



Rethinking the Mystical: Thoughts from the Spiritual Sub-Basement A Roman Catholic Perspective

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These thoughts emerge from Oregon, one of the least church-ed states in the union, where in recent years the only newsworthy events of a mystical flavor have been the rise and fall of the Bhagwan Shree Rasneesh. The author is a Benedictine monk, a seminary professor, a specialist in medieval spirituality. The understanding of mysticism operative in what follows draws heavily on the medieval catholic tradition and aims to reflect the tolerant eclecticism which has characterized Benedictine spirituality at its best. There are four questions to be addressed: What is mysticism? Is it desirable? Is it reviving? What would aid its revival?

I. WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

Mysticism is difficult to define, as are faith and the love of God which are its essential elements. For this discussion a two-pronged, encompassing definition seems useful, if inelegant: Christian existence qualifies as mystical when it is characterized by a God-given, intense, and abiding sense of the presence of God (even in his silence and inscrutability) or when it regularly includes the wordless prayer of contemplation which comes as a divine gift after prayerful words become superfluous. Whether either of these states is possible without the other is doubtful; it is even more doubtful that one can abide in the mystical without having struggled with some success to eliminate deliberate, sinful acts from one's life. It is certain that the mystical is pure gift; if and when it comes, it is experienced as God's grace.

The first member of the definition just given described mysticism as an intense and abiding sense of the presence of God.¹ There are three main areas of

¹A classic statement of this sense of God's presence is Br. Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. John J. Delaney (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977). Not unrelated is the truism: "The interior life is not a question of seeing extraordinary things but rather of seeing ordinary things with the eyes of God" (Thomas Green, *When the Well Runs Dry* [Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1979] 151).

human experience where Christians have found God present: nature, self, the other. Aristotle and Kant thought the starry skies above were pointers to God's existence. For the mystics the heavens declare the glory of God; and so do the earth, the trees, the grass, the seas seen from the top of Skellig Michael, and perhaps the recluse's pet cat. For the mystic:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah!
 bright wings.²

The Latin Middle Ages agreed with St. Augustine that the conscious self is the image and likeness of God. For Augustine and his medieval disciples there was tension between this conviction and the sacramental sense of the world, since they regularly urged that the Christian should withdraw from outward dispersal among created things to unified inwardness. However, there seems to be no inherent contradiction between awareness of God in nature and a sense of his image within oneself. The self images God in its freedom, in the boundless range of the imagination, in its capacities to know and love. Likeness to God may be obscured by the unlikeness of sin, but the image of God is ineffaceable. So to know oneself is to recognize a dignity bestowed by God's creative generosity and restored by Christ's redeeming grace. The other side of self-knowledge, which seems to have received increasing emphasis in later spirituality, is recognition of one's sinfulness and need for God's mercy.

The third locus of God's presence is one's neighbor, or more accurately, the bonds that relate Christians with each other. In the suffering Christ, divine compassion wore a human face, and wherever the power of the cross is operative, compassionate love unites the sisters and brothers of Christ in communities which range from the nuclear family (and friendship, an example not very frequently discussed in Christian authors) to the human family.

Today it seems to be difficult to find the presence of God in nature and the self. By itself nature is thought of as the field for a bloody struggle for survival; in relation to human society nature appears as an amorphous material element to be transmuted into shopping malls and mortgages. Air and light pollutions make the starry skies almost invisible. The self is no more sacred: the image and likeness of God has dissolved into the id and the ego, and of late the latter threatens to become an all-absorbing interest. Perhaps for late twentieth-century Christians it is the sacrament of the other which holds the most promise of the presence of God. However, if it is in life together that contemporary Christians are to become aware of God, what sort of communities are there or should there be for enlivening their sensitivity to God's loving presence?

²Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges (Oxford: Oxford University, 1933) 26.

