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## CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM A TESTIMONY TO THE SPIRIT.

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Chillingworth gave his famous book the title, "The Bible the Religion of Protestants," a title which was fruitful of much error because it did not state the whole truth. The Bible is not the religion of the Protestant or of any other Christian sect. At best, it is only the record of the Christian revelation made through certain individuals and a course of human history. No religion can be found in a book, because religion always has to do with persons. The book can only record the experiences the person has had.

In this respect the Bible is of priceless value to mankind. It keeps alive the experiences of those who have known religion in its greatest purity and will, for this very reason, always remain as an indispensable guide in religious matters.

But Christianity is not confined to these experiences which man had centuries ago. Christianity, if it is anything, is a redemptive process, and if the experiences of the early Christians were real, if there was a Holy Spirit which was the source of their redeemed lives, which enriched them in greater love and holiness, the same experiences must be possible to-day. The work of the Holy Spirit must be continuous and the consciousness of His Presence must be the constant experience of the Christian Church. Unless this is true Christianity has no value for the world to-day. A God who worked in the past but does not work in the present would be interesting from a historical standpoint but of no value to practical religion. "It is useless to preach the Christianity of eighteen centuries ago, if we ignore the Christianity of to-day." Realizing this fact, we turn to the Christian experience of the Church for some evidence of the reality and activity of the Holy Spirit.

For those to whom Christian experience is a mere sentiment, a set of pious feelings, this article will have no interest. All religion begins in experience, experiences that can be described, that are real to the person who has them, and we assume that

these experiences belong to the realm of facts and are worthy of explanation. We even assume that they may be used as one of the sources for the construction of our theology and that no philosophy of religion is complete which does not take them into consideration.

In this article we deal with that religious experience which is known as mysticism. It is not an experience which belongs exclusively to the Christian Church. The mystic is to be found among the Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans as well as Christians. Our investigations, however, will be confined to Christian mysticism.

To understand Christian mysticism and its place in the Christian life there are a few things which we must know about the development of thought in the early church. The central thing in the lives of the early Christians was the Spirit of God. "I live and yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," was the key to the understanding of their religious experiences. They lived and moved and had their being in God and in their lives was the fruit of the indwelling Spirit. Their religion was pre-eminently a religion of the Spirit. But within a hundred and fifty years from the time of the Apostles the conception of the Christian life had entirely changed. Under the influence of the Roman Empire, the church and the kingdom of God had become identified. Men were taught that the Spirit of God could only work through the Church, its sacraments and its priesthood. Thus as early as the second century Irenaeus says: "It is only at the breast of the Church that man can be nursed to life. He cannot partake of the Holy Spirit who takes not refuge in the church. He who separates himself from this church renounces the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." The church was declared to be the one medium through which the Holy Spirit acted. The soul received the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of baptism. Partaking of the elements of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper they partook of the divine life. Baptism had something of the effect of a charm, completing at a stroke the work of regeneration. Furthermore only as Baptism was received at the hands of the priest did it have objec-

tive validity. It mattered not what might be the character of the officiating priest, in his official capacity he was the instrument in the hands of the Spirit for working the salvation of men.

Thus Christianity had passed from a thing that was inward and vital to a thing that was outward and formal. Instead of seeking the kingdom of God in the heart, made conscious of its presence by the indwelling Spirit, men were henceforth to seek it in outward forms and ceremonies. The altar was to take the place of the heart, the form of baptism the place of the indwelling Christ.

Christian mysticism was a quiet protest against this outward form of religion. The mystic has appeared in both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches and wherever he is found he represents that in human nature which cannot be satisfied with the mere outward forms of religion. He represents the craving of human nature to know God and to know Him intimately, rebelling against any external authority and craving for that one supreme authority which is found in the spirit of man. Sometimes this mystic goes to extremes; sometimes he becomes the man of visions and ecstasies, but the mystic at heart is the one who seeks the kingdom of God in the heart, and endeavors to enthrone God as a living presence in the life.

It will be impossible for us to cover the entire field of mystical literature. We must content ourselves with a study of the Spirit of God in a few of the most conspicuous representatives of this school of thought.

