

Mysticism and Scripture

Dialogical companions

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THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, of Christian mysticism and of Christian scriptural exegesis is a single evolution; reflection on the theological truths contained in Scripture gives rise to ongoing expressions of the reality of God in words and in human experience. What I would like to outline in this article is a dialogical relationship between Scripture and mysticism, in which the words of Scripture become embodied in the human person, and the life experience of the Christian provides new meaning and application for the truth contained in Scripture. In other words, the mystical tradition provides concrete, tangible and continuing expressions of Scripture, making it a living tradition, both by embodying it in human lives and by contributing in unique ways to its ongoing interpretation.

As Origen, the great patristic theologian and exegete, teaches, the multiple meanings of Scripture can only be approached gradually, through a life of study and practice. This lifetime of scriptural assimilation is, in fact, the contemplative life, and the gradual knowledge of the reality of God it entailed has transformative effects for Christians, allowing them to participate in the very mystery of God. As Origen describes his own hermeneutical principles, he states that divine truths have been subtly implanted in the Scriptures, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in the apostles, prophets and other writers, in such a way as to encourage readers to ponder, to reflect, and to search for deeper meanings.

They [the scriptural authors] did this so that not anyone who wanted would have these mysteries laid bare and ready, so to speak, to be trodden underfoot, but so that the person who devoted himself to studies of this sort with all purity and continence and careful watching might be able in this way to inquire into the profoundly hidden meaning of God's Spirit that had been woven together with an ordinary narrative looking in another direction. And in this way they thought someone might become an ally of the Spirit's knowledge and a participant in the divine counsel.¹

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Origen, widely considered the first systematic theologian as well as the first to outline the Christian mystical life, was convinced that the truth and wisdom of Scripture, assimilated slowly and progressively, could lead the human person 'from smaller things to greater and from visible to invisible' to arrive at a more perfect knowledge of God and even to more intimate participation in God.²

Scriptural seeds for the mystical life

If Christians who aspire to deeper union with God need Scripture to begin to approach the mystery of God, are there some scriptural passages that mystics have found particularly important in their contemplative life?

The first notable Christian reflections on God, human nature and the person of Christ come from the missionary writings of Paul, a Pharisaic Jewish convert to Christianity. Whether or not Paul himself was a mystic is not the question I intend to address. What is important for our purposes is his outline of the Christian life as a moral, spiritual and contemplative journey which gradually transforms the human person. This journey contains elements of revelation (e.g., 2 Cor 12:1-6), moral discipline and a gradual recapturing of the image of God in the human person (cf. 2 Cor 3:17-18). For Paul, the reality of mystical union with God was expressed in several ways, most notably in Galatians 2:20, 'For it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me', and in 1 Corinthians 6:17, 'But the one who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.'

The entire text of 1 Corinthians 13 is also critical to the Christian mystical tradition, since it expresses the enigma of the human-divine relationship, which gradually moves from darkness and obscurity to greater light (1 Cor 13:12): 'For now I see as through a glass darkly, but then I shall see face to face.' Paul's definition of agapic love both explains who God is and lays out the pathway towards assimilation to that God. Similarly, we read in 1 John 4:7-8, 12: 'Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and the one who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . . No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and God's love is perfected in us.' Contemplation and a thorough learning of the discipline of love enable a gradual cleansing and even perfecting of the image of God implanted in humanity at the time of creation.

While Paul and the author of the Gospel of John capture many complex and essential theological truths, we must clearly recognize

that the New Testament was not understood to contain the full expression of the reality of God and the possibility of intimate union with God. The outpourings of complex human emotions contained in the Psalms, for example, were also considered critical in the expression of the God-human relationship and the prayerful development of the human person. And the scriptural text that was to provide the most fundamental resource for expressing the relationship between Christ and the individual or communal soul was that of the Song of Songs. Commentaries on the Song of Songs proliferated throughout the history of Christianity, from Origen to Ambrose to Bernard of Clairvaux to Teresa of Avila, whose commentary was burned upon the direction of a confessor. The unique capacity of erotic language to express the depths of desire for intimate union that characterizes both God and humanity was clearly recognized both by those who formulated the canon of Christian Scripture and by mystics who hoped to convey fully the reality of the God who is love.

Scripture in the mystical tradition

The most important evidence indicating the centrality of Christian Scripture to the Christian mystical tradition is the repetition of certain core scriptural passages within the works of many mystical authors. This suggests that not only did Paul have insights into the experience of union with God and a language that began to approach the expression of such an experience, but that Christian mystics who were themselves struggling with how to articulate the theological truths they had experienced found such scriptural expressions helpful in their own reflective processes. As a concordance to mystical texts would demonstrate, the key Pauline texts above appear repeatedly in the Christian mystical tradition, in the works of authors as diverse as Origen, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila.

