

MYSTICISM AS A FORM OF REVELATION

Mysticism has often been a thorny issue in the history of Western Consciousness, unlike the East where it is the norm. It has always been regarded with a great deal of suspicion in the Church. This is also true, and to a greater degree, in Islam and Judaism. For in orthodox Islam, dominated as it always has been by the theologians and its extreme transcendent orientation, there has been unremitting hostility to Sufism, Islam's very striking school of mysticism. Likewise, in Judaism, there has always been caution, as the Jews have been careful to guard the transcendence of God.

This attitude of Western religious consciousness has had an impact on the view of what constitutes the nature of revelation. We will present two perspectives on revelation, that of St. Thomas and that of St. Bonaventure, which we could call the technical, in the narrow sense, and the existential views respectively, the latter being more ecumenical than the former. The latter view will make it clear that mysticism is central to revelation. We will also show mysticism's influence on the development of religion. Finally, we will present some of the mystical experiences from the lives of St. Bernard, St. Francis and St. John of the Cross, who are the figures representing the three most dominant forms of spirituality in the Church. It will also be helpful to bring in the insight of Pseudo-Dionysius on method in the spiritual life in relation to the goal of the unitive vision of the Divine Essence.

I

REVELATION

Rene Latourelle, in his *Theology of Revelation*, calls it the most basic and all-embracing category of Christianity.¹ He sees

1. Rene Latourelle, S.J. *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1966), p. 12.

it as essentially the way "God comes out of His Mystery" and communicates Himself to humanity. This communication happens through the inspired word of Scripture.² Thus, for Latourelle and the school he represents, revelation has the precise meaning of designating Scripture as such as the locus of God's manifestation, and this alone, for him, is properly called revelation.

Now this attitude has its origin in the very technical position of St. Thomas. Thomas maintained a strict hierarchy in divine matters. He held that there are three degrees of the knowledge of God. The first is the level of unaided reason, which by reflecting on God's effects in nature, comes to a very abstract knowledge of God; the intellect, in this stage, which is purely philosophical, sees the necessity for God. The Second degree of divine knowledge occurs when God enters into history and man's situation, which is recorded in Scripture. This is precisely what Thomas means by revelation. Because of its restricted range, we call it technical. The third degree of divine knowledge is mystical experience and the Beatific Vision, which both occur via an elevation of the mind as a consequence of grace.³ In relation to the present situation of humanity and the continuing dialogue of the world religions, Aquinas' position becomes problematic. This is true because it excludes the possibility of revelation in the other traditions in the sense defined. Robley Whitson, in his book *The Coming Convergence of World Religions*, where he takes up the question of revelation, says that the attitude of Christianity on this point is "conceived of much too narrowly."⁴ Whitson would rather follow the tradition of revelation, based on experience, coming from the Greek Fathers, passing through St. Augustine to the Middle Ages and receiving its most eloquent articulation in St. Bonaventure and the Franciscan School of Scholasticism.⁵ This tradition allows for the possibility of a true ecumenism in such a way that we see the truth in each religious faith.

In this, he follows the lead of Ewert Cousins, an authority on Mysticism, Bonaventure and the dialogue of religions. Cousins

2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Liber IV, ch. 1, 5.

4. Robley Edward Whitson, *The Coming Convergence of World Religions* (New York: Newman Press, 1971), p. 148.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

feels that Bonaventure's sensitivity to the "depth and nuances of religious experience" and his unique synthesis of the philosophical, theological and mystical dimensions of consciousness, make Bonaventure important in relation to other religious traditions,⁶ particularly because of his enlightened view of revelation, which permits a more sympathetic approach in the appreciation of other traditions. This makes it possible to sustain a fruitful dialogue since there is common ground.⁷

Bonaventure's notion of revelation centres around the self-diffusiveness of God the Father in generating the Son as the perfect *exemplar* of creation and of all things. In this, Bonaventure is clearly in the Neo-Platonic Stream coming through Pseudo-Dionysius. The Son expresses the Essence of the Father's being, and creation reflects the Son.⁸ Thus, the entire cosmos is theophanic, reflecting the Divine. Everything is revelational. Theophany, as the essential experience, touches the core of metaphysics and theology.⁹

