

# THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ez. 36:26).

Heart transplantation is the essence of the Christian mystical process. The mystic at the apex of the mystical way loves the trinitarian God and his neighbour with God's own love. He possesses the heart of Jesus.

"My true love hath my heart and I have his  
By just exchange one for the other given  
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss  
There never was a bargain better driven."

Sir Philip Sidney expresses it neatly except that the exchange is scarcely just! It is a painful business. Perhaps the wisest writer on mysticism is the eighteenth century Jesuit Jean Pierre de Caussade. He is quoted in the excellent *Encyclopaedia of Mysticism* by John Ferguson (Thames & Hudson) as follows: "There is nothing more sublime than contemplation as we find it in books; nothing more beautiful or grander than passive prayer in theory. But in practice there is nothing more humiliating, more crucifying."

Contemporary writers on mysticism are almost universally concerned with two phenomena, "religious experience" or "mystical experience". This emphasis on "experience" rather than on "process" is utterly misleading. The *experience* is the by-product of the *process*. What matters is not the *experience* which is modified by temperament and culture but the *process* and its "fruits". The traditional fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. A Christian who does

not possess the fruits of the Holy Spirit has no right to the title of *mystic* however spectacular his inner experiences or psychic powers.

Nevertheless the "experiences" may have some utility either to the person called to the mystical path or to his or her guide. An "inner experience" is the emergence of a problem, an image, a word, a preoccupation, into consciousness—or an alteration of focus within consciousness itself. The more self-conscious or psychic the person is, the more likely he is to be able to monitor the process going on within him. Two recent books on mysticism (Ruth Burrows *Guidelines to Mystical Prayer* (Sheed & Ward) and Herbert Slade *Contemplative Intimacy* (MT) have independently argued that the visions of St. Teresa of Avila should be interpreted in terms of depth psychology. Slade asserts that her visions of Christ indicate the formation of an adequate animus image which evolved gradually into communicating symbols and then into authentic intellectual visions. "She had grown capable of envisaging the cosmic Christ". The individuation process is not identical with the mystic process but one may lead into or set off the other. The mystic is usually called to become fully human as well as fully Christian.

St. Teresa's visions can be understood more fully in the context of the individuation process than in the context of her progress up Mount Cannel. She herself was continually worried about whether her visions were authentic, i.e. from God. The teaching of St. John of the Cross was that no great store should be set on visions since they have nothing in common with union with God. Union with God consists of doing the will of God to the *nth* degree. While he was right in teaching that the visionary should be detached from his visions, St. John's teaching need not imply that the visionary should not examine them critically to discern what they indicate about himself (if not about God). The Ignatian rules for the discernment of spirits which direct the attention of the visionary to proximate effects of disturbances of consciousness, rather than to their content, might well have been more useful to St. Teresa than the blanket condemnation of these occurrences by St. John.

This point needs to be expanded since it touches on wider issues. If mystical experience is essentially a by-product of a mystical process going on in the depths of the soul (and this is the sum of traditional mystical theology) it is not surprising that the form "experience"

takes varies according to the psychological makeup and cultural experience of the mystic. The false inference that has been widely made throughout the centuries is that the "experience" can be said to be more or less "pure" inasmuch as it is imageless. Hence the talk of the common mystical "core" experience found in all religions. This is a misleading way of talking. It is more correct to assert that since all "experience" of God is indirect, no one form of that experience can be said to be purer or impurer than any other *on phenomenological grounds alone*. The source of the experience is indicated by its fruits not by its content and form.

Karl Rahner makes an important point in *Visions and Prophecies* (Burns & Oates): "...it can be said with but little exaggeration that the history of mystical theology is a history of the theological devaluation of the prophetic element in favour of non-prophetic 'pure', infused contemplation." Prophetic messages have by necessity to be less formless than mystical prayer but it cannot be denied that God speaks to his prophets as well as to his mystics.

The truth that God can speak to men through images as well as in a formless way has been stated most eloquently by Charles Williams. Beatrice was for Dante a living ikon, in the same way that Jesus was *the* living ikon of God. An incarnational religion must affirm as well as deny the utility of images in the religious life if it is not to become a kind of Platonism. Men, like Muhammad and Cromwell, who were naturally attuned to words and abstractions in their religious sensibility, have no right to deny images to those persons who find them helpful in their own way to God. The quarrel between the iconoclasts and the icon worshippers does not take its source from divine but from human nature. Renee Haynes suggests in *The Seeing Eye, The Seeing I* the preferences for image thinking or abstract thinking have biological roots.

St. John of the Cross, although a poet, was the great iconoclast of the inner life. Dante, Jung, and Blake are his antitheses. God Himself is beyond any image that we can affirm or deny of Him.

The argument has been designed to show that Christian mystical theology cannot advance without admitting that the way of the affirmation of images is just as genuine *qua mystical* path as the way of the rejection of images. Not everyone has to shut his eyes and travel in the dark as St. John of the Cross puts it); some people (and in particular poets) construct a symbolic calculus by which the infinite is expressed in finite terms as Coventry Patmore explains). However, for either type of mystic the important thing is not "experience" but obedience.

The way of the rejection of images and the way of the affirmation of images can be found in all the great religions of the world. What is unique to Christian mysticism?

The traditional teaching is that the three-personed God dwells in the soul of the mystic when he reaches the unitive way, and this indwelling is such that the mystic, without being any less of a unique person, now loves God and his neighbour with God's own love, agape. His heart is now made of flesh. Jesus Christ is the prototype of the man with the heart of flesh who loves with God's own love but, *in his case*, he loves as he does, not because of any transplant, but because he was God as well as man.

So, it is possible to say with Mrs. E. Herman, the neglected contemporary of Von Hugel and Evelyn Underhill, that "the pearl of great price that is hid for us in the field of Mysticism is *simple devotion and humble loving intimacy with Jesus as the secret of the mystic knowledge of God and the mystic communion with God*" (*The Meaning and Value of Mysticism* (J. Clarke)). Or, as De Caussade puts it: "Yes, dear souls, God asks for your heart only... For if your heart is wholly devoted to God it forthwith becomes this treasure, this very kingdom that you are desiring and seeking." (*Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* (Fontana)).

Union with God in Christ is the *sine qua non* of what Margaret Masterman calls "passionistic action" and the distinctive characteristic of Christian mysticism. "*Human passionistic action is action resulting from a 'state in which a human being is totally relaxed, fearless, and joyful* (and therefore supremely effective) *in circumstances which would normally inspire ultimate horror, terror and collapse.*" (*Theoria to Theory* 1973).

The spirit of the martyr is the spirit of the mystic. He dies and rises with Christ.

Since God has spoken at sundry times and in divers manners Christians cannot cavil at the idea that non-Christians can and do attain knowledge of and some type of union with God. What they can dispute is that non-Christians know God as the Risen Lord.

An adequate understanding of human psychology is the prerequisite of a scientific, yet theologically correct, analysis of the effect of the mystical process on the human being. The St. John of the Cross or Benedict XIV of the twentieth century would undoubtedly be interested in parapsychology.