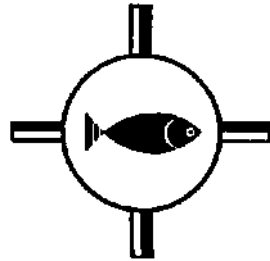


LIBERAL CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF STUDIES



Unit 14

THEOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM

Paper 3

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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140.003. Printed in Australia

Christian Mysticism

by

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The Literature on Mysticism is very extensive. No particular book is prescribed for this paper.

Suitable for general reading are:

Happold, F. C. *Mysticism* (Penguin 1975)

Underhill, E. *Mysticism* (Methuen 1911)

(see also the Bibliography)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Behold, I show you a mystery
 "(1. Corr. 15,51)

"And He said unto them – Unto you it is
 given to know the mystery of the kingdom
 of God
 "(Mark. 4,11)

There is a complete unanimity amongst the mystics of all times and places and religions, and it is this: their experience is that underlying all things is a oneness, a unity; and the essence of this is Love. They find it hard to express this oneness and their experience of it in words, yet since words are the medium of communication, at least at the beginning, they needs must try to find the right words. Words not so much to persuade by argument as to excite towards that experience. To experience for oneself is the trend in religious matters today. Sir Hugh Sykes, then our Presiding Bishop, wrote in the preface to the fourth edition of our Liturgy (1967) "While emphasis within religion is gradually shifting from dogmatic statement to acceptance of living experience ...our way to unity lies... through the open altar" to which one could add, and the mystery shown thereon, for there we are "drawn into wondrous and mystic communion." (Liturgy 5th ed. p. 220 and p. 237).

To return to the difficulties of using words. If you consider the phrase "a oneness, a unity," the difficulty becomes obvious because the moment you think about oneness there are two things involved; you and what you are thinking about, - there is no longer one-ness. To experience one-ness means going beyond thought to a world in which knowing is by identification; a world in which there is no duality, no relationship between you and it, no separateness, only identification or at-one-ment. This is the world of the mystic.

In the Cloud of Unknowing (Chapter 6) the author, referring to God and to that Unity, wrote "He may well be loved, but not thought. By Love may He be caught and held; but by thought never." Again, immediately, we are in trouble with a word. What can that word "love" mean? Surely it is more than sentiment, more than can be known by the personality, more even than the fundamental force of attraction in the Universe. Perhaps it is a word meant to be used as a symbol, something to excite you towards an experience rather than as a definitive description. The English language uses the word "love" to describe a great variety of things; and it places an understanding of the appropriate meaning on the one using or hearing the word. Greek has many words for love and of these, Agape is perhaps nearest to the use we are discussing because it has a connotation of "essentiality of being", of That without which nothing is or can be. It is a word-symbol worthy of your meditation and contemplation. ¹

It follows that a paper such as this cannot be meant to persuade by words, nor can it appeal to the words of others as to authority, although it may use them as examples. Perhaps it

¹ An excellent article on this subject is in the "Liberal Catholic" for February 1984, Vol. LIII No. 1.

may help to excite you towards the mystical experience, or it may help to reinforce you there. An exciting process it is, for the mystical experience represents the "last frontier", the great challenge - in the words of St. Augustine: "People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, or the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass themselves by without wondering."

WHY SEEK THE MYSTIC EXPERIENCE? WHY NOW?

I believe that there are compelling and down-to-earth reasons why we have to seek the mystical experience actively and urgently. They derive from the force of evolution itself.

At times just before great historical changes there comes a flowering of mysticism. Plato, the "Father of Christian Mysticism", lived at a time when great changes were in the offing; St. Augustine was writing at a time when the Roman empire was collapsing; the medieval mystics at the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation; and there are signs that this present time is one when men may take a major step forward in their evolution. ² Nuclear weapons make the choices all too plain, mankind either must learn to live in harmony as one humanity or it will destroy itself. For men to live in harmony they must first perceive how much it is to their advantage to do so, that to harm another is to hurt themselves, that all are in fact part of the one greater whole, Humanity.

Is not this exactly the mystical experience; that there is a one-ness underlying all things? As more and more people perceive this as a fact within their own experience will not warfare and the use of nuclear weapons become more and more pointless? There is evidence (outlined below) that a relatively small number of people who do realize this fact could start a chain reaction so that the pointlessness of war would be "socially accepted", become a fact accepted as obvious, and men would cease from making war on, from harming, their neighbors. ³

You can see a similar process in the "social acceptability" of smoking. A few decades ago a man who was "a man" smoked this or that tobacco, which variety depended on the particular advertiser. A few people saw the dangers involved in smoking; gradually more and more people realized these as fact, until now you find, for example, smoking allowed in parts only of an aircraft - whereas all seats still have an ash tray! Smoking has become much less socially accepted.

THE "ONE-NESS" OF THE MYSTIC AND THE "WHOLENESS" OF PHILOSOPHY

To return to the much more dangerous nuclear weapons. The study of physics, especially of small particles, has led to descriptions of these that use the language of the mystics. For example, consider this statement: the observer and the act of observation, affect the thing observed ⁴ (I paraphrase), and compare it with "when you think **about** a one-ness, immediately there are two things involved, you and the thing you think about". Compare the saying of the mystics that "un-

² If you are interested in the indicators that man's evolution is at a point of decision, a crisis point, see *The Awakening Earth, Up from Eden, The Atman Project and The Turning Point*. Details are in the bibliography.

