

## Christian Mysticism

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Christianity was at its beginnings, and has been down through the centuries, a deeply mystical religion. So much so that, in my opinion, any form of Christianity that rejects mysticism is in danger of becoming an empty shell—the worship of words, texts, and practices rather than the worship of the living God.

“Mysticism” simply means the cultivation of direct experience of spiritual realities. Its root meaning from the Greek language has the sense of hidden, or secret experiences, not a deliberate hiding but rather the acknowledgement that spiritual realities are “hidden” to people who have closed their hearts to them.

“You shall indeed hear but never understand,  
and you shall indeed see but never perceive.  
For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are heavy of hearing,  
and their eyes they have closed,  
lest they should perceive with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their heart,  
and turn for me to heal them.”

—Jesus, quoting the prophet Isaiah (Matthew 13:14-15)<sup>1</sup>

What are these mystical experiences? There are many types, including dreams, visions, raptures and ecstatic (“out-of-body”) experiences, which are frequently mentioned in the Bible

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, revised standard version, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

and have been testified to across Christian history. But the ultimate and most important mystical experience is the experience of “union with God”—not simply in some future life after death, but *now, in this life*. For if one of the most important Christian teachings is that Jesus Christ was one with God in his life on this earth, and Christians are called to be like Jesus, then Christians are called to be one with God in their lives on this earth as well.

“I do not pray for these only,  
 but also for those who believe in me through their word,  
 that they may all be one;  
 even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee,  
 that they also may be one in us,  
 so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

—Jesus (John 17:20-21)

The call to oneness with God is not always heard in Christian churches, and Christian mysticism is something that church leaders have sometimes been uncomfortable with and tried to suppress. There have been both good reasons and bad reasons for these attempts, but the effect is only to periodically drive mysticism “underground,” so to speak, although it always pops up again, because the capacity for spiritual experiences can never be extinguished from people.

### **1. Dream, visions, and similar experiences**

A variety of mystical experiences are attested to in the Bible. Some examples would be the prophetic dreams of the patriarch Jacob (Genesis 28:10-17) and Joseph the husband of Mary (Matthew 2:13-23); the visions of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1, 8:1-2) and the apostle Peter (Acts of the Apostles 10:9-16); and the ecstatic experiences of the apostle Paul (Second Letter to the Corinthians 12:1-4). Christians have described mystical experiences not only in Biblical times but across history, as recorded in literature such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* (second century), the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich (fourteenth century), and the autobiography of Teresa of Avila (sixteenth century).

One concern of church leaders has been to evaluate the reliability of such experiences, in keeping with the apostle Paul’s admonition to “test everything” (First Letter to the Thessalonians

5:21). Traditionally, there have been thought to be three possible sources of a mystical experience: God, one's own mind (that is, self-delusion), or a demonic influence. Many methods of discerning the source of specific mystical experiences have been used over the centuries, from their conformance to official doctrine to psychological evaluation of the person who had the experience. Unfortunately, caution has sometimes been replaced by hostility, particularly when such experiences seem to present a challenge to religious authority. Paul's full admonition was "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything," and negative attitudes on the part of church leaders can "quench the Spirit" by creating fear about mystical experiences, causing people to avoid speaking about them. This not only drives mysticism underground, it prevents people from getting guidance into the deeper experience of union with God.

## 2. Union with God

"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

—Jesus, Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:48)

How is it possible for a human being to be perfect? The word translated "perfect" above is the Greek word *teleios*, which has the sense not simply of moral perfection but of a fulfillment of potentiality. As God is all that God can be, human beings should become all that a human being can be. In the spiritual dimension of life, what is it that a human being can become? One of the foundational Christian beliefs is that Jesus was both human and God. The point of this teaching is not just to elevate Jesus above other people, but to call people to become what Jesus was—at one with God.

"Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity."

(maturity = *teleioteis*; —Letter to the Hebrew, 6:1)

To be at one or in union with God is to have "the mind of Christ," a fundamental overturning of our ordinary ways of thinking. The gospels tell us that the theme of Jesus' preaching was "repentance" (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15), which has come to be thought of as

feeling bad for our wrongdoings. But the Greek word is *metanoia*, “change (*meta*) of mind (*noos*),” a concept which is reflected in a passage from the apostle Paul:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed [*meta-morphosthe* = change of form] by the renewal of your mind [*noos*] that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect [*teleion*].”

—Paul (Romans 12:2)

Our ordinary ways of thinking are to be transformed into a new type of mind, one that can discern God’s will; in other words, to become a spiritually mature human being who thinks and acts in harmony with the divine spirit within.

“The unspiritual man<sup>2</sup> does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.”

