WERE THE EARLY CHRISTIANS MYSTICS?

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The fact that modern liberal theology, taking its rise mainly from Ritschl, has reacted against mysticism or any first-hand dealings with the divine, with communion with God in any deep sense, that is, in any sense except through the historical records of the New Testament, has brought into notice that tremendous movement we call mysticism. It is to that movement so far as the early Church shows any traces of it that I wish to speak in this article.

What is mysticism? As you know, the word is related to mystery, and comes from the Greek *μυστήριον*, which comes from the Greek *μύω*, to close, to shut, especially the lips or eyes. The idea is of something hidden, or of knowledge out of the common which comes to one not through sight of the eyes or hearing of the ears. There are many definitions. Morell thinks of it as that system of knowledge which emphasizes faith, feeling, or inspiration, rather than sense or reason, as the source of truth. That lamented young scholar, Robert Alfred Vaughan, who was the first to open up to English speaking students a scientific knowledge of the subject in his classic book, *Hours with the Mystics*, first published as far back as 1856, and I think still in print, says that mysticism is that form of error which mistakes for a divine manifestation the operations of a merely human faculty, and refers to those who make it not only an initiation into something hidden but as an internal manifestation of the divine to the intuition or in the feeling of the secluded soul. But whether we are mystics or not, God has and can have no way of revealing anything except through the human faculties, and to place in opposition divine manifestations

and human faculties is absurd. When Paul was caught up into the third heaven the only vehicle of his new information was his faculties, of course heightened and illuminated. The philosopher Cousin says that mysticism is the pretension to know God without intermediary, and so to speak face to face. For mysticism, whatever is between God and us hides him from us. This is only partly true. The mystic says: We can have direct knowledge of truth and God, but we can also have indirect; and we can mount up to this direct knowledge through various indirect means. Professor Seth (who changed his name to Seth Pringle-Pattison) has excellent remarks. Mysticism, he says, is a phase of thought or of feeling which from its very nature is not susceptible of exact definition. The human mind endeavors to grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things, and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the highest. The first is the philosophic side of mysticism, the second its religious. The thought is of a supreme, all-pervading, indwelling power, in whom all things are one. God ceases to be an object, and becomes an experience. I would say that He becomes at once an object and an experience.

Professor William James gives four marks of a mystical experience. (1) It is ineffable. It cannot be described to another. It is the secret of the Lord. (2) But it is noetic, that is, it is a state of knowledge. It is not imaginary. It is an actual experience, and it is therefore authoritative for after-time. (3) It is transient. It is real when here, it can be recognized, but it passes and cannot well be reproduced. This reminds me of what Patmore says about the mystic vision, that it is not what you expected, or could have imagined, and that it is never repeated. (4) The mystical experience is passive. You feel you are in the grasp of a higher power. It is not something you work out for yourself, it is a gift of God. I do not understand James denies to the mystic practical

beneficence or interest in life; he means that the highest experiences are the free bestowments of the Higher Powers.

Miss Underhill says mysticism is the art of establishing conscious relations with the Absolute, the organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the love of God. She calls it the unitive state,—the state in which or by which we become united with God. If I might quote my own definition, mysticism, so far as we have to do with it in the Church, is an attempt to find truth and life by direct revelation of God in the soul, either with or apart from His revelation in the Bible and the community. It is a reaction from anything that impedes the spontaneous movement of the soul toward God, whether sacerdotalism, or rationalism, or orthodoxy, anything which looks with an unfriendly eye on manifestations of the Spirit not in conformity with regular formulas or doctrines. You have all heard of Dr. Chalmer's famous definition of Methodism as Christianity in earnest. One might define mysticism as Christianity as a living first-hand knowledge of God and Christ and divine things.