³ See especially *The Awakening Earth*, listed in the bibliography, on this point.

⁴ For those interested in the relationship between the physics of small particles and mysticism, see especially, *The Tao of Physics, Wholeness and the Implicate order, The Turning Point* - details are in the bibliography.

derlying all things is a one-ness" with this from a famous theoretical physicist* Albert Einstein, "The Universe is one unit, ruled by one law".

Holistic philosophy, the view that sees each thing as a whole, and as part of a greater whole, is becoming more accepted. Medicine seeks to treat the whole patient rather than a particular part of him; education is for the whole of life, not only for a particular occupation; the environment is not seen as separate from the living things in it; the social system sees need to care for the sick, the disabled, the unemployed; co-operation between members of a team or group is preferred to senseless competition. These changes in attitude are by no means complete, but they are there, and there is an accelerating rate of change to ensure their increase. Such changes are towards a unity, a wholeness as is the mystic way.

THE MYSTIC WAY IS NOT IMPRACTICABLE

Some people consider mysticism to be unreal, impracticable, other-worldly.

It is not so. The knowing of the mystic is very clear, very precise and very certain, far more certain than the knowing that the mind can achieve; and which is then subject to argument. Perhaps we should consider how these misconceptions may have come about and thereby increase our understanding of mysticism.

The word mystery has its root in the Greek *muo*, to shut or close the lips or eyes. To close the lips - how far should one go in trying to describe in words that which is indescribable? On this subject the Christian Master said, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs...lest they trample (it) under their feet" (Matt. 7.6), which I think means do not talk of things which are, as yet, beyond the understanding of your audience. In another religion it is said that "The Tao which can be spoken is not the true Tao." Perhaps to learn to keep the lips closed, to learn control of speech, is a necessary step before even approaching the mysteries. Similarly, to close the eyes. Do you not do this yourself in preparation for meditation or prayer? To close the eyes in the meaning of closing off one's senses from the lower worlds is an essential preliminary step before approaching any mystery, it is part of the purification stage on the mystic way of purification, illumination in contemplation, and unification.

In earlier times, keeping one's mouth shut concerning the mysteries may have provided a needed protection. That quotation from St. Matthew goes on, "...lest they trample it under their feet, and turn again and rend you." It is not too long ago that people were tortured and killed for views different from those currently accepted.

To return to modern times. No one would regard physics as unreal or impracticable in face of the computer, of radio and T.V., of interspace travel, of nuclear weapons; but the language of physics, especially the physics of small particles now comes close to that of the mystics. Please consider as examples these comments from leading physicists. From Albert Einstein "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger...is as good as dead" and "Imagination is more important than knowledge." From Gyorgi "The basic texture of research consists of dreams into which the threads of reasoning, measurement and calculation are woven." And this from Fritjof Capra "Sub-atomic particles are...not isolated grains of matter but...probability patterns, inter-connections in an inseparable cosmic web...the universe...(is)...one indivisible dynamic whole...at

the sub-atomic level...the interrelations...between the parts of the whole are more fundamental than the parts themselves...there is motion but...no moving objects... there are no dancers, there is only the dance." Compare that last phrase with any description of *Fohat* ⁵

Physics and mysticism are drawing close together, too close to label one real and the other unreal, impracticable, other-worldly. Perhaps we should not be too surprised at this drawing together because both use the same approach of experiment and observation, the one starting from the material world, the other from an inner world. That they reach similar conclusions is not surprising because their main difference is that they start from different ends of the stick. Both find it hard to get the right words to describe their results, and so the physicist rests on his mathematical symbols and the mystic on his.

One definition of mysticism is that it is "the experimental knowledge of God," a matter of experience, not of woolly minded speculation. Physics, which started as the experimental study of matter, finds itself having to speak of a "whole" or, in a mystic's terms, the one-ness that is God. Now, if you want to experience for yourself in physics you must learn to construct and use the appropriate apparatus; if you want to play Bach on the piano you must undergo a period of learning and training, of preparation of your apparatus of hand, eye, and brain co-ordination; if you want to follow the Mystic Way you must tread the path of purification and contemplation.

The choice is yours, it must always be yours. If you have a will to it, the mystic experience, the experimental knowledge of God, can be attained. There are cogent reasons why this work should be undertaken, some are outlined above in the section entitled "Why seek the mystic experience" and to these can be added specific reasons applicable to those training for the priesthood. They are centred on the Eucharist, which is itself central to our Church and its work, and which can be celebrated only by an ordained priest and no other, however erudite or clever or pious he may be. In that Eucharist we are "drawn into wondrous and mystic communion" with the Master Himself. It is a mystic communion, a state beyond words, beyond the reach of the mind. It behoves a priest to understand that state as best he can; which means starting along the mystic way.

⁵ See H.P. Blavatsky: *The Secret Doctrine*.