The other part of the description of mysticism spoke of a Christian existence which regularly includes the wordless contemplation which comes as a divine gift after prayerful words become superfluous. Medieval writers spoke of the lifeline of Christian living as though it were woven of six strands: reading, meditation, prayer, action, contemplation and teaching.³

One reads slowly with purity of heart and the help of the Spirit the books written by the hand of God, above all the Scriptures. Reading leads to pondering the meaning of God's Word. Such meditation makes one conscious of God's mercy and one's own misery, and this awareness

evokes prayers of thanksgiving and contrition, as well as pleas for help. Sooner or later, more or less often, meditation conscientiously practiced begins to simplify. The many tasks of the life of faith fuse in the fire of love. In prayer the Christian becomes content to be with the Triune God in expectation, silence and dazzling darkness. What God might do next is unpredictable and ineffable: absence and visitation, suffering and consolation, darkness and light, desolation and union—these are all possibilities.⁴

Just as the awareness of God's presence doesn't seem to be thriving in contemporary society, so too the age does not seem to be conducive to contemplative prayer. If normally the life of prayer grows slowly as the Word of God sinks roots into the well-tilled soil of reading and meditation, then the prospects for contemplation do not seem very good. Whether this is a loss for the churches is the next question to be considered.

II. IS IT DESIRABLE?

There are many reasons to be suspicious of mysticism. Mysticism is usually associated with visions and raptures.⁵ The definition just expounded purposely does not include such extraordinary and perplexing phenomena. St. Teresa of Avila, who experienced many such phenomena, is ample authority for not including them in our definition. That such secondary phenomena have become identified with mysticism is neither inevitable nor acceptable. Whatever the significance of visions and levitations and trances, they are not essential to mystical experience.

Second, one might ask whether mysticism does not involve a Pelagian and/or Neoplatonic effort to reach God on God's level.⁶ It is perfectly possible

³Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks*, trans. Edmund College and James Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981); Walter Hilton, "Letter to a Hermit," *Way* 6 (1965) 230-241.

⁴The spiritual journey toward contemplation has been described countless times. Three recent and very competent summaries are Jan-Hendrik Walgrave, "Prayer and Mysticism," *Communio* 12 (1985) 276-292; Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1976); and Louis Dupre, *The Deeper Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁵For example, Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 151: "The term 'mysticism,' more familiar in modern scholarly parlance than it would have been to the mystics themselves, can mean various things. For present purposes it may be taken as covering two closely linked phenomena: ecstatic experiences (raptures), in which a person's consciousness of the spatio-temporal order is temporarily lost or diminished; and extraordinary glimpses of spiritual or otherwise hidden realities (revelations) whether communicable or ineffable."

⁶Martin E. Marty, "Interestingness and the Imagination," *Word & World* 5 (1985) 234-235.

that a Christian might be seduced into such an effort, but Christian mystics are usually very careful to warn against it. They affirm in the strongest terms that every aspect or phase of Christian life is dependent upon grace. When one crosses the threshold of contemplation, every further step depends entirely on extraordinary gifts of the Spirit which blows where it wills. Thus, for example, the word "grace" occurs more than ninety times in the short *Cloud of Unknowing*. In chapter 67 the author says to the one who experiences contemplative prayer: "Certainly you are above yourself, because you succeeded in reaching by grace what you could not achieve by nature. And that is that you are united with God, in spirit, in love, and harmony of wills."⁷

Clearly connected with the foregoing is the question of whether mystical experience purports to take one beyond the realm of faith, so that sight somehow replaces belief; private vision, church doctrine. In fact, it is traditional Christian teaching that mystical awareness is a flowering of faith. Moreover, there is not inbuilt conflict between church doctrine and mystical awareness. Richard of St. Victor, St. Bernard, and the author of *The Cloud*, were all men of unimpeachable orthodoxy, and St. Teresa was fully justified in laughing when the Inquisition had scruples about her doctrine.

Fourth, one may object that mysticism draws people away from the sacramental life of the church. It is certainly true that some periods of fervent mysticism (e.g., the fourteenth century) were not times of liturgical vitality. It also seems likely that contemplative prayer and vigorous hymn singing are difficult to sustain simultaneously. Yet a sense of God's abiding presence in nature, self, and community is as essential to liturgy as it is to contemplation. Further, the prayer of most of the great mystics was nourished by the liturgy; similarly there is every reason to think that experiences of intense mystical union with God enhanced their appreciation and celebration of the church's sacraments.