But, if we are to understand fully the integration of the scriptural and mystical traditions, then it is important to explore, not the repetition of key scriptural passages, but the mode of their integration into the theological system. By way of example I shall consider briefly the thought of three mystics with widely divergent hermeneutical methods – Bernard of Clairvaux, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila – in order to demonstrate both the centrality of Scripture to their mystical theology and the creativity with which they integrate Scripture. This will indicate something of the breadth of theological insights contained in the Christian mystical tradition.

Bernard of Clairvaux's dedication to developing, expressing and teaching the contemplative ideal is widely recognized. A major part of his influence in the Cistercian reform tradition was his explication of the mystical life contained perhaps most notably in *On loving God* and the *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. In both texts Bernard sketches a kind of scriptural mosaic, interlacing citations from many scriptural sources in such a way as to create a larger picture of God and human life. In Sermon 31, for example, Bernard weaves together aspects of God's agapic love with characteristics of the bridegroom from the Song of Songs, suggesting that the encounters we experience with Christ are like glimpses in the darkness that prepare us for the 'face to face' encounter with God to come.

On all these occasions he is kind and gentle, full of merciful love. In his kisses he shows that he is both loving and charming; with the oil and the ointments that he is boundlessly considerate and compassionate and forgiving; on the journey he is gay, courteous, ever gracious and ready to help; in the display of his riches and possessions he reveals a kingly liberality, a munificent generosity in the bestowal of rewards. Through the whole context of this song you will find images of this nature to delineate the Word. Hence I feel that the Prophet was thinking on these lines when he said: 'Christ the Lord is a spirit before our face; under his shadow we shall live among the nations', because now we see in a mirror dimly and not yet face to face.³

For Julian of Norwich, the Christian life consists of a constant search for God, akin to that of the bride in the Song of Songs (cf. 3:1-2), the soul's thirst for God indicating a level of commitment to mystical union to which God will not fail to respond. Julian writes:

For it is God's will that we believe that we see him continually, though it seems to us that the sight be only partial; and through this belief he makes us always to gain more grace, for God wishes to be seen, and wishes to be sought, and wishes to be expected, and wishes to be trusted.⁴

The ongoing revelation of God to the Christian results in a knowledge of God which contains sensual, emotional and experiential dimensions and prepares the soul for the direct and continual knowledge it experiences in the complete union of God and the soul. The knowledge of God's goodness, the appreciation of the depth of God's love and the clarity in self-knowledge that results from this ongoing revelation, is

similar to a gradual shedding of scales before the eyes; the soul becomes gradually able to behold God as intimate lover. For Julian, this union is indicated by the text of 1 Corinthians 13:12, as she explains:

And so we shall by his sweet grace in our own meek continual prayer come into him now in this life by many secret touchings of sweet spiritual sights and feelings, measured out to us as our simplicity may bear it. And this is done and will be done by the grace of the Holy Spirit, until the day that we die, still longing for love. And then we shall all come into our Lord, knowing ourselves clearly and wholly possessing God, and we shall all be endlessly hidden in God, truly seeing and wholly feeling, and hearing him spiritually and delectably smelling him and sweetly tasting him. And there we shall see God face to face, familiarly and wholly.⁵

Thus, for Julian, all revelation from God is bound up in the deepest reality of God's love, a love that leads to mutual self-disclosure, truth, goodness and intimate union.

Writing in a very different context, the Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila describes a very similar process toward mystical union, a process that reveals much about the nature of the human person and the nature of God along the way. The directives of the Valdes *Index of prohibited books* kept Teresa from vernacular exegesis, but her masterpiece, *The interior castle*, is nonetheless peppered with scriptural references. A similar intertextual weaving is contained in the sixth mansion, a state of rapture and theological insights experienced just before the mystical union of the seventh, or final, mansions. In the sixth mansion, 'the soul is now wounded with love for its Spouse'.⁶ and its desire for spousal union heightened in intensity. With each encounter with God the soul is enkindled by a spark of love from God which cannot sustain itself and goes out, leaving the soul to suffer from God's absence. As Teresa characterizes the effects of such experiences, she writes:

It [the soul] feels a strange solitude because no creature in all the earth provides it company, nor do I believe would any heavenly creature, not being the One whom it loves; rather, everything torments it. But the soul sees that it is like a person hanging, who cannot support himself on any earthly thing; nor can it ascend to heaven. On fire with this thirst, it cannot get to the water; and the thirst is not one that is endurable but already at such a point that nothing will take it away. Nor does the soul desire that the thirst be taken away save by that water of which our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman.⁷

The deeper awakening of the soul produced by these temporary encounters leads to a gradual knowledge of God in the soul's own depths, experienced in the seventh mansions, the very dwelling place of God. Raptures pass away and the soul dwells with God in a way that Teresa describes by analogy as a drop of water falling into a stream or as indicative of Paul's words which she paraphrases, 'He that is joined or united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him' (1 Cor 6:17).

