

Christian Mysticism.

THE modern revival of interest in this field of religious life and thought, if it has failed to produce great mystics, has without doubt substantially advanced our knowledge and understanding of the subject in all its various aspects. Investigation has been particularly fruitful on the side of psychology, with valuable results for the deeper appreciation of the subjective aspect of religion generally. But despite so much excellent research, there is even now as little agreement as to the precise nature of Christian Mysticism as there was thirty-eight years ago, when Dr. Inge illustrated the prevalent diversity of opinion by drawing up a list of twenty-six different definitions.¹ His catalogue could then, as he admitted, have been considerably extended; to-day it would be longer still. It is evident that until this chaos of opinion is reduced to order it will be impossible to assess truly the place, function and significance of the mystical element in historical Christianity. The confusion is doubtless due in large measure to the fact that the term "Mysticism" in ordinary usage has to cover various groups of phenomena, extending from spiritual or first-hand religion to occultism and magic. German has the advantage of possessing two terms, *Mystik* and *Mysticismus*, but how they are to be distinguished depends upon individual judgement as to what is true or false in mystical experience. A scientific nomenclature, generally approved by scholars, is much to be desired; if one were established, our understanding of the subject would be immensely advanced.

Recent work in the wider field of the Philosophy of Religion appears to have offered the proper clue to the resolution of this central problem of Christian Mysticism. It is now customary to distinguish in the higher religions two main types, the mystical and the prophetic.² Hinduism and Neo-Platonism best illustrate the former type, Biblical religion the latter. In this connection, Mysticism is the scientific term for what has hitherto been described as Pure or Exclusive Mysticism. Heiler has given an excellent general characterization of the two types,³ but to Dr. Oman we owe the isolation of the essential differentia. This

¹ *Christian Mysticism*, 335ff.

² Heiler (*Prayer*, 135f) attributes the pioneer-work to Söderblom. Oman employs the same distinction, but prefers the term apocalyptic to prophetic; cf. *Natural and Supernatural*, 405ff.

³ *Op. cit.*, c. VI., "General Characteristics of Mysticism and Prophetic Religion."

he holds to lie in their contrasted ways of regarding the Natural. "A mystical religion is . . . one that seeks the eternal behind the illusion of the evanescent; . . . apocalyptic . . . any religion which looks for a revealing in the evanescent."⁴ "The essential marks of Mysticism are, first, its attitude towards the Natural, as in no form a manifestation of the Supernatural, but a mere confusing manifold, the illusory evanescent; and second, its attitude towards the empirical personality as the source of the unreal."⁵ In another connection, he seeks to show that Mysticism is fundamentally the attempt to escape from the disturbing sense of the manifold by regarding as alone real the unities of the world, the self and the feeling that embraces both, divested of their content. "From the disturbing content of the senses it seeks to escape by asceticism, and of thought by contemplation and ecstasy, until, beyond experience and beyond thought, there is nothing save oneness with the One."⁶

If this is the true account of the nature of Mysticism in its pure form, what light does it throw on the nature of Christian Mysticism, and how does it help us to its proper characterization? It is immediately clear that, theoretically at any rate, there can be no such thing as Christian Mysticism, for as Dr. Oman says, "in so far as there is use of a historical revelation and of a church, with its cult, fellowship and active service of others, the religion is not mystical."⁷ There have, in fact, been few, if any, who have been Christian mystics of the pure type. The great mystics of the Christian Church have been generally of the mixed type, whose religion has been a blend of mystical and prophetic religion. When we speak of Christian Mysticism, we have mostly the mixed type in mind. The term is really a misnomer, but it may stand if its precise sense is clearly understood.

What, then, is the real significance of the mystical element in Christianity? If the Christian religion is essentially non-mystical, it must be due either to a tendency native to human nature but alien to classic Christianity or to an intrusion from without taking root on Christian soil. Dr. Oman inclines to the latter view, and adduces evidence to show that Mysticism is a peculiar product of India, which found its way into Christianity through the Neo-Platonism of Augustine and the Pseudo-Dionysius.⁸ But though this should be the case, we have still to explain how an intruding element found itself at home in the Christian faith. It seems necessary to suppose that there is between Mysticism and Christianity an element common to both.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, 409.

⁶ *Ib.*, 144.

