

hope that they can arrange some means by which these matters can be considered more fully. Like a few other difficulties facing the servants of Christ in these days, we can be sure of this, that if we shut our eyes to them they will not go away.

### MYSTICISM - AND A TOUCH OF EASTERN PROMISE

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Drugs, the occult and gurus on the pop-scene have combined to bring mysticism into popular focus during recent years. Amongst theologians, the influx of experience-centred religion together with ecumenical lack of discrimination (proverbial 'tolerance') have consorted to import numerous eastern cults into the centre of much contemporary religious discussion in the west. A new book '*The Inner Eye of Love, Mysticism and Religion*' written by a Jesuit, William Johnston, and published by Collins at £4.95, provides a useful and stimulating survey of some of the considerations facing the Christian at such a juncture.

For evangelicals there are many obvious warning signals in the volume. For example, the author says "*I came to the conclusion that mystical nothingness ... is dynamite. It is the power that moves the universe and creates revolutions in human minds and hearts*". He also gives some hints on how to get into contact with the All:

*"Concretely, one can concentrate on a part of the body - the space between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, the lower abdomen ... The second point was control of the breathing"*. All this is frivolous and hopelessly irrelevant, hardly the type of thing Paul or Augustine or Athanasius, Calvin or John Owen, Whitefield or William Williams, Spurgeon or Ann Griffiths would indulge in.

The main theme of this volume is suggested in the title, and a quotation from Jean Gerson may underline it: "*Mystical theology is experimental knowledge of God through the embrace of unitive love*". We cannot perhaps be reminded too often that our first thought or duty or action as Christians is not to serve God, not even to testify to His grace, but to love Him and that to concentrate or even work towards the single end of "*raising the mind to God through the desire of love*", as Bonaventure puts it, is our greatest joy and purpose.

Living, however, at a time when all sorts of rubbish masquerade as Christian discussion, what are the safeguards, or discriminating criteria, that an evangelical should adopt when considering the significance of mysticism? To put it another way, in the so-called dialogue or confrontation with the great religions of the East, what are the key questions that need to be answered?

One of the dangers in placing Christianity near the same melting-pot as other world religions is that terms are too readily confused and the most important term that immediately becomes meaningless is 'God' Himself. In Christianity God has 'defined' Himself very clearly: He has not only told us what sort of a God He is, but He has appeared to us concretely, and there is no compromise between such a reality and the idea of God that may vaguely float about in other less blessed spheres, however mystical they may be.

What we are discussing now is infallible and complete truth that needs no addition. What gain is there for such a truth by putting it in the same pot as erroneous religions, however many good points they may have 'in common'? Eclecticism is hardly good will, nor is it common sense. Professor Johnston suggests that one happy method for a useful encounter between religions would be in silence. The silence, of course, should be contentless, non-historical, subjective and impersonal. In other words, such an encounter must necessarily be non-Christian.

The author assumes that we do not try to convert the Buddhist. We accept him as he is, and try to find common ground in some mystical process that he shares with the Christian. In such an attempt he tends to emphasise the dilution and weakness within certain individual Christians. He also takes certain end-products, such as 'unrestricted love', as his aim in life rather than the worship and service of a real known and living God, who according to His own will and restrictions (with clear limitations against sinful imaginings) gives of His grace to needy men. He makes a subtle distinction between belief and faith, and is prepared to scuttle beliefs as long as faith - that nebulous link that he tells us binds Jew and Gentile, Hindu and Buddhist, Christian and Moslem in one happy bundle - remains.

Now, God's dealings with us are certainly diverse. He wounds: He is a God who brings low and subdues. He can be a terror to our hearts, and a convictor of our consciences. He is, of course, too, Creator: He is Saviour. He can also be a shepherd and guide. But William Johnston's emphasis in this volume is that of a loving knowledge of God, a knowledge that God Himself gives us. We were conceived to embrace our Lord Jesus and He is therefore to be the object of our deepest affections. He refers to Origen's claim that no-one can fully understand John's gospel "*who has not, like its author, lain upon the breast of Jesus*". Such, of course, was the experience of a Calvinistic Methodist mystic of the beginning of the 19th century, such as Ann Griffiths. And within the unbending framework of His truth, her hymns express ecstatically her chaste and glorified love of God.

Let us enumerate, however, certain tests that should be applied in examining religious experience.

1. Christian truth is centred not on man's experience but on God's nature and will. Certainly,

unless knowledge of God is a reality in experience too, then it is nothing. Abstract statements or theological generalities are as so much wind unless they are felt and known personally by the believer who is being dealt with by a personal living God.

Yet the centre is not the individual, but the living God who, as He has chosen to reveal Himself in His spoken Word and in the Word made flesh, was certainly no void nor solely subjective. Discussions of mysticism tend to over concentrate on man's reactions and vague sentiments and ignore God's own character as it has already been infallibly revealed and stated, and such discussions easily run off the rails.

