

**COMMITTEE VII**  
In Search for Understanding  
Among the Monotheistic  
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**CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM**

by

**Adriaan Peperzak**  
Professor of Philosophy  
University of Nijmegen  
Amsterdam, NETHERLANDS

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(†1588) and Jakob Böhme (†1624), the latter of which had a considerable influence. Perhaps the protestant insistence on the "sola fide" (through faith alone), which in itself is common to catholics and protestants, has underestimated the importance of the believing subject's own experience of God's presence in faith. Perhaps also the prosaic soberness of Protestantism has been necessary as counterpoise to the catholic lyricism of mystical poetry.

Abstract:

The essence of christian mysticism

In this paper I shall try to delineate the basic characteristics of mysticism as it has been understood within the history of the Christian religion. Starting <sup>with</sup> a brief attempt to define the essence of christian mysticism, I will lead to a consideration of the relationship between faith and experience. A description of the union to which the mystical way leads will prepare the understanding of the conditions of its possibility. These must be realized through the stages of ~~this~~ way. Its end, the union with God is at the same time a purified love of all human beings and the whole created universe. I will close with a remark on the relationship between the mystical life and ecclesiastical authorities and some thoughts about a possible future of mysticism in light of our desire for authentic religion and serious ecumenism.

Definition.

Without dwelling too long on the question of an adequate definition, two things may and must be said about the meaning of the words "mystic" and "mystical", as they are used in christian contexts. The first is that they are intimately related to the central "secret", the "mystery" or "mysterion", of christian faith; secondly they indicate special experiences that are uncommon and beyond the "normal" experiences of christians and non-christians. Some writers distinguish the two references involved here, as the objective and the subjective meaning of mysticism. As I will try to show, this distinction, useful as it is, cannot be understood as an opposition. Christian faith in the mysteries of the biblical revelation cannot be separated from the experiential side of christian life, although there are many varieties and degrees in intensity and extension of christian experience.

Before we reflect upon the relation between faith and experience within christianity, it's good to state firmly that all sorts of paranormal phenomena, like illuminations, visions, levitations, extases, bilocations etc., do not belong to the essence of mysticism. They are extremely unimportant and should not attract much attention, since they are, at the utmost, accidental and easily obscure the

proper significance of mystical life.

To begin with the "subjective" side of mysticism, consciousness and feeling are involved in any human relationship, especially when we are in contact with important dimensions of our existence, like love, art, power or religion. In the routine of daily life the feelings that accompany our involvements may pass unnoticed, but in extraordinary moments their intensity imposes itself on our consciousness. The faith of a christian is not a particular event within his life story, but the continuous support of his activities, attitudes and perspectives. Together with hope and the practice of christian love, i.e., as a living faith, it penetrates the whole of one's mind: not only a human intelligence, but equally the totality of moods, affections, wishes, decisions, customs and ways of behavior. Faith is much more than a theoretical belief in dogmatic statements; first and above all, it is complete trust and abandonment to God as the One who takes care of the believer. If, indeed, faith is a profound and overall relationship of a human person to God, it would be surprising if it did not have any influence on the nature of that person's experience. The moods, the ways of perception and thought, the motivations and the behavior of someone who believes in God as revealed in Jesus the Christ, will be different from the moods and the behavior of an atheist. (To

save the truth of this sentence, we should make a distinction between someone's saying or believing that (s)he believes in God, and authentic faith, which - notwithstanding its very real and effective presence - might be very hidden, even <sup>from</sup> the believer himself. Those who seem to stay outside, may in fact be inside).

The mystical experience is essentially nothing else than the full and deep experience of faith, in as far as it has taken possession of a christian and permeates the totality of his/her existence. The main criterion for the authenticity of the feelings, representations, perceptions, phantasies, thoughts, motivations and <sup>e</sup>practic~~s~~ of a mystic is their adequate correspondence to the true mystery (or mysteries) of christian faith. Their correspondence or conformity is not to be measured primarily by theology, for, as a result of reflection, this is a derivative expression of faith and revelation, whereas the experience of authentic mystics is much closer to the heart of faith than any translation of it into the form of conceptual thought. In basing itself upon the authority of the Bible and its interpretation within the historical community of christians, theology should not neglect the hermeneutic value of the mystical experience, which - in a much closer communion with christian history - appeals to the same authority. On the other hand, the mystics cannot ignore the

importance of theological explanation as a service to the christian community, from which they will never want to isolate themselves. Faith and mystical experience need each other in order to constitute a full christian life.