⁸ *Ib.*, 495f.

⁵ *Ib.*, 411.

⁷ *Ib.*, 420.

This appears to be the underlying principle of the late Baron von Hügel's rich and massive work, *The Mystical Element of Religion*. The general contention of the book is that the mystical is one of the three essential elements that go to make up religion. But by this he means the affective-volitional, as distinct from the historical and institutional on the one side, and the rational and critical on the other. He calls it Inclusive Mysticism, and so distinguishes it from Pure or Exclusive Mysticism. He regrets that English has only the single term "as covering both the right and wrong use of feeling in religion," which in German could be separately discriminated as *Mystik* and *Mysticismus* respectively.⁹ The effect of this analysis is to show that the common factor in Mysticism and Christianity is the experimental; in the one case, it is "the all of religion," in the other, but a part, though an integral part, of it. It is an abiding merit of von Hügel's work that he has made this point clear, though it is to be regretted that he perpetuated the use of "mystical" and "experimental" as interchangeable terms. There is really no opposition between the views of Dr. Oman and von Hügel. The latter simply shows how the intruding element of Mysticism was able to unite itself with the Christian religion and is liable to recur, in some form or other, in historical Christianity.

Although the identification of the "mystical" and the "experimental" has brought to light their common nature, it has also concealed their difference, and this explains much of the current confusion. It has led earnest apostles of experimental religion to become enthusiastic apologists for Mysticism on the one hand, and vigorous opponents of it on the other. Dr. Rufus Jones is a good example of the former. Valuable as his work is in other respects, especially on the historical side, it is vitiated throughout by the failure to maintain a clear distinction between Mysticism in the scientific sense and what he calls spiritual or first-hand religion. Hermann's religious classic, *Communion with God*, is an equally good example of the latter. It is a radical misunderstanding of his thesis to suppose that his attack upon Mysticism as alien to classic Christianity is a denial of experimental religion. His conception of communion with God through Christ, though unduly narrow in some respects, approximates closely, as has been well said, to Paul's doctrine of faith-union with Christ.¹⁰ This kind of confusion runs not only through serious works on Mysticism, but also through our common religious vocabulary, and it would be an immense gain if it could be dispelled. Would it not be a real advantage if we were

⁹ II, 291.

¹⁰ Garvie, art. "Ritschlianism," E.R.E., 10, 818. I have purposely avoided his term "faith-mysticism."

to use the term "experimental" for that aspect of religion which has affinities with Mysticism, though without its special, in particular, pathological, characteristics? The religion of those Christian mystics who in a real way approximate to Pure Mysticism could then be denominated "mystico-experimental." This would cover what in the narrower sense is described as Christian Mysticism, whilst the term experimental could be retained for what is not mystical at all, except that it springs from the same root.

To show fully the common ground occupied by experimental Christianity and Mysticism and the essentially non-mystical character of the former would require a substantial book. All that can be attempted here is to glance at some characteristic features of mystical doctrine and at one or two representatives of experimental Christianity, who are commonly designated mystics. As regards the former, we may take the classic Mystic Way; this does not cover all the ground, but covers sufficient for the present purpose. As regards the latter, we may take the Apostle Paul and the Fourth Evangelist. Both belong to the creative period of the Church, and both are outside Neo-Platonic influence, though not unaffected by Hellenism.

The Mystic way, though generally regarded as consisting of three stages—the *via purgativa*, the *via illuminativa* and the *via unitiva*—really comprises only two, for the last is strictly the goal and not part of the process. The conception of the aim of the spiritual life as union with God may be regarded as common to mystic and non-mystic alike, but they do not agree as regards the nature of the union. For the former, union means absorption, and requires the surrender of individuality. But for the non-mystic, union is thought of in terms of fellowship with the Father of spirits, in which individuality is regarded as being not denied but enhanced, and whose perfection is to be completely realized only as all souls are united in it. Christian fellowship may thus be said to be individual, but not individualistic. Further, mystic union is identified with ecstasy, which as being closely connected with trance is really pathological. But though fellowship is accompanied by an exalted and ineffable emotional quality of joy, it is not an abnormal experience, and may be usefully distinguished as bliss, as Söderblom has suggested.¹¹ The two stages of the way to union which the mystic distinguishes—they are not necessarily successive—have also, like the goal, a place in the typical Christian experience. The *via purgativa* is broadly moral discipline, comprising not only interior purification of the soul but also the training involved in the due fulfilment of social and civic duties. But