—Paul (1 Corinthians 2:14-16)

### 3. Mysticism in Christian history

Since apostolic times Christians have continued to cultivate the knowledge and practice of mysticism and growth towards union with God. In the second century the common word for spiritually mature Christians was “gnostics,” meaning people holding true knowledge, with the sense of insight into spiritual truth. The debate over “gnosticism” was not whether such insight was possible, but what was true and false gnosticism, and who were the true and false gnostics. True gnosticism was thought of as the accurate interpretation of Christian teachings, and true gnostics were those with the spiritual maturity and insight to so interpret them. This debate went on before the New Testament was put together, and had a lot to do with which writings and

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<sup>2</sup> Literally, the “soulish” man. Paul distinguishes three types of spiritual condition: the *sarkikoi* (carnal people), those focused on bodily concerns; the *psychikoi*, people focused on the *psyche* or soul; and the *pneumatikoi* (spiritual people), those who have attained spiritual maturity.

teachings were ultimately accepted and which were rejected by the later Christian community.<sup>3</sup>

At the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire in the fourth century and crowds of people were joining the churches, some Christians had begun withdrawing into the desert in order to more effectively pursue spiritual growth. The monastic communities they created preserved and developed the teachings and practices meant to facilitate union with God, and passed them on to succeeding generations. On a theoretical level, intellectual understanding of mystical experience drew from Greek philosophical currents, particularly ideas derived from Plato (the “contemplative” tradition).<sup>4</sup> By the sixteenth century these intellectual traditions were systematized by writers such as Saint John of the Cross, who discussed the mystic path and the stages of spiritual growth in great detail. Although John and other writers dealt with experiences such as visions and ecstasies and how to discern their sources, they emphasized that union with God was the true aim of mysticism.<sup>5</sup>

But Christian mystics often lived in tension with political and religious authorities, who felt a responsibility to suppress those they regarded as false mystics as well as to uphold their own authority against any possible challenge. Church authorities often tried to regulate mysticism by confining it to religious orders operating under approved constitutions; it came to be regarded as something for a spiritual elite and not for ordinary lay people to dabble in.<sup>6</sup> Despite periodic reform efforts, many monasteries eventually became corrupted by political power, which led to their dissolution in Protestant nations.<sup>7</sup> Thus in Protestant Christianity the mystic tradition became marginalized, although the emphasis on direct spiritual experience later

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, Vol. I of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), 72-73, 96-99, 101-108. “Gnostics” and “Gnosticism” later came to be the terms used for teachers and teachings that lost in this struggle.

<sup>4</sup> McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, 131-182; William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, revised ed., trans. By Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991). This body of theoretical knowledge later came to be called “spiritual theology” in the Roman Catholic tradition; see Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 52-55.

<sup>6</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 65-90, 141-167.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 235-241; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2003), 85-87.

re-emerged in other forms, such as Quaker meetings and the evangelical movement.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile in Catholicism the attitude persisted that mysticism was something only for the select few, rare souls living in special communities set apart from worldly life.<sup>9</sup> Although ordinary laypeople in Western Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic, may have had mystic experiences, in effect they were largely ignorant of the accumulated knowledge and experience of the Christian mystic tradition.

#### **4. Conclusion: the current situation**

In the modern age, as science and rationalism gradually eroded traditional religious belief in Western nations, there was a tendency to stigmatize mystical experience as a form of psychological aberration. However, by the middle of the twentieth century mysticism had once again erupted from the underground. Experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs, interest in meditation and Eastern religions, the spread of Christian pentecostalism and the charismatic movement, and “New Age” practices, all, to one degree or another, have been manifestations of the perennial desire for direct experience of spiritual realities. Following a bit behind these there has been a growing interest in and awareness of Christian and other Western mystic traditions, along with the dissemination of many classic mystical texts. But this awareness has not spread far enough, for mysticism is still unfamiliar in many churches and often regarded with suspicion.

One of the problems of the current situation is the lack of institutions for recovering, revitalizing and further developing the Christian mystic tradition. Local churches that are open to it may offer programs in Christian meditation and mysticism, but ministers are not really trained for this and have many other responsibilities to attend to. Monastic communities and religious orders continue to play a role in revitalizing Christian mysticism, but have shrunk too small to effectively serve the needs of the larger Christian population, and do not provide the models for a lay form of mysticism that seems to be the great need of the times. Academic institutions have begun to institute programs on Christian spirituality, but their orientation is more toward the study of mysticism than its practice and development.

More promising has been the proliferation of various types of resource centers for spiritual growth, such as meditation centers and retreat houses. These often draw from the

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<sup>8</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 675-676.

<sup>9</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 53-54

experience of individuals and organizations adapting Eastern religions to the contemporary West. Much like the infusion of Platonic theory helped further the Christian mysticism of the early monastic era, the infusion of meditation practices and philosophical and psychological ideas from Eastern religions seems to be playing an essential role in furthering the development of Christian mysticism in the modern world.

Christianity has gone through surprising changes from its very beginnings, changes that were only later acknowledged to be inspired by God. The Acts of the Apostles in the Christian Bible tells the story of how the apostolic church gradually came to understand that God was leading it from a very Jewish form of Christianity, to one adapted to embracing the non-Jewish population. In our time the changes coming from the historic encounter of Christianity with Eastern religions are still in the beginning stages, but I predict that out of this will come a Christian mysticism that is more universal, and yet paradoxically even more true to the spirit of Christ than what preceded it.

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