Bonaventure speaks of revelation as having three modes, which he calls the book of creation, the book of Scripture and the book of life. Now, the Trinity, as the Essence of Truth, experience and reality, is revealed in both the book of creation and Scripture. And through Scripture, the book of nature is understood.¹⁰ In order to supplement man's knowledge of the divine in creation and in His Word, God has also given that special knowledge of Himself, which arises in human experience, and this is the book of life.¹¹

Thus, Bonaventure has a very profound and expansive conception of revelation which embraces the vast variety of theophanies and shows how all of life and reality is an epiphany of the Divine. Hence, mystical experience, located in the realm of the book of life, is also the highest level of revelation, because it is nearest to the Divine Essence. This is why we call Bona-

6. Ewert Cousins, "Bonaventure And World Religions." *Philosophica*, III (1971), p. 698.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 699.

8. St. Bonaventure, *Hexaëm*, coll. 1, n. 12-17 (V, 331-332; and Questions *Disputatæ de Mysterio Trinitatis*, q. 8, ad. 7 (V, 115); and *De Reductio Artium Ad Theologiam*, n. 12 (V, 322-323 of *Opera Omnia*).

9. *Op. Cit.*, Cousins, Bonaventure, p. 699.

10. *Op. Cit.*, *de Mysterio Trinitatis*, q. 1. 2. 2, concl., *Opera Omnia* (V, 54).

11. *Ibid.*, (V, 55).

venture's position on revelation existential, because it encompasses the whole of reality and includes the most significant dimension, the mystical, whose intuitions and glimpses, William James called the "truest insights into the meaning of life."¹² And yet, Bonaventure's view is also technical in the good sense.

II

MYSTICISM

Mysticism is, thus, a form of revelation, taken in its larger sense. It is also true to say that revelation can be, in some of its instances, a form of mystical experience. Many narratives in the biblical writings refer to contact with the Divine that transcends mere reason or revelation in its strict, technical interpretation. The experience of Moses and his encounter with God in the guise of the "burning bush", where God tells Moses His name,¹³ is a clear example of a mystical experience occurring in Scripture.

This is also an indication of mysticism's influence on the development of religion. Although it would not be accurate to say that mysticism generates all forms of religion, still it is certainly true that it is the origin of many types which religious consciousness has assumed in history. This is undoubtedly the case in Hinduism and Buddhism. For, if we take mysticism as normative in Eastern religion, then we can see that both Hinduism and Buddhism, in their structures, reflect an original intuition or insight which has its beginnings in the mystical experience of the founders. In the case of Hinduism, it would be the mystical utterances of the sages dwelling in the forests of India, who embodied a Wisdom from experience and who handed it on to their disciples. This gave rise to the institution of the guru-disciple relationship, which is the methodological basis of handing on the tradition in Indian spirituality. In the instance of the Buddha, the structures of the faith have their origin in his experience of enlightenment, which is assuredly mystical.

12. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1961), p. 336.

13. Exodus 3: 14.

Often, the structures of a religion develop as an attempt to institutionalize a mystical insight. Indeed, the human psyche, belonging to the Eternal from which it has sprung, has a propensity for the permanent and, thus, tries to fix or hold on to unusual experiences as a matter of course. We can see this tendency at work in the event of the Transfiguration, where Peter wanted to pitch three tents in order to preserve and contemplate the moment of vision. This is true of much of religion, although it is least true of Christianity insofar as Christianity is not directly based on mysticism, although it is clearly mystical in what it promises and in what the saints were and are privileged to witness. Let us take a look at the experience of three such saints, Bernard, Francis and John of the Cross.

St. Bernard

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a pillar of the Twelfth Century and a great monastic theologian, who virtually directed the course of the Church from his monastery, like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, expresses his mystical insights in profoundly personal terms. Thus, Bernard has an intimacy with God, but it is also an awareness of God's transcendence, which manifests itself in Bernard's doctrine by an accompanying awareness of Mystery.

