

# JOHANNINE MYSTICISM

By JAMES McPOLIN

THERE ARE few more fluid and ill-defined words than 'mysticism' in the vocabulary of theologians and spiritual writers. That is why many biblical scholars show a distinct reserve in speaking about the 'mysticism' of John. Some vigorously deny that the type of religion represented by the Gospel and First Letter of John can properly be described as 'mysticism'.<sup>1</sup> Some will either grant that there is a 'so-called mysticism' in John or will use the term with reference to his theology provided it is always placed in inverted commas. Others see no problem in calling John 'the greatest of christian mystics'.

In the restricted sense, mysticism embraces a small number of phenomena in the spiritual life. It is a special experience of those chosen to enter into a privileged communication with God. It is an 'experiential, intellectual knowledge of his presence. He makes us feel that we are really entering into communication with him'.<sup>2</sup> More recently, writers, deploring the ambiguity of the term, have attempted to define it in this restricted sense: as 'an incommunicable and inexpressible knowledge and love of God or of religious truth received in the spirit without precedent effort or reasoning'.<sup>3</sup> This mysticism stresses God's action and a special consciousness of God's self-communication within man. John does not describe this kind of mysticism between God and man; he is not concerned with those extraordinary mystical graces as recorded by a later John or a Teresa of Avila.

But he does give special attention to the theme of communion with God. It is this which has allowed even scholarly commentators to speak about johannine mysticism.<sup>4</sup> Not only christian theology, but also comparative religion deals with mysticism as a form of spirituality which seeks or experiences an immediate contact, a

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<sup>1</sup> The Apocalypse is not taken into consideration. It is a work of an entirely different kind. The language and theology of the Fourth Gospel and the Letters of John derive at least from the same tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Poulain, A.: *Graces of Interior Prayer* (trans L. L. Yorke Smith, London, 1950), p 65.

<sup>3</sup> Knowles, D.: *What is Mysticism?* (London, 1967), p 13.

<sup>4</sup> For example, J. Huby: *Mystiques Paulinienne et Johannique* (Desclée de Brouwer, 1946).

union of the soul with God. This is also a characteristic of Buddhism and Islamism, which desire union with the Supreme Being. Mysticism as applied to John can be taken in a wider sense than that special experience of those who become conscious of God acting within them in extraordinary ways. It denotes a communion with God which is an essential constitutive principle of the christian life. Those who describe their reception of special mystical graces stress God's activity and the need for receptivity. The communion of the Christian with God, such as John describes it, is also a matter of God's activity and our receptivity to his action.

*John's theology of communion*

The desire for communion with the divine appears in the language of the cultures and milieu with which the New Testament writings are sometimes linked. For example, classical greek literature and some religious philosophy of the hellenistic world describe a type of communion with God.<sup>5</sup> A comparison with John can highlight his distinctiveness. 'The creator is in all things'; man and his world is 'in God'. The mystic is sometimes described as possessed by God. This possession is manifested in ecstasy. Being 'in God' has a wide range of meanings. It may be dependence on God, conformity with his will, an ecstatic possession by the divine, or a quasi-pantheistic absorption into the divine being. John's theology of communion is a far cry from a world in which religion is expressed in ecstasy, and where the personality of the individual is swallowed up in the language of metaphysical pantheism. John describes the christian life in terms of personal relationships. Through faith in Christ we enter into a personal community of life with an eternal God.

A seemingly impersonal image of branches abiding in the vine (Jn 15, 1-17) expresses the quality of relationship which God offers man through Christ. 'Abide in me and I in you . . . Abide in my love'. The only kind of communion between persons which we experience is one of love. This image sketches the network of relationships inherent in communion with God. The connections between the vinedresser, the vine, branches and the fruit show the quality of our personal relationships with one another, with Jesus and the Father. This is the language of the indwelling through love of man in God and God in man. As two friends can be present

<sup>5</sup> Cf C. H. Dodd: *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1958), pp 187-200.

to one another through listening, understanding and loving response, so also we can be present to Christ in faith and love. He abides in us and we in him. We abide in his love. This divine indwelling is of such a nature that even a sacramental communion does not submerge the personality of the other. 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him' (Jn 6, 56). Sacramental union is a personal communion. Abiding is a life of mutual presence of one person to another.