### Christian faith.

It will be impossible to sketch the main lines of christian faith without interpreting it immediately in a, more or less, theological way, and this will always, to a certain extent, be one particular theology among a variety of possible ones. Indeed, as conceptual reflection on the christian mystery theology does not escape from its being marked by the standard convictions and commonplaces of its time and place. This does not exclude a certain convergence of all truly christian theologies, as to their quintessence, but their presentations of that quintessence are necessarily as different as the characters of the individual and collective subjects who developed them. Very conscious of the ~~unavoidable~~ <sup>avoidable</sup> particularity of my understanding I will now try to give a brief summary of the world and human history according to christian faith.

a) Everything in nature and history "speaks" of the one and only God. He is not a case in which a species or genus "god"(s) would be individualized, but the One who is

absolutely unique and incomparable to any (other) being. Nature and humankind depend totally, in all respects of their having and being, from his free will. They exist because of his "calling" them, through his "word", "from nothing" into existence. Or in other metaphors: they have received the totality of their being from his creation. This faith in "God, the creator of heaven and earth" has developed out of the trust of Abraham and Moses in the God who liberated their people Israel from oppression. A christian is convinced that the long history of the alliance between God and Israë<sup>l</sup> <sup>was</sup> confirmed and developed throughout a history of loyalty, betrayals, conversions and prophetic words <sup>that</sup> culminated in Jesus of Nazareth. He was the pleroma or plenitude through which God revealed who and how he is and how Jews and non-Jews should respond to his presence as Creator and Savior.

b) The man Jesus was fully human; like every other man or woman he had to learn everything from others; his needs were the same; his intelligence was finite, his ignorance great. In everything he was alike the rest of humankind - except in sin: he did and embraced always what God wanted him to be or do. This man was, however, more than a prophet, a great leader or a royal liberator. The way he lived, his "words and deeds" were so completely full of God's spirit, that he



was recognized by his followers as a man who was one with God.

Different metaphors have served to express this union: Jesus has been called the "son" of God, whom he called his and our "father"; he is also understood as "the word" (Logos) through whom God creates the universe. Jesus' union with God does not take anything away from his being completely human (and, thus, vulnerable, ignorant, needy, mortal and suffering like we). During centuries of meditation the community of christians developed their recognition of Jesus as "the son of man", who came to renew the Alliance and to bring us to a new life as sons and daughters of God. This has resulted in the insight, that this man, human as he was, was at the same time one with God in the strictest sense of oneness: "the Son" is "as much" God "as" his "F<sup>ather</sup>" is. Their union consists in the Spirit whom they share as the spirit of divine life. God has, Thus, revealed himself as "Trinity": "Father", "Son" and "Spirit". The seeming contradiction of this "three in one" has been a question of endless debate in the history of the christian churches. Using the conceptual terminology of late hellenistic culture, the Church leaders agreed on the formula "one God in three persons". Monotheism has never been put seriously into doubt among christians; the paradoxical

relations between God, Jesus and the Spirit, however, have constantly caused a multiplicity of discussions and real fights.

For our purpose it is important that the heart of christian faith is a union so intimate between God and a human being, Jesus, that we can call it, in some respect, a real identity. At least in one case the identity of God's and man's life and spirit is revealed to be possible and real. As we will see, the mystical union has been described very often as the identity of a human's being with God's being. None of the authentic christian mystics, however, claim to be a son or daughter of God in the same sense as Jesus, who was and remains "the (unique) Son", but several mystics protested against the affirmation that their relation with God would stop at a sort of participation in God's life. Instead of a partial coincidence they experienced a total transformation by which God himself became the Spirit of their spirit and the Life of their life. The main difference between Jesus and other christians who experienced their unity with God, lies in the fact that it was Jesus' essence or "nature" to be (one with) God, whereas for all other humans any form of divinization is a gratuitous gift or "grace" not included in their being born as humans.

c) Jesus' life is interpreted by himself and his followers as a summary of the religiously relevant moments of everybody's

life. Created, born and "sent" into the world to give testimony to God's love and pity for every human individual, he realized this same love in words and deeds. His ways were, however, not accepted by the leaders of Israel. This rejection, resulting in his death on a cross, was understood by his followers as the summit of obedience and love.

The final word on his generous life could, however, not consist in a despicable death. According to christian faith God did not abandon the "son of man", who was also "the Son of God". His strongly experienced presence after his death revealed his overcoming the powers of destruction by being one with God. The Spirit of God, who has inspired Jesus from the beginning, conquers death and expiates human guilt.

Not only is Jesus' life (including his death and resurrection) a concrete actualization of God's attitude towards humankind: "in him" God has also taken up the whole of humankind and united it - through his Spirit - with himself. In principle humanity has become divine and animated by the Spirit of God and Jesus. The only condition for the growth of divine life in human subjects is their being open and receptive to the "grace" of that inspiration. Everybody is "called" to accept God's Spirit in order to become a son or daughter "by adoption". Non-acceptance is the core of "sin". A sinner is someone who resists God's

realizing his care for this or other humans.

Christian experiences.