He speaks of the mystical union, or a stage thereof, as a self-forgetting, as self-emptying. For he says: "To lose yourself as if you no longer existed, to cease completely to experience yourself, to reduce yourself to nothing is not a human sentiment but a divine experience."¹⁴ The Sufis also mention this self-forgetting and call it "extinction" in the Divine. This may well be the anagogical meaning of Christ's sober exhortation "to despise oneself",¹⁵ that is, in the mystical sense, to free oneself of egocentricity, which must come in humility and in the unitive experience, which liberate us.

Mystical experience radically changes the person; it is a transformation, a process of becoming Godlike. Bernard says: "It

14. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, Cistercian Fathers Series, *Treatise II, Bernard of Clairvaux*, vol. V. trans., Robert Walton, O.S.B. (Washington, D.C.: Cistercian Publications Consortium Press, 1974), ch. X, 27.

15. Luke 14. 26; Mt. 16. 24.

is deifying to go through such an experience."¹⁶ Nor is this Divine love attained by human efforts. It is a 'precious gift which God gives to whomsoever He so chooses.¹⁷ And this gift is contemplation, which is a flying away to the Divine.¹⁸

Bernard also speaks of God entering his soul. He says that this is a mysterious happening, so much so that he could not determine when God had actually entered or when He had departed.¹⁹ God "touches" or takes hold of the soul; He invades one's being. This is the well-known *Divine touch* to which mystics often refer. In this sense of unknowing, it is a dark knowledge because of obscure elements. Both Pseudo-Dionysius and John of the Cross also emphasize this point. For all that Bernard knew was that God had become Present to him in a fuller sense or that, in grace, he had become more aware of God's Presence in his soul.

Bernard uses the terms of marriage to express this intimacy between God and the soul, and all throughout his *Cantica Canticorum*, he calls God or Christ the Bridegroom and the soul the Bride. This also suggests, although not explicitly, that the soul is always passive in relation to God. God, the Bridegroom, leads His Bride, the chosen soul, into the "bedchamber" of mystical love. This emphasis on love is characteristic of Christian, Judaic and Islamic mysticism.

St. Francis

St. Francis of Assisi is perhaps the greatest saint and certainly one of the most extraordinary mystics of all time. His appeal is universal; for every one loves him. Francis was so completely united to God and had become so totally Godlike, that he was at peace with himself, the world and with nature. Every one who ever met him could perceive so clearly the Presence of God.

16. *Op. Cit.*, *On Loving God*, ch. x.

17. *Ibid.*

18. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica Canticorum, Opera S. Bernardi*, ed. Jean Leclercq, H.M. Rochais, C.H. Talbot (Romae: Editiones Cistercienses, 1958), vol II, Sermon 52. 5, pp. 92-93.

19. *Ibid.*, Sermon 71. 5-6. pp. 212-213.

Francis' spiritual life was filled with long hours of prayer, sometimes lasting all night. He was often caught up, carried out of himself and absorbed into the Divine Light. His intellect was elevated, and he experienced mystical union.²⁰ Francis penetrated to the very centre of God's mystery. He describes to Brother Leo the extent of his contemplative experience: "...then I was in the light of contemplation, in which I saw the infinite depth of the Divine Godhead and my own wretched abyss of misery."²¹

The climax of the mystical life of Francis came upon him when he had the vision of the six-winged Seraph on Mount La Verna, his hermitage. It fittingly occurred on the day of the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross as Francis knelt in prayer on the side of the holy mountain. In the midst of the winged Seraph, he beheld Christ on the cross. It swept Francis into ecstasy and when he came back to himself, he noticed that the sacred wounds of Christ's passion had been imparted to him in his hands, feet and side. Thus, his identification with the Lord was total.²²

Francis was also a great nature mystic. Perhaps, this is one of the chief reasons for his popularity. He somehow represents a perfection that is more than human. We see ourselves as we could be in his profound example. He was so utterly joyful, because he saw God in everything. In this, he was like St. Ignatius of Loyola. He had a natural sense of his unity with all creation without being a monist. He was far too conscious of the radical distinction between the Creator and the creature, between the Absolute perfection of God and the sinfulness of man, to make such a bold assertion.

