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# Another Celtic Spirituality – The Calvinistic Mysticism of Ann Griffiths (1776-1805)

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RM Jones

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**The second and concluding part of an article begun in issue 38 of  
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**M**ysticism is of course a non-Christian as well as a Christian phenomenon, – just as “enthusiasm” itself, or “believing” as an act – and anyone trying to discuss Christian mysticism must necessarily define its terms *vis-à-vis* the experiences that Hindus and Buddhists as well as Moslems have undergone. The fashionable ecumenical stance, of course, is all-embracing compromise; and perhaps, a serious Christian in reaction against that may feel hurried into a glib and rather unconsidered condemnation, *en-bloc*, of anything outside the Christian tradition.

What are the conditions that must be laid down in examining the mystical experience of union with the Deity and spiritual apprehension of truths *outside* the Christian tradition? I suggest five:

1. That there is no other name under heaven by whom one can be saved than Jesus Christ our Lord: that is, naturally, not to say that Jesus *has* to be named (ignorance may prevent that, but is no “excuse”), but there must be no *other* name.
2. That *man* of himself, in his own experience or through his own powers, is helpless and deprived utterly of God; and God-given grace (and faith) alone can be the channel to save him from the consequences of his own lost condition.
3. That any subjective experience of the reality of a personal God revealed to an individual in any part of the world can only be checked by the objective word breathed by the Holy Ghost in the Scriptures.
4. That experience-centred rather than God-centred religion, and that hankering after experience rather than a longing for God, must be suspect.
5. That the wholeness of holiness – in thought, feeling and will, that is to say, in the central theology, in experience and in practical or moral application – must not be supplanted by the wonderful enthusiasm of a felt knowledge of God. God claims the heart, that is to say, the wholeness of man: he must have the whole lot.

We readily recognise that the wiles of the Devil can conjure up a stupendous conglomeration of so-called experiences, but the Christian is fortunate in possessing a measuring-rod that is final and authoritative. Scripture is now our reliable check. It demonstrates that God and not human experience is the centre of things; that He has revealed Himself objectively with clarity; that though man is of himself morally unacceptable, God has acted historically to reconcile Himself to man. For each and every Christian at the present moment, a personal relationship with this living God is not only possible but is absolutely necessary. Such a mystical relationship – *union mystica*—is of the heart and is complete. Ann Griffiths – like the Scriptures – sometimes conveys this union with God in terms related to the senses, a custom that has

much enamoured some secular observers. Much has been made of the influence of the Song of Solomon on her diction. Just for the record, I would like to note that according to my calculation, in her small handful of hymns there are 24 references to the Psalms, 23 to Revelation, 22 to Isaiah as to Exodus, 21 to Hebrews, 20 to Luke, and that the Song of Solomon tags along seventh with 19, in the incredible list of books Ann refers to in her handful of scripture-crammed hymns.

Permit me to quote one of these so-called erotic hymns, which brought no qualms to our healthy Methodist forefathers, although in our more licentious times readers feel a little more uneasy:

As my life is so corrupted,  
 And my failings beyond count,  
 What a privilege allows me  
 Dwelling on Thy holy mount,  
 Where the veils are rent asunder  
 And the covering open flies,  
 Where Thine excellence of glory  
 Blinds this brief world from my eyes.

Oh, might I from high salvation's  
 Fountains drink and drink each day  
 Till my thirst for fleeting pleasures  
 Has completely quenched away;  
 Waiting ever for my Sovereign,  
 Quick to answer to His call,  
 Then to open for His entrance,  
 Enjoy His image all in all.

In another hymn, she speaks of “kissing the Son for all eternity”, a phrase she got of course from Psalm 2:12, which was also used in singing the metrical versions of the Psalms, but which our present-day congregations would probably find somewhat embarrassing.

What has perturbed most recent Welsh students of her work, however, has not been this ecstatic warmth, of course, but that this was related to objective truth, that the *content* of her faith could be communicated, and that there were certain propositions that were inherent in her praise. In other words her Methodism would be all well and good, were it not *Calvinistic* Methodism.