Though this union between God and man is not pantheistic – an impersonal absorption into the divine – it does involve a real community of being. God's greatest act of friendship towards man is described in terms of receiving the divine life. 'In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him' (1 Jn 4, 9). God is a living Father because he communicates himself and gives all that is most treasured in himself, his life, to his Son. Jesus, in turn, manifests and mediates this life to those who respond to his word and accept him for who he is. We find no trace of an ecstatic possession by divine inspiration such as appears in hellenistic mysticism. At the same time, this relation between God and man is not static. There is a communion of will and action, through which men may speak the message and do the works of God. It is not a purely contemplative mysticism like that of the neo-platonist, who considered that action detracted from contemplation. John does not separate morality from mysticism. For him, as for all New Testament writers, Christianity has its application in the domain of morality, just as moral conduct finds its motivation in God. John develops this point in a radically personal form: that is, with his gaze fixed on the activity of Jesus. He, united to his Father, offers himself as a model to disciples; he asks that they conform themselves to him, abide in him and bear fruit in fraternal love: 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends . . . I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit . . . This I command you, to love one another' (Jn 15, 13. 16–17).

#### *The prayer for communion*

We find the kernel of the evangelist's theology of communion in the prayer of Jesus for his disciples (ch 17). The main direction and content of the gospel is synthesized in the prayer of Jesus, who is presented both as one still facing death and as already glorified, as if he were still in the world and as if he had just left it. It is the

prayer of his 'hour' – of his death and resurrection. It is a prayer of intercession and communion, of intercession founded on his own communion with his Father. Jesus prays for disciples that they may experience communion with himself and the Father, and consequently with one another. In prayer, the Christian tries to get into touch with and express the deepest desires and preoccupations of his life. In prayer, the johannine Christ discloses the nerve-centre of his own life: his communion and intimacy with the Father. This is epitomized in the one word 'Father'. He reflects on his relationship with his Father and sees his presence in all that he does, in all that he is. 'All that is mine is yours; all that is yours is mine' (Jn 17, 10). He looks forward to a communion in glory with his Father.

This community of life between himself and the Father is not only the model but also the source and cause of the communion of Christians with Christ and with one another. Christ prays that his disciples 'may be one even as we are one'. This oneness is spelled out as the thought broadens and includes all Christians:

That they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me . . . that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.

Centred on Christ as Son of the Father, this communion with God is not a timeless mysticism, detached from space and time. Fellowship with God is disclosed and made possible in the earthly Jesus (Jn 14, 7-11). God's self-communication in the Incarnate Son is linked with the experience of union with God in faith. Through Jesus made man, we know what God is like and what man can become. Communion is given its full reality through the glorified Christ.

'I in them and you in me': this sums up the reality and the source of christian communion with God. Christians are not only drawn into communion with God through Jesus. They are also integrated into a communion that exists within God himself, into the community of love and life between Father and Son. In addition, this communion within the Godhead is creative of communion or community among Christians themselves. The core of johannine mysticism is that communion with God means man's integration into community within God, by which his life in human community is radically changed. 'That they also may be one in us': the focus

is not so much oneness of believers with one another. John does not view unity in terms of distinct 'vertical' (union with God) and 'horizontal' (union with one another) categories.<sup>6</sup> The communion of believers with Father and Son and their communion with one another originate from the life and love shared between Father and Son. The resulting relationship with Jesus, revealer of the Father, is not merely internal or spiritual. It is manifested concretely and perceivably. The life and love of the Father and Son are brought to light in the shared faith and love of the community. 'As I have loved you, you love one another': the message of Jesus about fraternal love is based on his own example. It corresponds to his prayer for brotherly communion which, in turn, is founded on his own communion with the Father.

The johannine Christ, man and divine Son, expresses his longings and central preoccupations in prayer. From out of the world he 'raises' human eyes to heaven, namely that 'space' in which he himself experiences communion with the Father. Out of this communion he intercedes on behalf of disciples and all Christians, that they may enter into and be kept in a life of communion with himself and the Father. 'Glorify your Son . . . This is eternal life that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'; his petition for his own glorification is an unselfish prayer. It is a request that men may open themselves to the life and love of the Father which are made flesh in him. He intercedes for the greatest gift man could be offered – that they be kept safe in a life of intimacy and friendship with the Son and his Father: 'keep them in your name . . . sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth'. The name is the person of the Father in so far as he communicates his life and love to the Son. The Christian is to be drawn away from the force of evil into that vital sphere in which the Father and Son share life together. The truth, the self-revelation of the Father in Jesus, is the descending word of the Father which Jesus speaks. It is the word through which the disciple gives witness to Jesus. It is also the instrument of his interior sanctification and communion with Jesus and the Father. 'I desire that they also . . . may be with me where I am, to behold my glory'. As Jesus is about to cast off the limitations of space and time, he looks forward to his own communion in glory with the Father; he prays that

<sup>6</sup> This point has been well developed by M. L. Appold: *The Oneness Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Tubingen, 1976), pp 283–86.

the disciples will come to share in this too. Our present christian existence is a communion of love and life with the divine. This, however, is only a temporary foretaste of the everlasting communion with Jesus. 'We shall see him as he is' (1 Jn 3, 2).

