



Rethinking the Mystical: Thoughts from the Spiritual Closet *An Evangelical Perspective*

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As one whose roots are deeply imbedded in the evangelical tradition, but whose current understanding of Western spirituality has been informed by studies in the mystical tradition, the author's reflections originate in his desire that more informed analysis of the mystical search for God become a part of Protestant/Lutheran awareness. I was nurtured in evangelical biases relating to mysticism. Previous assessments of mystics or mysticism were limited and conditioned by assumptions which lay in the unconscious of Protestantism: (1) mysticism is a religion (or religious expression) which elevates humanity to the level of divinity and thereby destroys the essential direction of grace from God to humanity; (2) mysticism is an expression of Roman Catholic piety which ignores or denies the principles of the Protestant Reformation; and (3) mysticism is a religion of feeling which ignores the historical nature of Jesus Christ, isolates the mystic into a prayer closet, and divorces faith from the necessary activity of Christian love and service.

These assumptions give birth to a certain theological self-righteousness which tends to justify the Reformation. The Reformation was, then, a return to historical/biblical Christianity in reaction to philosophical religion which had failed to maintain its Christian integrity. Mysticism was a main cause for this triumph of philosophy over faith, or at least a major symptom of it. This evangelical skepticism of mysticism—or, rather, rejection of it—helps us feel good about ourselves. But we rarely ask from whence it came or whether it is based on an accurate picture. This is how it has been allowed to remain in our collective subconscious.

The author's recent surveys of mystical literature in the Western tradition strongly point in a different direction. Whereas our assumptions speak of mysticism as a homogeneous body of religious writing, the reality testifies to diverse, heterogeneous expressions of our search for God and the faithful life. Similarly, the examined material points in the direction of grace and Christian charity at least as often as in the direction of works-righteousness and other-

worldliness. Lastly, it has been fascinating to discover both the Reformation spirit in the mystical and the mystical in the Reformation.

It is time to rethink the mystical. That is so not only for the sake of historical and scholarly accuracy, but also for the deepening of our understandings of ourselves, and our sisters and brothers of various Christian traditions which reflect a spirit of the mystical.

I. SOME POSSIBLE ROOTS FOR OUR SKEPTICISM

A cursory glance at the history and development of twentieth century evangelical theology related to mysticism reveals some possible sources or roots for our skepticism of the mystical. It is the author's intent to suggest that part of our unconscious skepticism has been the result of a three step progression of anti-mystical polemic in evangelical thought.

The first step in this progression is found in the simplifying categorization of mysticism in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl. Ritschl's assessment of mysticism is best summed up in his statement that mysticism is "the practice of Neoplatonic metaphysics."¹ In this sweeping categorization, Ritschl placed all mystical literature in one homogeneous lump. Beyond that, the implications for evangelical theology were clear. All mysticism was an ascent of the soul to heaven made possible by an individual's practice of self denial and vigorous prayer. It certainly had the flavor of works-righteousness and the character of idolatrous self elevation. That this was the intent of Ritschl becomes clear as he later asserts the lack of servanthood in mysticism, the elimination of the necessary distinction between God and human beings, the isolation of the individual from the Christian community, and—worst of all—the indifference of mystical literature to the historic revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Ritschl's indictment of mysticism was complete.

The next step in forming our unconscious skepticism was taken by an admirer and friend of Ritschl's, Adolph Harnack. The historian's thesis for his significant work *History of Dogma* was that Protestantism was the resurgence of primitive Christianity. Roman Catholicism was the consequence of Hellenizing influences on the true church. The spirit of Roman Catholicism was, according to Harnack, its mystical piety. This mystical piety "was rooted in the Neoplatonic-Augustinian view."² Having borrowed heavily from Ritschl in his understanding of mysticism and having identified the heart of Roman Catholicism with it, the logical progression was to assert that Protestantism and mysticism were antithetical to one another. This assertion helped shape even further our evangelical skepticism of the mystical through this simplifying differentiation which equated Roman Catholic piety with mysticism and Protestant piety with historic Christianity.

A last step in our suggested three-fold progression was taken by Wilhelm Herrmann who shared Ritschl's concern of de-mystifying Christianity. Herrmann's thought developed into a simplifying denigration of mysticism. For

¹Albrecht Ritschl, *Three Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 76.

²Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols.; New York: Dover Publications, 1961) 6.101.

Herrmann, mysticism was simply a religion of feeling devoid of historicity, rational content, and ethical behaviors. In mysticism, the quest of the mystic is for a feeling of union, Herrmann surmised. Therefore, Christ is simply a means to an end and not the ultimate revelation of God, the source and fulfillment of faith.³

With the writing of Herrmann, the anti-mystical polemic in evangelical theology was deeply established. Neither the reassertion of Friedrich Schleiermacher that the mystical is central to Christian piety, nor the suggestion of Rudolf Otto that the mystical is seminal for religion was substantial enough to cause a reassessment of the accuracy of the descriptions of Ritschl, Harnack, and Herrmann in evangelical theology.

II. A BRIEF REAPPRAISAL

In our thinking about the mystical we have given a cursory glance toward some significant theologians (for surely Harnack's history was fundamentally theological) who might have shaped our evangelical skepticism toward mysticism. The point of that discussion was not to say that critical analysis of mysticism is no longer appropriate. It was to suggest that a true reappraisal begins with a skeptical questioning of one's own assumptions. This reappraisal then equips us to address the pertinent material afresh. The questions before us, then, are: (1) Is mysticism a homogeneous body of literature with a fundamental Neoplatonic character? (2) Does it necessarily eliminate the experience of God's grace as the foundation of all Christian belief? (3) Does mysticism necessarily isolate one into a privatistic, prayer-closet faith and ignore the call of Christ to servanthood?

