

Mysticism – Fact Sheet

“There is intoxication in the waters of contemplation”

Thomas Merton

“Mysticism is no longer irrelevant; it is in the air we breathe”

William Johnston

Contemplative mysticism, which originated in the Roman Catholic monastic movement, is permeating every branch of Christianity.

Leonard Sweet says: “Mysticism, once cast to the sidelines of the Christian tradition, is now situated in postmodernist culture near the center. ... In the words of one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, Jesuit philosopher of religion/dogmatist Karl Rahner, ‘The Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or he will be nothing’” (Quantum Spirituality, 1991, pp. 11, 76).

Ursula King observes that “recent years have seen a greater interest and fascination with the mystics of all ages and faiths than any previous period in history” (Christian Mystics, p. 22).

The Fruit of Mysticism

I will extensively develop this theme later in the book, but here I want to emphasize the fact that mysticism’s fruit is well demonstrated and plainly unscriptural. Catholic mysticism leads inevitably to a broadminded ecumenical philosophy and to the adoption of heresies. For many, this path has led to interfaith dialogue, religious syncretism, universalism, pantheism (God is everything), panentheism (God is in everything), goddess theology, and the New Age. A Definition of Mysticism I want to emphasize, first, what mysticism is not. It is not merely a desire to know Christ intimately and to be filled with the Spirit and to walk in God’s perfect will. It is not merely a life of worship and devotion to God and fruitful Bible study. Mysticism goes far beyond this. **Mysticism, as we are using the term, is an attempt to commune with God experientially and to find spiritual understanding beyond the pages of the Bible by means of Roman Catholic monastic practices.**

Following are three characteristics of this mysticism:

First, mysticism emphasizes a direct experience of God. Chamber’s Dictionary defines mysticism as “the habit or tendency of religious thought and feeling of those who seek direct communion with God or the divine.” Leonard Sweet defines mysticism as an “experience with God” in the metaphysical realm that is achieved through “mindbody experiences” (Quantum Spirituality, 1991, p. 11). Anthony de Mello says: “... we are, all of us, endowed with a mystical mind and mystical heart, a faculty which makes it possible for us to know God directly, to grasp and intuit him in his very being...” (Sadhana: A Way to God, p. 29). Ursula King says, “Mystics seek participation in divine life, communion and union with God” (Christian Mystics, p. 4). Thomas Merton says: “Meditation is for those who are not satisfied with a merely objective and conceptual knowledge about life, about God--about ultimate realities. They want to enter into an intimate contact with truth itself, with God” (Spiritual Direction and Meditation, p. 53).

Second, mysticism emphasizes finding spiritual insight beyond thought and doctrine. It is focused on experience, feeling, emotion, intuition, and perception.

Leonard Sweet says, “Mysticism begins in experience; it ends in theology” (Quantum Spirituality, 1991, p. 76). Anne Bancroft, author of Twentieth-Century Mystics and Sages, defined a mystic as someone who feels “a need to go beyond words and to experience the truth about themselves” (p. vii). Thomas Merton defined mysticism as an experience with wisdom and God apart from words. Anthony de Mello said: “The head is not a very good place for prayer. ... You must learn to move out of the area of thinking and talking and move into the area of feeling, sensing, loving, intuiting” (Sadhana: A Way to God, p. 17). “Contemplation for me is communication with God that makes a minimal use of words, images, and concepts or dispenses with words, images, and concepts altogether. This is the sort of prayer that John of the Cross speaks of in his Dark Night of the Soul or the author of The Cloud of Unknowing explains in his admirable book” (p. 29). Christianity Today says there are many young evangelicals who are tired of “traditional Christianity” and want “a renewed encounter with God” that goes BEYOND “DOCTRINAL

DEFINITIONS” (“The Future Lies in the Past,” Christianity Today, Feb. 2008). This is a good definition of mysticism. It is an attempt to experience God beyond the interpretation of Scripture, beyond doctrine, beyond theology. Spencer Burke of the Ooze says: “A move away from intellectual Christianity is essential. We must move to the mystical” (Emerging Churches, p. 230). Observe that he contrasts mysticism with the intellect. Mysticism tries to reach beyond that which can be understood with the mind, beyond the teaching of Scripture. We realize that the believer does not grasp spiritual truths with his intellect only, but the intellect should always be in gear, and this is what the contemplative mystics renounce. Consider this description of centering prayer, which requires putting aside conscious thoughts: “For in this darkness we experience an intuitive understanding of everything material and spiritual without giving special attention to anything in particular” (The Cloud of Unknowing, chapter 68). This is pure mysticism, and The Cloud of Unknowing is a primary resource for the contemplative movement. Tony Campolo describes contemplative spirituality as mystical stillness and communing with God without words: “I get up in the morning a half hour before I have to and spend time in absolute stillness. I don’t ask God for anything. I just simply surrender to His presence and yield to the Spirit flowing into my life. ... An interviewer once asked Mother Teresa, ‘When you pray, what do you say to God?’ She said, ‘I don’t say anything. I just listen.’ So the interviewer asked, ‘What does God say to you?’ She replied, ‘God doesn’t say anything. He listens.’ That’s the kind of prayer I do in the morning” (Outreach Magazine, July/ August 2004, pp. 88, 89).

Third, mysticism accepts extra-scriptural dreams and visions and insights as revelations from God and, in fact, expects them as a natural product of the contemplative experience. Richard Foster says, “Christian meditation, very simply is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word” (Celebration of Discipline, 1998, p. 17), and he is not talking here about hearing God’s voice through Scripture alone.

In the book Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home, Foster, quoting Thomas Merton, says that contemplative prayer “offers you an understanding and light, which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons” (p. 160). The “spiritual insights” that the practitioner obtains through contemplative meditation becomes truth to him that is at least equal in authority to Scripture. The Catholic “saints” who developed the contemplative practices received countless extra-biblical revelations. This is the mystical approach that is fast becoming an acceptable means of “spirituality” in all branches of Christianity.

Source: David W. Cloud. Contemplative Mysticism - A Powerful Ecumenical Bond (Kindle Locations 20-124). Way of Life Literature. Kindle Edition.

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