The fourteenth century was fruitful in the production of mystics. There appears the great philosophical mystic Eckhart, who was followed by the brilliant list of more practical introspective mystics, Ruysbroek, Suse, Tauler, and the author of the *Theologia Germanica*. Among this list, Tauler was the greatest preacher, being also a man of no mean ability as a philosopher. He was born in Strassburg in the year 1290 and entered the Dominican order in 1308. This Dominican monk was a preacher of fame, drawing about him large audiences of eager listeners. One day there came to him a layman, who

was rich in God's grace and asked the famous monk to preach a sermon, telling them how they might live the highest and best life. Tauler promised to do it and, after careful preparation, he preached a sermon in which stated twenty-four rules which, if carefully observed, would result in the perfect life. When Tauler and the layman met to discuss the sermon, the layman's comment was this: "You are a great clerk, and have taught us a good lesson in this sermon, but you yourself do not live according to it." Then proceeding to point the specific defects in Tauler's life, the layman said: "Your vessel is unclean, and much lees are cleaving to it, and the cause is, that you have suffered yourself to be killed by the letter.—In the life that you are now living, know that you have no light, but you are in the night, in which you indeed are able to understand the letter, but have not yet tasted the sweetness of the Holy Spirit; and withal you are a Pharisee." (Life and Sermons of John Tauler, pp 13, 14, 15). These were bitter words for a priest to hear from a layman but so clear was the layman's analysis of Tauler's character, revealing the imperfection of his life, that the learned priest was compelled to submit humbly to the unlearned layman and seek to be led by him.

The result of this conversation was a long spiritual struggle through which Tauler was compelled to pass. The struggle lasted for two years before he became obedient, and was touched and illuminated by the Spirit of God, his religion becoming more than a philosophy, a vital experience. One night he was overtaken by a fault and was so overwhelmed by the consciousness of his sin that he cried: "O merciful God! have mercy upon me a poor sinner, for thy boundless mercies sake, for I am not worthy that the earth should bear me." As he was in this penitent state there came to him a voice which seemed to say: "Stand fast in thy peace, and trust God, and know that when he was on earth in human nature, He made the sick whom he healed in body sound also in soul." Following this there came another experience when he found himself in the possession of a new strength and might in his inner life and also of a clearer understanding of the things

which before had been dark. The Spirit of God had become a reality to him, bringing him strength and comfort. (Ibid. p. 46). From this time the center of Tauler's doctrine, which he delivered to vast multitudes, was the indwelling of God in the soul. He says: "I have a power in my soul which enables me to perceive God: I am as certain as that I live that nothing is so near to me as God. He is nearer to me than I am to myself. It is a part of his very essence that he should be nigh and present to me. He is also nigh to a stone or a tree, but they do not know it. If a tree could know God, and perceive his presence, as the highest of the angels perceive it, the tree would be as blessed as the highest angel. And it is because man is capable of perceiving God, and knowing how nigh God is to him, that he is better off than a tree." (Ibid. p. 188). Again he says: What God works in the soul of those "with whom he holds direct converse, none can say, nor can one man give account of it to another, but he only who has felt it knows what it is; and even he can tell thee nothing of it, save only that God in every truth has possessed the ground of his soul." (Ibid. p. 223). This is the supreme blessedness of life, the highest good that the soul can attain, this knowledge of God in the soul.

It is a knowledge that is to be gained by looking into our own lives, rather than to the things about us. Says Tauler: "You may ask, How can we come to perceive this direct leading of God? By a careful looking at home, and abiding within the gates of thy own soul. Therefore, let a man be at home in his own heart, and cease from his restless chase of and search after outward things." If a man is true to the inner voice, he finds God and is led by him. But these voices come only to the soul that is living at its best. "The pure in heart shall see God," is one of the central principles of all the mystics. As Tauler says: "If my soul is to perceive God, it must be heavenly." The soul never finds its union with God simply for the asking; it must fulfill certain conditions. It must resist all unholy desires; it must be possessed with a deep humility before God; it must be willing to forgive its enemies, and

from the heart be the friend of enemies, and above all it must know how to serve the neighbour with a willing spirit, in all things striving to become like the Lord Jesus Christ, walking in obedience to its Lord. This is the pathway along which the mystic declares that the soul must travel if it would know God.