A christian who takes his religious relationship seriously will feel himself protected and favored by God's care. He admires God in the fertility of the fields and the beauty of flowers or landscapes, in a friendly word, the refinement of a poem, surprising moments of life and dramatic events of history. His perception and interpretation of natural and cultural phenomena will be enveloped by a general feeling of gratitude, safety and peace. If God really loves all beings, one may expect that the future will justify a general disposition of hope. When faith penetrates a human heart, this naturally becomes generous itself and imitates the generosity whose recipient it was.

Of course, not all christians are full of gratitude, peace, hope and love, and enough bad people claim to be christians. If they believe in God, their faith seems to be dead. But there are still other obstacles to a fully christian spirituality. The encounter with evil, for instance, in the form of human injustice or anonymous and absurd cruelty, constitutes a huge difficulty for having an open heart. Faith in God's creation and liberation has to stand a hard struggle between our moral feelings and the constatation of evil's victories in world history. Although

we will not be able to explain, and <sup>even</sup> justify these victories, it is possible to reach a state in which the instances of evil are accepted as enigmatic parts of a creation whose origin does not lose its goodness by hiding itself behind a mixture of joy and misery.

A christian for whom religion is the main concern of his life, will not stare on his own experiences, but concentrate on the central mysteries of faith and spend much energy on the deepening of his relationship to the present, yet hidden God. Such a christian dedicates him/herself to contemplation. As <sup>a</sup> fascinat<sup>ion in</sup> the mystery of God in his love for man, the contemplative life is a good disposition for the intensification of the christian experience. It is not surprising that a life of soberness and prayer often develops into affective and intellectual states of mind in which God's loving presence is felt and known as the most real and authentic core of all reality. This is not to say that such states of mind are reserved for people who separate themselves from the activities of daily life in society with others. As we will see, the social dimension and care for others <sup>are</sup> essential to authentic mysticism and most of the great mystics lived a very active life, e.g., as founders of an order, as preachers who went from town to town or as ecclesiastic diplomats, who had to face all sorts

of mundane power plays and sol<sup>ic</sup>itudes.

The mystical experience is the natural outgrowth of normal christian experience. Gratitude and hope, being at home and feeling protected by love, responsibility for others and benevolence and many other features of a truly christian way of life are intensified in a mystic, but their essence is the same as that of the common affections and virtues of a good christian. Many obstacles can present or hinder the full expansion of christian experience. Vices and psychopathological deficiencies, bad social circumstances, haste and noise, the frivolous fashions of a nihilistic culture etc., are not favorable to the awakening and deepening of religious experiences, but some specific experience will never be absent from a serious christian life.

The specificity of the mystical experience lies mainly in its degree of intensity and totality and especially in the experiential passivity of the human subject, who knows and feels that his being overwhelmed by the loving presence of God is a pure and total gift or grace.

The christian community has always believed that one can become a saint without being necessarily a mystic, whereas a mystic who would not be, at least to some degree, a saint, is certainly an inauthentic one. Here lies the criterion for distinguishing so called (pseudo-)mystical

phenomena that can be brought about by drugs or merely technical procedures, from authentic mysticism, which always includes a profound desire of the human heart for God himself. Sanctity will always be accompanied by an element of inner certainty, peace, trust and love of God and humans. Mysticism and the life experience of a good christian cannot be distinguished adequately. The difference is more a question of degrees.

#### Difficulties.

In trying to describe the characteristics of the mystical experience within christian history, we are committed to the descriptions given by those mystics who were also good writers. Not every mystic wrote down what he or she went through; not every mystical writer was reflexive enough and had a sufficient mastery of language to make us understand what he wanted to transmit. The language in which individual authors on mysticism write, the theological and literary schemes and images used etc., are always marked by the commonplaces of the cultural community in which they participate. To understand their texts, we must dispose of several hermeneutic skills. This dependence on time and context explains, at least in part, the differences of various descriptions. Another part of it comes from

differences in character and course of life. Still another cause of difference is the contingency of what according to the mystics is God's freely giving grace. The main difficulty in reading mystical literature is, however, the fact that - as all mystics say and repeat - the experience they try to describe is inexpressible. Language is essentially deficient to describe what they experience. <sup>in</sup> an absolute <sup>certitude and</sup> lucid <sup>state</sup>. Just <sup>like</sup> poets, the writers among the mystics use a series of metaphors to suggest a reality which can neither be seen, nor imagined or understood conceptually. There is only one way to grasp the meaning of what they express of the inexpressible: by a sort of affinity and empathy the reader should be able to share their experience, be it in an only indicative, a distant and uninvolved, or even unbelieving way. To understand the mystical experience really is to live it. The understanding of mysticism cannot be displayed by scientific, philosophic or theological reflection because it coincides, as an essential moment, with the experience itself. A full understanding is here inseparable from the immediacy of experience.

Not only is the mystical experience inexpressible. but even for the mystics themselves, it remains obscure. Notwithstanding their extremely profound certitude and the new



luminous understanding contained in it, God himself, as well as the human heart related to him remain hidden and radically unknown. The high degree of knowledge given through this experience is a wise ignorance, a docta ignorantia. It involves the knowledge why God's infinity and man's profundity are at the same time revealed and yet remain incomprehensible and unknown.