CHAPTER 2: THE STAGES ON THE MYSTIC WAY

The stages on the mystic way are those of preparation by purification, illumination in contemplation, and of unification; but beware the discursive mind which regards these as sequential steps. Consider the analogy of a pianist; he starts not by preparation alone but by attempting small pieces, gradually the light dawns both as to technique and to the understanding of the music; and all three stages are there when the concert pianist starts to understand, to identify with, to become one with the composer. Even then unity is not perfect, much more study and practice are needed for that.

Here is an example of a mystic experience that befell a young man on a cricket field, awaiting his turn to bat, and which shows that the stages are not necessarily sequential; one does not have to be complete before the next one is started. (It is taken from *Mysticism* by F.C. Happold which quotes from Margaret Isherwood, *The Root of the Matter*.)

One summer afternoon,...I was thinking about nothing in particular... suddenly and without warning, something invisible seemed to be drawn across the sky, transforming the world about me into a kind of tent of concentrated and enhanced significance. What had been merely an outside became an inside. The objective was somehow transformed into a completely subjective fact...The event made a deep impression on me but, because it did not fit into any of the thought patterns with which... I was familiar it...was finally forgotten .

There is an appropriate quotation from St. John (3.8) "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit".

THE PURIFICATION STAGE

The purification stage essentially is one of non-attachment to the ego-centric life, and one of a continuous cleansing of the perceptions. St. John of the Cross, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* gives these directions:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,

Desire to have pleasure in nothing.

In order to arrive at possessing everything,

Desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at being everything,

Desire to be nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything,

Desire to know nothing...

(for) When the mind dwells on anything,

Thou art ceasing to cast thyself upon the All.

For in order to pass from the all to the All Thou hast to deny thyself wholly in all.

An even more succinct expression of this, one that can be easily carried in the mind throughout the day is this: "Desire nothing; refuse nothing."

There is a paradox of course between "desire nothing" and the urge to pursue the mystic way, the desire to know God. But there can be desire-less desire. Reflect on the invitation (Matt. 6.28) to "Consider the lilies of the field..." or the injunction to "grow as the flowers grow"—they yearn towards the light, yet they do not desire to possess the light. The essential attitude is to

desire nothing for the separated self (not even progress) whilst obeying the commandment "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Matt. 22.37, Mark 11.30, Luke 10.27). Half measures will not do. It must be all thy heart-- only then is there no room left to desire anything else.

All the mystics agree that it is necessary to achieve non-attachment to the things of the separated self; each puts it in terms suited to his own understanding and nature. St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee," a thought repeated in the Confiteor in our own Liturgy: "Our hearts are ever restless till they find their rest in Thee." The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* is characteristically blunt when he writes of a "naked intent": "Your whole life must now be one of longing (for God)...a naked intention directed to God...alone" is necessary.

But there is no violence here, no violent effort even, more a quiet persistence, a determination that is unstoppable. One cannot imagine anything less violent than a young plant, yet the growing tip exerts a force such that it can push through small cracks in concrete.

There are many paths along this Way of purification, perhaps as many as the number of people who tread it. An essay such as this can do no more than point to the Way and refer the reader to sources of information (such as the bibliography at the end of this article). It can also gently remind the reader that it is his own experience that matters, his treading of that Way, and it can do this in the words of St. Teresa who wrote in her *Life* that we are wrong if we think that in the course of years we are bound to understand things that cannot possibly be attained without experience."

ILLUMINATION AND CONTEMPLATION

This stage requires a transcendence ⁶ of the abilities of the discursive mind.

All the mystics agree that although the mind is used in study and meditation to prepare the ground, and although it is in no way discarded or harmed, yet only when it is still, "held steady in the light," can there come a transcendence of its abilities. In the words of that young man on the cricket field that which was "objective was... transformed into a completely subjective fact." Instead of knowing about anything, one "becomes" the thing.

Here are a few examples of the mystic's writing on the need to transcend the discursive mind. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, referring to God, writes: "By love may He be caught and held; by thought never" and "Only to our intellect is He incomprehensible: not to our love." St. John of the Cross, never one to mince or waste words, writes: "He...who shall labour to attain union with the wisdom of God in reliance on his own wisdom and skill, is supremely ignorant and infinitely distant therefrom" (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*). (This raises the subject of grace, since St. John says that the higher levels of mysticism, and he talks of Union with God, cannot be reached through our own abilities and efforts; that help is needed, that help called "grace." It is a point discussed a little in the later section on Union.) St. Teresa has a more gentle use of words: "...there are things to a knowledge of which no man however learned can attain..." (*Life*) and..."the important thing is not to think much but to love much..." (*The Interior Castle*).

⁶ For an up-to-date discussion of transcendence and the need for it, see *Up from Eden*.

You see the mind has a logic of its own (not the only logic possible but one suited to its needs and abilities) and mysticism (or love if you like) has a logic of its own, aptly called a "logic of wonder." It follows that the symbols used are different in meaning. The mind uses words, or mathematical symbols for an abstract sense; mystic logic has to try to express its symbols in words if it is to convey something of their meaning to other minds. The trouble comes when the words used by the mind and by the mystic are the same, or similar, whilst the meanings of the symbols are not the same. That is why if one wants to make sense of mysticism one has to learn the meanings by experience.