*Union in faith and love*

The fourth gospel has been called 'the gospel of belief'. Throughout, it is clear that the Christian enters a life-giving communion with the divine through faith. Yet the abstract word, faith or belief, never appears in the gospel. There is only the personal activity of believing, always (with one exception), directed towards the person of Jesus. This is a dynamic movement, a personal commitment to him. Most frequently it is expressed in the form of 'believing into' Jesus: 'He who believes in (to) me has eternal life' (6, 47). It is more than accepting his message. It is a movement towards the person of Jesus, attachment to him as the promised One and Son of God. It is to give oneself to Christ in dedication and full confidence.<sup>7</sup>

The communion through faith with the Son and the Father is not only a sharing in their life. It is also a loving communion which binds and brings together the Father, Son and followers of Jesus. It is faith which discovers love and opens man to receive it as a gift: 'We know and believe the love God has for us' (1 Jn 4, 16). To understand Christ is to see in him, in his life and particularly in his death, the epiphany of God's love. Through faith in him as the expression of God's love, man receives the gift of the descending love of the Father. In the image of the vine and the branches and especially in the first letter of John, love is a divine gift which comes to us from the Father in Jesus. It is one which enables Christians to respond in love to Christ, to the Father and to one another. Fraternal love is a fruit, a sign, that they are in communion with Christ and the Father. 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God' (1 Jn 4, 7). If the Christian shares in the life of God, then love which comes from him is manifested in living action. The contemplation in faith of Christ, the living example of God's love, renders mysticism and morality inseparable for John. It leads to that response of love which accepts his message and example. All is made possible through the gift of *agape* (love) whose source is in the Father. This

<sup>7</sup> John uses other expressions for the reality of faith in Jesus: to 'follow', to 'receive', to 'come to' him and to 'hear' his 'voice'.

*agape*, which defines the relationships of the Father, Son and Christians, may be described as a sharing of life together in concern and understanding.

*The language of communion*

It has been a characteristic of christian mystics to express their experience of God in their own distinctive imagery and language. John draws on an astonishing variety of phrases and images to explain communion with God, particularly in his first letter. It is concerned with communion with God and with the question: how do we know that we are in communion with God? The criteria are faith in Jesus as the Incarnate Son and fraternal love. Scholars are still exploring the background on which John depends for some of his expressions about communion with God. They point to a milieu influenced by earlier christian traditions, by jewish, hellenistic and syncretistic elements drawn from various other phenomena and cults. It is possible that the author developed some of these expressions himself.

Communion is to 'have fellowship' (*koinōnia*)<sup>8</sup> with the Father and Son, to share in their life. It is manifested in the fellowship of fraternal love. It is 'to be born of God' or to be 'children of God'.<sup>9</sup> It is not a matter of a once-and-for-all communication of God's life through Jesus. There is growth in sonship through the action of the Spirit. The word of Jesus, received in faith and strengthened within us by the power of the Spirit, frees us more and more from sin. To be born of God is also to love the brethren. The Christian who lives with the life of a loving God is concerned for those whom God loves. The Christian is said to be 'of God'.<sup>10</sup> He allows his life to be directed by and open to God's action. God is even possessed by man! The man of faith and love has the Father and the Son.<sup>11</sup> He has for and in himself the presence of Father and Son. He possesses their life.

Knowledge belongs to the essence of communion. 'This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God and Jesus whom you have sent' (Jn 17, 3). Jesus describes the quality of the personal relationship which he offers: 'I know mine and mine know me' (Jn 10, 14). This is not a purely intellectual knowledge or an understanding, even in faith, about Jesus in relation to his Father. In

<sup>8</sup> Cf 1 Jn 1, 3. 6. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Jn 1, 13; 1 Jn 2, 29; 3, 1-2. 9-10; 4, 3-7; 5, 1. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Cf 1 Jn 4, 3-6.

