

Christian Mysticism

A mystic is a person who is deeply aware of the powerful presence of the divine Spirit: someone who seeks, above all, the knowledge and love of God and who experiences to an extraordinary degree the profound personal encounter with the energy of divine life. Mystics often perceive the presence of God throughout the world of nature and in all that is alive, leading to a transfiguration of the ordinary around them. However, the touch of God is most strongly felt deep within their own hearts.

Although much influenced by its Jewish and Greek background and similar other forms of mysticism in its passion for the Absolute, Christian mysticism also has very distinctive features of its own. While Platonic philosophy stresses the essentially spiritual nature of human beings and their kinship with the Divine, Christianity teaches that they are God's creatures rather than his kin, utterly dependent on and sustained by him, created in the image of God, which is deeply imprinted in his being. The true nature of the human being is a balanced integration of spirit and flesh, a true unity, not a dualistic separation whereby only the spirit is close to the Divine. Platonic and Neoplatonic writers speak of the soul's ascent to God, whereas Christianity emphasizes the descent of God into the world so that the world and all humanity can become one with God.

For the Christian, the love of God is expressed through the love of Christ, who unites human beings to him, and through him to one another. Thus, the experience of the Christian mystic is not the Neoplatonic "flight of the alone to the Alone," but rather occurs in a community context by seeking participation in the mystery of Christ, itself inseparable from the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ. The Christian mystic is not primarily seen as a privileged individual or a member of an intellectual elite, but rather as a living cell of the body of Christ. Thus, the mystical life represents the full flowering of Christian baptism, which is the rite of incorporation, the foundational sacrament, for membership in the Church. Because of this, mystical experience is in principle open to all, not just the elect.

Of great importance also is the concept of God who is not simply One, Ultimate Reality or the Absolute, but a personal Being who yet transcends all notions of personhood found among human beings by forming a community of persons within the mystery of the Trinity.* God works mysteriously among human beings through his grace, his inexhaustible love, which creates the very possibility for the soul to seek and love God.

The way of the mystic has over time been divided into three significant stages through which the mystic had to pass to achieve union with God. It is like a "ladder of perfection," or *scala perfectionis*, which begins with the lowest stage of the *purgative life*, the way of purification, understood as detachment, renunciation and asceticism, to move away from the world of the senses and ego to the higher, eternally abiding reality of God.

Such purification of the senses and the mind, an utter stripping away that could include many practices of self-mortification, leads to a second stage, which is the *illuminative life*. At this stage, the mystic draws near to the divine unity, reaching the heights of loving contemplation. Fully illuminated, he or she realizes the ultimate mystery of all that exists, and dwells with joy in a state of sublime ignorance, likened to utter darkness, to an abyss of nothingness.

This is followed by the highest stage, the *unitive life*, the ultimate goal of loving union with God, an ecstatic experience of overwhelming joy. Some mystics have described this experience of union as a spiritual marriage between God and the soul, preceded by a spiritual betrothal during the stage of illumination. Others see the whole mystical journey as a process of "deification"—an important idea in Eastern Orthodox mysticism—but however intimate this union with God is, Christian mysticism never abandons the otherness of God, and the mystery never ceases to be God's creation.**

Christian mysticism can be Christocentric or theocentric, but these forms may also be combined. The mystic's devotion and contemplation can focus on the figure of Jesus Christ, his humanity with its healing ministry, suffering, death and resurrection, or on Jesus as the divine Logos and eternal Word, or on the presence of Christ in all things, his divine Lordship as ruler of the universe. There are many passages in the New Testament that inspire such devotion, and numerous Christian mystics give witness to a deeply personal and very intimate experience of the presence of Christ.

Theocentric mysticism focuses directly on God, on God's Being and attributes. Christian mystics also contemplate a triune God—God as Trinity—and God as Creator, who inheres with and in his creation. The visible universe reflects the beauty and perfection of the divine mind and the image of God is reflected in the human soul.

Whatever mystics try to convey about their knowledge and experience of God, however rapturously and ecstatically they express it, their vision far transcends, in fact explodes all limits of human language. Given this intrinsic insufficiency of language, Christian mystics distinguish its descriptions of God by way of negation or affirmation.

Perhaps the most widely used and known is the negative way, the *via negativa* (or apophatic way), whereby anything we say of God is so misleading that it must be denied. God is so unimaginably “other” that we can come to know him only by stripping away, by negating every attribute and description. This is why an unknown medieval mystic refers to the cloud of “unknowing.”

Some Christian mystics have a strong preference for the *via positiva* (or kataphatic way), which celebrates God in positive terms, affirming the divine perfections whereby God possesses all qualities in a sublime and limitless way. The goodness and beauty of creation, the positive attributes of all created things, the love between human beings can all help to seek, praise and find God.***

--Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages*, HiddenSpring, 2001, pp. 3; 17-21.