So far as our own religion is concerned Christ was the first mystic. God the Father was nearer to Him than hands and feet. He had studied the Old Testament; He had taken every means to know; but that did not exhaust the avenues of His approach. "I know that thou hearest me always." "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent" in their own eyes, who think there is no knowledge except through science and the recognized text-books and teachers, who think that all things come through scribe and wise men; "and hast revealed them unto babes", to the child-like hearts who listen in the night, like young Samuel, to the voice only heard by the humble. "Where two or three are gathered together there am I" (not simply God the Father),—I myself the Son of God will be there, an atmosphere of love and truth,

pressing around you and lifting you into the heavenly places. Do not look for the kingdom of God in some striking manifestation, in some outside big event, but the "Kingdom is within you", within you and among you. For I am the kingdom; in having me you have all things; "I am the way, the truth, and the life". The *way* hitherto has been the path of legal rectitude cast up by scribe and Pharisee; henceforth I am the way and when you have me you are already in it. The *truth* hitherto has been Old Testament Scripturers and the multitude of additions by the authorized interpreters who sit in Moses' seat; henceforth I am that truth, and when you have me you have more than Old Testament and Halacha and Hag-gada. The *life* hitherto has been in scrupulous obedience to a narrow Jewish orthodoxy; henceforth it is I myself, and when you have me you have the life, the life Eternal and the promise of the life that now is. On the mountain of transfiguration Christ entered into those mystic relations when the present and temporal subside and eternity communes with the soul. Moses and Elijah spoke to him, and the light of God irradiated from his person. He makes worship mystical rather than institutional. We worship God not in imposing ceremonies, as did the Jews; or in fantastic ceremonies as did pagans, but in spirit and truth. Even the written word retires behind me, because there is a word written on the heart. Ye think that in the Scriptures ye have eternal life, but ye will not come unto me, of whom they witness, to have life.

If Christ was a mystic, Paul must have been also because he tried to be in all things like his Master. And he was. He had two or three elements of mysticism. First, he had the first-hand revelation. On the way to Damascus, repeatedly at later times, he had visions, revelations, immediate unfolding of the divine will, purpose and truth. Second, he had absorption into the divine. Raised together with Christ, to live is Christ, Christ who is our

life, I know nothing except Christ Jesus and him crucified. Christ or God was not simply somebody outside of him whom he worshipped, but somebody in him whose existence there was the life of his life. And his idea of the Church as the body and bride of Christ was a thoroughly mystical conception. He also had a third possession which is the characteristic of some mystics, though I do not make it of the essence of mysticism, viz. ecstasy. I was caught up into the third heaven and heard unutterable things. If there ever was a mystic it was Paul.

John was a mystic. You know his mystical use of symbolism. The plainest things speak of heavenly values,—the lights of eternity shine through them. This is he who came through water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not in (or through) the water only, but in the water and in the blood: and the three agree in one. Christ's use of symbolism (not simply allegories or similitudes or parables) appeals to John. Birth is a symbol of regeneration: Ye must be born again. Washing the feet a symbol of humility and lowly service. Bread, light, water, door, way or road, shepherd, corn or grain of wheat, the word: these are the symbols of the mystic John. "The true mysticism is the belief that everything in being what it is is symbolic of something more." Other evangelists heard Christ speak the same things, but they did not have the mystic's mind to see and interpret them. It is as Milton says:

What if earth
Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought.

John has also the mystic idea of the seed of God, or life principle of faith, which is in the believer as the earnest of eternity. Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin, because his seed abideth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God (American Standard Re-

vision, 1 John 3:9). "Seed is a word", says Professor Rufus M. Jones, "which mystics have again and again adopted to express the implanting the divine life within the soul. It means that the principle by which a man lives unto God and resists the tendencies of the flesh is a divine germ, and something of God received into the soul, a new principle which expands and becomes the life of the person". The same idea is that of the well of water springing up into everlasting life, the Vine which brings forth the fruit, the Bread which produces life. "We are in him that is true",—a kind of identification of the disciple and the Master. But on the other hand, there was no tendency in John to symbolize or spiritualize away the actual historical events in Christ's life. No inner experience could take the place of these. The Word of God who was believed and was also seen, heard and handled. A revelation within rests on an incarnation without. Like all true mysticism John's rested on a body of historical facts. Whoever wrote Revelation, this verse is certainly in the spirit of mysticism: To him that overcometh will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it (2:17).