<sup>11</sup> Cf 1 Jn 2, 23; 5, 12-13; 2 Jn 9.

the Old Testament, to know God is to have communion with him. To know someone in the hebrew manner is to have a personal relationship with him, a real experience of him and to live somehow in communion with him. To know Jesus implies the gift of the heart, the personal experience of him in faith. It is attachment in loving obedience and a sharing in his life. This knowing is a progressive growth in intimacy and personal experience through faith of the Son and the Father. It is also practical. It is to keep the commandments of Christ (1 Jn 2, 4), which are not specified as a decalogue but rather as the word and message of Jesus. This develops the Old Testament word or Torah. Central to this message is: 'Love one another as I have loved you'. Therefore to know God is to love: 'He who loves is born of God and knows God' (1 Jn 4, 7).

### *John the contemplative*

Writers often call John a 'contemplative' because among the gospel writers he has the most penetrating gaze into the mysteries of God made man. Some say they find themselves closer to God and to Christ in John's gospel than in any other book. The author demands from us a deeper level of reflection on the meaning of Christ for our lives. That is why some early christian writers named him John the theologian. They called the gospel the spiritual gospel. More specifically, we could call contemplative his tendency to use a variety of words, which sometimes have different nuances, for 'seeing' Christ. This seeing not only refers to a concrete, physical experience of those who were with Jesus, it frequently includes a vision of faith by which one comes to understand the meaning of his person. It may also refer to all christian believers who enter into communion through faith with him. 'Again a little while and you will see me' (Jn 16, 16). The promise of Jesus points forward to the days of the Church when Christians, through the power of the Spirit, come to understand the meaning of Jesus and his message for their lives. To look on the crucified One is possible in faith for all who see in the death of Jesus the Father's love for man (19, 37). The man who believes in Jesus sees God now; his hope is: 'We shall be like him (Christ), for we shall see him as he is'.<sup>12</sup> What has been

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<sup>12</sup> The religious and cultic background of such a statement, 'see him as he is', does not contain any traces of later philosophical distinctions as regards the intellectual contemplation (see) and fruitional activity of the will in the presence of God. Rather the meaning here is: to be in the presence of Christ (or God), to be in familiar communion with him.



partly hidden will be manifest, namely, that we are *filii in Filio* – sons in the Son. There is a contemplative element in John's theology of communion. Communion means to 'know' and to 'see'.

### *Johannine imagery*

The Kingdom is an image for that area or divine sphere where man through faith experiences and receives the life of God. To see and to enter into the Kingdom<sup>13</sup> is to understand Jesus as the manifestation of the life of God and the reception of a communion of life with him. Communion is also to be understood in terms of John's favourite image of 'light',<sup>14</sup> as opposed to the darkness of sin and unbelief. God is not hidden. Jesus is the 'light' because he reveals the life and love of God. To accept Jesus for all that he is and means to us is to 'come towards the light', 'to believe in the light' and to 'have the light'. To be 'in the light' is to be in communion with God through Jesus. This light is given to us for living. To lead the life of communion, of faith and love is 'to walk in the light'. The image of the vine and the branches expresses more vividly than Paul's image of the Body of Christ the closeness of communion with Christ. 'I am the vine; you are the branches'. Paradoxically, Christ is compared with the vine which is the whole tree, including the branches. Christians are incorporated into this whole vine. The intimacy of communion with Christ could not be more forcefully expressed.

At times John expresses himself in spatial imagery. The Christian is drawn into a kind of divine sphere, a 'dwelling-place', a new temple where he shares in the life of the Father and Son. He 'walks' *in* the darkness or in the light, in the truth and in the commandment of Jesus. Like a branch which remains in the vine, the believer remains in Christ, in his love and in his word of teaching. In these examples a personal relationship with Christ through faith or love is conceived in a metaphorical locative sense. The Word, his love and his self-revelation, which cannot be separated from his person, is the area or sphere in which and from which the Christian lives. It is contrasted with the area of darkness and of sin where the force of evil is at work. 'Holy Father, keep them *in* your name which you have given me . . . Keep them *from* the evil one' (Jn 17, 11. 15). The 'name', the Father's self-communication in life and love to his Son, is the domain or sphere in which disciples are to be preserved,

<sup>13</sup> Cf Jn 3, 3. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Cf Jn 1, 4-9; 3, 20; 8, 12; 9, 5; 12, 35-36; 1 Jn 1, 5; 2, 11.

in contrast to that area of unbelief which is the work of the evil one. Communion with Jesus and the Father, which is granted through the Spirit after the glorification of Jesus, means belonging to a new, divine domain. This divine domain is a dwelling-place (Jn 14, 2-3, 23).