¹¹ *The Living God*, 60ff.

whilst the mystic thinks of discipline merely as the necessary means to the attainment of union, normal Christianity conceives of the moral life as good in and for itself. Goodness is an intrinsic part of holiness, and the Christian ideal of worship requires, both for life here and hereafter, the inclusion of active service as well as of adoration and fellowship. The Beatific Vision must be served with both adoring love and loving service. By the *via illuminativa* is meant the spiritual preparation for union by the concentration of the soul's faculties on what has been happily summed up in the classic phrase "the practice of the presence of God."¹² There is nothing to challenge here as far as general principle goes; indeed no Christian may deny the demand so long as he cherishes the great saying of the Master, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." Unfortunately, it is always the tendency of the mystic to deny rather than to enhance and chasten, the faculties of the soul. Instead of bending them till in their variety they manifest a single purpose, he achieves concentration by a process of elimination that issues in the bare feeling of unity. It is obvious that this is very far from loving God "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."

We see here with sufficient plainness the limits of the affinities between Mysticism and Christianity. Though it is easy to see how the earnest Christian, seriously bent on the quest of vital religion, finds much in mystical doctrine with which he has natural sympathy and much in mystical practice that is stimulating, it is no less easy to see the line of real cleavage between his way of spiritual pilgrimage and that of the thorough-going mystic. Christianity, far from being a mystical religion, can only be classed satisfactorily with religions of the "prophetic" or "apocalyptic" type. And this is only made the clearer when we turn to its outstanding representatives. In whatever respects they may appear to show so-called "mystical" tendencies, they are really exponents, not of Mysticism, but of experimental Christianity.

No example could be more illuminating and instructive than that of the Apostle Paul. On the one hand, his importance as the chief creative force in giving historic Christianity its form and shape is so great that it has been possible to claim him as the real founder of the religion. On the other hand, it has been categorically affirmed that "he is the supreme example of the Christian mystic . . . second only to that of Jesus Himself."¹³ He is, then, the test case, for it may be said that, in so far as he was a mystic, to that extent Christianity is

¹² Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 53.

¹³ Underhill, *op. cit.*, 159.

itself mystical. But it should be pointed out at the outset that few would concur in Miss Underhill's judgement. Her interesting and instructive attempt to fit the Apostle's religious experience into the framework of the mystical diagram of the Mystic Way is really nothing short of a *tour de force*. Yet there would be a wide consensus of opinion in favour of the soberer verdict of Schweitzer, who claims that though Paul was not wholly a mystic "Pauline personal religion is in its fundamental character mystical."¹⁴ The problem cannot be fully investigated here, and we must content ourselves with the consideration of two or three salient points.

An inevitable preliminary question, and one which still occupies students of Paulinism, is whether Hellenic influence played any real part in the shaping of Paul's life and thought. Since the Hebrew genius is essentially non-mystical, as the Old Testament clearly shows, we should not expect a mystical trend in the Apostle unless it came from outside or was integral to Christianity itself. The crux of the problem is the possibility of decisive influence from the Hellenistic Mystery-religions. Without going into detail, it may be sufficient to re-affirm the judgement of sober scholarship, that a case has not been made out for more than influence of, at best, a quite secondary degree.¹⁵ Schweitzer has been concerned to find Mysticism the key to the Apostle's thought, but recognizing that God-mysticism is alien to Hebrew thought he conceives it as exclusively Christ-mysticism.¹⁶ It is this Christ-mysticism which really constitutes the so-called mystical element in the Pauline doctrine. Schweitzer denies its specifically Hellenic character, and we may accept his judgement, without, however, accepting his special thesis as to its relation to Late-Jewish Eschatology, which has not found general favour.

The result of faith Paul sets forth as union with Christ which he variously represents as Christ being in the believer,¹⁷ and the believer in Christ.¹⁸ This union, commonly referred to as "mystical," is closely connected with the doctrine of the recapitulation of the death and resurrection of Christ in the experience of the believer. This doctrine has two aspects. It

¹⁴ *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 25.

