

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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1. Mysticism may be defined as the spirituality of the direct experience of God.

NOTES. Spirituality is a composite word referring to the "domain where mind, personality, purpose, ideals, values and meanings dwell" (Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan). Spirituality involves the longing to be connected with the largeness of life as well as to something larger than one's ego-self, in other words, a power-not-oneself.

Also, for the Christian mystic God is seen as an all-embracing love that unites the universe into one indivisible whole, the ground of all being, the being of all beings, Being Itself, our very essence, the oneness that unites everything.

2. Mysticism is *not* essentially about "mystical experiences" - experiences come and go - but is focused on the lasting experience of God, leading to the transformation of the believer into a transforming union with God. "In him we live, and move, and have our being We are his offspring" (Acts 17:28). Jesus proclaimed, "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30) showing the world what the union of God and man can be. It is also written, "There is one God who is father of all, over all, through all and within all" (Eph 4:6).
3. Mysticism is a vital part of the Christian heritage. Indeed, it is actually the *core* and *spiritual essence* of Christian spirituality. The direct experience of God is a transrational (but not necessarily "supernatural") kind of knowing, which goes beyond ordinary intellectual or rational understanding.
4. Christian mysticism is not a matter of "belief" or "emotional experience" (nor is it a psychological malady) but is a natural state nevertheless characterised by positive emotions and states of consciousness such as love and joy.
5. The Christian mystic looks *within* in order to have a relationship with God other than via priests and institutions. Saint Paul spoke of the goal and nature of mysticism and the mystical experience when he wrote, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor 13:12).
6. In the mystical experience the Christian mystic no longer experiences him/herself as a separate individual but rather as an expression of the Oneness of all Life. God, who is perceived as the only reality, is everything and does everything. Saint Paul achieved the divinized state of losing his "self": "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me!" (Gal 2:20).

GOD AND I

I walked with God, God walked with me,
But which was God, and which was me?
And thus I found, the Truth profound,
I live in God, God lives with me. - Anon.

7. The Christian mystical experience is available to all who sincerely and diligently seek it. The 16th-century Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross wrote, "God does not reserve the high vocation of mystical contemplation for certain souls only. On the contrary he wants all to embrace it, but finds few who will permit Him to work such exalted things for them." The very purpose of human life is to come to a knowledge of God, and if we simply turn toward God, that is, seek God, we will find that God has been waiting for us all along. The 17th-century French mystic Brother Lawrence assures us, "Knock, persevere, in knocking, and I guarantee that He will answer." We do not need to "find" God as if God were in some way lost.
8. The Christian Church, even in its multiplicity of discordant forms, is first and foremost a mystical church, despite the efforts of many who would rather have it otherwise.
9. For the practitioner of Christian mysticism, there are essentially three stages in the mystical experience: first, purification; secondly, contemplation; and, thirdly, union.
10. In the first stage – purification – the believer seeks to weaken and weed-out all of the structures of the personal self in order to open oneself to an experience of one's True Self, God. This involves the complete subjugation of the lower nature by the higher. "The essence of purgation is self-simplification" (Richard of St Victor). The mystic constantly seeks out those areas of his or her own life which are governed by the little, selfish "I" (the ego-self), and places them under the control of the selfless "I", or, if you like, the True Self ("the Self" or God). "For the trouble is that we are self-centred, and no effort of the self can remove the self from the centre of its own endeavour" (Archbishop William Temple). The ego-self has to be thrown off-centre, and we must give up all things that stand in the way of our spiritual development (bad habits, obsessions, addictions, in fact, all forms of self-obsession or "mental furniture"). There needs to be a shift in emphasis from self to non-self (Norman Vincent Peale).
11. We need to find a power-not-oneself. However, denial of the self tends only to increase one's obsession with oneself. The answer is not to be found in trying to be self-less. The key is self-forgetfulness. "The only way to get rid of self-consciousness is through God-consciousness. We become so conscious of another Self within us that we lose sight of our own self" (E Stanley Jones).

In order to arrive at 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.
 In order to arrive at that wherein thou hast no pleasure,
 Thou must go by a way wherein thou hast no pleasure.
 In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not
 Thou must go by a way thou knowest not.
 In order to arrive at that which thou possessest not,
 Thou must go by a way that thou possessest not.
 In order to arrive at that which thou art not,
 Thou must go through that which thou art not.
 When thy mind dwells upon 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.
 And when thou comest to possess it wholly,
 Thou must possess it without desiring anything.
 For, if thou wilt have anything in having all,
 Thou hast not thy treasure purely in God."