Jesus speaks of his departure and the new communion which is granted believers through the gift of the Spirit in this life. Communion is described with reference to 'my Father's house', a 'place' or a 'dwelling-place'. Further, it is God's activity and man's receptivity to his action. It is an action of the Father and of the Son. The many dwelling-places or mansions are not different degrees of perfection, or lower and higher grades in heaven, or the ascending stages in mysticism with which they have been associated. Johannine mysticism looks on the Father's love as all-inclusive. It has space for all those who love him. Communion is a gift of the Father's love to believers. It is also the work of the Son who takes believers to himself: into communion with himself and the Father. He gathers the children of God; he draws men through faith into communion with himself (Jn 11, 52; 12, 32). Communion arises from man's response when he accepts the word of Jesus, 'which is not mine but the Father's who sent me' (Jn 14, 24). The images of a place, dwelling-place and my Father's house, probably refer to Jesus himself as a new temple, in which believers find communion with him and his Father. He is the new dwelling-place of God and man. He is the place which displaces the temple worship of Jerusalem. In him, who is the truth, the self-revelation of God, and through the gift of the Spirit, men will worship the Father: 'The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4, 23). The temple cleansed by Jesus is 'my Father's house'; it is the symbol of the new temple which is his risen body (Jn 2, 16-22). The temple imagery explains that our communion with God is granted in and through Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

### *Immanence*

Distinctively johannine is his theology of immanence,<sup>16</sup> a being or remaining in one another that binds together Father, Son and the

<sup>15</sup> 'Jesus truly transferred to his own person the privilege, long held by the temple, of being the place where man would find God's presence and salvation, and the starting-point of the communication of every form of holiness'. Y. Congar: *The Mystery of the Temple* (trans R. F. Trevett, London, 1962), p 138.

<sup>16</sup> Jn 6, 56; 10, 38; 14, 10-11. 17. 20; 15, 4-7; 17, 21-26; 1 Jn 2, 6. 24-28; 3, 6. 24; 4, 15-16.

believer. Remain or abide adds the note of permanence to this mutual indwelling. The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is also in believers. These expressions of immanence do not depend on spatial imagery. 'I am in my Father and you in me' (Jn 14, 20). They express an indwelling that extends beyond a communion of action. The communion and sharing of life between the Father and Son is the pattern for and is extended to the relationship between Jesus and disciples. In the image of the vine, the divine indwelling is an intimate union which finds expression in a way of life, lived in love. Mutual indwelling, life and love are different facets of the basic unity which binds together the Father, the Son and the believer. To remain in Jesus, or in the Father or in one of the divine gifts (love, truth, the word etc.) is not an exclusive experience of specially chosen believers. It expresses personal relationships which belong to the heart of christian living. It is linked with keeping the word or message of Jesus in a spirit of love. It entails a struggle within man against the forces of evil.<sup>17</sup>

Communion for John is the mystery of God's action and man's receptivity. It is the action and gift of Three Persons. God the Father and Jesus the Son remain or abide in the believer; the Holy Spirit is in the disciple. Faith which leads to communion is the work of the Three.<sup>18</sup> But the relationships to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in this communion with God are distinct. The Father is the source of all gifts – of life, love. He draws us to faith in his Son. His word, his life and love are manifest in Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit who works within us, interiorizing the word of Jesus so that it becomes a life-giving power. It is he who deepens our communion through faith in Jesus.<sup>19</sup> The relationships of the believer to the Father, the Son and the Spirit are described in the language of communion. He remains or abides in God and in Jesus; he worships in the Spirit. Through faith in Jesus, given by the Spirit, he enters into a communion of life and love with the Father. But it is through and in Jesus that he receives all, even the gift to love. The man who enjoys communion is a contemplative; he 'knows'. He is called to recognize and to live the word, especially the commandment of Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> Cf R. Brown: *The Gospel according to John*, Vol I (New York, 1966), pp 511-12.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Jn 3, 5; 6, 29. 37. 44. 65; 14, 17; 15, 26; 16, 13; 1 Jn 4, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Jn 3, 5; 6, 63; 16, 13.