

THE RADIANT LIFE

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etc.

"Arise shine; for thy light is come, and the
glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. Thou
shalt see and be radiant and thy heart shall
thrill and be enlarged" Isaiah LX: 1-5

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CHAPTER VIII

TYPES OF MYSTICISM

I have very little sympathy with the frequent attempts to reduce, or regiment, mysticism to a single rigid "mystic way." One might equally well undertake to squeeze the creative poetry of the centuries down to one single type, and claim that poetry is not real poetry unless it is written in Homeric hexameters. The soul's direct approach to God, which is the heart of mysticism, is as bound to be marked by surprises, variations and novel aspects as is human love-making, which has an amazing gamut of ways of arriving at the heart's goal. When Christ restored sight to the blind He followed a different method in each case. Once He anointed a blind man's eyes and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam and he *saw*. But sometimes He merely said: "Receive thy sight," or "Thy faith hath made thee whole," or He touched the blind eyes and the man saw. In every case the person who was healed felt that the way it happened to him was a good way. The important fact to take note of was that formerly "I was blind and now I see," and any way that accomplished that event was a good way.

I shall begin, therefore, with a very broad and inclusive definition and then I shall differentiate a variety of more specific types under the one general rubric. **Mysticism, in its broadest meaning, is a type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of the soul's relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence.** It feels like an invasion, like a thrust from

beyond the mind of the individual—something breaks in on the mind; one is *met* in the way, and it feels like the Life of God breaking in on the soul. The experience clarifies life, gives it direction, marching power, emotional intensity. One person tells us, "Out of all the gray days of my life at last I know what life means." And another tells us, "I have had *an eternal moment*, when the reality at the heart of life flooded through me like a tide of music bringing unutterable peace and joy." The recipients in all instances are stung awake and sent beyond themselves. Dante, who distinctly belongs in the list of the great mystics, said very wisely that "the experience of passing beyond the limit of humanity can never be told in words." That difficulty which confronted Dante, who often compelled words to express what they had never expressed before, confronts everybody who endeavors to interpret mysticism. Frederic Myers was confronted with this same difficulty when, in his Prize Poem, he has St. Paul say:

Oh could I tell, ye surely would believe it!
 Oh could I only say what I have seen!
 How should I tell or how can you receive it,
 How, till He bringeth you where I have been?

The most an interpreter of these higher levels of life can do is to throw light, indicate the upward steps, suggest the line of direction, give glimpses of the creative effect upon the life of the recipient and insist that there are varying degrees of mystical experience, and emphasize the point that almost everybody has had moments when life was flooded with joy and wonder, and has been carried beyond all power to express what is happening within—a moment that might very well be called "an eternal moment."

One of the most important points to keep clear, while we

are still at the stage of talking about words, is the distinction between what is properly called *Mysticism*, and what should be designated *mystical experience*. The word, *Mysticism*, should be used as the German word "Mystik" is used, for the historic doctrine of the relationship and potential union of the human soul with ultimate Reality, that is, with God. And the actual first-hand experience of invasion, of inward thrust or personal uplift, of the sense of divine Presence, breaking in from beyond the margins of the self, should be called "mystical experience." *Mysticism* would then be thought of as a doctrine, sometimes theological and then again metaphysical; while *mystical experience* would be used for the emergence of a type of consciousness, or super-consciousness, which would belong in the sphere of psychology, or rather in that higher brand of knowledge, not yet perfected, which deals adequately with the *spirit in man*.

A wholly different word, not derived from the same Greek root, *myst*, ought to be created by some scientific expert who is in the habit of creating words to match his discoveries, to cover what the Germans include under the word, *Mystizismus*. In this field or sphere would belong esoteric, or occult, phenomena, theosophical knowledge, gnosis, hidden lore, possessions, "Schwärmerei," which means buzzing in the head, psychic phenomena, borderland occurrences, "spurious knowledge"—the claptrap and mental rubbish to which scientists often refer and which they condemn under the use of my beloved word, *Mysticism*.

