

What is a Christian Mystic?

by John Whittle

Looked at carefully, the title proves to be a tautological question! A more proper question is, "What is a Christian?" And the correct answer is, "A mystic."

As someone has rightly said, "We are not called to be Christians, but to be christi." *That one sentence well expresses the extension of incarnation which is the inner core of the New Testament revelation.*

A mystic is one who sees the spiritual nature of all things. He sees Paul's observation that "*in Him we live and move and have our being*" in all its fullness. He understands that his personal experience of an inner birth of the spirit extends to the furthest galaxies, to "time's remotest bounds," and that nothing is excluded. The spirit of harmonization in the universe is Christ in His infinite variety of expression. All the pettiness and limitations normally accepted as inevitable to life are, from the mystic's point of view, disintegrating and reforming into the new image of the universal Christ. Nothing is lost, since as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin says, "For the believer, everything is turned into Christ."

This is the reality by which the Christian mystic lives. He does not by any means escape the world, but finds it transformed from within by his corrected vision. He believes that there can be no true Christianity outside of a mystical experience of the Christ within. From that revelation and personal embrace of Christ, "God unfurls His immensity and reveals Himself as Universal Being" (again from Teilhard de Chardin).

The term "Christian" was coined in the early days of the Church by onlookers who merely meant to indicate a group of people of a certain persuasion. We who embrace union have accepted and baptized the name in the light of a mystic experience, so that "Christianity" refers to an experience that operates from the inside out, not the reverse.

To be a Christian in the *worldly* sense is to be loosely attached to a body of truth commonly held and taught by Christian churches. It means that one gives credence to certain historical facts involving Christ's life, death and resurrection. This type of "Christian" lives by the golden rule and is generally known to be a good citizen and a fair dealer. It is barely even the outer shell of the reality.

In the *biblical* sense, a Christian is one who is *experiencing Christ*. He has passed from the mere historic facts into the glowing heart of the matter by means of a new birth of the Spirit. He is of necessity a born mystic, whether or not he wishes to use that name for himself. He knows the person of Christ within and continues on into an expanded awareness of the growing kingdom, which is "within you," as Christ plainly stated in Luke 17:21. One person living within another! How can we call that other than a mystic experience?

The Christian does not find his motivating center in an ethic or in a body of doctrine, but in a Living Person who actually initiates him into a spiritual dimension totally unknown to the rational or scientific man. What can that be considered in the eyes of the world but an unknown and an irregular concept of life?

One of the most prominent Bible teachers in my area, a man with a great following and a thriving church, not at all given to extremism, said twice in my hearing, "The failure of us Bible-teaching and evangelical people is the failure to recognize that Christianity at root is

mystical." A man that believes that Jesus' living, dying, and rising again two thousand years ago actually set free a stream of spirit and life in the world that changes men from the inside out must surely have a mystical mind, for this is far beyond the range of normal experience and therefore incomprehensible, apart from the mystical view of life.

Man has an inner, spirit world which has to be satisfied or suppressed. That center for the Christian is Christ, a center which glows with inner certainties and dominates the outer life and behavior. Jesus' concept of life for Himself and us is "My Father lives in Me and I in you." This is not mere poetry but the expression of true being.

Of this inner world of man William Law, perhaps the most rational of the Christian mystics, wrote, "Christ is in all men, either crucified or resurrected." Law is a good introduction to the true mystic expression of evangelical Christianity. His statement gives us the key to our seeing Christ in all men and of our part in helping to release them and bring about the re-emergence of His image within them.

The goal of mysticism is *union*. This is the central theme of all the mystic writers, both Catholic and Protestant, down through the centuries. At the risk of being over-simplistic, I think we may divide mysticism into two streams of expression. I would call one stream *aspirational* and the other *affirmative*. The first stream is inclined to emphasize our effort and discipline, stressing the necessity for withdrawal from the world and its temptations.

The second stream declares everything is *done* for us already. According to this "affirmative" brand of mysticism, we who are in Christ live in a constantly increasing awareness of the union we have in Him. Rather than struggling to attain, we enjoy our total acceptance by God and His presence within us. Writers in this stream stress the finished work of Christ as being ours and that therefore we "reign in life by one, Christ Jesus," as Paul says. Totally affirmative and declarative.

Both streams have their dangers: the first is seemingly weak on faith, whereas the second can be accused of encouraging carelessness, by regarding everything one does as of necessity Christ doing it!