Calvinism is for most people a sort of swear-word. In a memorial volume to Ann Griffiths, the Welsh poet and critic Euros Bowen discussed her imagery, occasionally referring to her theology. Whenever he confined himself to analysing her poetic devices, his discussion was excellent, but when he made a few scattered references to her theology, almost inevitably he was not only completely inaccurate, but the truth about Calvinism was diametrically opposed to what he claimed it to be.

For instance, take his discussion of the word *delw* (image or form). Hymn V of the published edition uses the word three times to refer to the objective form of Christ. This sacred image is independent of Ann's own personality, but she longs to conform to it. It is an image of holiness to be loved and worshipped. Notice the last line of the hymn I translated: “Enjoy His image all in all.” A similar line occurs in Hymn XX. This emphasises the concreteness of her meditation on Christ, as well as her own individuality, as contrasted with God in man: they are distinct. The image is stamped upon her: she conforms to that image. She does not dissolve Hindu-like into its being. In other words, she is primarily concerned with her privilege now as a new creation, newly formed on the image of Christ, to conform more nearly with him through sanctification every day.

Dr Bowen's complaint is, of the little handful of hymns she has written, that she gives too little attention to the first creation and to the primary formation of man on the

“image” of God *before* the fall. Dr Bowen contends, and rightly contends, that this fundamental starting-point is of utmost importance in establishing man’s essence and value, his purpose and dignity. But having made the point that Ann does not get around to this particular doctrine—nor might it be asserted does she encompass a great number of other doctrines as her motive was to express her warm delight in her saviour rather than systematise theology—then Dr Bowen waxes eloquent about this being a basic fault in Calvinism itself. As this seems to be a blind spot with some sacramentalist divines (I find them making frequent accusations that Calvin neglected the Creation in favour of Redemption), might I be permitted to refer to Calvin’s *Institutes*. What I am trying to demonstrate is the fundamental position of the doctrine of Creation. In Book One, as you may well remember there are four chapters (5, 14, 15 and 16) dealing particularly with God in Creation; but what is of particular interest are some sections in Chapter XV that use the word “image”, this term which is of key importance in the study of Ann Griffiths. I will confine myself to section summaries of 3, 4, 5:

3. The *image* of God is one of the strongest proofs of the immortality of the soul. What is meant by this *image*. The dreams of Osiander concerning the *image* of God are refuted. Whether there is any difference between *image* and “likeness”. Another objection of Osiander is refuted. The *image* of God is conspicuous in the whole Adam.
4. The *image* of God is in the soul. Its nature may be learnt from its renewal by Christ. What is comprehended under this renewal. What the *image* of God in man was before the fall. In what things it now appears. When and where it will be seen in perfection.
5. The dreams of the Manichees and of Servetus, as to the origin of the soul, are refuted. Also of Osiander, who denies that there is any *image* of God in man without essential righteousness.” (my italics)

In a later chapter (VII of Book Three) Calvin opens out on why “we should consider the *image* of God in our neighbours.”

Now, the word “image” is important for Ann Griffiths as we have seen. Although there is none of Calvin’s discussion in her work, I strongly suspect that even when Ann uses this word “image”, the whole doctrine of creation and of man made in the image of God is well and truly fixed in the back of her mind. Even when she speaks of Christ’s great act of Redemption, Creation is not too far removed: she is amazed and expresses it (as she does so often) in paradox, that –

The *author of life* has been put to death  
And the great resurrection was buried.

The main significance of Ann Griffiths’ particular use of the word “image” is, I believe, in what it tells of her mysticism. The Christian picture of union with Christ is something like the impression made on wax by an image: the wax does not disappear, but takes the shape of the object that is printed on it. This is Ann’s way of explaining what has happened to her heart. We can contrast, on the other hand, the union described by the Hindu as he imagines his union with “God” like a drop of ink being completely dissolved in water, so that union really implies deletion. You may remember too the well-known tale of Sufism which I shall try to relate with due seriousness:

The lover knocks at the door of the Beloved. “Who is there?” asks the Beloved. “It is I,” replies the lover. “This house will not hold Me and thee,” comes the reply. The lover goes

away and weeps and prays in solitude. After a long time he returns and knocks again. The Voice asks, "Who is there?" "It is thou." Immediately the door opens; lover and Beloved are face to face at last."