Mystical experience is as old as humanity. It has an equal date with smiling and weeping. It is not confined to any one racial stock, and it is almost certainly one of the most important of the original grounds of personal religion. It

may very well be a dawning power in the human race, with great possibility of expansion with the progress of man's soul. It may be that Tennyson's hope of the coming of "a crowning race" is not wholly vain,

No longer half akin to brute,
For all we thought and loved and did
And hoped and suffer'd is but seed
Of what in them is flower and fruit.

Then perhaps it will be "natural" to live in the glory of immediate fellowship with God.

Mystical experience is a type of consciousness which is not sharply focussed or clearly differentiated into a subject-object state. The "subject" and the "object" are fused into an undivided one. This situation occurs sometimes in high moments of enjoying beauty, as Wordsworth's poetry attests, and it is present, too, in the high-tide experience of love, as Shakespeare knew when he wrote the lines:

So they loved as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts; division none,
Number there in love was slain.

Whatever is seen, heard or felt in these high mystical moments is flooded with an inrush from the abysses of the inner life, or from beyond its margins. Deep-lying powers, not ordinarily put into play, seem suddenly to be liberated. The usual insulations, which sunder our inner life into something like compartments, seem to be shot through. We find our whole being in an integral and undivided experience. Not only so, transcendent energies from beyond our usual margins appear to *invade* the individual self. A large environing Life, an enfolding Presence makes itself felt—"a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused"

than ordinary experience reports. This "sense sublime" is of course not limited to the sphere of distinctively religious experience. The sudden insight into the meaning of a truth long sought and now at length found, high absorption in the enjoyment of music, moral exaltation of life in the pursuit of duty, serene companionship with beauty or sublimity of nature, and, as we have already seen, the awakening of love, may bring a type of experience which immensely transcends what we usually mean by "knowledge"—a subject knowing an object.

Religious mystical experience is an intense and striking dynamic variety of this fused and undifferentiated consciousness. The individual soul in these high moments feels invaded, infused, vitalized with new energies, merged with an enfolding Presence, liberated and exalted with the conviction of having found what it has always sought, and feels itself flooded with joy. "I have found," Isaac Penington declared in a rapture, "what I have sought since my childhood. I have found my God." There are many degrees and levels of this experience. It may come as a gentle, quiet, inner assurance, or it may occur with powerful emotional results. With persons of peculiar psychical disposition the mystical experience may be attended with unusual phenomena, such as automatic voices, photisms, visions, profound body changes, swoons, ecstasies. These physical phenomena are, however, only the more intense and excessive resonances and reverberations which in milder degrees accompany all psychical processes. They mark no rank of sainthood and indicate no miracle-working power. The great mystics of history have usually discounted the spiritual values of these reverberations. St. Paul ranks "speaking with tongues" far below the exhibition of *agapé*, the love that suffers long and is kind.

Mystical experience, especially in the loftiest spiritual geniuses of the race, may very well be the emergence of a new-type level of life, a higher manner of correspondence with ultimate sources of Reality, a mutation, an *élan vital* of the soul, a surge of the entire self toward ineffable fullness of life. It may be in the higher sphere of the inner life an instance of what biologists call a *tropism*, i. e., an inherent tendency of a living thing to turn toward the sources of its essential nutriment. There can, I think, be no question of the functional value of mystical experience. The experience as an inner life event, is unmistakably one of the great tap-roots of personal religion, bringing, as it does, to the recipient undemonstrable, but at the same time irrefragable, certainty of the Sources of higher Reality in contact with the personal self, and revealing a superaddition of life-functions and new interior depth-levels.

Mystical experience almost certainly has a noetic, that is to say knowledge-bringing value, although I am inclined to discount "oracular communications." I do not look for mysterious "information," or ideas with novelty of content, through the secret door of mystical openings. "Ideas," "communications," "openings of information," always reveal an historical background, and show the marks of the gestation of group-experience. They do not drop ready-made into the world from some other region. This is strikingly true of the "openings" of George Fox and his fore-runner, Jacob Boehme. The important point to emphasize is the leap of insight through heightened life, the intensification of vision through the fusing of all the deep-lying powers of intellect, emotions and will, and a corresponding surge of conviction through the dynamic integration of personality.