His poverty, which is intimately related to his spiritual vision, was probably a profound form of humility in which he saw his absolute dependence upon God. He was attuned to the Divine Harmony. So sensitive was this great and gentle little man that he could see the workings of Providence in all the situations of life.

20. *St. Francis of Assisi: writings and Early Biographies. English Omnibus of the Sources For The Life of St. Francis*, ed. Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972). *Thomas of Celano's Life of St. Francis*, ch. XI, p. 259.

21. Johannes Jørgensen, *St. Francis of Assisi*, (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1955), p. 245.

22. *Op. Cit.*, *Bonaventure's Legenda Maior*, ch. 13, pp. 729-736. *Omnibus sources.*

He refused to play the ego game to which the world is addicted, thus, his poverty was an act of self-defacement. His exterior was not pleasant to behold; he was so overcome with his long fasts and endless hours of prayer that poor "brother ass" became too frail to bear the strains of his mortifications. His unattractive exterior cloaked one of the profoundest souls ever to traverse this world. This was evident in his luminous eyes. Oh those eyes! Francis is a mystic who went all the way and that is perhaps a further reason why he is so loved. Very few souls, including all of the saints of all the ages and traditions, can equal the brilliance of his spirit that shines with such radiant sanctity for all the ages of History and Eternity.

St. John of the Cross

Some of the most beautiful descriptions of the mystical life are given by John of the Cross in his poems. John, like Bernard before him, uses the symbolism of love in his mystical works. This permits him to convey the intimacy existing between God and the soul and the unitive relationship with Him. For instance, consider the tender intimacy of his famous poem entitled "The Dark Night," and then let us try to reveal its transcendental meaning.

1. One dark night,
Fired with love's urgent longings
—Ah, the sheer grace!
I went out unseen,
My house being now all stilled;
2. In darkness, and secure,
By the secret ladder, disguised,
—Ah, the sheer grace!
In darkness and concealment,
My house being now all stilled;
3. On that glad night,
In secret, for no one saw me,
Nor did I look at anything,
With no other light or guide
Than the one that burned in my heart;
4. This guided me.
More surely than the light of noon
To where He waited for me

—Him I knew so well—

In a place where no one else appeared.

5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
The lover with His beloved,
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.
6. Upon my flowering breast
Which I kept wholly for Him alone,
There He lay sleeping,
And I caressing Him
There in a breeze from the fanning cedars.
7. When the breeze blew from the turret
Parting His hair,
He wounded my neck.
With His gentle hand,
Suspending all my senses.
8. I abandoned and forgot myself,
Laying my face on my Beloved;
All things ceased; I went out from myself,
Leaving my cares
Forgotten among the lillies.²³

In the first Stanza, the soul is longing for God and she has quieted her senses and the reason; her house is at rest. All is prepared. In an unknowing knowing, which is darkness, because the soul does not fully grasp God, but she knows that He is there, and this is a secure knowledge, because known in a direct manner, the soul ascends via the ladder of contemplation. This is hidden from the world existing in this mystical knowing, but the soul does not apprehend the full range of the encounter. Again, the soul is hidden from the world, and does not desire it; she is joyful, because returning to her Source. The light of God directs her from within, guiding her to where He waits. This light leads the soul into the Presence of God, to whom she is united. He leads her to a place where only they are. This night is more lovely

23. St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans., Kieron Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: I.C.S. Publications, 1973), pp. 711-712.

than the dawn because God and the soul are united in a mystical way; she is being transformed without losing anything. They are a long time together there. The mystical union suspends all of the soul's senses; she is drawn into the unity of God. The soul is united to God and she forgets her very existence, finding Him, thus, leaving her "cares forgotten among the lillies." The soul transcends with God.

John of the Cross goes on to describe this Presence of God dwelling in the soul as it reaches the heights of intense, constant love and becomes the "Living Flame of Love".