Fifth, it may be objected that mysticism creates an elite in the church, a cadre of adepts who are put on a higher plane than the rest of the baptized. This is certainly possible. Mystical gifts are not unmixed blessings to their recipients; they bring with them temptations to pride. Hence, it is traditional to point out that mysticism is not sanctity. The heart of sanctity is love, and there is no reason to think that progress in charity and progress in mystical experience are entirely equivalent.

Sixth, can the church afford the luxury of contemplation in a world in which millions are starving for food and millions are hungering for the bread of life? Unfortunately, there has been a sort of spirituality which cultivates the wilting roses of one's spiritual garden in unholy oblivion of the world around one, but this is not inherent in mysticism. St. Bernard and St. Teresa urged their followers to avoid the world, but in fact they themselves were deeply involved in the struggles of their times.

Who, in fact, can be a liberator? Only Christ, the Christ who preached and who spent nights in prayer, who died on the cross in public view and prayed in private with his disciples in Gethsemane, who healed bodies and prayed for crucified thieves. If the church does not join him in prayer before the Father, in

⁷*The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Baltimore: Penguin, 1978) 37-38, 141.

the breaking of the bread, in recitation of the Psalms, there is no chance the church will experience the transforming power of his resurrection. The church aims to slake humanity's thirst for God. It cannot do so if its own wells run dry.

Of course, no Christian vocation fully expresses all the facets of Christian existence. The anchorite and the missionary, the executive and the sailor, all have their own gifts from the Lord. It is a besetting temptation for Christians to elevate their own call and their own talents into the standard for all the baptized, instead of delighting in the variety of the Spirit's gifts.

Seventh, it may be objected that mysticism is a monastic preoccupation, something which usually is possible only for those who live in the seclusion of the cloister. It is true that cloistered life can facilitate living in God's presence and enhance fidelity to prayer. In fact, one of the main

services of monasteries to the wider church has been the witness they give to silence, simplicity, the use of artistic reminders of God's presence, and a regular routine of prayer, all of which are conducive to mystical experience. If these are not found in other Christian communities, perhaps those communities should alter their lifestyles. On the other hand, monastics—especially in edifying writings designed to serve as internal reinforcement for other monastics—have made claims for the efficacy and superiority of their “contemplative” way of life which are excessive and unfounded, and which may have discouraged Christians of other vocations from developing a serious prayer life.

III. IS IT REVIVING?

The argument thus far has been that mysticism as defined here is a positive, even an indispensable, element in the church's life. What is its state in the church today? It is very difficult to say. There is much more data available about the intimate sexual practices of contemporary people than about their prayer. What statistical data is available from polls suggests that people pray and read the Bible more than one would have thought. One may assume that where many people pray conscientiously, some people are mystics.

On the other hand, Louis Dupre, an astute scholar of religion, is pessimistic: Never has there been more talk about “religious experience” than today. Yet actual experiences are few and mostly of low intensity. “Mysticism” has become a common term in current language. Yet religious immediacy has rarely been less available. Our existence has become so secularized that the act of faith once supported by a wealth of communal and private experiences must now almost totally dispense with direct evidence and be satisfied with the will to believe.⁸

Nevertheless, scholarly studies of mysticism are burgeoning. One reason this is so is that there is a growing distrust of one of the more questionable legacies of the Enlightenment: “the denial of cognitive value to spiritual experiences” and the concomitant “atrophy of Christian transcendental

⁸Louis Dupre, “Christian Spirituality Confronts the Modern World,” *Communio* 12 (1985) 334.

experiences.”⁹ In spite of all the obstacles which contemporary American culture puts in the way, there is a widespread interest in techniques and forms of prayer. It is difficult to estimate how deep this mystical interest is; it is impossible to determine whether the status of mysticism among Christians is greater or less than it was in the sixteenth century, or the thirteenth, or the first. What seems likely is that the current interest in prayer and mysticism is a call of the Spirit to deepen and explore the rich Christian tradition of prayer and the possibilities suggested by the mystical traditions of non-Christian religions.