Thus the mystic after the type of Tauler is no dreamer who wastes his days in passive contemplation, but rather is an intensely practical character. He is the one who strives to be holy within, crucifying all the lusts of the flesh and the sins of the spirit, bringing his life under the dominance of love, that he may at length be united with God whose very nature is that of love. He strives to be perfect as his Father in heaven is perfect, developing those moral qualities in his life which are like God, believing that he can know God only as he is like him.

We now turn from Tauler. A life sad beyond comparison, yet triumphant through faith in all its sufferings was that of Madame Guyon. Born the thirteenth of April, 1648, she was destined to a life of hardship and persecution. Forced to marry a man whom she had seen but three days before her marriage, forced to marry upon the principle of filial obedience rather than of love, married to a man with whom she could find no real chords of sympathy, her home made wretched by the cruel disposition of her mother-in-law, left a widow and an orphan while yet a young woman, persecuted wherever she went because of her religious views, insulted, imprisoned, suffering from the solitary confinement of the Bastille and finally banished from her friends and her city, hers was a life wounded and bruised, yet a life which found peace in the midst of its sufferings and joy in its possession of God.

Madame Guyon was a devoted member of the Roman Catholic Church and while she was declared to be a heretic and imprisoned because of her religious opinions, she never was anything but a pious Catholic. When twelve years of age, at the suggestion of her father, she was prepared to partake of the sacrament of the Eucharist. There seems to have been at this time a slight awakening of her religious life. She made con-

fession of her sins and expressed a degree of satisfaction in partaking of the sacramental elements. But her life had not been deeply touched and all of these impressions soon passed away. Rapidly she grew to a young woman, tall and beautiful, attractive both in her mental and physical qualities. Indulged by her mother, who was proud of her beautiful daughter, and fascinated by the influence of the world, she soon became a victim of pride, forgetting in a large degree the Christ.

The story of her religious life from this time until after her marriage and birth of her first child is one of vascillation. Periods come when she is intensely earnest in her search after God and then again she is lost in the fashionable life of the world, in the gayest of all cities, Paris. But God has His own way of dealing with choice souls, though sometimes he must lead them through the fire and the furnace, and in fitting this woman for her great work He was compelled to lead her along this thorny road. Unhappy in her marriage, her home wrecked through the cruelty of her mother-in-law, the loss of part of their property, the death of her mother and half sister, her own sickness and the birth of a child, were a few of the events which caused her to seek consolation not in the things of the world but in religion. Earnestly she sought this consolation but did not find it, until she met a Franciscan, whose name is unknown to us, and to him she stated her condition and her failure to find peace. After listening to her story he said: "Your efforts have ben unsuccessful, madame, because you have sought without, what you can only find within. Accustom yourself to seek God in your heart, and you will not fail to find Him." (*Life of Madame Guyon* by Upham, pp. 35-36).

These words were God's voice to her soul. At that hour the light dawned and peace was enthroned in her heart. She says: "I told this good man, that I did not know what he had done to me; that my heart was quite changed; that God was there; for from that moment He had given me an experience of His presence in my soul, not merely as an object intellectually perceived, but as a thing really possessed after the sweetest manner. I felt in my soul an unction, which healed



in a moment all my wounds. I slept not all that night, because thy love, O my God! flowed in me like delicious oil, and burned as a fire which was going to destroy all that was left of self in an instant. I was all of a sudden so altered, that I was hardly to be known either by myself or others. I found no more those troublesome faults or that reluctance to duty which formerly characterized me. They all disappeared, as being consumed like chaff in a great fire." (Ib. p. 37).

The change which had been wrought in her life was of the most marked character. She came apart from the social life in which she had been such a central figure, ceasing to attend theatres, dancing and parties of pleasure, not because she found these things wrong, but because she found them dull and insipid, so much so that she wondered how she could ever have enjoyed them. She quit the fashionable world and her dress and manner of living were made to conform to the simplicity and purity of her inner life. She entered with new zeal and from higher motives into her work as a mother, wife and daughter. Not only was she devoted to her family, but also gave her time and money to objects of Christian benevolence. The poor came to her in great numbers and out of her abundance she gave liberally to them. She often retired to solitary places for meditation and found the communion of the divine Love unutterably sweet to her soul. So great was the change that had come over her that her entire being was changed. She was a new creature as the fruits of her life clearly indicate. She was immersed in God and saw all things in God.