1. O Living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest Centre! Since
Now you are not oppressive,
Now consummate if it be Your Will.
Tear through the veil of this sweet
encounter!
2. O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch!
That taste of eternal life
And pays every debt
In killing You changed death to life.
.....
4. How gently and lovingly
You wake in my heart,
Where in secret You dwell alone;
And by Your sweet breathing,
Filled with good and glory,
How tenderly You swell my heart with love!²⁴

God, the 'Living Flame of Love,' wounds the soul in her deepest Centre, because of the Power of His Presence as love, dwelling secretly in the soul. The Divine touch has become a permanent dwelling within the being of the soul and this is a taste of eternal life. God wakes the soul to His Presence within her and wells up into this flame of love that totally absorbs her into its Reality. For God becomes the Absolute Centre of the soul's attention and longing, filling her with the glory of the Divine Life. And in his

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 717-718.

poem entitled "Stanzas Concerning An Ecstasy Experienced In High Contemplation," John of the Cross says that contemplation gives the highest knowledge possible, a knowledge of God's Essence, which is a transcending of knowledge as such and "an understanding of not understanding".²⁵ We receive some knowledge of God's Essence, but it is a dark knowledge which cannot be understood. We understand by not understanding, because this knowledge is ineffable. Although we can have it, still we cannot express it or adequately grasp it in the mode of a rational knower, because its Meaning is *boundless*. It transcends the entire range of our categories and the parameters of our ordinary and our metaphysical consciousness. Such is the Vision of St. John of the Cross.

Method In the Mystical Ascent

The method and the stages of the soul's ascent to God, which John of the Cross elaborates in his works, is essentially the insight of Pseudo-Dionysius, though the content and stylistic expression are John's.

All Being, Truth and Love are hidden "in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence..."²⁶ This is the Godhead in underived Unity and in the Trinity, which is the Divine Essence knowing itself. The way to union with the Divine is through complete renunciation of the selfish designs of the ego and a withdrawal from all perceptions of the senses, from images, and all notions, concepts and thoughts of the mind.²⁷ In this way and in God's time, the soul finds "Him that has made Darkness His secret place."²⁸ The soul comes into the luminosity of His Truth as it exists in Him as pure Essence, the perfection of Esse as Infinite Meaning unified in the consciousness of its act of being that which it is. God being simple, His Essence and His Existence are the same and thus, He is existence itself; He holds the Eternal moment of TO BE in His infinite act. All existence comes from Him because He is the very being of what is. He is the pure Meaning of Holy love. Thus intellect is blind before the Presence of God. Thus, He dwells in Darkness, which means, the light of His being is so luminous that it seems as Darkness to the mind; the intellect

²⁵. *Ibid.*, pp. 718-719.

²⁶. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans., C.E. Rolt (London: SPCK: 1920), *Mystical Theology*, ch. I, p. 191.

²⁷. *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

²⁸. *Ibid.*

simply cannot understand. One has to pass beyond all things in order to be united with Him Who is beyond all things.²⁹ The soul comes to know God when the mind is *still* and in unknowing is "united by his (the soul's) highest faculty to Him that is wholly Unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding."³⁰ We can, thus, have vision of God but we cannot really reconstruct it in our reflections. We can know it but it is a private knowledge insofar as we cannot actually show others what we mean, what God shows us of Himself and His mystery.

Mysticism is yet the most essential form of knowledge, and as direct experience of the Ultimate Truth, of God, it is the most urgent form of revelation because it is the highest form of knowledge of the Divine that the soul is capable of in this life. The Beatific Vision alone is higher. To see this, we need first to have a larger perspective on revelation, like that of Bonaventure, and more importantly, we need the encounter with the Divine in the mystical state where we understand first-hand that God *is*. For mysticism is the revelation of God, the Absolute in a direct encounter; it is, thus the primary dimension of experience and of God's communication of Himself. Let us conclude with this little poem.

WONDER AT THE SOURCE

To see the equal of a star
in a flower
To hear the presence
in the wind
To gaze at the flight
of graceful birds
their dignity so sublime
is to perceive that it signifies
The Dawn,
The Horizon,
The Vast Openness
of the immeasurable
Boundlessness of God,
and yet there.

²⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁰. *Ibid.*, p. 194.