Meditation, at least in its early stages, is of the mind. Consequently, techniques of meditation can be described in words, (please refer to the bibliography for details of books on meditative technique, or to the appropriate other papers in this course) but to describe contemplation is more difficult. A good description of how meditation can clip into contemplation is this taken from *The Journey Inwards* :

...a deep slow brooding and pondering, a deliberate effort of attention and concentration, an equally deliberate effort to bring the mind to a complete state of stillness, culminates at length in the consciousness... finding itself in a plane characterised by an immense increase in receptivity, an almost complete suspension of the reflective powers and surface consciousness, and a strange indescribable silence. The self is content to rest in a new level of vivid awareness marked by a deep peace and a living stillness.

Many, especially those in the Church, can reach this stage in prayer; the Prayer of Silent Regard is the technical name for it, and it can, through Grace, merge into the Prayer of Quiet. The later section on Prayer discusses the stages of Prayer a little more.

This "vivid awareness" is a thing all the mystics agree on. With the senses quiet they seem to be more alive than ever, with the mind still it is more receptive than before; and then can come a knowing that is certain and sure.

The poet Tennyson found it thus "Individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this was not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the sure, utterly beyond words..." That which could be argued and debated before is now beyond argument, or, put differently, there is no longer any point in debating things which are known with certainty. This is not a reasonless and unreasoning closing of the mind, but a certainty that Handel must have experienced when he wrote in the *Messiah*: "I know that my redeemer liveth."

With the certainty comes peace because there is no longer any possibility of conflict; and with that coming there is then a complete loss of fear. "There is nothing within the world or without it that can make us afraid" was the feeling engendered in the novelist Winifred Holtby by a mystical experience, although she knew then that she would soon die (see *Mysticism*, F.C. Happold, p. 131). St. Paul described it in these words: "I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels,...nor things present, nor things to come,...nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8.38-39). Please allow for the changing meanings of words with time. St. Paul was not "persuaded" in the sense that verbal argument had moved him, but in the more original meaning of being sure, through and through.

There is another characteristic of the mystic experience that must be mentioned here. It has a time-less quality, time seems to stand still, things happen in a flash yet still in an ordered

sequence; and the state engendered, although leaving an indelible and an unforgettable mark, nevertheless subsides to a more "normal" level. One cannot live for too long in that state, the strain is too great, at least for most of us. It may be a different matter when it is consciously achievable at will, as, for example, by St. John of the Cross. Fear too can gradually re-assert its hold, albeit a weaker hold than before. St. Teresa, that gentlest of the gentle mystics, was moved almost to asperity on such an occasion "He will not fail you...either you believe this or you do not; if you do...why do you wear yourselves to death with worry?" (*The way of Perfection*).

If ever you doubt the value of even these early steps along the Mystic Way, just think of the effect a complete absence of fear would have on the lives of those near you, and on the world situation. Individual people would have no need of those psychological reinforcements that can cause so much friction between people they no longer would need to keep up with the Jones', no longer seek reassurance of their status in their jobs, their homes, their family-life; they would have none of those stresses brought on by the fear of being "unable to cope" which do so much damage. Imagine a society in which labor had nothing to fear from employers, where manufacturers and traders had no fear of unions and strikes; imagine a world in which neither super-power feared the other, where no country feared economic collapse because of the actions of another.

The huge advantages of a world free from fear are obvious—but perhaps you may feel that your contribution would be too small to be effective? Studies ⁷ have indicated that one person's state of consciousness can have a direct effect on others, that there is a mind-linking process, that enlightenment is contagious, that there is a sort of chain reaction after a critical threshold is passed, so that only a small number of things (or people) need to act coherently for their effects to dominate. For an example from physics, please consider how light is reflected from a metal surface, yet coherent laser light can drill a hole through hardened steel. So it is with people; estimates of the number of people who are striving to raise their own consciousness that are required to affect the consciousness of the population in which they live, range from 0.1 to 1%. Other studies indicate that the number of people taking up work to raise their consciousness doubles about every four years.

If I emphasize the point at the risk of overmuch repetition, it is because it seems important at this time, when the affairs of men are tending towards a crisis. The choice facing humanity is to learn to live in some sort of harmony or perish, and the essential pre-requisite for men to live in harmony is that human consciousness must be raised to a level at which men want to live in harmony because they see how much it would be to their own advantage. If the mind-links which

⁷ Some of these are outlined in *The Awakening Earth* by Peter Russell (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1982). For example, and to whet your appetite to read, the story of McDougall's rats at Harvard in the 1920's. It was found that the progeny of rats who had learned to find their way out of a maze, learned that task quicker than their forbears — an experiment repeated and enlarged on in other places and at later times. Or the work of Targ and Puthoff at Stanford University, who took pairs of people who were related by blood or other ties, placed them in separate rooms, and flashed a light into the eyes of one. This causes an increase in the alpha rhythm of the brain which can be recorded. The other partners could not predict when the light flashed, but their alpha rhythm increased at the same time. Although they were consciously unaware of the stimulant applied to their partner, their brain registered it.

are indicated by studies and affirmed by the mystics from their own direct experience are real, then a relatively few people can, by raising their own consciousness, render a very great service to the rest. This stage along the Mystic Way is within the reach of all of us, if we have a will to it and if we put in the necessary effort; and, moreover it can be reached whilst living in the world, living what the mystics call "the active life."