The mystic passion dwelt in Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, on the way to Rome to be thrown to wild beasts for his Christianity (about 110-117). It is good for me to die for Jesus Christ rather than to reign over the farthest bounds of the earth. Him I seek who died on our behalf; him I desire who rose again. The pangs of the new birth are upon me. Bestow not on the world one (that is, myself) who desireth to be God's, neither allure him with material things. Suffer me to receive the pure light. Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God (Christ). If any man hath Him with himself, let him understand what I desire; let him have fellow feeling with me, for he knoweth the things which straiten me (*ad Rom.*

6). He was in direct communication with the Spirit. I cried out when I was among you (that is, the Spirit which searcheth out the hidden things cried out through me, as we see from the words just before); I spake with a loud voice, Give ye heed, etc. . . . He in whom I am bound is my witness that I learned it (my message to you) not from the flesh of man; it was the preaching of the Spirit who spake on this wise (through me) (*ad Philad.* 7). He has also the mystic's literalizing of symbols or symbolizing of literal things: "Recover yourselves in faith which is the flesh of the Lord, and in love which is the blood of Jesus Christ" (*ad Rom.* 8). Breaking one bread which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote that we should not die but live forever in Jesus Christ (*ad Eph.* 20). Ye are all companions in the way, carrying your God and your shrine, your Christ and your holy things, being arrayed from head to foot in the commandments of Jesus Christ (*ad Eph.* 12). There is nothing incompatible between being a man of ecclesiastical affairs or a bishop and a mystic, as Ignätius was both. I pray (he says) that there may be in the churches union of the flesh and of the spirit which are Jesus Christ's, our never failing life,—a union of faith and of love which is preferred before all things, and what is more than all—a union with Jesus and with the Father; in whom if we shall endure patientiy all the despite of the prince of this world and escape therefrom we shall attain unto God (*ad Magn.* 1).

In 1909 J. Rendel Harris published for the first time *The Odes of Solomon*, an anonymous book of the second century (probably first half, though Harris thinks that the most of it belongs to last part of first century), which belongs to the religious school of John, and one of the most precious discoveries in Christian literature since 1884, when the Didache or Teaching of the XII Apostles became known to Church historians. *The Odes* is the most mystical book of the early Church.

I was crowned by my God: my crown is living: and I was justified in my Lord: my incorruptible salvation is He . . . and the thought of truth led me on. And I walked after it and did not wander: and all that have seen me were amazed: and I was regarded by them as a strange person: and He who knew and brought me up is the Most High in all His perfection. And He glorified me by His kindness, and raised my thought to the height of His truth (Ode 17). The Lord hath caused me to know Himself, without grudging, by His simplicity: the greatness of His kindness hath humbled me. He became like me, in order that I might receive Him: He was reckoned like myself in order that I might put Him on; and I trembled not when I saw Him: because He is my salvation: like my nature He became that I might learn Him and like my form, that I might not turn back from Him (Ode 7). I love the Beloved and my soul loves Him . . . I have been mingled with Him, because I shall find love to the Beloved . . . I shall love Him that is the Son, that I may be a son, that I may be a son . . . for he that is joined to Him that is immortal, will also himself become immortal (Ode 3). The Lord is on my head like a crown (Ode 1). As the hand moves over the harp, and the strings speak, so speaks in my members the Spirit of the Lord, and I speak by His love (Ode 6). The Most High clave my heart by His Holy Spirit (Ode 11). As the wings of doves over their nestlings . . . so also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart (Ode 28). I went up to the light of truth as if into a chariot: and the Truth took me and led me . . . it became to me an instrument of Salvation: and set me on the arms of immortal life: and it went with me and made me rest, and suffered me not to wander, because it was the Truth (Ode 38). Like the flow of

waters flows truth from my mouth (Ode 12). I am a priest of the Lord, and to Him I do priestly service: and to Him I offer the sacrifice of His thought (Ode 20). Behold! the Lord is our mirror: open the eyes and see them in Him: and learn the manner of your face: and tell forth praises to His spirit: and wipe off the filth from your face: and love His holiness, and clothe yourselves therewith: and be without stain at all times before Him (Ode 13). He is my Sun and His rays have lifted me up . . . Death hath been destroyed, . . . there hath gone up deathless life in the Lord's land (Ode 15). The Lord renewed me in His raiment, and possessed me by His light, and from above He gave me rest in incorruption . . . He carried me to His Paradise; where is the abundance of the pleasure of the Lord; and I worshipped the Lord on account of His glory . . . There is abundant room in thy Paradise, and nothing is useless therein . . . glory be to thee, O God, the delight of Paradise forever (Ode 11).