¹⁵ Cf. Anderson Scott, *Christianity according to St. Paul*, 122ff, for a sound and balanced estimate. For a critical account of the controversy on this question, see Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters*, 179ff, also *op. cit.*, 26ff.

¹⁶ *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, c. I. It should be noted that he secures his result only by a forced exegesis.

¹⁷ Cf. Rom. viii. 10; Gal. ii. 20; Col. i. 27.

¹⁸ Cf. Phil. iii. 9; 2 Cor. ii. 17; Rom. xvi. 17.

expresses the thought that the believer so participates in the results of Christ's work that he does actually through faith die to sin and rise to newness of life. But it also sets forth that spiritual law of life through death, which being central in the experience of the historic Jesus must also become central in that of every Christian. Dr. Inge has thus tersely expressed this double aspect: "The victory over sin and death was won *for* us; but it must also be won *in* us."¹⁹ But being in Christ must not be construed merely as an individual experience. There are many passages in which the phrase "in Christ" quite clearly refers to incorporation into the divine community of which Christ is the Head; the Church as the Body of Christ Paul is able to think of naturally as Christ.²⁰ This union with the Fellowship has also been represented as "mystical."

Before we consider the applicability of the term "mystical" to these doctrines, we may well glance at the Apostle's own religious experience. His dramatic entry upon the Christian life by his vision of the heavenly Christ on the Damascus road has been termed a "mystical" experience. However we explain his conversion, there is no doubt that it introduces us to the fact that he was personally familiar with such abnormal phenomena as visions and revelations and even ecstasy. But these are not specially "mystical" phenomena, except as they are specially induced by ascetic practices. They occur in prophetic religion, where they are not regarded as being specially important in themselves apart from their ethical value and results. There is no evidence that Paul took pains to invoke them, and he certainly attached no great importance to them, save his conversion experience, which he regarded as the foundation of his Christian life and apostolic commission. It may be admitted that his intensely emotional temperament suggests the type of psycho-physical constitution that we are wont to find in mystics generally. But is there more than evidence for the fact that he strongly emphasized the experimental side of religion? There is no reason to suppose that he ever thought of his own personal union with Christ as absorption. The great text, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me," might be construed as suggesting complete identification, but taken in conjunction with his experience as a whole it is more likely to indicate an ethical bond, the closeness of which leads him to describe it in hyperbolic language. A survey of the whole range of his life and experience leaves the impression on the mind of one who is best classified as an outstanding example of the prophetic type of religion. His firm stress on the historical, his emphasis on

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, 64.

²⁰ Cf. Anderson Scott, *op. cit.*, 151ff.

the coming of God's final revelation in time through the Man Christ Jesus, his valuation of the Natural as the scene of God's appearing and the medium through which the divine purpose is manifested, the pronounced ethical note which makes love alone the supreme and ever-abiding spiritual gift, his own life of active service—all this and much else of the same kind points to one who belongs without question to the prophetic line. Possibly in other times and circumstances, Paul might have been the pure mystic. But conjecture is difficult, for if in some respects he seems to reveal the temperament of the mystic he manifests in others those virile qualities that do not readily accord with it. The truth is that he was a many-sided personality, and it may well be that his racial inheritance and Hebrew training would never have allowed him to become the pure mystic. At any rate, as he stands before us, he can in no sense be described as the supreme Christian mystic. What he really is can better be described as the supreme exponent of experimental Christianity.

If this interpretation of his personal experience be correct, there is no reason to suppose that his doctrine is strictly mystical. Religion for him was indeed communion with God through union with Christ, but it is fellowship and not absorption. The question whether his "mysticism" was exclusively Christ-mysticism is of no real importance, for God was in Christ, and Christ Himself as divine was the Mediator of the life of reconciliation and communion. If the way down from God was through Christ, so also was the way up to God. To find Christ and to enter into personal relations with Him was to enter the sphere of the Divine. Personal communion is of the essence of religion, and with Paul it is essentially prophetic and not mystical.