It seems pretty clear that the saints, the prophets, the

founders of religions, in the main the spiritual leaders of the race, have been recipients of this "heightening of life," this "intensification of vision," and that through this mutual and reciprocal correspondence with the world of unseen and eternal realities, they have shaped the line of march, and have discovered the springs and resources of spiritual progress on toward the City of God. It is difficult to envisage what our world would be like if this line of mystical revealers and healers and helpers were eliminated from the story of the human race.

This mystical experience, in its essential aspects as *experience*, is pretty much the same through the centuries and in all lands. It varies greatly in degree of intensity, from a mild heightening of life-level to the rapture and ecstasy of union with God—"lost in God, in Godhead found." What accounts for the historical *types* is, therefore, not the nature of the experience as such, but the prevailing theological or metaphysical conceptions of the time and place, which color the *expectation* of the given mystic, and form the background setting through which he interprets his illumination:

For every fiery prophet in old times
And all the sacred madness of the bard,
When God made music through him,
Could but make his music by the framework and the chord.
Or, to say the same thing in Shelley's words:

Life, like a many-colored dome,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity.

We remain human, place- and time-bound beings, no matter how exalted the invasion from Beyond may be, and what we expect, what we think, about ultimate truth and reality, is bound to form the tinge of color or, to put it in

Tennyson's figure, "the framework and the chord" which give shape and form to the experience, especially when it is reported, told, and interpreted. **Mysticism, therefore, as a doctrine of contact with or union with God, is bound to be, through the centuries, marked by varying types.**

Plotinus (205–270 A. D.), profoundly influenced by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and especially by the third-century conception of Divine Reality as an Absolute Unity beyond all finiteness and change, held, as he was consistently bound to hold, that God cannot be found or even thought of in terms of finite things, or transitory happenings, or in any states of mind however exalted. God, according to this conception, is utterly beyond the *here* and the *now*. He is forever above all that can be seen or felt or known or named. There is, however, something in the human mind which is forever unsundered from Absolute Reality—a point of junction which remains "unlost," and so there can be a return to the Fatherland from which we have come. But, on this formulation, it is bound to be a way of negation, a *via negativa*. The God of this formulation is above and beyond all that is concrete and finite. He is not "this"; He is not "this"; He is not "this." The person who would reach the goal of bliss in union with the Absolute God must therefore rise above all states and processes of mind, above emotions and thoughts, above aspirations and deeds, and find in wordless communion, in a super-consciousness, transcending images or ideas or mental states of any kind, a junction of the unlost Soul-Center with Absolute Reality—"a flight of the alone to the Alone." That formulation quite obviously makes Mysticism take the way of *ecstasy*.

In his famous account of the great experience of himself and his mother at Ostia, St. Augustine says: "We came to our own minds and *we passed beyond them.*" "By the utmost

leap," they reached *that which Is*, which never comes to be, for *it eternally Is*. Plotinus and after him St. Augustine, profoundly under his influence, more or less fixed the type of expectation through which mystical experience through the Middle Ages took its form and color. The unique theologian who in the early sixth century wrote under the name of "Dionysius" pushed the doctrine of the negative way and the goal of mystical ecstasy to its extreme limit. He became an unescapable influence all the way down to the Reformation. The mystics of the fourteenth century, the major ones—Eckhart, Tauler, the Author of *Theologia Germanica*, and Ruysbroeck—were men of genius and they struck out many fresh lines of mystical interpretation. They found unique expressions for the unsundered junction of the soul with God, such as "Apex of the Mind," "the Ground of the Soul," "Divine Spark," "Synteresis," "Uncreated Center," "Inward Light," but the general direction of their interpretation was the way of negation and the climax of ecstasy—the leap beyond the mind.

It is one of the tragedies of history that the discovery of a Concrete Infinite was so long delayed and that so many of the mightiest intellectual guides and spiritual geniuses of our race had to formulate their thought with an abstract Infinite at the center of their thinking—an Infinite entirely beyond, above, and sundered from all finites, an Absolute Other.

