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

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Mysticism is a term usually related to an emphasis experience of union with “God”. It has numerous other connotations of course, but that is generally the crux. Recent studies have tended to veer towards discriminating between differing “mysticisms” and away from lumping them all together in an amorphous mass as “Mysticism”. And this is only right and proper.

The reactionary response amongst some evangelicals against all “Mysticism” as such, because other religions have an unacceptable concept of union with God, is just as if we repudiated “belief” because those other religions also have “beliefs”. Awakened discrimination in this, as in every other field, must be more enlightening. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones recommended the reading of the works of Tauler “and certain others of these so-called mystics of the time, who even in the darkness of that era were burning and shining lights” (*Joy Unspeakable*). And his own preaching, in the continued emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the sense of the presence of God, can only be counted as a phenomenon in the tradition of great mystics such as Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. “He was clearly mystical and yet we must grant he was evangelical,” he said of the latter. But he warned against mysticism centred on subjectivism, mysticism that is neglectful of the authority of scripture and weak on the doctrine of sin (*Fellowship with God*).

In the history of Welsh mysticism there are three distinct periods: the Medieval “visionary” period, followed by the main bulk of Welsh mysticism which is Calvinist and scriptural, and then thirdly the humanist, romantic and subjective mysticism of recent times. This present essay is a review of the work of just one of the most interesting of the Calvinist mystics, a young woman who died, twenty-nine years of age, in a remote Welsh farmhouse soon after childbirth, and whose work was only conserved “accidentally” by the providential memory of an illiterate maidservant who had heard her mistress singing around the farm.

The term “mysticism” is of course pretty flabby. It has been used inevitably and consistently throughout this century in referring to Ann Griffiths’ work, just as it has about various people and faiths far removed from Biblical Christianity. Mysticism, although not new, is one of the fads of our times. We may relate some of the recent attention given to it to the Eastern cults that have filtered into Europe and America together with hippies and the drug-scene: it possess a plausible appeal of escape and otherworldly impreciseness that tickles the palate of an uprooted generation. But it is also found in the established denominations, inheritors of the organisations set up in a more spiritual era. In them, at the beginning of this century, it seemed to take the form of what I would call “romantic mysticism”; and sometimes at the present day – amongst the neo-liberals of various shades of opinion – it approximates more to the longing for the pseudo-psychological or pseudo-spiritual experience that one associates with gurus,

hypnotists, the occult, the charismatic movement in a variety of religions and Tillichian attempts to penetrate to the ground of all being.

We know, of course, that there is also what one may certainly term mysticism clearly evident in the historic Biblical faith. Amongst those who cling with fervour to the gospel and to the truths precisely revealed in scripture and in the Lord Jesus Christ himself there are those – I would say very many thousands – who have truly known and still know something that has elements in it of an experience that could be described as mystic, or as Calvin expressed it *unio mystica* (a mystical union).

What I would like to consider, as a main theme, is what exactly defines truly Biblical mysticism? What is the difference between that which takes the name Mysticism in other religions (or even amongst atheists and agnostics) and this experience often considered as mysticism amongst those who are obviously deeply orthodox and profoundly God-loving Christians?

Instead, however, of following this theme generally and perhaps abstractly, I think it would be well for us to sharpen our perspective by relating our considerations to one particular Christian, a great Welsh hymn-writer of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. One who never knew the word mystic, although almost ubiquitously described as such, and would never have considered herself anything more – nor less – than a poor, broken and unworthy, though rejoicing, Christian. And yet one who seems to possess strange and wonderful attributes, namely Ann Griffiths. A farmgirl from Montgomeryshire, unknown outside a restricted circle of friends, a composer of hymns who never published and as far as we know never even wrote down more than one stanza, together with a few amazing letters. An unconscious mystic. Differing in this from Morgan Llwyd or Islwyn (two other Calvinist Welsh mystics), one who never came in contact with recognised mystics of repute. And perhaps, for those reasons, a more genuine mystic, indeed, the most genuine and certainly the most fascinating mystic in Welsh history.