The Fourth Gospel has been called "the charter of Christian Mysticism," although the writer who coined that memorable phrase admits that "the distinctive features of Mysticism are more marked" in Paul.²¹ If this is true, the reason may lie partly in the fact that the author of the Fourth Gospel nowhere gives us the clue to his personal experience. It has been inferred, indeed, that he was an ecstatic mystic, whose writing "is the fruit of his own vision and meditation, his own first-hand experience of the divine, which he pours into the evangelical mould."²² This view, which holds that the Gospel "is in no sense a historical, but a poetic and devotional book,"²³ no longer finds general favour, in spite of the recent support given to it by Canon Streeter,²⁴ on the ground that it fails to do sufficient

²¹ Inge, *op. cit.*, 44, 59.

²² Underhill, *op. cit.*, 225.

²³ *Ib.*, 217.

²⁴ *The Four Gospels*, 390ff.

justice to the objectively historical element in the narrative. We are obliged, therefore, to take the doctrine as it stands. The "mystical" element in it has been variously estimated, reflecting, as we should expect, diverse views of what constitutes Mysticism. The different views cannot be canvassed here,²⁵ but we shall be on safe ground if we confine ourselves to the doctrine of union with Christ. Deissmann has lent his great authority to the view that the true significance of the Fourth Evangelist lies in the fact that he is to be regarded as the great exponent of what he calls the Pauline "fellowship-mysticism."²⁶ Schweitzer allows that the Johannine Mysticism is not exclusively Christ-mysticism, since "the Logos-Christ prays to God for those who are 'in us' (Jn. 17.21), that is to say, in Him and the Father."²⁷ Whatever may be the relation between Paul and the Fourth Evangelist, there is no doubt that their doctrines on this point are closely similar. The idea of the indwelling of Christ in the believer and the believer in Christ recurs again and again in the Gospel, under various images, but notably in the allegory of the Vine and the branches and in the High Priestly Prayer. But there is no indication that this union is, to use Deissmann's terminology, absorption-mysticism. It is not conceived individualistically, for it is not only individual union with Christ, but is also union with the Fellowship of which Christ is the central stem. Nor is it a union in which the believer loses his personal identity. If we may not press the idea that the branches are not the Vine though dependent on it, we may appeal to the metaphor of friendship—"I have called you friends"—where the relationship is reciprocal. Here again we have no instance of pure mysticism, but a classical presentation of experimental religion.

If this brief account of the "mysticism" of Paul and the Fourth Evangelist is on the right lines, we have impressive confirmation of the view that Christianity in its classic expression is not strictly mystical. It would conduce to clearness if this could be frankly recognised. It is only confusing to describe as mystical what is more strictly simply experimental. Mysticism is alien to classical Christianity, but there is an affinity between the two that allows the former to flourish on the soil of the latter. Whether the intrusion of this type of religion has been on the whole good or bad for Christianity is an interesting question which cannot be gone into here, but it may be remarked that if it has sometimes diverted experimental religion out of its true channel it has nevertheless often helped to recall

²⁵ These are well summarised by Howard, *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation*, 197ff.

²⁶ Cf. Howard, *op. cit.*, 201f.

²⁷ *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 350.

Christianity to its true character when it has been apt to become dry and legalistic and formal. The so-called Christian mystics teach us much that is of vital importance, for they have often been true masters of the spiritual life. Yet it is not untrue to say that the more mystical they have been the less help they are in showing us the way to Christian holiness and sanctity. A careful study of the interaction of Mysticism on historic Christianity, in the sense of the present article, would be of great value in estimating the true worth of Christian Mysticism.

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Dr. G. A. Cooke, who retired last year from the Regius Professorship of Hebrew in Oxford, at the same time completed the task of half a working life-time, viz. his long awaited commentary on Ezekiel (T. and T. Clark, *International Critical Commentary*, 20/-). It is a book of which a scholar may be proud and for which a diligent student of the book will be grateful. Those who are prepared for the serious study of a difficult but important prophet can safely invest in it, with the confidence that it is not likely to be superseded during the next generation. There is, of course, a good deal in it for the Hebraist only, but even those who cannot follow the linguistic reasons for a particular interpretation will find a well-considered and weighty judgment on all points of obscurity, of which there are many in this prophet. A year's work at this book, at the rate of a chapter a week, might give a minister both many practical and living topics on which to preach and a new standard of what Biblical interpretation ought to be. But this is not the book for the man who wants short and easy cuts to knowledge; it is essentially a student's book, and that of first-class quality.

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