

THE NEW MYSTICISM

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I'd better begin by describing what I mean by 'new' and 'mysticism', because neither of these terms is very straightforward. I think it's pretty clear that we are coming into a new era, a new age. You walk down the street and people are using mobile phones, and there's the Internet and email, to say nothing of the scientific explosion - everybody knows about relativity and black holes and so on. But more important than those scientific changes is the change in consciousness, a change in the way that people are thinking and feeling and judging; and a religious change, and this is more significant. It's interesting that in the 1950s Pope John saw this before he called the Second Vatican Council. He spoke of humanity being on the threshold of a new era, and in reference to those who spoke apocalyptically about the coming millennium, he said,

We feel we must disagree with these prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster as though the end of the world were at hand. In the present order of things, divine providence is leading us to a new era of human relations, which by our own efforts and even beyond our very expectations are directed towards the fulfilment of God's superior and inscrutable design.

There's optimism for you, that this is the action of God, all this turmoil. So something really is happening. Mind you, Bede Griffith in his last book, *A New Vision of Reality*, thought that if all of the new era comes, there might be a big collapse. Anyhow, the optimism is there that God is behind it. We all know the famous words that Tennyson put on the dying king Arthur: 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new, and God fulfils himself in many ways.'

Underlying the technological revolution is a changing consciousness and changing spirituality. In the modern world there seems to be a deep hunger for spiritual experience. There is a meditation movement throughout the world which is very much influenced by Asia; among its proponents are Bede Griffith, Anthony de Mello, Thomas Merton and John Main. However, it's in danger of being superficial, and that's why we have to learn something about mysticism, because mysticism is a deep form of meditation. I was going to say that mysticism is the deepest form of spirituality, but then I caught myself, because in Judaism, Christianity & Islam, the deepest spiritual experience is martyrdom. Greater love than this

no-one has, than that a person lays down life for his or her friends. But martyrdom I believe is a form of mysticism. We can't look on mysticism as very sweet and easy; there are challenges, and a death, too.

There are other forms of spirituality, too. In the Hispanic and Afro-American world there's the Pentecostal movement, involving the body in a holistic way. It looks different to mysticism but it's in the same line when you get deeper. And around the world, people just come and sit and pray in churches. But there's also a tendency to say, 'I want spirituality, but I don't want all those dogmas and doctrines, all that baggage.' I have a relative in the US who said to me last year, 'Oh, I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious!' In Japan we have learnt that that is a very dangerous position. The leader of the Aum Shin Rikkyo (Supreme Truth) movement taught yoga and spirituality. He claimed to have had the very greatest enlightenment, *gedatsu*. He'd studied Tibetan Buddhism in India. His great art was awakening the *kundalini*, the energy at the base of the spine which can be aroused and which travels through the body and gives the great enlightenment. He had this great experience and became a great teacher and people flocked to him: and then we know what happened. There was an outcry from the Buddhists, who said, 'He doesn't have the teachings. You need the dharma. You can have this great experience, but if it isn't protected by the teachings, it can be very dangerous.' This is true. This has happened many times in Christianity, too, that you get a great spiritual leader with a seemingly great spirituality, but it's an area in which people can be deceived, or can deceive themselves. I have here an article by a Japanese professor who speaks of how Asahara emphasised intense ascetic practices for the achievement of *gedatsu*, meaning *satori*, a world-renouncing enlightenment. (Some people have said that he was just out for money and power, but I don't think so. Money and power are less dangerous!) The awakening of kundalini was considered the most important element of the *gedatsu* experience. It's spirituality without the protection of religious experience - dharma in Buddhism, theology in Christianity. It's not the most important thing, these dogmas and doctrines, but this path of mystical experience can have its dangers and its problems.