Well, we know something of that sort of divinity in Welsh pulpits, with *man* becoming "God". It was the sort of situation that Tillich would try to imagine,—man disappearing as he became divine. Ann Griffiths' attitude was exactly opposite. Her imagery, the scriptural imagery, to convey the union was marriage—the marriage of Christ and His church, each completely joined, indeed made one, yet distinct and different in character and purpose.

One of Ann Griffiths' great terms was "object". Just as Morgan Llwyd emphasised the "outer" Bible, so too Ann had no doubt that her experience was objective as well as subjective. However private the knowledge of Christ was for her, she knew she shared it with thousands of other believers. The Calvinist Welsh mystics such as William Williams of Pantycelyn and Islwyn would have resisted any suggestion that their experience was merely emotive rather than cognitive. The experience that came to them, the ecstasy, the knowledge of the spiritual, this was validated by scripture.

The major myth about Calvinism proclaimed by some sacramentalists and liberals alike is that it is too systematic, too formal. That there should be so much order in God's act of Redemption is surely difficult to swallow: God must be more adaptable than this, and perhaps more pragmatic and compromising. Calvinism is too legalistic to permit true Christian love, which in the liberal sense is an undisciplined mess of sentimental and amoral blubber. So, how in the world can one have a *Calvinistic* mystic, such as Ann Griffiths? They must have made a mistake. And then valiant efforts are made to prove that Ann Griffiths was not really a Calvinist. The ridiculous suggestion is made in the discussion I have just mentioned that Calvin emphasises the sovereignty of God and Christ giving His life in order to gain forgiveness for sinners at the expense of proclaiming the love of God. Now, it is presumed, — as the love of God is so conspicuous in Ann Griffiths' work, she couldn't properly have been a Calvinist. Following the same reasoning, neither could Calvin have been much of a Calvinist.

As we all know, when Calvinism is mentioned by liberals, scholarship goes by the board: anything will pass. But, I think the inherent prejudices that are displayed here against a meaningful faith, a faith that possesses order and content and is discriminating, may help us to define something about Christian mysticism. Ann Griffiths' knowledge of God is ordered and structured not by her own whims and tempers but by the meaningful way of salvation set down by God, revealed externally in Scripture, accomplished objectively and historically by the second Person and then by the third Person in the Deity. Her growth in a timeless union with God is felt yet ordered: she has a complete hymn in praise of the "Way". The way of submission and utter abandonment, which she describes throughout her work, proceeds according to inevitable stages of spiritual growth: from effectual calling together with conviction of condemnation by the law, through regeneration, faith and repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, union with Christ, on to glorification. Her content is so ordered because the truth itself is ordered. This is her mystic way.

The attention the Law receives in her work sometimes persuades other critics to conclude that she probably *was* a Calvinist after all, so presumably she couldn't have

been a true mystic. They don't want to have it both ways. The Law itself, it should be said, appears in her hymns under two guises. Occasionally she refers back to it as it was on Sinai, in all its awfulness, standing between her and God: it is a condemnation. But more often than not, she portrays the Law as seen now through Christ's love: Christ standing between her and the Law, and the Law itself now being seen as lovely, an expression of God's own character. Her soul leaps with pleasure at seeing the law honoured (Hymn I). She meets with Christ, and there He is fulfilling the Law to its uttermost limits (II). She longs for complete sanctification in order for herself now to honour the Law completely, and to conform immovably with the pure and sacred laws of heaven (VII). She refers once again in Hymn XX to Christ giving due honour to the Law of His Father.

This emphasis on the honouring of the Law is not, of course, because she would deny that sin is primarily a transgression of something that God has set down, but rather that for her in essence it is a personal relationship. She would accept that God has certainly established a general and public pattern of behaviour, but in the first place He has created a family, and sin is not merely an infringement of a universal rule but a personal insult and an act of hatred towards and a separation from this loving Father. This accounts, of course, for the wrath of God.