Before considering what distinguishes her mysticism from the other mysticisms one could mention, let me just outline some of the main points in her brief but astounding life on this earth.

She was born, the fourth of five children, in 1776 in the north of the former county of Montgomeryshire, in a tiny farm house near Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa, a place not very distant from Llanfyllin. People from outside Wales sometimes reckon that she must have been rather isolated from intellectual and theological ferment, having been brought up so far from London and Oxford and such places. But Bala was within easy riding distance, and she was a regular visitor there; and Bala under the influence of Thomas Charles, one of the most incisive and energetic intellects in European theology in those days, was known as a centre of religious thought and activity that drew regularly on such giants as Thomas Jones of Denbigh and John Elias. Here the Dolwar Family would buy books, some of them classics of the faith, discuss doctrine, and hear some of the most inspired preaching of their day in Europe. From such a vantage-point some of the so-called centres such as Paris and Rome might well have seemed themselves isolated, and certainly in need of Welsh missionary activity.

In 1796 her previously carefree and lackadaisical existence was stopped in its tracks by the preaching of the Rev. Benjamin Jones of Pwllheli. The work of grace had begun: her life was changed. She became more and more assiduous in her church-going, more

fervent and feeling in her devotions. Although she had not yet gained the upper hand over her prejudices against the Calvinistic Methodists, there was now no peace for her – she was driven more and more to seek out the truth. Eventually, the work was completed under the preaching of Ishmael Jones of Llandinam, – what I suspect was not so much the sealing by the Holy Ghost as a clarification of what had already happened; and the account of her journey home from such meetings mentions her rolling on the road as the depth of her spiritual condition was revealed to her.

Within the immediate neighbourhood of Ann Griffiths' home there lived men of great theological and intellectual calibre, such as John Davies, who played not an unimportant part in the spiritual and cultural history of Tahiti, and John Hughes, a solid and perceptive theologian who published numerous books. There is no doubt that in Ann's frequent spiritual discussions with John Hughes in particular, both his and her understanding of the historic and classic Protestant faith was sharpened. But for everyone involved with Methodism in that area, Calvinism was much more than a clear and comprehensive outline of the biblical doctrines: it was a dynamic and experiential faith that demanded the whole personality. Perhaps what strikes one today with the Calvinistic Methodism of the century 1736-1836 is the sense of utter fullness that was enjoyed by Christians at that time. Ann Griffith sang (I translate):

Pilgrim, weak from stress of tempests,
 Look before thee; raise thy sight
 Where the Lamb makes intercession
 In His flowing robes of white.
 Faithfulness – His golden girdle;
 At His hem the bells proclaim
 Full forgiveness for the sinner
 Through the atonement of the Lamb.

When thou walkest through the waters
 To thy ankles in His love,
 Think what fathoms without measure
 Flow for thee through heaven above;
 Though the resurrected children
 Swim the tide where others sank,
 Lake Bethesda's mighty substance
 Has no bottom and no bank.

Oh, the depths of His salvation,
 Godliness in mystery,
 Nature's form of mortal manhood
 Has enclosed eternity.
 He's the Person who accepted
 Awful wrath on Calvary:
 Justice cried, – "He has accomplished
 Thine atonement: set Him free."

Blissful day of rest eternal
 From my labour will be sure,
 In a sea of endless wonders -
 No horizon and no shore;
 Finding an abundant entrance
 To the Triune God's abode:
 Seas to swim yet never compass
 God as man, and man as God.

Those acquainted with the diction of the mystics will recognise in a phrase such as "Seas to swim yet never compass" a kindred spirit. Her work is full of paradox, as often one finds in the mystical tradition. She lives "to see the Unseen"; her Saviour "gave strength to the arms of his executioners / who nailed him there on the cross"; angels were amazed to see the Giver of being and the broad Sustainer and Sovereign of all things, in a manger in swaddling-clothes with no place to lay his head"; and again "the creation there moving in Him, / He dead in the grave."