I would like to speak now about the traditional mystical experience within Christianity, and then of its relevance in the modern world and the new era into which we are heading. I agree with Karen Armstrong that the Orthodox tradition of Eastern Europe kept the mystical theology and tradition alive when it was to a large extent lost in Western Christianity, so that now it has

to be revived. But to speak first of all about mystical experience, it is important to remember that it is a process or a journey. People begin with meditation or prayer. In the Christian tradition people spoke of discursive prayer, which means thinking, reading the gospels, thanking God, praying to God, and so on, or repeating a mantra like the Jesus Prayer or the name of the Buddha, but repeating it with faith. Repeating a prayer or mantra drives it into the unconscious and helps people, but without faith you can't call it religious.

That's how it might begin, by repeating a word or name or a phrase like 'God is love'. But the time comes when people want to drop the words and become silent - a silence of contemplation. The Japanese have a word, *seishintoetsu*, which is usually translated as one-pointedness. In the Christian tradition it's called contemplation, of which there were two kinds. Entering into silence is a contemplation that is acquired through human effort. But as time goes on, people enter into a new dimension of consciousness, and they have this sense of presence: presence within, presence around, presence in nature. Very often contemplative people say that this new state of consciousness is not something they caused, and that they didn't deserve it, but here it is. That's the beginning of the mystical experience, the presence of God within. At that time, very often people say they couldn't deny the existence of God, and they have great joy, great consolation.

However, that doesn't last forever. If people really enter into the mystical experience, the sense of presence gives way to a sense of absence, of abandonment - the experience of there being no God. The hero in Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence* was like that; he said there is no God. I think he's speaking there about the dark night of the soul - a very deep loneliness which is part of the mystical journey. Things go wrong: people get sick or they have breakdowns or whatever. This is all a purification process. That's when people need help and direction.

I'm sometimes asked about the difference between the dark night of the soul and clinical depression. That's not all that easy to answer, because when people enter deeply into this life, the upper levels of their mind are swept clean, and then the unconscious comes up - and the unconscious contains a lot of garbage, as we know. I like to think of it in the Jungian way, in terms of a personal unconscious and a collective unconscious. The personal unconscious is all the personal fears and hangups that we've had since childhood. The advice of all mystics is, let it go. Of course, very often people today will say, I'd like to let it go but I can't. Then they need

counselling to solve their human problems. Then there's the collective unconscious. In St John of the Cross, the real dark night of the soul is the unpurified human being faced with God. A good psychologist will be able to point to the cause of one's personal suffering, whereas in the 'dark night' there is a dimension of mystery there: people don't know how why this has happened and they don't know when they'll get out of it. They have to just accept it; it's a time of purification.

People ask, well, is this really necessary? Can one go back? I think one reaches a point of no return. But I also think Gethsemane is part of the human condition. People talk about assisted suicides. They say, well, isn't it better to escape from this terrible suffering? But I saw the Dalai Lama say that there is no escape; sooner or later human beings have to go through suffering. And Jesus went through it, taking on himself the sins of the world.

When one gets through the death, there is a resurrection when the inner light and the inner fire come out. (That was my complaint to Endo about *Silence*: there is a death but no resurrection. But in his later books there was resurrection.) So, how does it end? The way St John of the Cross and the way the mystics of the Eastern Orthodox tradition put it, it's like we are a log of wood, sodden in water, and the fire of God's love is applied to that, and it belches forth dirt and smoke (that's the dark night), but then it catches fire, and there's light, like the light St Paul saw on the road to Damascus, a light brighter than the sun. That's the dispute between the Eastern Orthodox and the Western mystics. The former made very much of this light. Unless you see the light you shouldn't be writing theology, St Simeon said, because you have to have the experience of the light and of the fire.

I like to distinguish between contemplation and mysticism. Traditional Catholic mystical theology doesn't do that, but I think there is a difference between the sense of presence in contemplation, and then this deeper fire and light. For example, I would call Thomas Merton a great contemplative; but I wouldn't call him a mystic, simply because I don't see evidence of this light and this fire. Perhaps he died too young (he was 53).