### Mystical union

What has been said about the essential obscurity of profound mystical wisdom refers primarily to the highest stage of the mystical ascension: the experience of an immediate union of the "soul" (i.e., the core and the whole of a person) with God. This union is not a goal in the sense of some state that could be planned and produced by human exercises or training.

First of all, the end towards which a christian life is oriented, is not a state of one's consciousness, but obedience, fulfillment of God's will and, above all, the glory of God in the universe. The real end of every christian and mystical life is sanctity or, in other words, the full expansion of God's being in all creatures, including the participation of all christians in God's own life.

Second, neither sanctity, nor the mystical experience are products of human effort. Although human endeavor is

demanded, the union with God, to which everything in christian faith is directed, is a pure gift "from above". God alone can bestow it to a human subject. On the other hand - and this is perceived by the mystics with great clarity - the only possibility of full "satisfaction" or inner peace is <sup>in the union of</sup> humans with God.

"Satisfaction" is, in this context, not a good word, because the subjective intention corresponding to God's gift cannot be satisfied as a need. The satisfaction of a need stills it for a while, after which the need comes back, demanding that the process of satisfaction be repeated. A desire, however, cannot disappear by its fulfillment. On the contrary, it grows by the encounter of the desired. It is as a hunger that grows to the same degree <sup>as it is satisfied</sup> you <sup>is</sup> rishes it. <sup>as the</sup> Examples of desire are love, and passions <sup>as the</sup> urge for power or money. The deepest and most pure desire is, however, the religious one: desire for (the union with) God.

Bodily and psychological techniques, theological analysis and speculation, meditation and ascetism do have their function in the unfolding of a christian life, but they are absolutely powerless with regard to <sup>its</sup> most desirable and desired end. The final meaning of life - and therewith the final meaning of the universe, as far as

humankind may discover it - is a question of grace.

This separates mysticism from all forms of magic. One cannot force God to do or to give, to pardon or to love. To be loved is neither a right nor a possible demand. The role of freely chosen ascetic practices is stressed by most mystics, especially at the beginning of a spiritual life, but they are recommended as means for the preparation of a good disposition in the desiring subject. Indeed, since the union with God is pure grace, the main subjective condition for it is to learn the art of acceptance. But here, too, we must add at once that authentic acceptance, too, is a gift that comes from God. These statements should not be understood in a dualistic way, as if God's giving activity would exclude or diminish man's active liberty. The passivity of acceptance is not inactive at all; on the contrary, turning oneself to God and being open to his coming demand great concentration of attention and energy; and God does not oppose, but <sup>rather</sup> creates, envelops and frees human liberty.

The mystical union has been described with the help of images like absorption or drowning into God, but the experience of absolute oneness is, at the same time, the experience of an absolute abyss separating God and his creature. Everything is lived as gratuitously given. God's

overflowing generosity differs essentially from a necessary emanation. Although the human subject would be totally miserable if God altogether abandoned him to himself, he cannot claim God's presence.

Notwithstanding his infinite difference from God, a christian mystic experiences his own love as similar and equal to God's love for him and all other creatures. Catherine of Genua expresses a general feeling among mystics when she writes: "My being is truly being God, not by participation, but indeed by transformation".<sup>(1)</sup> At this summit the mystical experience reveals the final truth on human nature: (wo)man is as infinite as God, but in total dependency and givenness.

If the oneness and equality of human being with God is a gift, the origin of it can only be God himself. It is God who gives the "soul" its infinite capacity of receiving him as its fulfillment; it is God who causes an all-embracing love in human beings; it is the Spirit of God himself, who through and in human persons loves God and all his creatures. When human beings take care of one another as brothers and sisters, this gives "glory" to God, because it reveals His own love as their source. The sons and daughters of man and God (display then) one unique inspiration. The earth has reached its plenitude.

### The mystical way

A traditional theory of christian spirituality distinguishes three ways: 1) the purifying way (via purgativa), 2) the way of illumination (via illuminativa) and 3) the unifying way (via unitiva). Very often these "ways" are considered to represent three successive stages of one way, which leads from christian mediocrity to the heights of the mystical union. Rather than different stages or ways, purification, illumination and unification are elements of one journey during whose periods none of them is wholly absent, although their proportions vary. Roughly speaking, a period in which purification plays the main part precedes a period of illumination and both precede different degrees of unity with God, but sometimes a certain union comes before the main purification, and still other orders of succession are possible.