The master of the Christian Church said, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me " (St. John 12.32) and I think there is no irreverence in suggesting that His priests should follow His way⁸ and in the raising of their own consciousness contribute some small service to their fellow men. Indeed, what other excuse could there be for spending any time and effort on oneself or one's own consciousness? The mystics all say—seek nothing for the separated self, seek only God himself. Perhaps to seek God in this service of your fellow man is an aspect that is appropriate to the 20th century mind and to this particular time.

UNION

The third stage along the Mystic Way is that of Union with God. About this I can write little because I know little; the best I can do is offer quotations from those who do know. 'It is a state beyond the mind's abilities since "the relative has become the Absolute" (from Jami, a Persian poet) and the mind can function only in a world of relativity. The most that can be done is to speak about it rather than to describe it, or to use words that are enigmatic and so leave realization to the understanding and experience of the listener. (See the quotations from St. Teresa and St. Paul).

St. John of the Cross (*The Spiritual Canticle*) writes "Then the two natures are so united, what is divine so communicated to what is human, that without undergoing any essential change, each seems to be God—yet not perfectly so in this life, though still in a manner which can neither be described or conceived." Ruysbroeck in *The Spiritual Marriage* wrote "...to comprehend and understand God above all similitudes, such as He is in Himself, is to be with God, without intermediary and without any otherness..." and in *The Sparkling Stone*, "yet...we must eternally remain other than God, and distinct from Him... and we must understand and feel both within us..." In the *Theologica Germanica* it is written that one is "imbued or illuminated by the Eternal or Divine Light and inflamed or consumed by Eternal or Divine Love." St. Teresa's gentle simile of water likens union to "water falling from the sky into a river... where the waters are united, and it would no longer be possible to divide them, or to separate the water of the river from that which has fallen from the heavens."

Perhaps the language of poetry is more suited. St. John of the Cross writing of the garden of lilies where the soul is united with the Beloved in the secret Silence:

"All things I then forgot
My cheek on Him
who for my coming came.
All ceased, and I was not,
Leaving my cares and shame
Among the lilies, and forgetting them."

⁸ "His way" includes, of course, the celebration of the Eucharist. Perhaps this is the most effective and the best way we have of raising our own consciousness whilst performing an act of service in which there is no thought of self.

This state of conscious union may be beyond us at present, yet we should remember the prayer of the Master of the Christian Church that, "they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us " (John 17.21). We pray at every Eucharist that the Lord's "many children may know themselves to be one in Thee, even as Thou art one with the Father," and we recognize that it is an act of Grace when He "graciously draws us into wondrous and mystic communion." Consequently our taking part in the Eucharist may be the most important work we do—and the most effective.

CHAPTER 3: PRAYER

For many who follow the way of the Christian Mystics, the way to that "deep peace...(and) vivid awareness" is through prayer. It is a way that is particularly appropriate for those training for the priesthood. Yet some see prayer as a thing of the emotions, meditation as of the mind; and in the thought climate of the 1980's they see mind development as necessary and desirable, emotiveness as something less, something to be controlled by the use of the mind. This may have its roots in earlier teaching to use prayer as supplication, asking for what one desires whether this be a new bicycle, or protection from worldly circumstance or even progress in spiritual things. Prayer is much more than this. Mystic prayer goes beyond the mind, it is the means by which each can approach knowledge of God who "by love may be caught and held" (*Cloud of Unknowing*). It is a means towards an identification, or as the mystics would say a union, with God.

St. Athanasius wrote "Christ became man in order that man might become God" (*De Incarnatione*) but perhaps the words would be more comfortable to 20th century ears if the last part were rephrased—in order that man might become one with God.

Prayer is a way of becoming united to, of participating in, Spirit, God. That union...can only be brought about by a transformation of the lower nature by raising it to a different level of consciousness. What happens when this...takes place is described by St. Paul⁹: I am crucified with Christ, yet still I live...but it is...no longer my old...self which lives. It is now Christ who lives in me. Christ has "become" me: I have "become" Christ.

(*The Journey Inwards*)

Certainly prayer can be studied, but it matters more that it be experienced.

For one mystic it became "The Practice of the Presence of God"¹⁰; for all mystics it is a way of life everything, all thoughts, words and deeds are prayer so much so that the life becomes merged with God. The analogy used earlier of the pianist may assist understanding—after much practice the pianist and the composer become very close, so close that it is almost as if the composer directs the fingers and brain of the pianist, yet to all outward appearance the pianist is the same as before.

For us who are beginning this Way there are directions and simple pieces to practice. Walter Hilton's, *The Ladder of Perfection* has chapters (24-33) on prayer, the reasons for it and the manner of it; as also, *The cloud of Unknowing* (Chapters 37 and 38 especially). Perhaps the easiest to read is the description of stages given by St. Teresa of Avila in her *Life*, chapters 11 and 14-18 especially. Her style is charming in her refusal to be "clever"; it is effective because of her humility and truthfulness and it speaks directly to the heart of every man because its similes are known to the experience of all. But a word of warning and a plea that if you read or re-read, as I hope you will, the writings of these mystics of earlier times, you should allow for the idiom of those times. The manners and language and turn of phrase that suited those times, their circumstances and history were different from those of today, and even when the words are rendered

⁹ The quotation is from Galatians 2.20. A shortened form of the Greek is: *Christo sunestaurōmai — ouketi ego—en emoi Christos*. If you use this form in your prayer, you may find that it has a mantric effect.