The late Professor JR Jones argued that Ann Griffiths' mysticism was "shapeless and undeveloped". "No recognised system," he said, "was placed like a skin or shell around it. She knew nothing of such things." And again he claimed, the framework necessary for mysticism was completely opposed to the legal relationships demanded by Calvinism. What I have tried to argue is this: Ann Griffiths found in Calvinism the mystic road that led to the real objective Christ. For her there was no contradiction between the beauty of the Law (or what EF Kevan's book on Puritan theology calls *The Grace of Law*) and the sublime Christ she adored ecstatically. To contemplate the fullness of the Law, honoured and accomplished, was to contemplate the living Christ himself. They were both "mysticism": they were both Calvinism. She would not have heard of mysticism as such, although she would probably have heard the term Calvinism related to her particular brand of belief, which meant for her receiving the gift of God without resisting the divine action, being elevated beyond ordinary meditation and affection into holy contemplation, aspiring above all earthly images to fix her gaze on the One who had changed her: it meant a thrilling personal relationship that had been made possible by something God Himself had done in Jesus Christ. The personal relationship that was intended for every Christian.

Most of what I have been saying has been in correction of the excesses of a vague mysticism that loses contact with revealed historical truth. But I would like to conclude with some points offered in what seems the opposite direction: some considerations I would suggest to those of our brethren who are particularly involved in the proper defence of the doctrines of the *Reformed* faith. With no doubts about her Calvinistic tenets, what may we learn from Ann Griffiths about the wholeness of a living faith?

First of all, her hymns seem to tell us not to be afraid of the body. The body is inevitably confused with lust, and has to be suspect, but has a proper role; so equally, one must be guarded against the inhibitions of unbalanced pietism.

Secondly, these hymns seem to remind us that we are not on this earth primarily to

explain or defend: we are here to praise. If Jesus Christ is altogether lovely, let us say so. Let us sing it aloud. Let our whole personality, our affections, rationality, our will, let our whole being proclaim it with joy and adoration.

And lastly, if we are to be troubled by excesses—and we are always troubled by excesses—let them not be excesses of decorum and propriety and respectability. It is high time that those of us who cling to the doctrines of grace and to the belief that justification is by faith were suspected of being intoxicated in excessive expressions of our love for Jesus. Ann Griffiths had no modesty where her delight in the love of Jesus Christ was concerned. She was not too proud to sing forth her reverent affection for the Person who had snatched her from the emptiness of existence. She was not so anxious about what others thought to conceal the rapture and exaltation she felt towards her God Incarnate.

Tight-lipped and sedate orthodoxy and an obsessive self-discipline can be sinful when we encounter the real Lord. He is the One who should transport us with delight, as He did Ann Griffiths. This is what she is still telling us today. How can we believe these things about what has happened to ourselves without shouting aloud with elation? How can we be so subdued and so sober about such a Lord as ours?

So often in our sombre desire to interpret and argue against our error we have lost contact with our main task, which is to praise, to magnify, to speak well of our Lord, to tell of His beauty and majesty. For the old Welsh poets, praise was the structure of existence: this positive affirmation of goodness was their chief office. Nowadays, fashion dictates that poets should be ironic and ambiguous, critical and absurd, and praise is slightly reactionary and embarrassing. This attitude to the fundamental work for which we were created seems to have rubbed off on the community in general, and even on the church itself. It is not that we have not been over-enthusiastic about declaring the central propositions and doctrines of the faith, but rather we have not been enthusiastic enough (in the modern sense) about contemplating the Son. Ann Griffiths' central attention was directed at everything about the Lord Jesus,—His incarnation, His death, His resurrection, His intercession, His wonderful Person. She praised Him. She adored Him. He was absolutely everything to her. She could never fathom His love. She was driven to proclaim in majestic verse her longing for His company. She wanted to look at Him for ever. And she was right. More than our need for orthodoxy—and there is no denying that fundamental need—is our need for Jesus. He is deserving of an unbridled love, unbridled by worldly inhibitions. We are not primarily related to truths but to the One who is the Truth, to the One who has given Himself for us, not for us simply to believe things about Him, although that is a part of knowing Him, but for us to give ourselves “uncontrolledly”—and I use the word advisedly in its usual secular and rational sense—uncontrolledly to Him. We should not be satisfied until our services of worship are resounding once again with the sound of “Hallelujah”, until our whole life is full of hosannas to the living Lord, until He is exalted in every way:

Seas to swim yet never compass  
God as man, and man as God.

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