Secularization as the Background for Schillebeeckx’s View of Mysticism

The long process of secularization in western Europe began with the Enlightenment and its emphasis on science and rationalism. A growing disenchantment with traditional religious belief led to a decline in religious practice and eventually to a privatizing of religion as an affair of the individual’s heart. Religious institutions were deprived of their privileged status in society and had to compete with other institutions—educational, political and economic—in forging and defending society’s values. In the final decades of the twentieth century it became apparent that religion was not dying out—another claim of the secularization theory—but surviving and even flourishing in many parts of the world. The current standing in the social sciences of this secularization theory has been succinctly summarized into three separate aspects by Josse Casanova. The first is that the differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions mentioned above is “the valid core” of the secularization theory. Casanova describes this development as “the emancipation” of these spheres from a “religious and ecclesiastical tutelage” (Public Religions in the Modern World, 214). The second is the predicted decline of religious belief and practice: this has emphatically not happened. The third is that religion has been marginalized to a privatized sphere: if this has occurred in parts of Western Europe, it has not happened with Christianity in America and with Islam in the Middle East and elsewhere. Sociologist Peter Berger and others have discussed the reversals in earlier theories of secularization in The Desecularization of the World (1999).

The more immediate context for the Dutch Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx’s theology of mysticism is the two opposing attitudes toward the process of secularization that developed in the Catholic Church in the past century. The attitude of the Modernists was one of enthusiastic acceptance; the official position of the Vatican authorities was one of vigorous rejection, viewing secularization as a...
profound threat to the faith. Schillebeeckx is convinced that even the aggiornamento of the post-Vatican II church did not fully appreciate the important distinction between the social attitude of secularism and the historical process of secularization. If secularity or secularism describes a non-religious attitude toward life in which transcendent values and spiritual practices disappear, secularization is a quite different historical and cultural phenomenon in which the world and society regain what Schillebeeckx calls a “sense of terrestrial autonomy” (1994, 43).

Schillebeeckx argues for an optimistic vision of secularization. Once religious institutions lose their privileged position and secular society regains its “terrestrial autonomy,” religion then becomes part of the human quest for meaning in the secular culture and society. Following his hermeneutic method that insists on the practical nature of theology, Schillebeeckx points out that human finitude is the main challenge to any fully secularized view of the world. Finitude—the realization that every life is bounded by suffering and death—“can never be completely secularized . . . the modern world would have to find a magic way of removing the essential finitude of man and the world” (1981, 122). A non-religious or fully secularized attitude toward life must content itself with an acceptance of finitude. A religious and Christian “secularity”—a view of the world that accepts the result of the secularization process, that is, the non-privileged status of religious institutions—finds in this finitude a witness to God’s presence. This recognition of God’s presence/absence in a secularized world is how Schillebeeckx defines mysticism. This experience of God is not anything extraordinary nor does it depend on exotic visions. The grace and insight that Schillebeeckx names in mysticism is the motivation of the Christian’s effort to make the world a better place and seek the salvation of all humans.

Those who see secularization as an unmitigated disaster blame the contemporary crisis in religious life on this historical change. But, Schillebeeckx strongly argues:

It can’t be said that in the west we are the victims of secularization. It is rather that the institutional church has not understood how things are in some respects. Rather, I see this crisis of the religious life as a reaction to the supernaturalism of the religious life, understood as a flight from the world, as finding safety from the misfortunes of the world (1994, 78).

If there are any menaces to the church in this season of secularization, they arise from this manner of supernaturalism. After the Enlightenment, Christian theology sought to rescue a domain separate from “nature” where science and reason seemed to rule. A false dualism of the natural and the supernatural led to a distorted view of spirituality and mysticism which was now confined to the private and even exotic domain of “the supernatural.” Thus, mysticism came to be seen as intensely personal, removed from the social-political dimension of life; it likewise came to be seen as exceptional rather than an ordinary part of Christian life.

Mysticism as the Core of the Christian Faith

Mysticism is simply a more intense form of the experience of God in the world. Thus, Schillebeeckx locates mysticism at the heart of all Christian faith. He distinguishes two very different trends in mysticism in the recent tradition of Catholic spirituality. One trend, referred to as the Thomistic-Carmelite
and also as the Dominican interpretation, sees the essence of mystical life as an intensive but ordinary form of the Christian life, springing from the three virtues of faith, hope, and love. Another trend, described as "a Jesuit approach," has tended to see mysticism as a separate and exceptional sphere of spirituality that includes such occult phenomena as visions, ecstasy, and the like (1990, 70). In God Is New Each Moment, Schillebeeckx clarifies this point. "The Jesuit mystical writers have dissociated mysticism from faith and described it as an exceptional experience of God. I wonder whether that way of talking is really in accord with the teaching of Ignatius of Loyola" (1983, 118).