Then many of the mystics talk of the bride-bridegroom theme and the *Song of Songs*. But not all. I say this because of my experience in Japan. The Kyoto school of philosophers were interested in Zen, and bringing Zen to the West. They got interested in Western mysticism, but all their interest was in Eckhart rather than St John of the Cross. I think there are two reasons why. The first was that St John was Spanish, and the Western influence in

Japan from the time of the Meiji Restoration onwards shared in the Western prejudice against Spain. So there was great reverence in Japan for German philosophy and French literature and the English gentleman, but Spain wasn't much thought of. But I think it was more than that. There are two kinds of mysticism. The Eckhart kind of mysticism has less of the fire and the light that you find in India, in kundalini.

Let me read a passage from the *Song of Songs* about the dark night. The bride is speaking.

I slept, but my heart was awake.

Mystics use that as a description of contemplative prayer. A sleep of the outer faculties: I'm not thinking, I'm not reasoning, I'm not sensing, but at the core of my being there is an awareness.

Listen, my beloved is knocking.

There is an awakening in mystical experience, a knocking on the door. Sometimes people have dreams of a knocking at the door. If you have that dream, it's very important. Meditate on it, because it's an awakening. You had it in Macbeth too; remember Macduff was knocking at the door. And in the Bible: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock.' It's a Buddhist idea also: we are asleep, we need to be wakened up. Sometimes a Zen master will awaken you abruptly.

Then the lover's voice comes from outside:

Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night.

She's inside; she says,

I have put off my garment; how could I put it on again?
I have bathed my feet; how could I soil them?

She doesn't want to get up. St John of the Cross quotes that, and he says, 'Unless you get up out of bed, you won't meet the beloved.'

My beloved thrust his hand into the opening; and my inmost being yearned for him.
I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh upon the handles of the lock.
I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone.

Why did he go away? I'll tell you the answer St John of the Cross gives. He didn't come in because he wants you to go out. You have to get out of your little self, your little ego, into the night.

My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him but did not find him.
I called him but he gave no answer.
Making their rounds in the city the sentinels found me
They beat me, they wounded me, they took away my veil, those sentinels of the walls.
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him this:
I am faint with love.

Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loved.
I sought him but found him not.
I called him but he gave no answer.

It's the absence of God: where are you?

I will rise now and go about the city,
In the streets and in the squares I will seek him whom my soul loves.
'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?'
Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him and would not let him go
until I brought him to my mother's house
and into the chamber of her that conceived me.

But then, when the dark night is over, there's this passage which mystics quote so much:

The voice of my beloved.
Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.
For now the winter is passed. The rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth. The time of singing has come. And the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land.'

There you have the bride-bridegroom theme, the climax of spiritual marriage, and in St John of the Cross the strange equality of bride and bridegroom, even though the groom is the son of God. And then the divinisation of the human person. That's the goal; and in the Apocalypse, the divinisation of the human race, because finally the whole human race is the bride, and the lamb the bridegroom. You might think that divinisation is out of this world, but there are some mystical theologians who speak about the universal vocation to mysticism, that everybody is called to this finally, at some time - maybe before they die.

The theology I have explained to you is the traditional mystical theology of Christianity, but in the West it was marginalised, and a different kind of theology took over. What happened? Well, first in the West there was scholasticism, and scholasticism was very dialectical - as in the famous dispute between Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard. Theology became very rational. Then there came after the Enlightenment this scientific approach to the scriptures. It's good, of course, but if it's divorced from reading the scriptures as a spiritual experience, then the whole Bible is impoverished, and that's what has happened. The way I read the *Song of Songs*, many modern scholars would just laugh at that; they've got a scientific perspective, and they'd say that this is just a Middle Eastern love song that was sung at weddings or whenever. And that's true, but you can read things at various levels. We have to learn to read the scriptures at this spiritual level.