### Ascetism

If the union of God and man is the summit of the mystical way, and if it presupposes acceptance by a heart completely open for it, this heart must be freed and emptied from all sorts of attachment that resist or prevent its being united with God. Since humans (normally are) attached too much to finite realities and values, at the beginning of the way the

heart has to be reoriented to God against all ~~the~~<sup>our</sup> tendencies <sup>towards</sup> finite satisfactions as if they were the summit of good and happiness. If God's infinite value <sup>became</sup> totally clear to us, an intelligent comparison between God and created realities would inevitably result in a preference for him. The fact is, however, that human beings find it extremely difficult to give up their devotion to non-absolute realities like gastronomy<sup>i</sup> or sexual pleasures, sportive, scientific or artistic values etc., in order to concentrate on the essence of the religious dimension: God's awakening and fulfilling (wo)man's most profound desire. The human heart is not only led by a desire for the authentic infinite, but also by a tendency to overestimate finite realities and see them as absolutes. This tendency is our disposition to idolatry.

It would be false to present the finite value of created realities and God's infinite value as two poles of an alternative <sup>from</sup> which we should make a choice. God's infinity is not a contradictory or contrary opposite of anything. If he were, he would miss something, which would destroy his infinity. God's infinity is not diminished by the riches of his own creation. This creation, on the other hand, is lovable and must be held in high esteem, if it is true that God created it out of goodness and "saw that it

was good"<sup>②</sup>. Authentic love for all creatures and for ourselves in the first place cannot go against love for God. It should, therefore, never be despised and its extirpation would be one of the greatest sins. On the contrary, we should learn to love the finite realities of creation with a true and most intensive love. The spontaneous attachment by which we are inclined to venerate or even adore finite values and satisfactions, however, is not the most authentic form of love. If we make them into "absolutes" or "gods", we falsify their real value. By making myself, for instance, into a god, i.e., narcissism, I betray my true nature. In doing so, I do not overestimate, but rather underestimate myself because I prevent my being capable of much more profound wideness and depth: the depth and wideness of infinity. The result of such a diminution by narcissism and idolatry is unhappiness, very often in the form of a disquiet pseudohappiness. The mystical way is not merely a pilgrimage to the true love for God, but ~~also~~ <sup>a</sup> progressive discovery of authentic love for all created beings, ~~and~~ <sup>primarily</sup> for all human persons.

Because of our inclination to narcissism and idolatry, the first thing <sup>we</sup> ~~we~~ must do is find a way by which we may acquire sufficient distance from all things that are not the Absolute itself. Indeed, without such a distance our

horizon will be narrowed down and our mental eyes and ears become unable to perceive the presence of God hidden behind and in his finite traces and images.

Some mystics have been very severe in warning their readers that they should altogether turn away from finite satisfactions and pleasures, towards which we are driven by our natural spontaneity. Yet, their ascetism does not have anything to do with masochistic motivations, but only with the necessary struggle against the idolatrous and narcissistic illusions that imprison us in a <sup>very</sup> narrow circle of pleasure. Instead of the monotonous repetition of the same finite and ultimately boring satisfactions, we should be made *capable of receiving* fulfillment, beyond which nothing desirable exists. Doing away with all finite values cannot mean that one should stop eating, sleeping, reading, thinking and so on; it does, however, mean that the heart, the will and the fundamental desire do not stop at the ends of our finite wishes. A finite reality has a relative value only; the worth of a life does not ultimately depend on any finite realization or possession. Death is not the worst that may happen to me. The only "value" that decides on the ultimate meaning of a human life, is the character of its relationship to God.

Herewith we have found the criterion of all authentic



and healthy ascetism: detachment, patience, suffering and so on, do not have any value in themselves, but only insofar as they free a person from his being imprisoned in desires that are too narrow and not <sup>sufficiently</sup> sound. The turning away from finite inclinations by practices of mortification is only the reverse of a preparation for the non-finite. It is obvious that a totally narcissistic person is not capable of such a form of asceticism because the motivation of his behavior would not come from a desire of the infinite. The will should have been touched already by the infinite itself. Only a strong - conscious, (in)conscious or subconscious - desire of the absolute Other can originate an ascetic way of life that does not lead to neurotic, moralistic or masochistic attitudes, but rather to a free and profound human life. The whole ascetic enterprise is, thus, from its beginning a grace.

### Nights.

The necessary purification from false pleasures is partly an active training in self-detachment, partly the undergoing of psychological states and processes which befall the spiritual traveller without his looking for them. John of the Cross gave an extensive and detailed theory of those processes and states, which he <sup>called</sup> characterized by the name of "nights".

A christian who invests his energy in the search for God, at a certain stage of his way, will discover that the methods he was used to, notwithstanding his serious devotion, do not properly work anymore. They fulfill him with aversion and something in him resists their continuation. Meditation, for instance, not only has lost its attraction, but has become impossible. The imaginative and discursive consideration of Jesus' life, as it is told in the Gospels, and its application to actuality, from which until now he has drawn much strength and consolidation, has become an empty and repulsive exercise. This is a sign that this person will not make any progress from now on, if he sticks to the meditative way of concentration on "the unique necessary". Representation, imagination and discursive reasoning have lost their fertility for further progress. Another activity and another attitude must be formed, more adequate to new possibilities and promises on the verge of realizing themselves. The main thing to learn now is a special form of patience and passivity. The main part of human energy must now be converted into the generation of a profound and patient receptivity as a condition for the radical changes that are announced by the experienced impossibilities. All the elements of the human psyche must be transformed into organs of a new sort of attention,

practice and understanding. Imagination, affections, intelligence, memory and will, - all the elements of the anthropological structure are to be emptied, touched, purified and prepared for the encounter with God<sup>③</sup>. The very complex processes of such a radical transformation result in a sort of rebirth; they might take a long time, but much depends on the character, the former life, the application and the patience of the person in question.