IV. WHAT WOULD AID ITS REVIVAL?

If, as I have suggested, mysticism is a genuine part of the Christian tradition and there is an awakening interest in mystical prayer among Christians today, how might the churches respond?

First of all, ordained clergy need to be educated in the theology and practice of mystical prayer. It is at least as important that seminary students be initiated into the theology and practice of the spiritual life as that they be instructed in clinical pastoral methods. A minimum preparation for ministry should include courses in spirituality, practice in prayer, and ongoing individual spiritual direction. Moreover, Christian tradition has rightly not restricted the ministry of spiritual guidance to ordained clergy. Hence, others who wish to practice this ministry should receive a solid theological and spiritual training.

Second, some steps need to be taken to bridge the gaps between theology, spirituality, and social action. Here North Americans may have something to learn from liberation theology. There is also something to be learned from theologians like Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, St. Bonaventure, and Luther for whom biblical studies, systematics, and spirituality formed a seamless whole. Good mysticism is no substitute for good theology, but it may be wondered if good theology is possible apart from intense personal and shared prayer. Somehow hard thinking and hard praying need to spring up together from the same ground of faith.

Third, it is crucial that the Christian churches know and assimilate the riches of the Christian spiritual tradition. There is a vast spiritual heritage stemming from the Scriptures, through the Fathers, medieval spiritual authors, and the writings of the Reformation era to our own times. This heritage varies in quality and applicability, but it can teach contemporary Christians a great deal and free them from the provincialisms of late twentieth century mentalities. Without deep immersion in the classics of Christian spirituality, contemporary Christians will have to reinvent the spiritual wheel, a difficult and dangerous task. These classics need to be read prayerfully as well as critically, so that they are not simply mined to support current manias.

Fourth, the connections between self-discipline and mysticism need to be appreciated. “Asceticism” is almost a dirty word in our theology and our culture. Culturally, though, asceticism of a sort is enjoying a modest revival in

⁹Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. John H. Hallowell (Durham: Duke University, 1975) 3.

the fitness movement. Theologically, it is time to stop equating asceticism with Manicheism and works-righteousness. That asceticism might be seen in a better light is indicated in a passage in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. After an expansive list of “tools of good works,” most of which are drawn from the Bible, comes the admonition: “Place your hope in God alone. If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own and yours to acknowledge.”¹⁰ Christian tradition has been well-nigh unanimous in seeing virtuous living as a necessary precondition for mysticism. The foundation for contemplative prayer and for living in God’s presence is faith. Although prayer techniques have their place, they will profit only those who have given their hearts to God. It is difficult to give one’s heart to God in the midst of racket and hectic activity; it is impossible to do so in the midst of self-indulgence, narcissism, and *divertissement*. On the other hand, the techniques for meditation and prayer which are enjoying some popularity now can themselves force Christians to evaluate their lifestyles and discipline their spirits. In the very effort to quench their thirst for prayer some Christians are discovering the disciplines of silence, simplicity, and compassion.

More generally, there are many ways in which human beings relate to the world; for example, contemplation sees, hears, and touches the world to perceive how beings are individually and as forming wholes (and, if the contemplation is religious, the contemplated world becomes the sacrament of God's presence); art extends and images creation in particular objects; science strives to understand beings in relation to universal laws; technology adjusts, arranges, and uses the beings of the world for their benefit and for that of humanity; gratitude receives beings as gifts and celebrates the divine generosity from which they spring. Mysticism will not flourish if contemporary people do not have the capacity to perceive the world—nature, themselves, their communities—contemplatively and gratefully. Doing needs to be nourished in seeing and loving, doctrine in love. When and if this happens, mysticism does not need reconsideration; it is simply the flowing of faith. No one saw this better than Therese of Lisieux:

In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask You, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is stained in Your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed with Your own Justice and to receive from Your Love the eternal possession of Yourself. I want no other Thorne, no other crown but You, my Beloved.¹¹

¹⁰RB 1980. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981) 183.

¹¹*The Story of a Soul. The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS, 1975) 276.