

Mysticism and Spirituality

Mysticism and spirituality are similar but not identical terms. Mysticism refers to the experience of God, whereas spirituality is the whole process of growth from inauthenticity into full relationship with God and the possession of one's truth as *imago Dei*. Spirituality is the more inclusive term. This article addresses the relationship between the two topics from a Christian perspective.

The adjective mystical in patristic usage described the mysterious, objective content of word and sacrament, such as the deep meaning of Scripture as the Word of God or the real presence in the Eucharist. Thus "the mystical body of Christ" referred to Eucharist rather than the church. Pseudo-Dionysius added the element of experience, and over the centuries, especially in modern times, the personal, subjective emphasis has become the primary meaning.

Mysticism is sometimes a sweeping category for a variety of esoteric religious experiences. At other times it is restricted to higher forms of the experience of God found in the saints. In this article we follow Karl Rahner and define mystical experience as the same one experience of the Holy Spirit, given and received in faith and love, and present as the transcendent reality within all morally good human activity. This graced orientation to God is the unthematic, ordinarily anonymous experience of the self-communication of God. It has multiple manifestations that differ only in degree from one another. These experiences are also called contemplation and all of them by definition are infused.

One form is the latent and implicit contemplation in everyday activities. This seedling form of mystical experience has only hints or signals of the divine transcendence. The person is explicitly aware of the thematic or categorical contours of the act, with at

times adumbrations of the divine presence as found, for example, in limit experiences of loneliness or peak experiences on the mountaintop.

A variant of this form is the experience of the Holy Spirit in the charismatic gifts. The gifts are the phenomena of glossolalia, healings, revelations, visions, and locutions and the like. These sensible manifestations contain within themselves the transcendent experience of God described above. The distinctive feature here is an exuberant enthusiasm that detects the immediate presence and action of God. This feeling of immediacy, however, is exaggerated (Rahner called it "naive"), because the closeness comes more from the enthusiasm than the depth and purity of faith, which alone are the measure of true presence to God. Charismatic immediacy is not the same as the immediacy associated with classic infused contemplation.

This latter quality identifies the third extraordinary form, which is indeed an immediate and direct encounter with the living God, such as found in the prayer of union of Teresa of Avila or unitive contemplation in John of the Cross. This is the full flowering of the transcendent experience in faith. Rahner calls it extraordinary mysticism, not because it is a special charism or miraculous gift, but because it is rare and belongs to very holy people. While its theological explanation is grace come to term, the psychological aspects depend on psychic structure. The relationship between mysticism and spirituality varies according to these three modes of mystical experience.

Everyday Mysticism

Everyday mysticism is faith-filled activity and belongs in most reckonings to the ascetical life of ordinary active prayer and the

fulfillment of the duties of one's life. The transcendental method has uncovered and identified this experience of God. Today's widespread desire for spiritual experience finds resonance in this teaching. Far from being novel, it is the biblical truth that the way to God is a good life (e.g. Micah 6:8).

The experiential grace in ordinary faith-life bridges the gap between asceticism and mysticism or between meditation and contemplation. The two areas are not hermetically sealed off from each other. St John of the Cross himself connects them by identifying the fruit of meditation and of the charismatic gifts as "morsels of spirituality," which are in fact camouflaged, hidden contemplation (e.g. *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.17.8).

Mysticism is thus part of every Christian life. The spiritual life is radically mystical, essentially personal and relational as opposed to any reductionist system of law or morality or institutional piety. Impersonal religion is insufficient today, according to the often quoted dictum of Karl Rahner: "the devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or he will cease to be anything at all." (*Theological Investigations* 7(1971) 15)

Ascetical practice creates the pure heart that is the measure for the outpouring of the divine Gift. This is the purgative way and it leads into the overt contemplation of the illuminative and unitive ways. The whole journey is thus mystical from beginning to end, from the single-hearted choices for God in beginnings, through the passive purification of the dark nights, which themselves are contemplative experiences of the presence of God in absence, and into the highest union. True mysticism has no room for quietism and it engages all the aspects of the Christian life.

Charismatic Mysticism

This "mysticism of the masses," as Rahner called it, is a numinous experience that

is more frequent and accessible than the strict mystical experience of the saints. It moves on the lesser level of imagination and feeling, which are fed by the Pentecostal gifts. Its appeal is its passive and empirical quality; it happens spontaneously, often without warning, and it presupposes only an open and expectant heart. Its lasting value, of course, is the faith-experience that is nourished by these gifts.

The gifted experiences are combinations of charisma, psychic causes and cultural conditioning. The gift generally builds on a natural substratum and does not fall full-blown from heaven. It is incorrect to consider charismatic mysticism more mystical in the essential sense than sober, less emotional piety, since the one measure for both is the faith-filled spirit within.

Charismatic phenomena are accidental and unusual graces that are useful, but not necessary for sanctity. They can be immensely helpful, especially in beginnings, but they also can be dangerous if the experiences create an inflated, superficial spirituality. Good spiritual direction is essential. In times of great enthusiasm, as in Spain of the 16th century, the spiritual masters like St John of the Cross discourage the gifts. In rationalistic, agnostic times like our own they can play an important role in spiritual renewal, as the recent history of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements shows.

Classical Mysticism

Extraordinary mysticism is the climax of spiritual development. Is this direct encounter with the living God a necessary and normal component of high sanctity? Or is strict, classical "infused contemplation" a special but unnecessary component of high spirituality? These questions were much disputed in recent scholastic mystical theology. The Rahnerian and typical answer today is affirmative for the first question and

negative for the second, with the proviso that psychic factors determine the psychological aspects of the experience.

The responses of the past depended as much on the definition of terms as theological principles. Two basic schools of thought emerged. The Thomist position — taught by August Sauradeau, the Dominicans under the leadership of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, and by Jacques Maritain — defined infused contemplation as infused knowledge and love and explained it through the theology of the gifts of the Holy Spirit of John of St Thomas. This school saw infused contemplation as normal and necessary for the unitive way. The other school, largely Jesuit, based their response on the highly stylized description of mystical experience uncovered in the positive study of the mystics by August Poulain, S.J.'s *Graces of Prayer*. In this view mystical experience is a special divine touching, a sense of being lost in God, so that there is no shadow of a doubt that God is within and the soul is in God (e.g. Teresa of Avila, *Life* 10.1).

For Joseph de Guibert this experience goes beyond the normal evolution of grace and is a special condition that is not necessary for sanctity. De Guibert postulated a state of “acquired contemplation,” which is within the reach of all dedicated Christians, as necessary and sufficient for sanctity.

Contemporary Catholic writers have moved away from these scholastic debates. They favor an experiential quality as part of mature spirituality, thus leaning to the Dominican perspective, but without necessarily embracing the special theology of the gifts that underpins this view and without necessarily interpreting the psychic phenomena of the classical mystical experience as coming from grace rather than psychic structure. The experience of God is a fact in contemporary spirituality, not only as the crown of the spiritual journey but as a key ongoing feature along the way. Mysticism in other words is at the heart of genuine Christian spirituality.

Bibliography: Karl Rahner, *The Experience of the Holy Spirit*.