed every penny he spent. Frugal, yes, but by no means uncomfortable. After he died I discovered that in 1915 a group of his friends had established something called the Ward Fund. The leader of these friends was an exact contemporary of his, an Oxford don who at that time was Headmaster of Repton School. His name was William Temple. When Temple became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942 my grandfather accepted the only ‘job’ he ever held after 1915, as honorary and unpaid chaplain to the Archbishop during his tragically short archiepiscopate.

## II

In this brief narrative of his life I have dwelt chiefly on my grandfather’s early years, because they were the formative years of a personal life and a ministry which would have an enormous impact on untold numbers of people, on the Church of England itself, and on Anglican spirituality in particular. The facts of his early life were merely the exterior covering for a massive internal struggle during which he developed the spirituality, the rule of life, and the mysticism, which were to govern the way he lived and taught. It was no accident that *The Way* was the title of that first and most famous book.

What is important is that this spiritual development and learning took place not in a monastery or a hermitage, but while he was in the world, living his days in a torrent of activity and activism for the Sunday School Institute, as



a priest, a husband and a father. If he was a mystic (and, yes, he was), and if he taught the Mystical Way to Christ (and, yes, he did), then he lived and taught these things in an entirely practical way. He speaks to me through his writings, just as he once spoke to me in the flesh, as an entirely practical guide to a life in, and of, the world, but a life that is dedicated solely to Christ.

There are two strands of his teaching that intertwine, yet are separate. The Way of personal devotion and dedication is, he taught, a universal way, one that is available to every one of us. But there is also a Mystical Way to Christ. The Mystical Way is *available* to us all, certainly, but it is a way that is necessarily suited only to a few. God often works powerfully through those few. This differentiation between the Way and the Mystical Way is important.

Since most of us belong to the many rather than the few, let me say something first about his teaching of the Way for us. It is the way to Jesus Christ, but it was a way, he maintained, which is impossible for us to follow as flawed and weak human beings, unless we can make use of an outside power. And that power is the Holy Spirit. To make use of it in order to be powered by it we must surrender to it. That is the hardest thing of all. But we have two things we can offer to God, our time and our desire. So we must devise a rule of life in which we offer those two things to God. In a letter he sought to define some priorities for such a rule, and you may be surprised by the order of the priorities:

Your main duty in this world is to get the best out of your body, mind and soul with which God has endowed you. You endanger this duty whenever you give up the right priorities that govern the spiritual life. The first priority is prayer, by which the soul has contact with God, and receives the life which alone gives lasting value to all that is done in this life. The second priority is rest and recreation without which the body cannot be kept fit for God's service ... The third priority is the work He gives you to do for His glory and purpose ... If you get these priorities out of their right order, God loses (and incidentally, you suffer). In different lives, these priorities have different measures of time, but never of order.

It may seem strange that he placed rest and recreation above work, but he believed it profoundly and it was clear in his own life. Enormously hard though he worked (and he assumed by implication that everyone he advised did so as well), it was at times when he was busy in his carpentry shop or at his book-binding that his spirit revived.

There were those who thought they could take advantage of such a priority. An eminent bishop once admitted to me that he had attempted to. He was a parish priest in the East End of London where he had acquired a reputation as a preacher for missions in the late 40s and early 50s, when parish missions were much in fashion. He was fed up with leading missions, so during a carefully rehearsed interview with my grandfather he sought agreement that he ought to have more rest and recreation in his life, and this surely meant that he should give up taking missions. Absolutely, my grandfather agreed, with a twinkle in his eye. Imagine the priest's horror when, less than a month later, he received a letter from the Rector of Farncombe. Farncombe, it said, was going to have a parish mission, and Father Somerset-Ward had recommended that this priest should be asked to lead it. He felt he had no option but to lead it, and he admitted that he got the message loud and clear on the opening night when he gave his first address to a packed church, with my grandfather sitting in the very front pew, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

Incidentally seeing him in church was something of an event. He rarely went to services. He had a chapel in his own house and spent many hours of every day there on his knees, but he avoided churches. Nor was he much good at liturgy. My father once told me that he severely doubted whether my baptism, administered by my grandfather, was truly valid, so muddled had the service been.

If prayer, rest and work were the priorities of The Way, then my grandfather also understood that, for each one of us, there were hindrances in our paths, hindrances to our contact with God. Principally they were sin and fear. Sin was a choice made by free will, and it sprang almost incessantly from the dominance of self-love in the soul. The remedy must be repentance. But he believed that fear was almost as great a hindrance as sin, fear of many kinds, both mental and physical, and, for many of us, fear of the next world or of our ability to attain it. My grandfather had one terrible fear with which he battled all his life, that of claustrophobia, and another he used to talk about at the end of his life, the humiliations of old age. 'Our main task,' he said, 'is to exercise faith in the face of fear.'

I have said enough about The Way to give you an idea of the practical rule of life that he taught, a rule that was centred around prayer, or it was nothing. As a body of teaching it is contained in that series of books by the anonymous 'Author of the Way', as well as in a massive series of four hundred

and fifty-seven printed 'Instructions' which were sent over the years to all who came to him for advice and counsel.