Some documents found within the last half century have offered food for controversy by their light on Church organization and doctrine. But this wonderfully intimate and loving portraiture of a soul in communion with God and the blessings of His Kingdom breathes another atmosphere, of love and trust and joy, the fellowship of a believing soul with the Heavenly Bridegroom Christ. It is the Book of Early Christian Mysticism.

Clement of Alexandria (215), according to the ecclesiastical historian Bigg, was a father of mystics but not one himself. But how he could be the former without having at least a side to mysticism is a puzzle. Let us hear him. "We shall be perfected when we become the church and receive Christ as the Head." This perfection is much more than the mere performing of the law, for he

says, "Perfection as regards the performance of the law is to be but a child in Christ". He speaks of the inner knowledge in the mystic sense. The initiated have learned the divine mysteries from the only begotten Son, and they have become pure by the knowledge which is through the Son of God. By this means they are "initiated face to face into the blessed contemplation". A full insight into truth, a knowledge of mysteries, comprehension of the blood and flesh of the Word and of the divine power and essence,—this is another name for mystic. He is perfected through the science of divine things, as he is in union with the Word and with God. Some mysteries, he says, were concealed until the times of the apostles, who delivered them as they received them from the Lord. These are now revealed to the saints. The deeper things, the powers of the world to come, are known only to the initiated. "Come thou also, O aged man, leaving Thebes, and casting away from thee both divination and Bacchic frenzy, allow thyself to be led to the truth. I give thee the staff (of the cross) on which to lean. Haste, Tiresias, believe, and thou wilt see. Christ, by whom the eyes of the blind recover sight, will shed on thee a light brighter than the sun; night will flee from thee, fire will fear, death will be gone; thou, old man, who saw not Thebes, shalt see the heavens. O truly sacred mysteries! O stainless light! My way is lighted with torches, and I survey the heavens and God; I become holy whilst I am initiated. The Lord is the hierophant, and seals while illuminating him who is initiated, and presents to the Father him who believes, to be kept safe forever. Such are the reveries of my mysteries. If it is thy wish, be thou also initiated; and thou shalt join the choir along with angels around the unbegotten and indestructible and the only true God, the Word of God, raising the hymn with us.¹ This Jesus,

¹ Here are references to baptism and the Eucharist, and to the Trisagion, "Therefore with angels and archangels," which was universally diffused in the Christian Church. Busen, *Hippol.*, iii. 63.

who is eternal, the one great High Priest of the one God and of His Father, prays for and exhorts men". (*Protrep.* 12, A. N. F. 205). This is not to be interpreted as literal initiations, as in a lodge, but progressive unfoldings of divine truth and light to the soul progressively prepared, after the analogy of the Eleusinian mysteries and perhaps those of Mithras. Clement wanted the heathen to know that better things than they had in their mysteries, Christians had in Christianity. Clement says that the initiated (the true gnostic Christian) has the divine power and wisdom, which knowing things as they are, reach out to perfection. The Saviour removes the veil of ignorance. The true and spiritual meaning of Scripture is possessed by gnostic or mystic alone. "Knowledge lies in illumination; the end of knowledge is rest, which is the last object of desire." There are two kinds of Christians, the lower and the higher. Only the latter possess the secret of Christ, communion with God, joy, and "being as like unto the Lord as can be". The gnostic or mystic is superior to anger and desire, and is master of himself, like the Lord. He unites knowledge to faith and love. A perfect man after the image of Christ, he is truly spiritual, and is worthy to be called brother by the Lord. He is a friend and son of God. Clement teaches a kind of deification of such a man. He becomes assimilated to God by the indwelling of the Word, and his deification is his becoming immortal. After passing through the successive stages of initiation he will contemplate God face to face with full knowledge, "in the Holy Mountain of the Lord, in the church above. There are the divine philosophers, the true Israelites, the pure in heart in whom is no guile,—no longer remaining in the Hebdomas of rest, but by active well doing, after the divine image, looking up to the inheritance in the Ogdoads. He hastens to the Father's habitation, the mansion of the Lord, about to become, so to speak, an eternally permanent light forever unchangeable".