¹⁰ The title of a book by Brother Lawrence, who spent much of his life working in a kitchen and there found that Presence.

into modern English with the utmost care—yet still they may sound foreign and strange to your understanding. If you want to appreciate them you must seek to match your understanding of the words with theirs. As the mystics might say, if you seek this "pearl of great price" (Matt. 13.46) you must dig for it.

ST. TERESA ON PRAYER

I will try to paraphrase St. Teresa on prayer, in the hope that these snatches will whet your appetite to read and practice for yourself, or if you do this already, that it may refresh you as does the gentle rain her garden. The beginner in prayer, she writes, might "think of himself as of one setting out to make a garden in which the Lord is to take His delight." The soil may be unfruitful and full of weeds but you can rely that "He will uproot the weeds and set good plants in their place."¹¹

"We have...to make these plants grow, and to water them carefully." "Beginners in prayer (are like) those who draw up water from a well "using a bucket and rope, which is hard work—as hard as their having to keep their senses recollected" whereas their minds are used to a life of distraction. "Beginners must accustom themselves to pay no heed to what they see or hear...they must practice this during hours of prayer...they must be alone...and think over their past life...then meditate upon the life of Christ" and this will exercise the mind. There will be times when the well seems to be dry when "we cannot think a single good thought" then we should water the flowers with our "tears" that is "tenderness and an interior feeling of devotion."¹²

She describes in some detail (in two chapters) the trials and tribulations of this spiritual aridity, the times when the will seems dry; and how best we may cope.

Do read this for yourself for if I pick out one or two bits then what is left out may be just the part you need. Two things are important. Firstly, we can trust the Master to keep the plants alive, so we should not worry about that. Secondly, it is our job to keep on lowering the bucket for water even if it keeps coming up empty; until it does contain a few drops of water as it will eventually. This may take a while. St. Teresa writes "...I endured (these trials, these periods of aridity) for many years and when I was able to draw up but one drop of water" she felt amply rewarded. Perseverance, endurance, is what is most needed (see Matt. 10.22) plus humility and trust. "Forget yourself and all that you have done, both good and evil. Seek His Presence yourself and all that you have done, both good and evil. Seek His Presence in humility and trust...you will undoubtedly find it." (*The Ladder of Perfection*).

This is a supernatural thing, which we cannot attain by any effort on our own part. The soul rests in peace...all powers at rest... understanding with an understanding quite different from that given by the external senses that she is now quite close to God and that, if she drew a little nearer, she would become one thing with Him by union... She does not know how she understands; she sees only that she is in the

¹¹ This is worth thinking about if you are one of the school which believes you have to dig up your own "weeds". It is worth relating it to the injunction to "Grow as the flowers grow."

¹² St. John of the Cross (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 2, Chapter 15) puts it thus: "When the spiritual man is unable to meditate, let him learn to remain in loving attention to God, in the quiet of his understanding, though he may seem to be doing nothing."

Kingdom...It is like the suspension of all internal and external powers...the faculties are at peace and do not wish to move...so completely happy...

(The Way of Perfection)

Gradually the hard work becomes lighter, or it seems so; eventually it merges into a second stage, the Prayer of Quiet, likened to using a windlass to draw water from the well so that more water is drawn for the same amount of effort. There comes, writes St. Teresa, "a burning desire to make progress in prayer, and not to abandon it, however great the trials it brings us, we offer ourselves wholly to Him...we experience a security combined with humility...we realize that there is beginning to develop within us a love of God entirely devoid of self-interest, and we desire...solitude"...so that that love may come to greater fruition. "The flowers (in our garden)...are almost ready to bloom."

In the third stage, it is as if the garden is watered for us by a stream.

The faculties are almost in a state of suspension as if they belonged to an interested by-stander, but the sweetness is such that there is no concern that one's faculties may be lost or slip out of control. St. Teresa writes "In this state it is well for the soul to abandon itself wholly into the arms of God...it no longer belongs to itself, it is given wholly to the Lord, it can cease to worry all together...humility...is much greater and deeper for (the soul) sees clearly that it has done nothing at all of itself..."

The fourth stage, when rain waters the garden "often comes when the gardener least expects it." These words were put into St. Teresa's mind at such a time... (The soul) "dies to itself wholly...in order that it may fix itself more and more upon Me; it is no longer itself that lives, but I...". One is reminded Of the prayer of St. Paul ; "*Christo sunestaurömai - ouketi ego - en emoi Christos*" - "I am crucified in Christ - yet I live, but it is no longer I which lives, but Christ within me."

St. Teresa writes:

Sometimes... I have been so completely beside myself that I have not known whether it has been a dream or whether the bliss that I have been experiencing has really come to me...I have only known that it has not been a dream through finding myself bathed in tears, which have been flowing without causing me any distress...(The Soul) is alone with Him: what is there for it to do but love Him?...Almost without knowing it, and doing nothing consciously to that end, (the soul) begins to benefit its neighbours, and they become aware of this benefit because the flowers now have so powerful a fragrance. ..

In the words of our Liturgy (pg. 220, 5th edition) "the fragrance of a holy life".