There remains, however, another and very important period in her religious development. The aim of all mystics is to reach a perfect possession of and likeness to God and in this attempt of the soul to reach its goal there are, as Inge has observed, at least three stages. "The first is called the purgative life, the second the illuminative, while the third, which is the goal rather than a part of the journey, is called the unitive life, or state of perfect contemplation." (Christian Mysticism, pp. 9-10). Madame Guyon had passed through the first two stages but reached the third only after a long and ter-

rible struggle. She calls this her term of "privation and desolation." These years of desolation, which extended from 1674 to 1680, were caused by the discovery that her life was not yet free from sin and selfishness. She found it difficult to resign herself to the providences of God which placed so many crosses upon her life. She discovered that at root her religion was selfish. It was the consolations of religion that she enjoyed rather than God himself. These were things which brought years of spiritual privation and often times made her think that God had deserted her entirely.

Finally, however, her soul was delivered from its pains and peace returned. Describing her experience she says: "On the 23rd of July, 1860, that happy day my soul was delivered from all its pains.—I was restored, as it were, to perfect life, and set wholly at liberty. I was no longer depressed, no longer borne down under the burden of sorrow. I had thought God lost, and lost forever; but I found Him again. And he returned to me with unspeakable magnificence and purity. In a wonderful manner, difficult to explain, all that which had been taken from me, was not only restored, but restored with increase and with new advantages. In thee, O my God, I found it all and more than all! The peace which I now possessed was all holy, heavenly, inexpressible. What I had possessed some years before, in the period of my spiritual enjoyment, was consolation, peace, the *gift* of God rather than the Giver; but now, I was brought into such harmony with the will of God, that I might now be said to possess not merely consolation, but the God of consolation; not merely peace, but the God of peace. This true peace of mind was worth all that I had undergone, although it was then only in its dawning." (Quoted from Upham's *Life of Madame Guyon*, pp. 125-126).

From this time until her death her faith was never shaken and her peace in God was never disturbed. Her contentment under all circumstances is so remarkable that it must challenge the attention of the greatest skeptic. When she is on the lake in a great storm and her companions are all in confusion, she is calm; when she is in an accident where death seems certain, she

has a peace which cannot be disturbed; when she is cast into prison she is perfectly resigned to the will of God. Giving herself with utter abandonment to God and trusting in His good will she had become one with God. As she describes it: "Self is now destroyed. The soul, recognizing God as its center, is filled with a love, which, as it placed God first, and everything else in the proper relation to Him, may be regarded as pure. It is not until we arrive at this state, in the entire destruction and loss of self, that we acknowledge, in the highest and truest sense, God's supreme existence; still less do we, or can we, have God as a life within us." (Life of Madame Guyon by Upham, p. 241). She had become nothing in herself that the fulness of God might dwell within her. Passing through the mere form and shell of religious ceremony she had reached the center of all and found the life. God had become her all, her very being.

As a result of this consciousness of her oneness with the Spirit of God the virtuous life became the natural one. At the beginning of her religious experience she had struggled to practice the great virtues. The greater part of mankind never reach beyond the point where the moral life is a struggle. After this great experience, however, she seemed to practice these virtues naturally, almost instinctively. "It was my life to do them," she says. "Charity, sincerity, humility, submission and every other virtue, seemed to be involved in my present state of mind, and to make a part of it." (Ib. p. 133). This doctrine of the moral life, so central in the belief of Madame Guyon, is easily understood when we know her conception of the truest union of the soul with God. It is not only with God. It is not only a union in thought and affection but a union of wills. It is a union of the human and the divine will. A union of the affection might be an exceedingly imperfect one but "when the will, which sustains a pre-eminent and controlling relation, is in the state of entire union with God, it necessarily brings the whole soul into subjection; it implies necessarily the extinction of any selfish action, and brings the mind into harmony with itself, and into harmony with every-

thing else. From that moment our powers cease to act from any private or selfish regards. They are annihilated to self, and act only in reference to God. Nor do they act in reference to God in their own way and from their own impulse; but move as they are moved upon, being gradually detached from every motion of their own." Thus a life of holiness becomes the natural life. God becomes the fountain from which the entire life is drawn and as the fountain is pure the life must be pure.