According to the different dimensions and faculties of human nature there is a plurality of these "nights". Most of them are extremely painful because of the radical abnegation through which former habits and ways of concerning, feeling and acting must pass in order to be renewed. The most terrifying part of these nights concerns the experience that one has been abandoned by the One, to whom one is striving with all the forces of his heart. While the bottom of the heart is longing for him by a desire grown and still growing much more hungry than before, the seeming absence of the Sought causes more suffering than death. Such a night is a complete desert. The searching person does not find any support for his life; all the creatures are too small for his desire; the unique One whom he wants, has left him to an empty solitude. The passivity to which one is invited by the deadlock of a former active stage, has

nothing to do with an easy surrender, a permissive attitude or the laziness of someone who believes that he has done enough. The impossibility of constructing, by one's own forces, a new road that opens new perspectives, is full of energy and lucidity. The suffering would not be so intense, if the absence of any consolation were not animated by a nameless and unidentifiable dynamism.

### Light.

If the spiritual traveller is patient and does not fly away from the pains of the desert into which he finds himself abandoned, there will come moments <sup>when</sup> he will be touched by surprising forms of light and insight. God reveals himself in new ways. The newness of this illumination lies mainly in its intuitive immediacy. The truths that are revealed to him concerning God and the meaning of man, world and history are not the result of discursive thought; his new understanding is a very concrete participation of his whole affective, intellectual and volitive existence in the christian mystery by which he is overwhelmed.

The mystical insights received on the basis of a purified passivity, are described as infinitely more profound and luminous than the highest and most total

knowledge of theology. They are also more simple and concentrated. Ultimately the only concern and only truth is God alone, the great mystery in which all other mysteries and enigmas are contained. The mystic's understanding must well be distinguished from certain "illuminations" about specific points or events that do not make any difference for the central mysteries of faith, as, for instance, certain details of Jesus' or his mother's life or certain forms of paranormal knowledge concerning events in another part of the world or in the future. If these phenomena take place - and why would they not be possible? - they do not add anything important to the profundity of the religious understanding at stake. As John of the Cross says<sup>4</sup>, we should ignore those illuminations and prophecies. Maybe they are just false illusions that might lead us astray.

Authentic and relevant illumination refers to the mystery(s) of faith revealed once and for all in Jesus, who was God's total word. It is not possible to add new truths to the totality of truth revealed in the plenitude of that central revelation. Jesus is the pleroma of the biblical and ecclesiastical history. In him everything has come to its fullness. If we say that the mystical way leads to a new understanding and a new revelation of God and his work, we cannot mean that the mystic receives a supplement to the Bible, but "only" that the unique revelation, the mystery

itself, takes a fuller possession of <sup>the</sup> human subject. becomes <sup>aware,</sup> in a deeper and more concrete way, of the truth already "known" to him<sup>⑤</sup>.

The understanding of God given by mystical illumination does not diminish his obscurity. On the contrary, just as the approach of the Beloved intensifies the craving for him, so <sup>does</sup> the growth of knowledge intensifies the experience of his unknowability. God would not be infinite if we could explain his thoughts and ways. To know him means: to accept and agree and understand <sup>this</sup> more and more, in and why he cannot be understood. This truth has often been expressed by a commentary on the biblical image of the burning cloud which accompanied the Jews on their Exodus from slavery to the promised land.<sup>⑥</sup> As a cloud, whose inside is flames and light, God is present, but enigmatically hidden behind appearances of darkness and evil. Because he is more real than all phenomena, his presence may be taken for thorough absence. The mystic knows that atheism is a human possibility. In reaching the stage of union, however, he cannot doubt that God's reality is more real than anything else.

The mystical experience is the greatest delight and the greatest pain at once. The impossibility of tearing up the veil of God's absence in his burning presence causes a suffering so extreme that many mystics longed for death as

their final liberation. If they accepted to continue living, their motivation was pure obedience, their narcissism having already died before.

Praise of creation.

In the light of God's presence the finite world, too, changes face. If narcissism dies, the creatures lose their idolatrous attraction. Their true values and proportions can be respected. In fact, the truth of the created universe is its being the appearance of God himself. From the perspective of mystical union all creatures announce their being the visibility of the all-originating and all-embracing Source. God is recognized and venerated "in" the phenomena of nature and history. They "speak" of him; for an open ear they are his "word(s)".