2. God and Christian truth are personal, not impersonal. Denial of the wholeness of Christian experience and any attempt to forego the use of the senses or the operations of the intellect are not in harmony with the life portrayed in holy scripture. The author mentions the familiar Church fathers' comparison of our immersion in Christ to "*the drop of water which falls into the wine or the glowing iron or coal which becomes part of the fire*". The extinguishing or dissolving of personality in some sort of engulfing whole is quite different from individual salvation and individual resurrection in Christ. Oblivion or deletion of identity has nothing to do with being a Christian, however well it may describe the Hindu or Buddhist experience.

3. Christian truth is revealed and stated conceptually in the Bible. The negation of knowledge, which includes the ignoring of clear information about God Himself and His actions in history, is obviously not in conformity with God's self-revelation. There is a great deal of play by mystics with paradoxes that are on the borders of the truth: Professor Johnston describes the mystic: "*He knows God by unknowing ... One is in darkness, in emptiness ...*" The Christian has certainly known conviction of sin (although this is not what is meant here), and felt to his depths the reality of his own

inherent poverty before God: he has abandoned himself absolutely to God's grace: there is complete and utter surrender. But, because of God's immediate response and promise to all spiritual paupers, and because God is a God who speaks and has spoken, over-emphasis on the emptiness rather than on fullness and on the silence of death at the expense of the clarity of life is a departure from the obvious intentions of the gospel.

The vocabulary of negation must be watched assiduously. "*Non-self ... no-mind*". It can be subtly attractive to speak of experiences that a believing Christian might suspect 'approximate' to genuine enjoyment of grace. There is real and glorious peace in Him: there is an ascent that transcends thought in communion with God. But Christian truth is also propositional and communicative; and the further one launches into free-for-all experience-hunting and turns one's back on the guidelines set down with such loving care by the Holy Spirit in His Word, the more one is likely to err. The negative theory of Dionysius with its vocabulary of darkness, nothingness, emptiness and unknowing has received a certain currency in our own days under the auspices of Simone Weil, particularly in Wales. It must be viewed with great caution. Yet, the inexpressible joy of God's light, the unutterable loveliness of His presence, though they are beyond human comprehension, should not be denied merely because the Holy Spirit can fill our hearts with feelings beyond our words.

The usual well-known semantical tactic nowadays of persuading ourselves that light is darkness, and emptiness fullness, and presence absence and so on - oxymoron - is indulged in here and there in this volume as in most neo-modernistic discussions since the fifties, but these are thankfully just occasional bouts, and on the whole the author succeeds in following an uncompromisingly lucid course through a very complex subject.

4. The method of contemplating God should not be

humanly devised or depend on artificial physical or mental exercises. How is the Christian to gaze at Him and enjoy His presence? God has provided us with stated knowledge about Himself, about His nature and His works in Scripture. It is glorious knowledge. He has revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ, who once again is presented to us in His breathed Word. We are led to Him in prayer and in silent adoration through the Holy Spirit, but not independently following our own imaginations about whom He may be, but within the revealed portrayal He has made of Himself. We do not, of course, worship the Bible, but neither do we depart from the Bible in order to cook up our own machinations. God is exactly as He has told us He is and He has provided us, in His Word, with an unfailing means of distinguishing between true and false experiences of His presence. One criticism of Johnston's book is that he does not consistently set down sufficient discriminating criteria to recognise the phony phenomena which are rampant in this dangerous field of mysticism. His own fundamental belief, however, is interesting: *"The source of all Christian mysticism is - and must be - the Bible and in particular the Gospel ... If, then, there is to be an updating of Christian mystical theology the first step is a return to the Gospel"*.

Roman Catholic study of mysticism has undoubtedly on the whole been more diligent than orthodox Protestant discussion, perhaps because personal and 'felt' knowledge of God was accepted as more normal and part of the usual Christian experience among Protestants, whereas it was rather odd and esoteric in the Roman Church. One of the pitfalls that ensued from the particular approach adopted by the sacramentalist tradition is the rather mechanical (and planned) training often outlined for potential mystics, the do-it-yourself kit.

5. Christian life is not divorced from Christian action. He who 'loves' Christ keeps His commandments. The Christian mystic does not remain apart from the needs of his fellows in divine adoration, or he would

not be 'Christian'. As Professor Johnston puts it: "*it is better for the candle to give light than just to burn*". Neither is Christian experience in the present divorced from the historical events in the past. Professor Johnston, on the other hand, warns us: "*the theology of Paul is based not only on a historical event in the past but also on a living mystical experience in the present*". This is undeniable; but at the same time, with the experience-centred, highly subjective and unguided imaginings that are dressed up as 'Christian' teaching in our own day, the contrary emphasis, that the basis of our faith is in historical, concrete and objective happenings and personages, needs to be the safe starting-point even for the experience of the present.

The evangelical Christian has a faith rooted in the 'external', which has become internal through the grace of God. But it is a meaningful faith: it has content and is related, at all points and in every facet, to the expressed Word of God. It is an ordered and complete faith that satisfies the redeemed mind, heart and will. Professor Johnston's other warning: "*theology which is divorced from the inner experience of the theologian is arid and carries no conviction*", has of course always been acceptable to most evangelicals; but he should be at the same time mindful that a 'felt' religion un-governed by meaningful truth about the actions of our Lord and His objective teachings for our life before His throne is even more arid and devoid of proper conviction.