Both emphases, however, are unequivocal in their position that *God intends Christ to live by man in an extended incarnation*, making each a son of God. This is indeed mysticism of the highest order. The fuller implications of this are alluded to by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in *The Hymn of the Universe*:

"Lord, it is You, who, through the imperceptible goadings of sense-beauty, penetrated my heart in order to make its life flow out into yourself You came down into me by means of a tiny scrap of created reality; and then, suddenly, you unfurled your immensity before my eyes and displayed yourself to me as Universal Being."

This shows with mystic insight that all is Christ, and that everything and everyone is under His rule and in His presence, either to redemption or destruction. It must be seen that the mystery of iniquity works as a mystical element alongside the mystery of godliness. As Evelyn Underhill writes:

"Paul's mystical experience and all that it means to him must never be absent from our minds when we are trying to understand his declarations. He lives in that supernatural atmosphere which he calls "Christ-spirit"; he speaks to us from that sphere. Nothing

outside of it is real to him: Whatever its other bearings may be, his doctrine of Atonement is solidly real on that plane - the mystic plane, the plane of union - or not at all. When he says he is "crucified with Christ," and "hid in God with Christ," he means these things. They are not vaguely pious utterances, but desperate attempts towards the communication of a real state, really felt and known ... Because of this union - and only because of it - the acts, powers, holiness, and adventures of that life avail for him, Paul. He is a bit of its body, in his own bold metaphor. So the first great factor of salvation, as he sees it, is the essential mystical factor of the "union of the soul with Christ; the "doing away" of the flame of separation" (The Essentials of Mysticism).

Both the "aspirational" and "affirmative" approaches to mysticism speak of a progression in our awareness of this infinite union. The more classical, aspirational mystic writers usually mention three states of mystic experience-purgation, illumination and union. The affirmative approach, which sees the soul totally and presently "in Christ," in union with Him from the moment of the Spirit's new birth in him, covers the same ground but with different nomenclature - child, young man, and father, as John gives it to us.

It seems that the aspirational element in mystical writings stresses that we move "towards God," while the affirmative outlook is that we grow *in* God. But even so, those growing "in" God can also be said to be growing "towards" Him in a fuller realization of what and who we are in Him, of who He is in us, and in the whole universe. They are, therefore, mainly living in the consciousness of what one has called "the arrival zone." Perhaps it would be more accurate to say "in anticipation of the arrival zone"-that time when the sons of God shall be revealed in Christ's glory. Those who have this mystic vision themselves, bathed in the beauty and certainty of His ultimate triumph, recognize the privilege of being instruments to help bring it about.

The affirmative mystic can live in a world of contradiction and gloriously survive. The more aspirational person finds it needful to withdraw and live a more contemplative life. For the affirmative individual, such Scriptures as "You *are* dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God," "You *are* not in the flesh but in the Spirit," and "You *are* come unto Mount Zion ...," set the tone for his day-by-day confidence that all is done. John says also, "Of His fullness *have* we all received."

This explanation is intended to help towards a clarification concerning how and why the term *mystic* may be legitimately used of evangelical and biblical Christians. I have said very little, therefore, about the actual experience, but I would like to add a few remarks that might be of practical help.

First, the periodic experiences of dryness and darkness that come in the Christian's ongoing life are to be received and recognized as wholly from God. In fact they are times of incalculable expansion and benefit, providing we stay positive about them and do not let unbelief and doubt into our hearts. This is confirmed by all mystics and is very often stressed. But what of the opposite experiences of great uplift and exhilaration, those times when "God's immensity is unfurled in us"? I hesitate to describe these things, lest they be taken to be a general experience that should be often repeated. The awareness of union, not ecstasy, is the mystic's goal. But, indeed, there are times of unbelievable splendor of which it is difficult and perhaps unwise to write or speak.

As a young man I had an experience akin to Teilhard de Chardin's "unfurling of God's immensity." When I was seventeen and feeling hungry for more of God and for greater

resources by which to serve Him, and at a time when I felt quite flat and listless, I was suddenly transported to a level of unutterable joy and love for God and others. I was at that time lifted to a new plane of being with a new inner knowing of the Beloved and His resources. That initial deluge of the Spirit, quite unexpected and sudden, has in varying degrees remained with me in the ups and downs of a long walk with God of nearly sixty years.

Some of us have these ecstatic moments and some of us do not. We do not need to seek them, for we do not walk by any experience, either negative or positive. We walk by the One who walks in us. He walks His way for us, either in light or darkness, ecstasy or dryness, sorrow or joy. We take all from His hands learning, as Paul says, to “reign in life, by One, Christ Jesus.” This is true mysticism.