As with all attempts at cataloguing, in subjects such as mysticism there are always intermediate stages. The Prayer of Simplicity and Silent Regard is one such that precedes the Prayer of Quiet. I mention it because it lies within the reach of all of us. In earlier stages the mental faculties are wide awake, one moves in a world of forms and images. Gradually one moves into a world where thought and imagination fade out and time seems to exist no more. It has been described as a state in which "You look at Him, and He looks at you." To move into the Prayer of Quiet is the result of an act of Grace; it is given, one cannot do more than prepare oneself and wait "in humility and trust".

CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY

I will try to summarize the main theses of this paper. I have tried to avoid a catalogue of the Christian Mystics and to not draw comparison between them because I believe that to label some as intellectual or living or Christo-centric or by any other term, can mislead. The mind can lull us into a false sense of thinking we know all about a thing we have labelled whereas in fact all we have done is label it.

The mystic way is primarily one of experience although study can contribute to it—St. Teresa in *Life* puts it thus: "...it is extraordinary what a difference there is between understanding a thing and knowing it by experience Each one must choose their own path along it, selecting that closest to their own heart, and so I have tried to spread before you a feast of delicacies taken from the experiences of the mystics, for I myself have no great ability in these things. Choose what you will—only then follow it whole-heartedly. There is enough to delight the mind, even to exercise it to exhaustion and silence, if that is your choice. Then illumination may come. If you choose the "Royal road of the Holy Cross", the way of Love—and the author of "The Cloud" says bluntly "By love may He be caught and held; by thought never" there are sign posts for you to follow.

The way, according to St. John of the Cross, "consists not in the multiplicity of meditations...devotions or sweetness, though these may be necessary for beginners, but...in one thing only...(each must) deny himself...annihilate himself...if (he be) deficient in this...all he may do will be but beating the air...utterly profitless." (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*). All the mystics say this, each in his own way—seek nothing for the separated self.

Learning to pray, and it is a thing to be learnt, is both a means of progress along this Way and a powerful tool. It is especially suited to those in training for the priesthood and for long after their ordination, indeed it can be seen to be indispensable. Prayer, according to the author of "The Cloud" is "the lifting of the heart to God;" when that is done there is no room left for, nor is there any wish to pay any attention to one's own small self.

There come times when there is aridity, a feeling of not getting anywhere. What else would one expect? These are necessary times of digestion, of building earlier achievement into one's nature so that the next step forward is from a sure foundation. At such times we must persevere, endure; as St. John of the Cross advises "when the spiritual man is unable to meditate, let him learn to remain in loving attention to God..." (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*). All the mystics agree that we must do the spadework for ourselves, the work required for purification and preparation. Then, though longing, we must await the Grace that enables our next step forward. It is essential that we remain open, receptive; and wait on that Grace. Walter Hilton in *The Ladder of Perfection*, wrote, "Forget yourself and all that you have done, both good and evil. Seek His Presence with humility and trust..." This need to wait "in loving attention" may be hard to understand, especially if one has grown up in the busy world, but one should remember that "a thing is not impossible (just) because (one) cannot understand it." (St. Teresa's *Life*).

In all but the higher stages the way of the mystic can be followed by anyone who wills to do so and who puts in the effort. It can be done whilst living "the active life" in the world. In the past there has been a flowering of mysticism at times when the affairs of man had reached a crisis, a point of decision, and a huge evolutionary step forward was becoming possible, for a similar crisis point. Nuclear weapons pose the choice to live in some sort of harmony, or perish. For men to

choose to live in harmony they first need to perceive the great advantages to themselves of so doing, and that perception implies a raising of consciousness which in turn imposes a duty on those who can do this for themselves, because by raising their own level of awareness they heighten the perceptions of all men. With that raising come moments of illumination that bring a certainty and clarity of knowing not experienced by the mind, a surety that underlying all things is a one-ness of which the essence is Love. In that state, all fear goes for "perfect love casteth out fear" (1. John 4.18). Moments of illumination are all they can be for us because they impose a strain, yet the moment is enough, it cannot be forgotten. Although it may be overlain by the busy-ness of the world, it will recur, often at a time of great stress when we feel that we can take no more and we relapse into silence because we have exhausted our abilities; times when, as St. John of the Cross puts it, "everything fails us, when reason is powerless to suggest relief, we can lift up our eyes to Thee only..." (The Ascent of Mount Carmel).

Of the stage on the mystic way that is conscious union with God, little can be said, for it is one where "the relative has become the Absolute," there is no separation, no pairs of opposites, only the One. It is beyond us now but we may experience a foretaste of it in the Eucharist when we pray "...so may thy many children know themselves to be one in Thee, even as thou art one with the Father" and when we are drawn into "wondrous and mystic communion" with the Lord.

Our Church is a mystic Church—our Statement of Principles says we seek to combine the "sacramental form of worship, with its stately ritual, its deep mysticism...with the widest measure of intellectual liberty...", our Liturgy is full of the sayings of the mystics, we speak in the Eucharist of communion as "wondrous and mystic." The Eucharist is central to the work of our Church, its celebration the most important work of our priests. Only a priest ordained to offer this sacrifice can do the work, no other can, however learned and pious he may be. The closer a priest can come to the mystic experience, the more effective will be his part in it.

