The Venture of Mysticism in the New Millennium

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W. R. Inge opened his 1899 Bampton lectures on Christian Mysticism by saying, “No word in our language—not even ‘Socialism’—has been employed more loosely than ‘Mysticism’” (Inge, 3). Over three centuries earlier, Teresa of Avila in her autobiography spoke of “unexpectedly experiencing a consciousness of the presence of God of such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that he was within me or that I was totally engulfed in him. This was in no sense a vision; I believe it is called mystical theology” (Teresa, 1.10). Inge used the term “mysticism,” a word unknown to Teresa and the earlier Christian tradition, that employed contemplation, rapture, union, deification, and divine presence as different ways of expressing “mystical theology.” This term did not indicate an academic exercise, but rather a way of life dedicated to achieving transformative contact with God.

Between Teresa and Dean Inge two decisive shifts took place whose relevance is still important for understanding the significance of mysticism, or better, the mystical element in Christianity, in these early years of the third millennium. The first shift was the emergence in the first half of the seventeenth century of the category of “mysticism,” understood not so much as a total spiritual program rooted in the beliefs and practices of the Christian life, but as a form of inner ex-

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Debates over the legitimacy of forms of mystical teaching go far back in Christian tradition. The Quietist controversy was the final chapter in a series of encounters between mystics and ecclesiastical authority that began around 1300. Three issues were fundamental: the proper understanding of union with God; the role of personal will and intention; and the relation between outer and inner practice. An increasing number of mystics from the thirteenth century on had begun to claim that it was possible to attain, on at least some level, true identity with God, a union of indistinction. Many theologians thought such claims compromised the distinction between Creator and creature. In order to reach indistinct union some mystics asserted that the created will had to be annihilated so that there was no room left for personal intention, even the desire to be saved. Only the divine will remained. Finally, those who held such views so emphasized the role of inner states of peace and emptiness that they were accused of neglecting the external practices of the Christian religion. How far these views were actually held by the “Quietists” is still a subject of debate, but with the condemnations of Miguel de Molinos in 1687 and of François Fénelon in 1699 a decisive moment was reached. The link through which the mystical and the doctrinal elements in Christianity had contributed to their mutual flourishing was broken. On the basis of paranormal bodily manifestations interpreted as signs of ecstatic inner states, some individuals (mostly unlettered women) continued to be hailed as mystics—but only as long as their message was in strict conformity with established doctrinal norms. Mysticism as a creative aspect in the life of the church was moribund, if not quite dead.

The study of mysticism as a chapter in the history of abnormal psychology was widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To be sure, a psychological approach to mysticism could make important contributions, as we can see in two classic early twentieth-century works, William James’ Varieties of Religious Experience of 1902, and the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal’s Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics; but it is clear that the category of mysticism as it entered
the contemporary era tended to emphasize the psychological at the expense of the theological. My point here is not to reduce mysticism to theology, especially when theology is conceived of as a strictly intellectual appropriation of faith. Nor do I want to deny that psychology has a legitimate role in the investigation of mystical consciousness. What I want to stress is that the two seventeenth-century developments noted above had produced a skewed notion of mysticism that still influences current discussion.

The revival of theological interest in mysticism that became evident toward the end of the nineteenth century began as a chapter in the history of Neo-Scholasticism (McGinn 1991, 277–80). The search for certainty and uniformity characteristic of Neo-Scholasticism, however, gave a distinctive tinge to the renewed theological interest in the meaning of mysticism. There is no need to belittle the efforts of the Neo-Scholastic writers on mysticism, but their contributions and quarrels all seem ancient history now. If hardly anyone remembers these studies today, it is because a basic paradigm shift has changed the nature of our discourse about mysticism. The reasons for the shift away from the Neo-Scholastic view of mysticism with its disputes concerning a fairly narrow range of topics, to the present broad and intense, if sometimes vague, concern with mysticism and spirituality, were multiple. In large part the change was tied to the collapse of the dominance of the Neo-Scholastic model in the years following Vatican II. That dramatic change, of course, had been prepared for by developments within Catholic theology in the generation preceding the council, some of which were located within the study of mysticism itself.