Schillebeeckx himself is committed to the first trend, and believes that this kind of mysticism is an essential element in an authentic religious life. The second more exotic view of mysticism, with its emphasis on unusual psychosomatic phenomena, is not an indispensable part for Christian life.

What, then, is the relation of mysticism and religious faith? According to Schillebeeckx, faith involves a kind of cognition with two quite different aspects. One way of knowing relies on concepts and images as representations of religious faith; God is recognized here through the concepts of creator, redeemer and liberator. A different aspect of human cognition that underpins religious faith is a more direct experience of God in which the concepts and images of ordinary cognition disappear. This mystical way of knowing acknowledges a God who transcends human concepts with their many limits. This way of knowing is not exceptional but it is paradoxical: humans can experience the presence/absence of God not in the light of reason but in the traditional metaphor of "a dark night."

When using the word "paradox," Schillebeeckx is talking about a kind of negative cognition that has been celebrated by Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross. This kind of knowledge proceeds without any detailed description except that we have a powerful sense of the whole of the reality in which we are living and of which we are also part, just as we are surrounded by "a dark night." Schillebeeckx sums up this paradoxical mode of mystical knowledge in the philosophical term "mediated immediacy" (1990, 70).

The kind of cognition that a mystical knowing imparts is one of immediacy, without the help of concepts. But we learn of this intimate and immediate knowledge of God only when it is communicated—that is, "mediated" to others in speech and images such as a "dark night." Although it can be only expressed in a negative way, mysticism as a direct experience of God's grace and presence is an essential element of religious faith.

For Schillebeeckx, however, mysticism is much more than an interior, special recognition of God's presence/absence in the world. Mysticism is also a way of life: this kind of knowing leads a person to practical action in society, to work for its betterment. Schillebeeckx analyzes mysticism as a dialogue in which both partners are intensely active, in which one partner, namely God, seems to be silent in his active incarnation, and the other human partner, perceives God as the wholly other but also the source of all transcendent value. In Schillebeeckx's existentialist hermeneutic, mysticism is the embodiment of the authentic condition of the human existent. This authentic condition of the human person moves through three stages (1987, 68–69).

The first phase is the initiating experience of illumination. Here the person experiences a reconciliation with all things, with the usual disparities and antinomies between the objective and the subjective,
the world and the ego, falling away. This overwhelming feeling of reconciliation changes a person’s behavior and creates a new world. But this first phase of consoling illumination gives way to a second period of gnawing doubt. Is this all an illusion? This period corresponds to the classic stage of self-purgation in the spiritual journey. Doubt in time gives way to a third stage when the original sense of illumination, now purified, returns; one experiences a powerful sense of union with God, with no separation between the self and the divinity. All three stages can be experienced in different contexts and situations—in the family or in society and the world; whether visiting a religious place or nature, reading the scripture or in prayer.

On the Distinct Feature of Christian Mysticism

Mysticism as the most intense form of the experience of God or ultimate reality is not only found in Christianity. Schillebeeckx correctly points out that the practice and theory of mysticism can be found in both Western and Eastern religions:

There is a mystical current in Judaism, there is a mystical tradition in Christianity, not to mention Islam. The monotheistic religions are mystical religions. For me, mysticism is the most intense form of the experience of God, which is on an equal footing with faith. It is essentially the divine life. It is not the reserved sector of the Christian life to which only some privileged people have access (1994, 50).

In the study of religion there are many different classifications of mysticism: Western and Eastern mysticism, natural and supernatural mysticism, monotheistic and pantheistic mysticism, etc. Although he has not developed his own classification theory, Schillebeeckx examines various forms of mysticism as interpreted by his own political theology. Both forms of Western and Eastern spirituality originated in Asia, and though they share many fundamental similarities, there are also great differences (1983, 112–18).

The first difference is their conception of the divinity. The divine in Eastern spirituality is envisioned as impersonal or supra-personal, while the God of Christianity is visible in history in Jesus Christ. A second difference appears in their method. The Eastern religions emphasize the inner self harmonized with the entire cosmos, allowing little place for the confrontation between the human and the divine. Western religions, on the other hand, are prophetic religions that emphasize the often antagonistic relationship between God and humans. In this form of spirituality and mysticism God is not only united with humanity, but challenges humans to change their unjust world. A third difference is in their social results. Many Western leaders who are religious are also political leaders, committed to a social ethic and the improvement of society. Schillebeeckx argues for the intimate connection between a religious mysticism and a social praxis of ethical reform. “Mysticism which does not result in improving society is a false mysticism” (1983, 116). Schillebeeckx criticizes Eastern spiritualities as false mysticism when elites are content to enjoy their own prerogatives without acting for a more just world.