- St John of the Cross

12. The second stage of the Christian mystical experience is known as contemplation. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th-century masterpiece of medieval English Christian mysticism, we read this:

For in the beginning it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. Try as you might, this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God. You will feel frustrated, for your mind will be unable to grasp him, and your heart will not relish the delight of his love. But learn to be at home in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud.

14. Yes, the Ultimate dwells in obscurity, hidden behind a cloud of unknowing, so that we cannot "see" or otherwise contact it using the intellect or the emotions. Only faith can break through. ("Darkness to the intellect/But sunshine to the heart." F W Faber.) We must "learn to be at home in this darkness". Why darkness? Because the things of this world are no longer visible, and we can't see them. It does not mean that "ultimate reality" itself is dark. In fact, we often refer to that ultimate reality as being Light, which, of course, it is. Tennyson wrote, "Power/Which makes the darkness and the light/And dwells not in the light alone."

We are talking about a state of uncaused bliss or blessedness. Mother Julian of Norwich wrote:

Our Soul may never have rest in things that are beneath itself. And when it cometh above all creatures into the Self, yet may it not abide in the beholding of its Self, but all the beholding is blissfully set in God that is the Maker dwelling therein. For in Man's Soul is His very dwelling; and the highest light and the brightest shining of the City is the glorious love of our Lord, as to my sight.

What may make us more to enjoy in God than to see in Him that He enjoyeth in the highest of all His works? For I saw in the same Shewing that if the blessed Trinity might have made Man's Soul any better, any fairer, any nobler than it was made, He should not have been full pleased with the making of Man's Soul. And He willeth that our hearts be mightily raised above the deepness of the earth and all vain sorrows, and rejoice in Him.

15. John of Ruysbroek also wrote compellingly of the contemplative stage of Christian mysticism. He wrote:

For what we are, that we intently contemplate; and what we contemplate, that we are; for our mind, our life, and our essence are simply lifted up and united to the very truth, which is God. Wherefore in this simple and intent contemplation we are one life and one spirit with God. And this I call the contemplative life. In this highest stage the soul is united to God without means; it sinks into the vast darkness of the Godhead.

16. The third and final stage of Christian mysticism is union, when the mind sinks into the depths of the heart. There is no longer any sense or state of separation between us and God. We are one, in the same way as Christ himself was one with the Father, who is our Father as well. This heightened or expanded state of consciousness is beyond words, beyond language, indeed beyond all possibility of rational discourse. St Teresa of Avila, a 16th-century Spaniard:

The soul becomes one with God. It is brought into this mansion of the empyrean Heaven which we must have in the depths of our souls; for it is clear that, since God dwells in them, He must have one of these mansions.

Meister Eckhart writes:

Into the soul's essence no speck can ever fall. Anything, however small, adhering to the soul, prevents your seeing me. We cannot see the visible except with the invisible. When all things are reduced to naught in you then ye shall see God. God is not seen except by blindness, not known except by ignorance, nor understood except by fools.

... ..

In the soul's essence there is no activity, for the powers she works with emanate from the ground of being. Yet in that ground is the silent 'middle':

here [in the ground is] nothing but rest and celebration. . . . There is the silent 'middle,' for no creature ever entered there and no image, nor has the soul there either activity, or understanding, therefore she is not aware there of any image, whether of herself or of any other creature. . . . When the soul comes to the nameless place, she takes her rest. There . . . she rests.

17. In this third stage of the Christian mystical experience, there is direct, unmediated communion with God which. The mystic no longer exists as a separate individual but becomes one with the Oneness Itself. God is experienced not as something "other" but as our shared essential identity.
18. I would like to conclude this homily with a most mystical and powerful benediction, known as the "First Ray Benediction":

May the Holy Ones, whose pupils you aspire to become, show you the Light you seek, give you the strong aid of their compassion and their wisdom. There is a peace that passeth understanding; it abides in the hearts of those who live in the Eternal; there is a power that maketh all things new; it lives and moves in those who know the Self as One. May that peace brood over you, that power uplift you, till you stand where the One Initiator is invoked, till you see His Star shine forth. Amen.

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