The Neo-Scholastic view that saw Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross as the benchmarks of all mystical teaching had already begun to be challenged in the first half of the twentieth century. Friedrich von Hügel argued for a broad view of mysticism as one of the three essential strands of healthy religion in his classic work of 1908, *The Mystical Element of Religion*. A series of monastic theologians, such as Cuthbert Butler and Anselm Stolz, directed attention to the biblical, patristic, and pre-Scholastic foundations for later developments of Christian mysticism and emphasized the importance of the doctrinal over the psychological in the study of the subject. After World War II, Jean Leclercq’s case for monastic theology, especially as found in his 1957 *Love of Learning and Desire for God*, drew attention to the masters of medieval mysticism from Gregory the Great to Bernard and his contemporaries. This reaction from within students of the history of mysticism was a part of the wider “ressourcement,” the return to the riches of the fathers and the monastic tradition associated with the French “la nouvelle theologie.”

The enriching of the academic study of mysticism was accompanied by an equally significant development—the emergence of mystical teachers whose lives and writings belied the stereotypes of the post-Quietist image of the mystic as an unlearned ecstatic visionary characterized by unusual physical phenomena, such as stigmata and inedia. These teachers reminded the Christian world that mystical
these teachers reminded the Christian world that mystical theology was real theology, albeit one that was not just a classroom exercise. A number of this group, like many of the mystics of the late Middle Ages, were religious women such as Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–97). The bowdlerized versions in which her writings were first published tended to mask the theological weight that has been revealed in the recent appearance of more authentic versions. Thérèse was a true vernacular, if not an academic, theologian (McGinn 1998, 12–30).

The interpenetration of speculative insight and deep conviction of God’s transforming presence is evident in many of the major mystical authors of the past century. I would like to use three of these—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), Simone Weil (1909–43), and Thomas Merton (1915–68)—to explore some of the central dimensions of the current situation of mysticism. The three were different in style and in message—a demonstration of the symphonic richness that has characterized the history of mysticism. They all, however, show that the mystical desire for God flourishes in the soil of serious philosophical and theological thinking.

Teilhard is difficult to place, but it is possible to see the unity and power of his vision in terms of a modern form of positive, or cataphatic, cosmic mysticism based on a consciousness of God’s presence in the universe as “the prime psychic mover ahead,” (de Chardin 1975, 142), the One who draws the multiplicity of all matter and spirit upward toward the “Omega Point” of universal convergence. The mystical center of Teilhard’s thought is set forth primarily in three works: the Hymn of the Universe, the treatise entitled Le milieu divin. An Essay on the Interior Life, and the papers collected in Toward the Future.

Simone Weil demonstrates a different kind of fusion of mystical witness and speculative insight. If Teilhard sought to fuse evolutionary thought with a eucharistic cosmic mysticism, Weil’s possession by Christ during her stay at Solesmes in 1938 (Weil 1951, 69) presents us with the mystery of the salvific universality of Jesus, especially in light of the fact that she chose not to be baptized. Nevertheless, when we try to relate Weil’s philosophical writings with their sense of God’s withdrawal from the world, to her accounts of this possession by Christ, we are left with the impression that she found God more in suffering and absence than in ecstatic possession. Weil illustrates how traditions of mystical apophasis, or negation, provide new ways of addressing the search for God in the midst of a secular world marked by God’s absence.

The third twentieth-century mystic, Thomas Merton, illustrates the role of monasticism as witness to God in the modern world. His vocation brought Merton
into intimate contact with the life of contemplation and its classical literature, making him the most widely read spokesman for the importance of contemplation in his generation. Merton did make use of the term “mysticism” (e.g., Merton 1961, 145–50), but he preferred the more traditional word “contemplation,” as we can see from two of his central texts: *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Inner Experience. Notes on Contemplation* (Merton 1962 and 2003). In these works Merton advanced from a rather traditional perspective on contemplation found in his early writings to a holistic view of contemplation as “the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life.” It is, he says, “a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source” (Merton 1962, 1–2).

My point in presenting this brief sketch of some modern views of mysticism is to underline the historical contextuality of the mystical element in Christianity. Unless we have some sense of how far we have come from the regnant views of mysticism of a century ago, both the purely psychological and the narrowly Neo-Scholastic, it will be difficult to say much that may be helpful about possible avenues into the future. In order to take up this task I would like to return briefly to our three twentieth-century mystics, this time in reverse order, to pursue some fundamental themes they suggest for the future of mysticism.