*To speak of the Trinity in terms of a community, which reaches out to embrace all Creation, addresses the question, “What does it mean for Three to be One?” Yet, there is the question, “What does it mean for the One to be Three?” In response to that question we can say: “The One *retains* his Unfathomable and Eternal Mystery, in contrast to the finiteness of His Beloved Creation (Father); the One *expresses* his Mercy, Grace and Peace through his Suffering, Humiliation and triumphant Rising (Son); the One *works* to bring Life, Guidance, Comfort and Communion to and throughout His Creation (Holy Spirit). Each time the One breaks into our lives, no matter how we perceive that experience, all Three are Present.”

**Mystic Douglas V. Steere comments on these classical stages in *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, Marvin Halverson and Arthur A. Cohen, eds., Meridian, 1958, 237-38:

“There seems to be a period in the early Christian Church when the direct experience of the Holy Spirit was the common expectation of all. Ascetic specialists then appeared to have taken over, and the expectation of the mystic experience was narrowed down to a small elite. In fact, the name of mysticism has often been associated with the steps of preparation of the soul for this experience. There is *purgation*, the ridding of the soul with those practices which disperses it and prevent it from paying attention. There is *illumination*, the mobilization of the disclosures that focus attention. And there is *contemplation*, the final stage in which the presence penetrates the beholder.

In acknowledging the conventional description of the inward steps of preparation for mystical disclosure, the mystics have echoed [theologian and mystic] Augustine’s words that ‘We come to God by love, and not by navigation,’ and have been the first to insist that grace cannot be bound by any describable patterns and that this ‘gift of gifts’ may appear suddenly and elude any and all of the wisdom contained in these well-meant instructions for preparing the way.

[The mystical experience] points to the neglected sector of the Incarnation teaching, namely, that God became man in order that men might be lifted to God. It has given to men here on this earth a foretaste of eternal life and has kindled their powers of thought and expression by showing them how thin the membrane which separates us all from the illuminated life of common joy.”

Describable stages toward the mystical experience can also be deceptive in having us think that each of us must go through a prescribed progress of set “achievements” to know God’s Love in our lives, causing us to focus on where we are at in this progression, rather on Jesus Christ and doing his will. It could also cause us to focus on who is “spiritually advanced” and who is not, creating a hierarchy of authority rather than on humbly serving God and each other. The value of understanding the language of the Monastic tradition is to help us see behind their language to identify the spiritual experiences of our early Christian brothers and sisters and what we can learn from them. Ursula King’s book is helpful in doing just that.

***Also emerging from the Monastic tradition of Christian mysticism are three forms of devotional or spiritual exercises. They are described below, along with quotes from Mother Theresa of Calcutta found in Brother Angelo Devananda Scolozzi, *Mother Theresa: Contemplative in the Heart of the World*, Servant Books, 1985, passim, that further illustrate each form:

MEDITATION: Meditation is reflecting on the life of Jesus Christ, Scripture or Spiritual Writings and Images, the fruit of which is receiving spiritual knowledge.

- “By daily feeding on the scripture, particularly the New Testament, we shall grow in a deeper and more personal knowledge and love of Jesus Christ and his teachings, so as to be able to feed his children with his divine word.”
- “We shall be painstaking and diligent in studying and memorizing select passages, daily reading and meditating on scriptures—to be able to know and love God personally.”

PRAYER: Prayers are conversations with God in preparation for and within our actions in the world, as we seek to be obedient to the will of God.

- “If only we can understand what it is “to pray our work.” If we could only deepen our faith. Prayer is not just time spent and words uttered.”
- “Spend your time in prayer. If you pray you have faith, and if you have faith you will naturally want to serve. The one who does not pray cannot have faith, and when you have faith you want to put it into action. Faith in action is service. Faith in action becomes a delight because it gives you the opportunity of putting your love for Christ into action—it is meeting Christ, serving Christ.”
- “If you are really in love with Christ, no matter how small the work, it will be done better; it will be wholehearted.”

- “Ask the Holy Spirit to pray in you. Learn to pray, love to pray, and pray often.”

CONTEMPLATION: Contemplation is an awareness of the full presence of God in and through all of life, especially while in the midst of deep meditation and prayer.

- “Our silence is a joyful and God-centered silence; it demands of us constant self-denial and plunges us into the deep silence of God where aloneness with God becomes a reality.”
 - “Silence of the heart, not only of the mouth—that too is necessary. Then you can hear God everywhere; in the closing of the door, in the person who needs you, in the birds that sing, in the flowers, the animals—that silence which is wonder and praise.”
 - “If we do not live in the presence of God, we cannot go on.”
 - “We need to be alone with God in silence to be renewed and to be transformed. Silence gives us a renewed outlook on life. In it we are filled with the energy of God Himself, which makes us do all things with joy.”
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