In an indiscriminating condemnation of all mysticism, *Faith Misguided*, 1988, Professor AL Johnson raises the logical law of noncontradiction as a means of refuting paradoxes. But just as Calvin had no difficulty, within an eternal dimension, of taking the sovereignty of God together with the full responsibility of man, or the sinful

Creator as the author of all things together with the existence of sin, so Ann Griffiths' seeming contradictions have to be taken in a context that can accept one drop of water plus one drop of water still making one.

I believe that Ann composed her hymns as part of her own personal devotions. She had been nurtured in a very literary background, in a home and an area thoroughly immersed in the traditions of Welsh verse, and in a mode of verse-composition that I suspect was basically oral. That is to say, I believe that, although she herself was completely literate, she inherited an attitude and a craftsmanship in her literary activity which prompted her to versify mentally without the added chore of recording her work in writing. She was absolutely bereft of earthly ambitions: the only real audience intended for her devotional effusions was the Three-in-One God. She would sing her verses in delight as she went about her menial tasks, at the milking, sewing and knitting in the house, working in the fields, cleaning. The maid at the farm, Ruth Evans, an unlettered though intelligent young woman, would join in with her mistress, picking up these verses as they were sung.

Ann died in 1805, leaving behind in her own hand one letter and one stanza of a hymn that she had included in that letter. Nothing more survived, at least in writing, although her profound spirituality had bequeathed an indelible impression to all who had known her. A few months before her death, what I would consider "the marriage of the century" took place. Certainly no-one at the time looking at the marriage of Ann Griffiths' theological mentor, John Hughes of Pontrobert, an extremely awkward and ugly hulk of a man with Ruth Evans, that non-entity of a maidservant from Dolwar Fach, would have thought of their wedding in those terms. One day, however, soon after, one can imagine Ruth Hughes going about her work, maybe preparing dinner and thinking back about old times with her mistress, remembering Ann's death and what she had said about it before it came; and then quietly perhaps, not to disturb her husband unduly, she would break into song. I translate:

If I *must* ford through the river
One there is will break the flood,
Jesus, my high-priest will hold me
And protect me with His blood;
In His lap I'll call out "Conquest"
Over death, hell, world and grave,
Endless life with no more sinning,
Glorious in the arms that save.

It is sweetness to remember
That decree of Three in One,
Ever gaze upon the person
Who took on Him the form of man;

In fulfilling the conditions
Dying sorrow struck His soul:
Now a myriad myriad voices
Joyfully this song extol.

We shall live where tribulation
Cannot live, nor death be found,
When with sorrow terminated
We shall sing about His wound;
Swimming in life's pristine river,
Endless peace of holy Three,
Underneath the cloudless radiance
Of that precious Calvary...

Then one can imagine what must have happened. "What in the world is that you're singing, Ruth?" asked John Hughes.

"It's just one of Ann's hymns."

"But that's wonderful. Wonderful!...Swimming in the pristine river of life...Sing it again, Ruth; for God's good sake, sing it again."

And so, she did. And after singing it a number of times, John Hughes asked her, “Did Ann compose anything else? Do you remember any other hymns that she made?”
“Why yes? How does that other one go? – Oh for the faith to ponder...”

Gradually she recalled some eighteen complete hymns together with twelve individual or separate stanzas that may have been brief and complete expressions of devotion in verse, let us say some thirty hymns in all. John Hughes meticulously noted them down, and they were eventually published as were her letters. Ruth has been called “the most literate illiterate woman in Welsh history”. Through her, Ann Griffiths’ name, and some of her literary products, have been preserved for all posterity.

More and more appears in English about Ann. Hitherto the main proponents of Ann Griffiths in English have been High Church Englishmen and a Catholic Irish priest. Recently some of her hymns have been beautifully translated by the present Bishop of Monmouth. The latest study of her work by the Roman Catholic, Joseph P Clancy was published last year in the journal *Literature and Theology*. One of the most astute workers in the field is the Rev. Dr AM Allchin, a canon of Canterbury, – a most sensitive scholar, and an Englishman with a generous and very fine understanding of the Welsh language and culture. His work, coming as it does from a rich background of knowledge of the Eastern Orthodox Church, has been a refreshing contribution to the appreciation of Ann Griffiths’ compositions. Perhaps the stimulation he offers may someday encourage an English or an Anglo-Welsh evangelical to take up a further study of Ann’s work from within the Calvinist and evangelical tradition itself.