POSTSCRIPT

Thank you for reading thus far, and for bearing with the repetitions. Sometimes when a thing is repeated in slightly different words or in a slightly different way, the meaning becomes suddenly clear. This must be my excuse for the repetitions, for quoting from this or that mystic on the same point.

Do please read the mystics with your heart as well as your mind if you would understand them, and follow them so that:

When to the-new eyes of thee All things by immortal power,
Near or far,
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star...
Seek no more...O, seek no more

(Francis Thompson, "The Mistress of Vision")

There remains to offer you two pieces; the one on mystical, contemplative prayer in the prose of Bishop Ignatius Brianchanov:

It is one thing to pray with attention and with the participation of the heart; it is another to descend with the mind into the temple of the heart and from there to offer mystical prayer filled with divine grace and power.

The second is the result of the first. The attention of the mind during prayer draws the heart into sympathy: with the strengthening of attention, sympathy of heart and mind is turned into union of heart and mind. Finally when attention makes the prayer its own, the mind descends into the heart for the most profound and sacred service of prayer.

The second from the poetry of St. John of the Cross, *verses written in High Exaltation* (translated by Roy Campbell):

I entered in, I know not where,
And I remained, though knowing naught,
Transcending knowledge with my thought.

Of when I entered I know naught,
But when I saw that I was there
(Though where it was I did not care)
Strange things I learned, with greatness fraught.
Yet what I heard I'll not declare.
But there I stayed, though knowing naught,
Transcending knowledge with my thought.

So borne aloft, so drunken-reeling,
So rapt was I, so swept away,
Within the scope of sense or feeling
My sense or feeling could not stay.
And in my soul I felt, revealing,
A sense that, though its sense was naught,
Transcended knowledge with my thought.

The man who truly there has come
Of his own self must shed the guise:
Of all he knew before the sum
Seems far beneath that wondrous prize:
And in this lore he grows so wise
That he remains, though knowing naught,
Transcending knowledge with his thought.

The farther that I climbed the height
The less I seemed to understand
The cloud so tenebrous and grand
That there illuminates the night.
For he who understands that sight
Remains for aye, though knowing naught,
Transcending knowledge with his thought.

This wisdom without understanding
 Is of so absolute a force
 No wise man of whatever standing
 Can ever stand against its course,
 Unless they tap its wondrous source,
 To know so much, though knowing naught,
 They pass all knowledge with their thought.

This summit all so steeply towers
 And is of excellence so high
 No human faculties or powers
 Can ever to the top come nigh,
 Whoever with its steep would vie,
 Though knowing nothing, would transcend
 All thought, forever, without end.

If you would ask, what is its essence –
 This summit of all sense and knowing:
 It comes from the Di vi nest Presence –
 The sudden sense of Him outflowing,
 In His great clemency bestowing
 The gift that leaves men knowing naught,
 Yet passing knowledge with their thought.

And, since the essential attitude of mind in one attempting the Mystical Way is humility, ("When one shall have been brought to naught, when (one's) humility is perfect, then will take place the union of the soul with God..."—St. John of the Cross) you may care to consider this from *The Journey inwards...*

If you have experienced an inner realization of your real Self as the Christ within you, and your phenomenal self as only the instrument used by this Greater Self, Christ, you will become very humble. You will no longer have any attachment to, still less claim any reward for, your deeds, however good; for you will know that they do not belong to you at all.

Lastly, and this is also for those who attempt to write papers such as this one, again from St. John of the Cross: "...the preacher must bear in mind...that his function is more spiritual than vocal...However high his doctrine...his eloquence., and style, the fruits of his sermons will in general be no better than his own spirit...Though men be wonderful preachers, yet their sermons are soon forgotten if they kindled no fire in the will." The will is the spiritual heart; the will to experience.

THE BELOVED

The Beloved walks in my garden
clad as I, in pilgrim's cloak –
the Friend beside me.

On the highway walks the Beloved
clad as I, in pilgrim's cloak –
the foe beside me.

Where the Friend? the foe?
clad as I in pilgrim's cloak –
only the Beloved!

Phyllis Campbell

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Because I believe that what is written or said must stand on its own intrinsic truth rather than on the "authority" of the writer, the bibliography is arranged alphabetically using the first word of the title (excluding the article) rather than using the author's name. Thus, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (St. John of the Cross) precedes his *Collected works*. My excuse for giving names in the main body of the text is that this allows the reader to consider the quotation in the light of what is known of the worth of the author and the historical time in which he lived. In some cases brief comments are made which are intended to be helpful but are by no means an exhaustive or even partially complete description. There is no substitute for the experience of reading for yourself but perhaps the comments may whet your appetite to read further.

The list too is not an exhaustive one, only a selection from a large field. Mysticism is significant in religions other than Christianity but this selection has been limited to items that are either essentially Christian in outlook or which include significant comments on Christian Mysticism. They range from the time of the Gospels until the present. The current resurgence of mysticism and its closeness to scientific thinking have prompted me to include a few writings by scientists which show this. (All of these are understandable without previous study of a scientific discipline.) The view that "we are all one", held by the mystics of all time and now becoming shared by many scientists whose thinking is at the growing tip of their science, is of great importance in a world where nuclear weapons abound.

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