So this mystical theology that has been marginalised has to be centralised if Christianity is to speak to Asia. That other stuff won't speak to Asia. We have to have a mystical theology and mystical experience if we are to enter into dialogue with Buddhism and Hinduism. Sometimes people say mystical experience is all the same in different religions because they all go beyond reasoning and into the silence. I would say yes and no; it's the same but it's different. That all people are going to have the same religious experience would seem to be the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which said that all peoples comprise a single community, the whole world over, and have a single origin. Since God made the whole race to dwell over the face of the earth, their final goal is also one: God.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that while we are in this valley of tears, the experience is still different. I say that because in all mysticism, and in Buddhism too, the way is very important. The Chinese term is *dao*, in Japanese *do*. We sometimes think of the way like a ladder, that you climb up, then you get in the window and you throw away the ladder. That would be dualism. The way is part of the final experience; you can't divide the satori from the way. It's the same in Christianity. So there are various ways. Someone asked the Dalai Lama in London recently whether you could be a Buddhist and a Christian at the same time. He said no, that would be like putting a sheep's head on a yak's body. I think so too, because any religion requires a total commitment, and I don't see that you can be totally committed to the Buddha and totally committed to Christ at the same time.

Does all that I've said about mystical theology have anything to say to modern people and the modern world? As I've said already, it has a lot to say about the dangers of spirituality without teachings. But also in the modern world there is this big movement of spirituality coming out of the New Age. When you speak of the New Age, I like to go right back to 1893, which was the time of the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. There you had the well known Indian swami Vivekenanda, a disciple of Ramakrishna, who claimed to have had a Christ experience, and an Islamic experience, and so on. Vivekenanda taught a universal religion, that all religions are the same. His teaching was not well accepted by Muslims or Christians or Buddhists. They said that Vivekenanda's universal religion was in fact Hinduism, and that they were then co-opted into Hinduism. So that wasn't really well accepted. However, Vivekenanda founded the Vedanta Society, and also the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta. A lot of Western intellectuals were influenced by Vedanta in this way, including Aldous Huxley, who thought that drugs were a good way to get a religious experience, but without any of the teachings that I have been speaking about. Then there's Alan Watts, too, and the Theosophical Society, with Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant. And Krishnamurti, too, but he was against any kind of doctrines and institutions, and he made a very great impression on the West. This whole cult of religious experience coming from the East met up with the esoteric tradition in the West. These were forerunners of the New Age. These traditions were in a certain sense made respectable by Jung, who was very interested in alchemy and gnosticism.

There can be a dialogue between the old traditions and the new forms of spirituality. One of the things Christianity can teach is the idea of discernment: that you need community, and spiritual directors. At the same time, I see this spiritual movement in the modern world as very powerful. It can help the Christian tradition to develop further. For instance, the way it developed the priesthood was for unmarried people, whereas married people could only be part of the laity. That can't go on; we are in the modern world. Also, I'm very interested in the idea of energy, divine energy. In the US there is a book by Philip St Romain called *Kundalini and Christian Spirituality*. He found that just sitting in prayer in church, he found strange things happening, all this energy, and he asked people about it and read some books on kundalini and thought, My God, this is it! The Western world has been very influenced by Greek philosophy, which has a very negative attitude toward the body and sexuality.

If I could repeat what I have said very briefly, I spoke first of all about the new age into which we're coming, and how Pope John and the Vatican Council spoke about that new era. We can look at this new era from the perspective of science and technology, which is really stunning, but underlying that is the change in consciousness, a new way of thinking and seeing things - an axial age, an age of transition. At the time when Pope John spoke, in the 1950s, I thought this period would be over by the end of the century, but now I think it will last until the middle of the next century. Maybe it's only just beginning, but anyhow, an important part of that is the hunger for spiritual experience, which is very good, but to look for the experience and jettison the experience is very dangerous. (People wondered why the Aum happened in Japan. There were many theories put forward. The one that appeals to me is that after the military defeat at the end of WW2, the whole country geared up to make money, but there was a spiritual vacuum, and so people went to Aum. I think that's true of the whole world: China is going that way now too. The challenge of the religions is to give people what they're looking for, and then people won't be deceived.)

Then I spoke of traditional Christian mysticism as a process involving great joy, but the dark night of the soul is a part of it, too. Only then comes the mystical marriage and divinisation. I believe this mystical path should be central to religion, but Western theology went off in a rationalistic way. Some people combine both, but if it robs us of the real spiritual dimension of the scriptures, that is an impoverishment and a tragedy. This traditional mystical theology has something to say to us today, and that is the challenge which is before us: to build a new era.