Clement says that this "gnostic soul", in order to attain this highest knowledge or mystic state, must be stripped of matter, lay aside all frivolousness and all passions, and be "consecrated to the light" (*Strom.* 5:11 near beg.). The mode of purification is by confession, the mode of contemplation is by analysis. Taking away all material aids, or to use his own words, "abstracting all bodily and incorporeal things, we cast ourselves into the greatness of Christ, and thence advance into profundity (or immensity) by purity (or holiness), we may reach somehow to the conception of the Almighty, knowing not what he is, but what he is not" (*ib.* near middle, or A.N.F. 461 b). Elsewhere he says: "Being baptized we are illuminated; being illuminated we are adopted; being adopted we are perfected; being perfected we are made immortal". "The Word is the source of all true knowledge. He (or it) is the wisdom of God, the sanctification of knowledge, the person of the revealed truth, the person of the face of God, by which he is brought to light or revealed." "Purity is to think holy things." Prayer and study of Scripture go with it. Love is essential. "Perfection is attained only when the soul hangs upon the Lord through faith and knowledge, and especially love. Mystical knowledge is given only to those who love much" (W. M. Scott, *Aspects of Christian Mysticism*, Lond. 1907, 39, to whom I am much indebted on Clement). The final state is the perpetual contemplation of God. The soul now sees God not through a mirror but clearly, and smitten by love, the soul cannot be satiated, but holds sweet communion with God forever. With the church above the gnostic or mystic rests on the holy mountain of the Lord. And here is Clement's prayer, which Scott thinks is mystical:—O Lord, grant that we who follow thy injunctions may perfect the likeness of thy image. Grant that we all, living in thy peace, translated into thy city, safely sailing through the waves of sin, may be tranquilly borne along

together with the Holy Sprit, the ineffable Wisdom. And day and night until the perfect day may praise with thanksgiving, and give thanks with praise, to the only Father and Son, together with the Holy Spirit, all things in one; in whom are all things, through whom all things are one; through whom is eternity, whose members we all are. Amen.

Before I leave Clement of Alexandria a word might be said concerning the mystery religions, of which there are many echoes in his words, and which certainly in the second, third, and fourth centuries influenced Christianity. What was there about them which helped along the mystical development in our religion?

First, there was the idea that salvation comes from revelation (that is, so far as they had any idea of salvation or revelation). By your initiation, by a spectacle or drama, you were taught, or certain things were revealed to you, something as in a modern lodge. It is true that Plutarch says that the initiated could produce no demonstration of their new beliefs or knowledge, and Aristotle is quoted as saying that the initiated do not really learn anything, but rather receive impressions. Still, the idea of the mysteries was that a new knowledge of life, of God, of divine things, came through the mysteries.

Second, salvation in its highest form was regarded as freedom from the flesh, from this prison-house of body and the world, and introduced into the happy life of the gods. Sometimes ecstasy was produced or aimed at in the mysteries, a being carried out of the body, when the soul is for a time absorbed into the universal life of the gods. This was quite congenial to certain types of mysticism.

Third, salvation or divinity or immortality was imparted by mechanical rites, as sacraments do in the Greek, Roman and High Episcopal Churches. These rights had a magical or miraculous potency, just as in these churches.

The baptism of blood, the taurobolium, washed from sin and secured eternal salvation. Rites were even performed for the dead, in order that they might be saved or at least be benefited, which was copied as to baptism by certain half-heathen Christians (1 Cor. 15:29). Infants were also initiated that they might be cleansed from their "original sin". I do not think that the mystery religions influenced apostolic Christianity to any appreciable extent, in which I am borne out by some of the best modern scholars, but later—that's another question. The whole sacramental system of the so-called Catholic Church is shot through and through with pagan elements.