The bi-centenary in 1976 of Ann Griffiths’ birth saw a plethora of celebration from a wide spectrum of individuals, much less learned than Canon Allchin. Women’s libbers counted her as one of their bold fore-runners. Slack Laodicean liberals seized hold of her so-called mysticism in order to indulge in vague and subjective raptures about some sort of ground of non-being. And sensual aesthetes considered how apt her enjoyment of the Song of Solomon was in this enlightened age of permissiveness.

In view of such a fragmentation of approaches to one who everyone would agree, – even if they would agree regretfully, – was certainly an evangelical and a Calvinist hymn-writer, perhaps a brief consideration now from an evangelical and Calvinist viewpoint would not be entirely amiss, even if it may sound a bit odd.

First of all, it is important to grasp the combination of truth *and* beauty in Ann’s hymns: she sings doctrine; the teaching of the Holy Spirit is precise but personalised in her work, sometimes hovering on the edge of traditional formulæ but never losing sight of the lovely person of Christ and His redeeming action:

Oh for the faith to ponder
With angels from on high
The pattern of salvation –
Its holy mystery.
A person whose two natures
Are undivided one
In unconfused proportion
The ever-perfect Son.

My soul, see how becoming
Appears the Lord our God;
Venture your life upon Him
And cast on Him your load:
He’s man to feel the pity
Of every earthly woe,
He’s God to conquer Satan –
That worldly, fleshly foe.

I long each day that passes
To flee the battle strife,
My selfishness to conquer
And give to Him my life.
Invited to God's table
Now sit with Him I must,
Although it were sufficient
To love Him from the dust.

Although the swelling tempest
Would cast me overboard,
True wisdom is my pilot,
His name is mighty Lord;
Although the flood of evil
Breaks on me foul and dark,
The journey's end is steadfast -
God is Himself the ark. (translation)

Here we have inspired contemplation of the Deity, complete self-surrender, but the identity of God is "unconfused": there is no undifferentiated absorption. And this is where we come to define the *truth* of Christian mysticism.

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 and her neighbours, they knew they 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.

Understandable apprehension about using such terms as "union" with God, brought on by inhibitions about mysticism, may lead reformed evangelicals to abandon some more of the high ground to charismatics, as they have already done in the matter of praise. The abandonment of key sectors of the Christian life, as early twentieth century evangelicals did with God's sovereignty over social sanctification, can arise out of an unbridled negativity towards the dangers ever present in doctrine. Once again Martyn Lloyd-Jones' experiential emphasis is salutary, for instance in his sermons on Rom. 8:1,2,9-11; and Eph. 2:4-7, where he points to this important doctrine of experiential union referring to Romans 6, 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 5, as well as to the end of Gal. 2 (See too *The Life of Peace, Studies in Philippians 3 and 4*, 1990, pp. 70-72). One aspect of this union, says Lloyd-Jones "we may call *mystical* or *vital*."

The emphasis on scripture in Ann Griffiths' work is the final arbiter of propositional truth accepted by the evangelical. But in such zeal, he/she must not presume (as does Arthur L. Johnston, *Faith Misguided*, 1988) that there is no other way of gaining knowledge of God. Scripture mentions the creation and the conscience; and although these are checkable with Scripture, Calvin and the Puritans were not dismissive of their significance.

Johnston also tends to be negative in his attitude to "union" with God and, once the general position against all mysticisms is taken, the danger is to forego some of the great doctrines of the faith. "Many mystics," he says, "come to see the goal of the spiritual life to be this union – not salvation and Christian maturity." Well, Ann Griffiths considered honouring and glorifying God as full maturity: salvation was only the beginning of the Christian life, leading on to union and glorification.

To be continued in the next issue.

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