This situation is peculiarly acute in the philosophy of the Upanishads, the Vedanta, and the theistic conceptions of Sankara, and as a consequence the great systems of mysticism of India take the way of negation—"Neti," "Neti," "He is not this"—and culminate in a state of unknowing, if not in Nirvana, with this world and finite experience *maya*, illusion. The mystical experience of all these great

personalities, both East and West, was always vastly more significant and dynamic than the intellectual formulations would indicate, but there was always the tragedy of an intellectual defeat, even at the highest point of mystical attainment. The Greek Parmenides, a gigantic figure born c. 514 B. C., who is one of the "fathers" of Plato's thought, poured this false Infinite into the great stream of Western metaphysics, and it is a nice question whether in the case of Parmenides, or some time later, there was a contact, which we cannot now trace, with Indian thought.

Next in importance to the flowering of Mysticism in the fourteenth century was the burst of mystical life which came with the Counter-Reformation in Spain and France. Some authorities would, no doubt, put the latter movement first in importance. In any case a vast infusion of life and spiritual power poured into the world with vitalizing quality through the experiences, the contagion, and the writings of the dominant personalities of this creative period. "Stout Cortes" was not stouter of heart or bolder of spirit than were these contemporaries of his who explored the uncharted and unfathomable seas within themselves and tracked their way across still stranger jungles and stretches of desert in the human heart to the shoreless Mother Sea whose tides seemed to surge into their channels.

The great names of this mystical succession are those of St. Teresa, the greatest mystic of the group, and St. John of the Cross, in Spain, her extraordinary disciple; St. François de Sales, St. Jeanne Françoise de Chantal, and St. Vincent de Paul, in France. These Counter-Reformation mystics were followed by a unique outburst of Quietist mysticism, led by Miguel de Molinos in Italy, though born in Spain, and by Madame Jeanne Marie Guyon and François Fénelon in France. This later stage, under the name of

Quietism, was severely treated by the Church, but Quietism was implicit in the entire movement, even before it became explicit in the seventeenth century.

Quietism by no means signifies lethargy and inaction. It is not a religion of lotus-eaters. The Quietist took a course of life and action that would make most active Christians quail with fear and slink to cover. It is not a question of action or non-action; it is a question of *the right way to initiate an action that is to have spiritual significance.*

The entire movement, beginning in the period of the Counter-Reformation, took the darkest possible view of human nature. It held an utter miserabilism of man as "a creature." Nothing divine, nothing that has spiritual value, can originate in man, the total ruin. Our new inter-war theologians, who hold that God is absolute Other, and man a very sin-sick and fallen creature, still have something to learn of the utter worthlessness of man, and the complete dualism of the below and the Above, from these Counter-Reformation mystics. The only preparation, according to them, for God to move and act through man is the suppression and repose of all one's own powers, the absence of all strain and striving, the annihilation of all confidence in one's own capacities, the complete quiet of the "creature." Then out of this silence of all flesh, this inward calm, this pure repose, divine movings will come, grace will be granted and "spiritual fecundity" will be produced.

There can be no question, I think, of the greatness of the significance of this spiritual Odyssey. The impact of it was momentous and the books it produced are among our best spiritual treasures. But there is no doubt in my mind that this interpretation of human nature is a mistaken one, and this dualism of the self and the Divine Other is excessively

stated and so *out of focus as to be untrue* to the actual facts of life.

I can deal with only one more type of Mysticism in this essay, and I shall call it, after a phrase of Clement of Alexandria, the “mutual and reciprocal correspondence” type. It is best illustrated by St. John’s figure of the Vine and the branches—the vital organic relationship of God and the soul and the interflow of life between the Above and the below. St. John’s Gospel with its central Mysticism of Light and Love and Truth and inward Knowing, and the Spirit as the Guide and Comforter, has been, through the centuries, the major literary source of this *vital Mysticism*. It is vividly interpreted in St. Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill, “In God we live and move and have our real life,” and it breaks forth in most of his Epistles: “Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord we are transformed into the same image from one stage of likeness to another by the Spirit of the Lord.”¹ The transfiguration of Christ on a mountain apart, when the divine radiance, the Fatherhood and Heart of God, broke through the veil of flesh, is a supreme instance of this mutual and reciprocal correspondence. We already have here an approach to a Concrete Infinite. It is present in St. Augustine: “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” It is frequently found in St. Bernard: “I have many times been conscious of God’s presence in me.” It is characteristic of St. Francis of Assisi whose mysticism was an unbroken intimate love-affair. *It breaks in as a vital experience, in spite of formulations, in the case of Eckhart and St. Teresa, and in all the members of their schools.*

Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) is a unique interpreter and

¹ II Cor. III:18.

transmitter of this vital mysticism. There are many strands of thought and inheritance in Boehme, some of them difficult to fathom, but “the way of salvation” of which he is the “father” is a very significant *process of life*, through which the Life of God operates effectively in the life of man. “The center of man’s soul came out of eternity, as a mother brings forth a child out of her own substance and nourishes it therewith, so doth God with man, His child.” “The Son of God, the eternal Word of the Father, must become man and *be born in you*.” “Christ is the Eternal Life-Tree of the universe, in whom all the new-born souls of men shall live as springing, flowering branches or twigs. In Christ we are all only *one*, as a Tree in many boughs and branches.” The entire business of life is to “return to the soul’s eternal native country and abiding Home.”

Boehme’s influence on later mystical life and thought in England and America has been very great. His writings were translated into English between the years 1647 and 1661. His greatest influence is seen in the later writings of William Law (1686–1761), one of the most impressive of all English mystics. “Man,” he wrote, “has a Seed of the Divine Life given unto the birth of his soul, a Seed that has all the riches of Eternity in it and is always wanting to come to birth in him and be alive in God.” “There is but one salvation for all mankind and that is *the Life of God in the soul*.”

We have not yet succeeded in proving the *direct* influence of Jacob Boehme on George Fox (1624–1691) and the mystical aspect of the Quaker movement, but there is an unmistakable similarity between the man who died in 1624 and the man who was born in 1624. They both lived and thought and worked in terms of this vital Mysticism. George Fox reveals again and again the thrilling experience of the

breaking in of the Life of God which enabled him to "walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every person," even when his way led to prisons and dungeons. "Be staid," he wrote to one of his Friends, "in that principle of God in thee, that it may raise thy mind up to God"—"Thou wilt find Him *a God at hand*."

This vital life of mysticism is very much in evidence in the loftiest poetry of England and America. It is a powerful feature of the poetry of Vaughan, of Traherne, of Quarles:

I was flax and He was flame of fire;
Our firm united souls did more than twine;
So I my best beloved's am; so He is mine.

It rises very high in William Blake when he succeeds in uttering his authentic word. It is a constant note in Christina Rossetti, in Alice Meynell, and in Coventry Patmore. G. K. Chesterton said once: "There is in the last second of time, or hairbreadth of space, before the iron leaps to the magnet, an abyss full of all the unfathomable forces of the universe." It is a very suggestive illustration of that eternal moment when the leap of emergence occurs and the soul finds God, when the Above and the below meet. Wordsworth has powerfully described it in "Tintern Abbey"; Tennyson in "Higher Pantheism"; Browning in "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day"; Francis Thompson in "In No Strange Land"; Emerson in "The Over-Soul"; Walt Whitman in "Passage to India"; Lowell in "The Cathedral"; and Whittier in "Eternal Goodness."

What is hardly less important, unnamed and unnumbered hosts of persons on farms, in shops, in studies, in colleges, in the army, in the kitchen, in church, on the highway, have had this vital experience, have found their way to the Fatherland where they belong. I have had many

personal letters from persons who have had this experience, and there are many more reported in James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and in James B. Pratt's *Religious Consciousness*.

It may be, as Chesterton once said, that "the truth at the heart of things is too terribly simple and naked for the sons of flesh"—too simple and naked for the mind to "think out" and "explain." It was J. E. McTaggart who defined Mysticism as "contact with Reality—without the help of discursive reason." But when the inner self is fused and heightened it may come into mutual and reciprocal correspondence with God. It may find itself in parallelism with the currents of the Spirit. It may see with new eyes and know with the certitude of experience, and arrive at the goal. It was child-minded George Macdonald who wrote:

Leave me not, God, until—nay, until when?
Not till I am with Thee one heart, one mind;
Not till Thy life is light in me, and then
Leaving is left behind.