Fourth, the idea of moral fitness and moral purgation was not entirely absent from the pagan mysteries, or if it was there were protests against such absence. As the Roman poet Ovid said: "Our ancients believed purgations were able to remove all guilt and all cause of evil. Greece was the beginner of the custom. She believes the guilty purified lift away impious deeds . . . Ah! too easy they who think the melancholy crimes of blood can be taken away by flowing waters" (*Fasti* 2:35 ff.). Philo charged against the mysteries that good men were not initiated but that evil livers were.

Inge says (*Christian Mysticism*, 1899, 354) that the main conceptions which passed from the pagan mystery systems into Christianity or Catholicism were secrecy, symbolism, mystical brotherhood, sacramental grace, and especially the three stages in spiritual life, ascetic purification, illumination, and *εποπτεία* (the highest stage, full contemplation, immediate vision, or ecstasy). It is an actual fact that Christianity conquered Paganism partly by borrowing some of its best things (if we call them best) from it.

Origen the saint and scholar of Alexandria (active 215-53), in some respects the greatest church Father before Augustine, was a mystic in the sense of absorption

in divine things and studies, with little care for the historical and external. Spiritual Christianity with him was a mounting up with Christ to God, rather than a study and following of Christ himself. The Gospel history was all right for the lower classes, but the true mystic sees the spiritual meaning behind the external word. Human souls fell in a pre-existent state from union with the Logos (the Christ to be), and that Logos came to recover them. In this recovery there are two methods, one of general faith and obedience for the common run of Christians and the other of asceticism, strenuous following of Christ, and supersensuous vision on the part of the elect. These last grow into Christ and become truly divine. "From Christ there began", he says, "the interweaving of divine and human nature, in order that the human by communion with the divine might rise to the divine,—not in Jesus alone but in all those who not only believe but enter upon the life which Jesus taught".¹ "Contemplatives are in the house of God; those who lead an active life are only in the vestibule."² The soul flies away like a dove from all things here below that it may rest in the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.³ Harnack calls Origen's mysticism a "joyous ascetic contemplativeness, in which the Logos is the friend, associate and bridegroom of the soul, which now having become a pure spirit and being herself deified clings in love to the Deity."⁴ Miss Underhill thinks that in him as in no other writer are found all the elements which came out in the mysticism of the Middle Ages. He is the first to apply the passionate imagery of the Song of Songs to the souls union with Christ or God, and thus is the forerunner of St. Bernard. He leads us on the oriental path of passivity and

¹ *Contra Celsum* 3.28.

² In *Psalmos* 133.

³ In *Cantic*, 1.4, I am indebted to Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 1913, 284-8.

⁴ *Hist. of Dogma*, ii. 376.

withdrawment which some think the very essence of mysticism, but which Miss Underhill regards as only a psychological method which some mystics take to get themselves immersed in what she calls Reality, that is, in God or the Last Ground of Being.

But with all his mysticism or whatever it might be called, Origen kept himself humble, even though some call him a religious Superior Person or Spiritual Individualist. "Any one who sees that his light in comparison with a greater light is reckoned darkness can never be puffed up with pride. What is my righteousness even if I become an apostle Paul? Or my chastity even if I become a Joseph? Or my courage, even if I become a Judas Maccabaeus? . . . If God wills to save me he does not bring his own light to the judgment". But he claims with Wesley that there is a sense in which it can be said with the apostle that men may live without sin. He says that motive is everything, that he who loves God cannot sin, that faith is root and works the fruit, and that whoever sins is at fault in his faith or belief. "O that my lips were touched as Isaiah's. But why do I speak of my lips? Isaiah was holy. But I fear I have an unclean heart and eyes and ears and feet. Who will cleanse me? Who will wash my feet, Jesus come . . . stoop to be a slave for me. Come, wash my feet." The Rev. Campbell N. Moody, in his scholarly and fine book *The Mind of the Early Converts*, 1920, 289, thinks that gloom eclipses the sunshine in Origen's mind and experience. He did not understand Paul sufficiently to enjoy the glorious freedom of God's sons.

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