Thomas Merton’s late teaching on contemplation was, as noted, holistic in the sense that “For a contemplative his whole life is contemplation” (Merton 1996, 303). This does not mean that a contemplative need always be engaged in prayer, but rather that the entire life of the contemplative is to be lived out of the sense of the reality of God’s presence. Contemplation is a mode of one’s being, not a series of particular acts or practices. Mysticism may be but one aspect of the complex reality of Christianity, along with the intellectual, social, and institutional elements, but Merton insisted that it is also the leaven that focuses the rest on “the one thing that is necessary” (*unum necessarium*: Luke 10:42). Teilhard de Chardin agreed: “Without mysticism, there can be no successful religion,” he said; “and there can be no well-founded mysticism apart from faith in some unification of the universe” (de Chardin 1975, 40).
Merton’s view of contemplation was not only holistic; it was also hermeneutical. Mysticism is hermeneutical in the broad sense of depending on an interpretive dialogue, or conversation, between the spiritual classics of tradition and contemporary human existence. This dialogue is a two-way street. It is constituted not just by the way in which we read mystical texts to find what is useful for us, but it also embraces the possibility of discovering new ways of living in the divine mystery through how the past challenges us. The range of Merton’s reading included not only neglected Christian classics, but also extended to other traditions, most notably Zen Buddhism. Merton was a model of hermeneutical praxis in that he did not want to copy or revive the past, but rather strove to take from the wisdom of tradition the values and attitudes useful for his own struggle to become a better monk and contemplative. His studies of the Desert Fathers and the early Cistercians, for example, did not lead him to think that their practices should be revived or transferred to the present, but rather that their writings might help restore monks to a deeper sense of the fundamental charism of the monastic vocation as the opportunity to be free for God (Merton 1998). Much of the hunger for contemplative prayer and the search for deeper contact with God evident in recent decades has been inspired and mediated by the study of classic mystical texts that have provided inspiration, guidance, and theological nourishment to readers for centuries. It is astonishing to think how little of this literature was readily available even fifty years ago.

Simone Weil’s notion of God’s withdrawal from the world and the role that she gave to “affliction” (malheur) in the human situation cast light on the forms of negation that have been part of Christian mysticism from the beginning. There has been a distinct turn to the apophatic in recent philosophical and theological discussion. Nevertheless, the need for “unsaying God,” that is, recognizing that the reality of God is so far beyond human thinking and speaking that at some point language needs to destroy itself and the God it constructs in order to point to the mystery beyond knowing and speaking, is only one of the forms of negativity that have been central to Christian mysticism (McGinn 2007). Along with apophasis, the negation of language (negativity I), we need to recognize at least two other significant forms of mystical negation.

The second negativity is the negation of desire. Just as language needs to go beyond both affirmation and negation in attempting to address God, so too human desire is invited to self-destruct, as some mystics such as Meister Eckhart have insisted. This negativity II has its roots in the Gospel command to deny oneself, give up all things, and follow Christ (e.g., Matt 19:21). Negativity II reached a new and controversial level in Eckhart and those mystics who insisted that the annihilation of the created will itself was needed to achieve the state of detachment and release in which one might attain God. Detachment does not reject exterior works of asceticism, but it emphasizes that interior letting-go is always more important. It insists on the giving up of any and all practices insofar as they are seen as a means to an end. It is not a particular kind of experience or an act of
The present revival of interest in mysticism is a worldwide phenomenon, not only on the superficial level evident in pop culture, but also in serious investigation and ecumenical dialogue. Negativity III has been prominent in a number of modern mystics. Thérèse of Lisieux’s final months were marked by a profound engagement with negativity III in the form of a temptation against faith in which the thought of heaven, formerly so consoling, became a “cause of struggle and torment” to such a degree that she was afraid she might blaspheme when she spoke about it (1996, 210–14). Simone Weil experienced and reflected on all three forms of negativity. Something of the attraction that her writings continue to hold for so many today resides in her conviction of the spiritual significance of affliction, the inner and outer degradation and humiliation that destroys all hope for joy—a situation in which so many people around the world find themselves now. Weil appeals to the biblical archetypes of dereliction in a passage from her Notebooks: “It is attachment that produces in us that false reality (ersatz form of reality) connected with the outside world. We must destroy that ersatz form of reality in ourselves in order to return to true reality. No doubt extreme affliction produces this far more surely than any religious practices (Job. The Cross)” (1976, 1:313).

