

Mysticism And Prayer 2009

Mysticism is often seen as something which begins in mist and ends in schism. The reality is very different. Mystics are men and women who have received from God the great gift of profound prayer; not the common chatting to God that we all know, but the direct experience of God in silent communion. Mystics are found in all the world religions. They are "mindful of the mysteries" of God and His created world. Mystics are not to be confused with psychics in the same way as the spiritual is not to be confused with the psychical. Matters of the psychical realm are to do with the created order; the spiritual, including mysticism, are to do with the Creator.

In Scripture, the "mysterion" is a secret but a very particular one. It refers to the mystery of God's love for us as shown through Jesus, the Christ. The mysteries with which Christian mysticism have to do are therefore neither numerous nor fantastic: they are *God*, and the *Soul*, and *Revelation*; the last being the making known of the One to the human soul. Because God so wills it, the secret is accessible to all mankind. To the degree that our lives really are "hid in Christ", then we belong to "the fellowship of the mystery". The other two uses of the word "mystikos" in the usage of the early church fathers are :1 the 'mystic' meaning of the Bible, and 2 the 'mystic' significance of the churches' sacraments, which even today in some circles are known as the mysteries of the church. This 'hidden' and spiritual meaning of sacraments and the holy word are not some arbitrary allegorical and personal interpretation but an activity by which we are grasped by the mystery of Christ.

It has frequently been argued that because the mystics experience is interior, and so hidden to others, that it is 'purely' as in 'merely' subjective and personal. Down the ages, mystics have been portrayed as concerned with certain psychological states and discussing them in a language current to their time. For Christians, the things of God are not reducible to exploring one's inner life or gaining psychic - or cosmic- powers.

When mystics try to describe their experiences of the Divine, they tell of a wondrous, profound and compelling, self-authenticating sense of unity and union. Time, as we know it, is transcended and the recipient has an enhanced sense of well being, joy and praise. We cannot wrench such occasions from the Creator, so our part is to practise humble, patient waiting upon the Lord in "self-abandonment to divine providence". "Prayer is a conversation of the spirit with God. Seek therefore the disposition that the spirit needs, in order to be able to reach out towards its Lord and to hold converse with him without any intermediary". (Evagrius of Pontus *On Prayer*, 3). Self- knowledge, self-understanding, and a disciplined way of life and worship are all implied.

The seeking of visions, charismatic experiences or gifts is unwise. We are taught to seek and love God only for himself, not for what we may hope to get out of the relationship. "Humility and distress free man from every sin, the former by cutting out the passions of the soul, the latter those of the body." (Maximus Confessor *Four Hundred Chapters*, No 76).

Prayer has also been called the descent of the mind- or intellect- to the heart. By heart is meant the unifying centre of the human person as a whole. Descent to the heart thus becomes reintegration and a recovery of integrity. Prayer of the heart is prayer in which one is actively identified both with the act of prayer and with God who meets us in our heart. It follows that personal experience of the Divine must precede prayer.

Books on prayer may break the topic down into differing aspects such as;-Adoration, Confession, Intercession, Petition, and Thanksgiving.

Adoration is not homage because God is beyond all limits of comparison: ultimately beyond words, so we fall into silence. Physical acts come into use; bowing, genuflecting, prostration etc. Adoration mixes contemplation and love with absolute self-surrender.

Confession is the open acknowledgement of our inability to love God with every part and particle of our being and our neighbour as ourselves. It relieves the soul of guilt and distress, bringing in its wake an increase in awareness of how strongly God loves us, commonly called forgiveness. Confession helps us to know ourselves better, to understand our failings and to see more clearly where we need to allow God to transfigure us further.

No man is an island; prayer of one individual has an impact in all realms of time and space. Intercessory prayer for another is that they may become more aware of the love that ever surrounds them, increasing their faith, hope, and courage to face whatever the future has in store for them. Intercession is a work for others. Like petition, the prayer is "Not my will, but Thine be done, O Lord."

Catholics and their Protestant siblings are split over (1), calling upon the angels and saints also to pray for us and assist our requests, (2), praying for the dead. The inclusion of both kinds of intercession seems more holistic. One can offer ones own pain, or even life, vicariously for the good of another.

Petition is the prayer of asking ; usually for ourselves. It reminds us of our frailty and dependence upon the Lord. It requires faith;-simple, open, honest trust in the flow of the universe- and coinherence in Christ;" If you abide in me and I in you, ask what you will and it shall be done unto you."

We praise God for what he is and offer Thanksgiving for what he has done.

"If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to make it a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing." William Law. Thanksgiving includes awe and wonder, happiness and joy and can be expressed both in the Eucharist and in silence.

The mystic, in prayer, expresses his relationship with God in a way that is neither purely intellectual, nor purely emotional; but one that employs, in one act, all the powers of a man's soul. That of the divine which the mystic brings down to earth, i.e. incarnates, is naturally expressed through their personality. Henry Simmons in his book "In The Footsteps Of The Mystics" divides styles of prayer into those who seek illumination of the mind or illumination of the heart. And into those who appreciate image-rich meditation or prefer non-imaging contemplation. For example, under the heading 'Heart/ imaging' we find excerpts from Julian of Norwich and under 'Mind/ non-imaging' are passages from the Revd. William Law. These are possibly our two finest home-grown mystics. This book contains extracts from sixty-nine "Classics of Western Spirituality", is in print and would be useful in continuing studies.

Booklist

<i>Approach to Mysticism</i>	M. Israel.
<i>In the Footsteps of the Mystics</i>	H. C. Simmons.
<i>A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality</i>	ed. G. S. Wakefield.
<i>About Prayer</i>	M. Israel et al.
<i>The Devout Life: William Law's understanding of divine love</i>	ed. M. Israel & Neil Broadbent.
<i>The Roots of Christian Mysticism</i>	O. Clément.

Tapelist

<i>Mystical Healing</i>	Neil Broadbent
<i>Mysticism in Daily Life</i>	Christopher Bryant
<i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i>	Christopher Bryant
<i>The Prayer of Action</i>	Martin Israel
<i>The Christian's Use of Silence</i>	Alan Paice