Since they are inspired by God's own Spirit, the mystics love all creatures as beloved parts of God's self-revelation. In this Spirit Francis of Assisi could sing of brother sun, sister water and mother earth<sup>⑦</sup> - but also of sister death. Everything in the universe becomes radiant as a "trace" or "footprint", a "similarity" or "image" of the Creator.<sup>⑧</sup>

At this stage it is obvious that the ascetic abnegation, as part of man's purification, differs essentially from all dualistic forms of contempt with regard

to matter and body in the name of high respect for spirit. Authentic christian faith does not oppose matter and spirit, as Greek philosophy does. The biblical tradition meditates on the relationships between God's "spirit" (i.e., his life-giving and creative "breath") and the human weakness ("flesh"), which easily degenerates into sin. A sinner is not a person who likes material things like flowers, bodies, food, sex, sport, art, health or pleasure, but someone who replaces God by himself or other pseudogods, for instance by committing himself to the rather immaterial attitude of haughtiness. Disobedience and hate, not an adequate appreciation of material creatures, are the roots of evil. The art of being good consists ~~of~~ the most adequate love for all people, "our mother the earth" and every being in it. Although the christian faith, in its history was contaminated by hellenistic and other dualisms, it always has professed that every single creature is good, whereas human beings, men and women, as bodily and spiritual images of God, are "very good".<sup>9</sup> Indeed, a christian does not desire to be delivered from his body, in order to become a pure and freely thinking "spirit" or immaterial "soul"; on the contrary, the resurrection which he believes to be the culmination of God's plan, is the divinization of human nature in its totality. When mystics desire death, they do



not think of becoming angels, but only want that God should take possession of their whole being, body and soul included.

This is not to say that abnegation progressively disappears from their perspective. The way to resurrection goes through the suffering of the cross. ~~Aside~~ <sup>Aside</sup> the pains caused by God's absence and one's own rests of guilt and weakness, the cross involves the enduring~~ing~~ of all sorts of evil in the world. The wisdom that is given to the mystics does not contain a water-tight explanation of the reasons why there is pain and injustice in the creation. They have, however, learned to tolerate the apparent absurdity of evil because they believe that it is - together with the rest of creation - in the hands of God. His goodness cannot be diminished by the powers of evil because he would not be infinite if he had a real opposite. The enigma of evil's force is not explained, but accepted as part of God's obscurity.

#### Brotherly and sisterly love.

As summits of creation and as brothers and sisters of Jesus, the "Son", men and women are the most beloved creatures of God's universe. The core of christian faith has always held together the two commandments of love for God and love for

every single human being. They form the two sides of one unique and indivisible commandment. A person who does not love the other, neighbour, stranger or enemy, does not love God. Since the history of christianity shows many episodes of hate for jews, Muslims and fellow-christians, it cannot serve as practical illustration of the ideal proclaimed in it, but all the mystics have insisted on the indivisibility of divine and human love. According to their experience heaven and earth are animated by <sup>the</sup> same inspiration.

As the word "charity" has almost lost its original force, it will be difficult to hear it as a name for that inspiration. If we can restore its original meaning, we can understand the following quotation: "A work, an act of will done by charity is more agreeable to God than all the visions and communications that might come from heaven".<sup>(10)</sup>

### Church and mysticism

Church history shows that mystical movements often raised the suspicion of ecclesiastical <sup>u</sup> ~~au~~thorities. At least two reasons may explain the tension between the mystical way of life and the official, more administrative and bureaucratic approach to religion.

First, there is the theological suspicion that the mystics' insistence on the experiential union of God's being

with the being of humans would defend a version of pantheism. Against this accusation it is important to stress the fact that the mystical literature also constantly affirms the infinite abyss that separates God from man and the total freedom of God's gift, without which the human subject would be nothing at all. It's God's own Spirit, who loves Him in and through the love of his beloved, but this love is not a natural capacity and one cannot claim any right to it.

The second reason for a certain tension between the official Church and mystical saints lies in the authority they seem to claim for their experience. When Saint Francis, for example, in his testament wrote: "The Lord revealed to me .."<sup>(11)</sup>, he seemed to appeal to a divine authority which was not necessarily enclosed in the authority of the Church to which the whole of revelation has been trusted. As I have already mentioned, the only revelation and the only true authority to which authentic mystics appeal, are the biblical revelation as it has been transmitted, read and understood by the christian community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. No saint has ever thought of challenging this authority by an appeal to subjective illuminations that would be his/her exclusive privilege. In fact, most mystics declared expressly that they submitted themselves, by anticipation, to the judgment of the Church, if their

writings were to be found in contradiction with its doctrine. Still, it is possible that certain ecclesiastical officials neither understand (very well what mystics wrote), nor excel in exegesis of the Bible or theology. In any case, one criterion of true orthodoxy is the firm will to remain a trustworthy member of the christian community. The "happy solitude" of a mystic is certainly not found in a splendid or miserable isolation.