The second, and much less well-known, part of his teaching was what I have called The Mystical Way. His own name for it was 'The Road', and whatever claim can be made that he belongs to the great line of English mystics – from Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich onwards – is contained in his book, *The Road to the Mystical City of Jerusalem*. It is his most important book, yet it has never been published because he said it never should be. It was written as early as 1910 when he was still enmeshed in the hectic organisational life of the Sunday School Institute. That is why those early years when he was still in his twenties were so important. The book was privately printed and copies given to those three or four hundred people who had chosen to make the massive commitment entailed in following The Road. Although it has much in common with the teaching of The Way, it is an infinitely greater commitment to a contemplative life of mystical prayer and to a life of absolute obedience. That does not mean, and it has never meant, that its followers were limited to those in the cloistered life – quite the contrary.

The Road is introduced by a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Let us therefore go forth unto Jesus without the camp, bearing his reproach.  
For we have not here an abiding city, but we seek after the city which is to come.

The camp is clearly the world with all its attendant baggage, and so he wrote, 'I am emboldened to make a humble Road Book for the use of such travellers as shall desire to journey from the camp of the world of senses to the mystical city of Jerusalem.'

The Road Book is a guide, a road map, for those dedicated people who are prepared to make this huge commitment. I believe that, is why he would not allow it to be published. It was what he called 'a group manuscript', written for a small group of people who had made the commitment to travel The Road. I am not competent to discuss The Road, or its teaching, but I would not want you to think there is anything sinister or secret about it. Its origins are in the ancient Christian idea of the group linked by prayer, an idea that goes directly back to Our Lord and his disciples. There have always been such groups. They belong to no person or organisation, but to the Holy Spirit.

Historically, each such group has dwindled away, but the Holy Spirit has not. Thus the group that my grandfather formed is still in existence today, but inevitably dwindling in its earthly manifestation. For that reason it may be that the Road Book should now be published in some limited way.

The life of The Road is only for the very few. It is a gigantic, all-embracing commitment to a life of prayer and obedience that is almost impossible for most of us to undertake. The vast majority of people who committed themselves to follow The Road were and are people in and of the world. Most often they do not know each other, but they know of each other because they are linked in prayer. Through them the Holy Spirit can do wondrous things.

The mystical life of The Road, the more practical life of The Way. It's all rather awesome, isn't it? Are these things really meant to apply to us? Or are they just for the mystical few, the people who have the luxury of being able to contemplate these things from outside the hurly-burly of life? My grandfather was never far from the hurly-burly of life, yet he believed that every one of us, whoever we are, wherever we are, has time and has desire. Those are the gifts we have to give back to God and we can only begin to do so in prayer.

Consider his own life: he was born in 1881, died in 1962. He lived through the greatest upheavals in human experience, incredible advances, terrifying cataclysms. Reading his diary, which he kept retrospectively, you can see it all, from the uncertainties occasioned by Queen Victoria's death in 1901 to the horrors of the Holocaust and unveiling of the atomic bomb in 1945. His faith in human beings may often have faltered, but never his faith in God.

Sometimes, it is true, his diary leaves the reader slightly confused about what is progress and what is regression. A single, terse entry for 1930 reads as follows:

I first rode in a motor car in June, 1906. I first flew in an aeroplane in October, 1928. I started using the Revised Prayer Book in January, 1929.

Deeply suspicious of bureaucracies and committees though he always was, he nevertheless played a rather remarkable role within the established Church. His Sunday School reforms in the first decade of the century were evidence of that. So was the part he played in the 20s and 30s as a prophet and pioneer in the movement to formalise the role of deaconesses within the Church of England. And it could be said that during the last thirty years of his life he had a

peculiarly powerful position within the Church of England, though he would be deeply shocked to hear me say so. Many of his friends and pupils, from Temple and Ramsey on the Bench of Bishops, to teachers like Evelyn Underhill and Charles Raven, became influential people within the Church. It was a strange paradox for such a hidden ministry.

He was pre-eminently a spiritual director, a physician of souls. Martin, writing in *English Spirituality*, called him, 'probably the most influential spiritual director of modern Anglicanism'. That is not an area I want to explore here; suffice to say that he did on one occasion pass on to a friend his own recipe for spiritual direction: 'For every pound of spiritual direction, use eight ounces of prayer, three ounces of theology, three ounces of common sense and two ounces of psychology'.

Even though as a teenager I had very little idea of his real life and ministry, of the intense internal struggle he had waged all his life, of the hours he spent each day in prayer, of the mystical side of his life, yet I was never in doubt that he was a man of God. And I saw it best in the serenity with which he died. If, for all those years he had been a Pilgrim on the Road, then he approached the Final Mystery with a certainty and a joy which was wonderful to behold.

But if he were here now I rather fancy he would be glancing at his watch and muttering, 'Smell of Abraham!' Time to end.

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