We may now sum up our impression of these mystics. First they make practical what is oftentimes only a theory. It has always been one of the fundamental principles of Christianity that the soul can abide in God and God can abide in the soul, but we must hasten to confess that oftentimes this principle is nothing more than an idea held by the intellect, not a vital experience of the life. The mystics make this fundamental truth one of experience. They find God a reality in the soul. They do not despise outward forms, nor do they neglect the study of the scholars, but to them the central source of our knowledge of God is in the human heart. A consciousness of something "far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting sun and the round ocean and the mind of man," is the poet's expression of the mystic's feeling. The forms of worship have value but only so far as they lead to a better understanding of this eternal Presence in the life. The creed has value but only as it has a deep spiritual experience as its foundation. Religious forms are necessary but only as a means of leading to a deep religious life.

Wherever the mystic is found he insists upon the reality of the union of his soul with God! Saint Teresa says that the soul may be so fully awake to the presence of God that "she is utterly dead to the things of the world and lives solely in God." Mr. Trine, one of our modern mystics, says: "I know an officer on our police force who has told me many times when off duty, and on his way home in the evening, there comes to him such a vivid and vital realization of his oneness with this Infinite Power, and this Spirit of Infinite Peace so takes hold

of and so fills him, that it seems as if his feet could hardly keep to the pavement, so buoyant and so exhilarated does the become by reason of this inflowing tide." (In Tune with the Infinite, p. 137). J. Trevor writes: "It was in the most real seasons that the Real Presence came and I was aware that I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God." Madame Guyon wrote to a young man who was about to enter the ministry: "It is very desirable, in the earlier part of your ministry especially, that you should spend a portion of your time, and that perhaps not a small portion, in communion with God in retirement. Let your own soul first be filled with God's Spirit; and then, and not otherwise, will you be in a situation to communicate of that divine fulness to others. No man can give what he has not; or if a man has grace, but has it in a small degree, he may, in dispensing to others, impart to them what is necessary for himself. Let him first make himself one with the great Fountain, and then he may always give, or be the instrument of giving, without being empty." (Life of Madame Guyon by Upham, p. 214).

Some may look upon these experiences as purely pathological conditions, signifying nothing which can be classed as reality. But such a superficial treatment of the great phenomena of mysticism fails to take into account the fact that some of the best and most beautiful lives of history have come from the mystics. Out of this union of the soul with God has come deliverance from sin and some of the finest fruits of righteousness. Tauler, speaking of the outward forms which men use to help them to lead a holy life such as fasting, prayer, penance, vigils, says: "Know, that shouldst thou let thyself be stabbed a thousand times a day, and come to life again; shouldst thou let thyself be strung to a wheel, and eat thorns and stones; with all of this thou couldst not overcome sin of thyself. But sink thyself into the deep, unfathomable mercy of God, with a humble submissive will, under God and all creatures, and know that then alone Christ would give it thee." Out of this sinking of himself into the "unfathomable mercy of God" Tauler gained his life of holiness and power.

One of the most beautiful confessions of the power of God in the human life which Christian literature contains is this one from the Autobiography of Saint Teresa: "Like imperfect sleep, which instead of giving more strength to the head, doth but leave it the more exhausted, the result of mere operations of the imagination is but to weaken the soul. Instead of nourishment and energy she reaps only lassitude and disgust: whereas a genuine heavenly vision yields to her a harvest of ineffable spiritual riches, and an admirable renewal of bodily strength. I alleged these reasons to those who so often accused my visions of being the work of the enemy of mankind and the sport of my imagination. I showed them the jewels which the divine hand had left with me: they were my actual dispositions. All those who knew me saw that I was changed; my confessor bore witness to the fact; this improvement, palpable in all respects, far from being hidden, was brilliantly evident to all men. As for myself, it was impossible to believe that if the demon were its author, he could have used, in order to lose me and lead me to hell, an expedient so contrary to his own interests as that of uprooting my vices, and filling me with masculine courage and other virtues instead, for I saw clearly that a single one of these visions was enough to enrich me with all that wealth."