Along with the attitude toward tradition and the renewed emphasis on the importance of negativity, one of the crucial issues confronting Christian mysticism at the beginning of the third millennium is its relation to the other forms of mysticism. The present revival of interest in mysticism is a worldwide phenomenon, not only on the superficial level evident in pop culture, but also in serious investigation and ecumenical dialogue. The relation between Christian and non-Christian
mysticism as a theological problem is not new, but it is becoming ever more pressing. At the risk of oversimplification, it is possible to speak of two approaches in recent Catholic theology: the inclusive and the exclusive, that is, either Christian mysticism can in some way incorporate at least some other forms of mysticism, or, considering itself to be the only true mysticism, it should remain suspicious of comparison (Fields 2001, xii–xvii).

Teilhard de Chardin turned his attention to this issue in his last decades. Teilhard saw mysticism as the fundamental cosmic desire for unification made conscious in the human noosphere. That desire, he argued, comes in two forms, what he called the “Road of the East” found in differing ways in India, China, and Japan, and the “Road of the West.” The Eastern approach seeks to deny or suppress multiplicity to reach the universal essence that underlies all things, attempting to reach an identification (not a real union) in which there is no room for love. The Western approach, on the other hand, “replaces immersion in a sub-stratum God, a God of non-tension, by the anticipation of a God who is center and peak, a God who is tension. [. . . It] immediately establishes complete coherence between the different spiritual values which the wisdom of the East found it impossible to reconcile” (de Chardin 1975, 142). Its goal is a mysticism marked by convergence, love, and sublimation. Teilhard’s position seems strongly exclusionistic (1975, 200), but another side of his thought is more inclusive. What he called “Western Neo-mysticism,” which is only now emerging and in need of further development, is the “now-realized and evolved expression” of a Christian mysticism of the past that has mingled both the Eastern and Western approaches (de Chardin 1975, 45, 46–59, 199–206). With characteristic optimism, the French Jesuit believed that although the Western breakthrough was essential, the spiritual traditions of the East would soon join with those in the West to add “volume and richness to the new (the humano-Christian) mystical note rising from the West” (de Chardin 1975, 146 and 203).

An inclusivist position has been advanced by Karl Rahner (Egan). On the basis of his distinction between the supernatural existential, that is, the openness to God as a question that characterizes the human spirit, and the categorical supernatural experience of God’s coming to meet and answer humanity in the incarnate Word, Rahner argues both for the existence of “the anonymous Christian,” and, by implication, what we might call the “anonymous Christian mystic” outside the visible confines of Christianity as a faith community but not outside the influence of grace and implicit faith (Rahner 1969 and 1974). Since grace is found both inside and outside Christianity, we cannot preclude the possibility that extra-Christian manifestations of mystical experiences are the result of the impact of the grace of Christ in a way that is real, but not thematized, that is, not known as such to the recipient (Fletcher).

An exclusivistic view was argued by Anselm Stolz and more recently by Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar sees Christian mysticism as founded in biblical faith and in Christ as the model for obedient surrender to God. However much the Christian
may sympathize with the ideals and spiritual achievements of mystics from other traditions, there is an essential difference that limits the effectiveness of comparisons and makes them potentially dangerous. Von Balthasar advances a thesis-antithesis perspective, noting how the significance of seven “similarities of structure” in the ascent to God found in Christian mysticism and many forms of non-Christian mysticism is undercut by the biblical foundation of Christian mysticism in which “it is not the man who sets out to search for God but God who quite unexpectedly and spontaneously goes out to search for man” (von Balthasar, 324). As a result, Christian mysticism must conform to the objective biblical basis founded on the primacy of obedient readiness over union, as well as the uniqueness of the mediation of the incarnate Word as the perfect expression of the unknowable God.

This is not the place to assess these disagreements or to try to decide in favor of one or the other approach. An exclusivist view does not prevent all dialogue, though it does put severe limits on it. An inclusivist approach must be careful to remain true to the basic witness of faith, on the one hand, and, on the other, not to adopt some kind of Christian imperialistic stance. As noted above, Teilhard de Chardin’s thought contains both inclusive and exclusive aspects in the way in which he sought to relate what he called “the Road of the East” and “the Road of the West” in mysticism. One does not have to agree with Teilhard’s simplified view of the contrast to find an important insight in his hope that more developed forms of mysticism still lie ahead of us. His vision of the unity in diversity of convergence toward Omega suggests that one way of understanding the relation of Christian and non-Christian forms of mysticism is as an eschatological event, though one we are called upon to work toward by our efforts at dialogue and collaboration with others in our commitment to “living the truth in love,” as Paul put it (Eph 4:15).

References