The heterogeneity of mysticism becomes clear when one compares the writings of those identified as mystics throughout the centuries. This variety is revealed when the sermonic quality of Clement of Alexandria is compared with the arid texture of Cassian and the desert monks; it is shown in the opposing languages of the negative way (with its terminology of abyss and darkness as the place of meeting God) and the positive way (with its identifying of God with light and life), both of which seek to express the mystery of God. The richness of the diversity of mystical writing is further shown in the comparison of the theologizing of Augustine with the practical teaching that graces the writing of Teresa of Avila. To put it simply, the only homogeneity one finds in mystical writing is that of faith which seeks its God in love.

Similarly, it becomes apparent that whereas some mystical writings are decidedly Neoplatonic, others are not reflective of an ascent to God, nor are they a denigration of the created world. Simone Weil (1909-43), for example, stands within the heritage of Western mysticism when she declares that "The longing to love the beauty of the world in a human being is essentially the longing for the incarnation."⁴ Her assertion is that the created world bears the grace and

³Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 23.

⁴Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 171-2.

goodness of God in an incarnational sense. She further asserts that the mystics understood this.

Likewise, the assertion of God's grace as the foundation for Western Christian mysticism comes clear in most of the writings of the great mystics. How evangelical, for example, is this brief quote from Jakob Boehme (1575-1624):

As little as a piece of work can apprehend him that made it, so little also can man apprehend and know God his Creator, unless the Holy Ghost enlightens him; which happens only to those that rely not upon themselves, but set their hope, will and desires only upon God.⁵

Or, again, the clear assertion of Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) in his *Sermons on the Canticles*, when he writes that "Grace alone can teach it," referring to the mystical experience of the presence of God. These two reflect the foundation of grace upon which the majority of Western Christian mystics built their understanding of meditation and contemplation.

If grace is the foundation of Western Christian mysticism, and if the Neoplatonic homogeneity of Western Christian mysticism is no longer an adequate categorization, then we are left with one more significant element to our evangelical skepticism. Is the thrust of Western Christian mysticism away from the cross of servanthood? Does Western Christian mysticism entice individuals apart from others into a private exercise of believing and feeling?

Again we seek the writings of some of the great Western Christian mystics. In one of the more well-known sections of the *Interior Castle*, Theresa of Avila (1515-82) writes:

When I see people very anxious to know what sort of prayer they practice, covering their faces and afraid to move or think lest they should lose any slight tenderness and devotion they feel, I know how little they understand how to obtain union with God since they think it consists in such things as these. No, sisters, no; our Lord expects works from us. If you see a sick sister whom you can relieve, never fear losing your devotion; compassionate her; if she is in pain, feel for it as if it were your own and when there is need, fast so that she may eat, not so much for her sake as because you know your Lord asks it of you. This is the true union of our will with the will of God.⁶

Teresa clearly does not understand the life of meditation or contemplation to be one that separates people. It is rather a life that calls us to the sacrificial giving of the cross. This is, she has asserted, to know and live the will of God.

Similarly, William of St. Thierry (1085-1148) succinctly expresses the Western Christian mystical practicality by writing, “But in this question of seeing God, it seems to me that there is more value in one’s manner of living than in his manner of speaking.”⁷ The mystics, by and large, are unified in their understanding that one cannot pray and meet God without also meeting one’s

⁵Jakob Boehme, “Aurora,” *The Works of Jakob Boehme, the Teutonic Theosopher* (4 vols.; London: M. Richardson, 1974) 2.24.

⁶St. Theresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*, ed. Hugh Martin (London: SCM, 1958) 67. The quotation is from chapter 3 of the Fifth Mansion.

⁷William of St. Thierry, *The Enigma of Faith* (Washington, DC: Cistercian Publications, 1974) 3.

self and, subsequently, others. The particular service rendered to others may vary substantially from direct aid and succor to the prayer support of the world by those who in faith have entered into monastic communities.

There is, therefore, sufficient cause for evangelicals to rethink their attitudes toward the mystical. This sufficiency comes from a cursory glancing at the richness of mystical writing which contradicts some basic assumptions inherent in our skepticism. The mystics cannot be said to be of one homogeneous, Neoplatonic mold. Neither can it be deemed accurate to dismiss the writings of the mystics of Western Christian tradition as being so entirely “other-worldly” as to deny the cross and the Christian call to servanthood. And to the degree that a writer of mysticism asserts grace as the first cause of his or her experience and faith and as that which is upheld and nurtured by that experience, to that degree evangelical, Reformation theology ought to find a witness which it can affirm and take to itself.

The intent of this essay has been, first, to suggest certain elements which could have shaped our evangelical skepticism or rejection of the Western Christian tradition of mysticism. Second, it has been our intent to examine those elements over against certain representative passages from this tradition. Lastly, it is our hope that in so doing a new openness toward our heritage of mystical writings can be encouraged. Evangelicals ought to rethink the mystical: not uncritically, but prayerfully and thoughtfully, and with an openness to hearing the genuine witness of faith which many of the writings in this tradition contain.