Saint John of the Cross, a co-laborer with Saint Teresa in the reform of the monasteries, writing of the touch of God on the soul, tells us that "they enrich it marvelously. A single one of them may be sufficient to abolish at a stroke imperfections of which the soul during its whole life had vainly tried to rid itself, and to leave it adorned with virtues and loaded with supernatural gifts. A single one of these intoxicating consolations may reward it for all the labors undergone in its life, even were they numberless. Invested with an invincible courage, filled with an impassioned desire to suffer for its God, the soul then is seized with a strange torment—that of not being allowed to suffer enough."

Not only does the mystic bear the fruit of goodness and love but also he breathes with the spirit of supreme contentment.

His life is nearly always marked at the beginning by spiritual struggles but end with a peace that passeth understanding. However we may account for it, and it is not our purpose to account for these things but simply to observe them, these people found what they describe as a supreme blessedness, a joy unspeakable as it is full of glory. The price they had to pay was always great but the thing gained was what we most desire, a life of contentment and peace and joy.

When these mystics forgot their theology and spoke in the language of Christian experience there was the same variety of expression which we find in the Bible. Sometimes they called this inner transforming power the Spirit of God, sometimes the Spirit of Jesus and again the Holy Spirit. Sometimes they found words entirely different from these to describe their experiences. Tauler speaks sometimes of the Spirit of God in the soul and again of Jesus "entering in of a surety." Madame Guyon, speaking of the source of her knowledge and power in writing her commentaries, speaks with equal freedom of her union with the Lord and Christ. "The Lord was so present with me in this work, and kept me so under control, that I both began and left off writing just as He was pleased to order it; writing when He gave me inward light and strength, and stopping when He withheld them." And again he says: It was in the experience of this intimate union with Christ that my words whether written or spoken, had a wonderful effect." (Life of Madame Guyon by Upham, pp. 232-233). A President of one of our theological schools, writing in the language of experience, speaks of "the actual work of the ever-present, life-giving Spirit, the Living Christ," thus identifying the presence of the living Christ in human life with the presence of the Spirit. But no one can fail to understand what these mystics meant. A Power-not-themselves was in their lives, transforming them, filling them with joy and enabling them to live in holiness a Power-not-themselves which we must call the activity of God in the human life.

While apparently the inner witness of the Spirit is fundamental in the life of the mystic, a more careful study of the

mystics makes it clear that the subjective experience was aided by the objective revelation. Both Madame Guyon and John Tauler found the secret of a happy life in the indwelling of the Spirit. They were conscious of an immediate and personal communion with God. Looking in their souls they found God and their hearts burned within them because of this experience. But what was the experience? What did it mean? This question became clear only as the work of the Spirit was interpreted by the Word and by the Witness of the Spirit in the Church. Madame Guyon was a careful student of the Bible. She wrote a series of commentaries which have been published, those on the Old Testament in twelve small octavo volumes and those on the New Testament in eight. Her inner experience was a constant interpretation of the Bible while the latter was constantly illuminating her experiences. The published sermons of John Tauler are remarkable as an illustration of the Mind of the Spirit, revealed in the Word, interpreting the Spirit, working in his life. They are a series of sermons of great practical value to the religious life because the inner and outward works of the Spirit are constantly illuminating one another, showing with wonderful power the blessed redemptive work of God in a human life.

We can conceive of the Spirit of God filling the soul of a heathen who has never heard of the Gospel with blessed experiences and so quickening his entire life that henceforth he will live upon a higher moral level. But we cannot conceive of that man growing into the highest character without the aid of the Word which shall interpret the inner work of the Spirit. The record of the Mind of the Spirit revealed in Jesus and in men in whom the Spirit has worked, the Mind of the Spirit as recorded in the collective experience of the Church, are the only things which can reveal the meaning of the Spirit as it works in the human soul. Without these objective guides there can be no Christian experience. The subjective element divorced from the objective ends in an unchristian and philosophical mysticism.