#### The future of mysticism.

For the future of mysticism, at least, the following points seem to be important.

1) The mystical way - of which every great religion has impressive examples - is an excellent antidote against the activistic, hasty, noisy, technologically powerful, but ideologically poor culture in which our time seems to be caught. "Workaholism" and many other addictions express a desperate dissatisfaction with reality as it is, notwithstanding the multitude of appeals to care for neglected people, the milieu, the mysteries of nature, the body and the mind. The mystics show a non-superficial way out of all pseudosatisfactions. They know the way to true knowledge and love with regard to the real reality of a just

and generous communion that does not betray the conditions of its worldly existence.

2) The experiences lived and described by the great mystics seem to be indispensable, at least to some extent, if the christian churches <sup>are</sup> not <sup>to</sup> die from sclerosis, servility to the fashions, moralism, superstitions, idolatrous overestimations of theological divergencies, dogmatic authoritarianism and meaningless consumerism. A resurrection of the christian community is impossible without a passionate search for "the only necessary", the courage to ascetic liberation and the most profound receptivity. By rooting christians in the Absolute, mysticism permits them an inner distance to everything that is not the ultimate concern itself. Thereby, a non-relativistic pluralism may be prepared, which seems to be a necessary condition for authentic ecumenism.

3) The ecumenism of different religions, too, will be favored by those who, deeply involved in the sources of their own religion, do not attach themselves to superficialities, but search for the most intimate contact with the central mystery of their religion. Indeed, although at first sight, it may seem that these firm believers will have more difficulties to find a common ground than the average adherents of the different religions, this is not

the case. Superficial and mediocre believers stick to exterior and superficial aspects of their religion. Either they are fanatic literalists and, thus, idolatrous; or they take their religion not very seriously and rely mainly on convictions nowadays common to all sorts of people. In our time we observe, for instance, a widespread agreement on the morality of human rights. This is certainly a source for great moral satisfaction and as such it contributes also to the genesis of a humanistic ecumenism of religions. However, a true ecumenism of world religions cannot consist in an attempt to separate the peculiarities of every religion from that part which they have in common. The Enlightenment tried to determine such a common divisor, but it is too superficial to serve as foundation for a religious community. A religious ecumenism demands the thorough involvement of those who are concerned about it. Ecumenical congresses and world associations, theological discussions and bureaucratic procedures may be necessary, but if those activities are not rooted in the fundamental mystery, they will be even more superficial than political administrations that are not supported by a profound consensus on cultural values. The contemplative way leads to the core of all religions. If it is the only One who hides and reveals himself in all religions - be it partially or with distortions - the different ways they proclaim must converge

somewhere, but the where and how cannot be found out by superficial talks or measures. The mystics give an example of the utmost authenticity and simplification necessary to a concrete and worldwide familiarity of (wo)men. They are the contrary of fanatics because their freedom does not force anybody to believe or do what they believe and do. They point to a source of unity that cannot be discovered without thorough contemplation.

Adriaan Peperzak

Wassenaar, February 13-16,  
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- 1) Catherine of Genua, Laude, as quoted in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité X, 1907.
- 2) Cfr. Genesis 1, 4. 10. 12. 18. 21. 25. 31.
- 3) A thorough thematization of the various aspects of the mystical nights demands a) a refined psychological observation of the phenomena experienced and described by different mystics in different ways, and b) an anthropological theory of the dimensions and capacities of human existence.
- 4) Cfr. his work on the Ascension of the Mount Carmel (Subida), Book II, chapters 23-27.
- 5) Cfr. John of the Cross, Subida II, 22, 3-8.
- 6) Exodus 13, 21-22; cfr. 14, 19-20. 24.
- 7) In his Cantico del frate sole (Canticle of brother sun), which is the oldest poem in Italian:

"Praise be to thee, my Lord, with all thy creatures.

especially for Master Brother Sun

who illuminates the day for us,

and Thee, Most High, he manifests.

(.....)

Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for our sister Mother Earth,

who nourishes and sustains us all,

bringing forth divers fruits

and many-coloured flowers and herbs.

(.....)

Praise be to thee, my Lord

for our Sister Bodily Death

from whom no living human can flee."



8) Saint Bonaventure combined the Franciscan spirit with Augustinian philosophy and theology, when he systematized the hierarchy of cosmological and anthropological dimensions, for instance, in his beautiful Itinerary of the mind to God, where he uses metaphors like umbra, vestigium, similitudo, imago to describe the created universe as glorious expression of its Author's overflowing goodness.

9) Genesis 1, 31.

10) John of the Cross, Subida II, 22,19.

11) Cfr. Opuscula (Grottaferrata 1978), p.310 (Testamentum, n.14).

12) I thank Angela Scrup, M.F., for her assistance in English in which I wrote this paper.