This-Worldly Mysticism

This very important aspect of mysticism has been neglected by many Chinese scholars who, when studying religious spirituality, have tended to identify mysticism with the second trend in the Catholic tradition—that is, as an interior, exceptional, and world-rejecting spirituality. Can
a genuine mystic flee from this world and live without any relationship to society? Schillebeeckx says no, and claims that even in Eastern religious mysticism there are deep political and social dimensions. “Mysticism on its own, without any sociopolitical consequences, can come to nothing” (1983, 118). As the heart of the faith and an important part of the dynamic growth of faith, mysticism should not be an exceptional experience of God and an abandonment of this world; it must have some relationship with worldly redemption. Otherwise, mysticism becomes an effective means of diminishing the revolutionary and critical potential of the Christian faith.

Reconciliation with the divine is the motivation of a worldly mysticism. “The mystic first of all wants to let everything go, everything including himself or herself; but in the grace of God he gets everything back a hundredfold, himself and herself included. Genuine mysticism is never a flight from the world, but out of a first disintegrating source experience arises integrating and reconciling mercy with everything” (1987, 69).

Schillebeeckx emphasizes the mysticism of Meister Eckhart and insists that the model of Christian mysticism is not the withdrawn and contemplative Mary, but the active Martha (1983, 116). He argues that Jesus Christ provides the best parable and paradigm for this active reconciliation of God and humanity. The fundamental and mystical doctrine of the Incarnation, and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates God’s involvement in the unending effort to resolve the antinomy between justice and injustice, the secular and the sacred, and the hope for the eventual reconciliation between humans and their world.

In Schillebeeckx’s praxis-oriented theology, mysticism must become prophetic. Mystical experiences should lead Christians to work for a more just world and to continually proclaim the justice and righteousness to which God calls humans.

Conclusion

Mysticism, understood as the experience of union with God or the ultimate without any mediator, has attracted the attention of researchers in aesthetics, philosophy, comparative religion, and psychology. Of course, mysticism is primarily a religious phenomenon, and is an important subject of religious studies and theology, in which many different traditions of mysticism compete for attention. Thus, it remains a controversial topic to analyze and evaluate.

Schillebeeckx’s analyses of mysticism have been spread over the more than 401 books and essays that he published between 1945 and 1983 (Schreiter, 297–321), and his discussions of mysticism have not been compiled into a single volume. Some of his ideas on mysticism closely parallel those of Pope John Paul II in his comparison of Eastern and Western mysticism in Crossing the Threshold of Hope. What, then, is the central contribution of this theologian to a richer understanding of this aspect of religious spirituality?

Schillebeeckx’s starting point is significant. He does not begin deductively from first principles or theological doctrine as did an earlier generation of scholasticism. Nor does he start from “the deep human experience” which the proponents of Protestant liberalism favored. He likewise does not proceed from the privileged Word of God as do neo-orthodox theologians. Instead he takes as his starting point the revelation available in human experience (see Hilkert, 35–51). Revelation for Schillebeeckx is not a formal, abstract message, but takes place in the ordinary historical experience in this world. Mysticism is one of the experiences that humans can have
of God's revelation; it is simply an intensive form of this revelation in historical human experience. Thus, mysticism is interpreted not as an exceptional or "supernaturalistic" event, but as an event at the heart of the Christian faith. Mystical experience, this "unmediated immediacy," serves to overcome the unfortunate dualism in Christian thought that distances faith from reason and the sacred from the secular.

Schillebeeckx's starting point in human experience is joined with his political theology to forge a vision of mysticism as ultimately about social ethics and the healing of the world. Through his method of "mutually critical correlation," he relates the experience of the first disciples to the experiences of persons in the contemporary world. In both historical contexts, humans contend with both positive experiences of God's presence and with what Schillebeeckx calls "contrast experiences" (1989, 158). These are experiences of failure, suffering, and injustice. In both historical eras, these painful experiences motivate Christians both to hope for healing and to work in society for a more just order. The central Christian mystery of the Incarnation reveals Jesus as a person who lived through such "contrast experiences, even that of a violent death, in the pursuit of justice." Thus Jesus becomes the "parable of God and paradigm of humanity" (1979, 626) that is able to encourage others to overcome those contrast experience and to achieve this worldly salvation.

We can discern a shift in Schillebeeckx's approach to mysticism over the course of his research. In his earlier books he followed a more traditional path of emphasizing the mystery of the sacraments. After Vatican II, he increasingly stressed the contrast experience of suffering and social injustice. During those years he kept close contact with liberation theology in South America, and with black and feminist theology. He also became for many years the chief editor of the journal Concilium. Promoting the Christian church's special calling to join the mystical with the prophetic in secular society and culture has been his ambitious mission. Perhaps the highest recognition of his theological work occurred when he was called a political theologian who was "honest to the world" (1994, xii).

How to keep the balance between an acceptance of the modern secularized world and one's identity as a committed Christian? To discover a means of combining a life in society with a prophetic mysticism has been my purpose in studying Edward Schillebeeckx's thought. I will continue to search out this delicate balance set forth by this charming Catholic theologian.

References