6. The proof of Christian mysticism is not in any account of elevated experiences nor in claims of felt visions in the midst of good deeds. It is in complete obedience and acceptance. If we find someone describing highfalutin knowledge of the presence of Christ, who then departs from complete trust in His holy Word, we should naturally be suspicious. Passionate visions paralleled with moderate scepticism regarding the historical revelation of

scripture are just not on. In chapter 6 he attempts to describe a 'general' all-encompassing mysticism, undeterred by the more definite and precise demands of historical Christianity and the details of biblical revelation. Mystics are to be treated with immense caution. Regrettably Professor Johnston is gullible: if a man makes the right mystical noises, his defences are down. His ability to present an argument clearly and attractively is not matched by a constant detection of error. He confuses too readily the impersonal or self-obliterating meditation of the East with specific Christian wholeness. He fails to perceive (e.g. p.46) the basic necessity of setting limits to mysticism; the 'magnanimity' towards other religions is a popular ecumenical stance; but an evangelical regards it as the direct opposite of real love. On the whole, Professor Johnston's presentation of the Christian position is infinitely better than the run-of-the-mill ecumenical; but when confronted with Buddhism he tends to fall to pieces. Here he conforms to type, "*I would like to sketch the beginnings of a mystical theology that will be universal in scope - that is to say, a mystical theology that will include the mystical experience of believers in all the great religions and, indeed, of those people who belong to no specific religion but have been endowed with profound mystical gifts.*" He clearly denies the uniqueness of Christ as Lord and Saviour alone and Christ is just considered as one way amongst many of climbing this tedious mountain. Mention is made of "*the inherent goodness of the human race*", and recognition of the virtues of believers in other religions seems to lead the writer away from a true analysis of their actual situation as revealed in scripture.

He suggests common prayer instead of discussion as a way over the difficulty, as precise discrimination in presenting the case for Christianity leads to controversy and anger. But avoiding the controversial was not Christ's way - nor Peter's way: the flight from discrimination leads not only to fuddled thinking but also to a fuddled gospel - which is no gospel; and

common prayer with those outside Christianity is absolutely impossible for those whose only way to the throne of grace is through Jesus Christ. The author's plan of compromise between Christians and Buddhists is the most painful section of his otherwise interesting study. He has really ducked the problem.

I find Part 3 of his study (pp 87-153) a most profitable part of the work. Most Roman Catholic meditation on mysticism traces the various steps in the deepening of this experience, and in this volume the chapter headings reflect more or less the sort of pattern frequently followed: - The Call; Journey into the void; Oriental nothingness; Christian nothingness; Journey towards union; Journey of love; Enlightenment and Conversion. Once again, we must ask the question, is this just subjective fancy, or is there some objective basis to such a plan?

Scripture reveals that there is a definite order of application of God's redemption in our lives, e.g. Romans 8:30. The more detailed steps recorded by John Murray in his *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* are a reminder of the many Biblical references to this 'mystical journey', viz Effectual Calling, Regeneration, Faith and Repentance, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification, Perseverance, Union with Christ, Glorification. There can hardly be a more cogent scriptural treatment of the experience of the Christian than is found in this profound volume. One immediately detects some correspondence between the Calvinistic and Biblical path traced by Professor Murray and the more eclectic back and forth journey followed by Professor Johnston.

What distinguishes the genuine Christian mystic (unadulterated with eastern paraphernalia) from the born-again Christian? I venture to say - absolutely nothing.

A description of genuine Christian mysticism is

merely a concentration on one aspect of every re-born Christian's life fully led - and underlines the loving union with God which is meant for every believer. Some gifted writers such as John of the Cross or Isaiah, (the latter under the inerrant direction of the Holy Spirit), have written marvellous descriptions of this experience far beyond the reach of the ordinary Christian. But something of the transformation they describe in approaching the throne of grace is a delight that many believers have known and should know.

When writing about mysticism, what happens to the Christian writer is this: instead of dealing with the whole counsel of God, and reviewing His saving powers or His common grace, or say His cultural mandate, or His will for the organisation of the Church, he merely devotes attention to the simple contemplation of God: gazing at Him, and nothing else. This, I agree with Professor Johnston, is not reserved for an elite amongst Christians, but is intended - although in very diversified ways - for all believers, namely, true adoration of our Lord.

Let me conclude with another brief quotation from amongst many excellent points made by the author that are sweet to any believer's ears. *"Not one step is made except by the power of the same Spirit. This is the path of one who has seen the footprints of the ox or the treasure hidden in the field and sells everything joyfully to follow the ox or to buy the field. It is the renunciation of one who has heard the voice of the beloved: 'Hark! my beloved is knocking' [Song of Songs 5:2]".* Here we are on familiar ground; it is such a pity that so many other issues are confused by the now so frequent eclecticism and rampant compromise that loses the distinctiveness of a faith for which God sent His only begotten Son to testify to and fulfil once and for all in perfection.