In very different ways, but with many parallels, each of these mystical authors has engaged in a dialogue with key scriptural texts, a dialogue that confers meanings in both directions, shedding light on how Scripture can be experienced and adding nuances and contours to the theological truths contained in it.

The significance of scriptural-mystical integration

The relationship between the Christian mystical tradition and Christian Scripture is a complex one, and its history has been fraught with apologetic argument. We are still far from able to show just how deeply intertwined the two traditions are. However, more detailed study of mystical texts for their scriptural content and theological interpretation is sure to reap important rewards not simply for church historians, historical theologians or historians of spirituality. Further study of the relationship between Scripture and mysticism promises to reveal deeper theological insight into doctrine and scriptural meaning, allowing us, individually and communally, to approach in our own lives and flesh the experiential truth of scriptural texts.

Much recent discussion of the Christian mystical tradition notes the ongoing division, even tension, between definitions of theology and definitions of mysticism and spirituality. Although most scholars now generally agree that such tensions are artificial and must be overcome, we are still working out how to do so.⁸ And the imperative to work out this integration is the mutual need both fields have for one another; spirituality without theology runs the risk of becoming superficial, individualistic, and even narcissistic,⁹ and theology without appreciation of the complex dimensions of human experience runs the risk of becoming equally superficial, imperialistic, socially naïve or rigidly dogmatic. But if our starting point is ourselves – individuals bound together somehow as the living, breathing tissue and organs of the body of Christ, and living words whose lives find meaning in ongoing reflection on the Word as it has been expressed in the words of Scripture and mystical texts – we can perhaps begin to explore the depths of the sacred, incarnational reality of our lives as human subjects, both at the

individual and the communal level. As theologians as diverse as Teilh ard de Chardin, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Dorothee Soelle, and Jon Sobrino remind us, theology is an ongoing attempt to express in words that which we must embody within the many spheres we intersect in our daily lives: the reality of the God we come to know over the course of a lifetime of reflection and experience.

Perhaps, in order to begin this exploratory process, we must remind ourselves that the mystical tradition exists only because individuals and communities who have gone before us sought to discover deeper understanding, meaning, joy and fulfillment in circumstances and contexts that were no less complex, challenging and even troubling than our own. Thus the words of mystical texts were embodied in persons who grew, changed and transformed their communities along the way. Convinced of the possibility of radical personal and communal transformation, mystics sought to create contexts – in cloisters like Teresa’s discalced Carmelite convents, as recluses like Julian, and in the hearts of urban centres – that would allow them to blend action and contemplation in sustained lives of service and reform. Critical in this process was the creation, at all levels, of life-giving relations with their peers, becoming intercessors of peace, cultivating trust and intimate sharing in correspondence and conversations laden with meaning and support, and developing companionate relations that allowed for life-long mentoring and accompaniment and the realization of the promise of Christ in Matthew 18:20: ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.’ The clearest starting point for this process is ongoing experimentation in prayer, ‘conversation with One whom we know loves us’,¹⁰ a multi-tiered and life-long conversation that moves ever more fluidly from the ultimately unknowable God of mystery to the enfleshed God in the faces and bodies of all those around us, transforming all engaged in such encounters.

Finally, as we have begun to appreciate more fully, the Christian mystical tradition is a vast heritage of tremendous import to all Christians and people of faith.¹¹ It is important, if we are to understand how the Christian tradition has interpreted and embodied Scripture throughout its evolution, to explore Scripture in conversation with selections from Christian mystical texts. Both theologians and pastoral workers will need to become more familiar with the mystical tradition and individual mystical texts, allowing them to have a more integrated hermeneutical framework for their work. Laity, too, need to take advantage of the greater accessibility, through translations and commentary, of Christian mystical texts, informing themselves so that

reflection on mystical writings can become more regularized in the activities of Christian base communities and parish-based small-group reflections, as well as in various liturgical functions. For the Christian community, such study will provide new directions for how, as members of a larger body of Christ, we might explore, glimpse and even reveal, mutually, the Word made flesh.

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NOTES

1 Origen, *On first principles*, Book IV:2:7 in Origen, *An exhortation to martyrdom, prayer, first principles: Book IV, prologue to the commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, translated by Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p 186.

2 *Ibid.*, p 216.

3 Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, vol 2 (Sermons 21–46), translated by Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), p 131.

4 Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, translated by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p 194. For Julian, the soul 'cannot do more than seek, suffer and trust . . . Seeking with faith, hope and love pleases our Lord, and finding pleases the soul and fills it full of joy.' Thus she concludes: 'It is God's will that we seek on until we see him, for it is through this that he will show himself to us, of his special grace, when it is his will.' *Ibid.*, p 195.

5 *Ibid.*, p 255; Teresa's reference to the soul at this stage as the bride in the Song of Songs frantically searching for her lover is more explicit in VI:4:9, which refers to Sg 3:2.

6 Teresa of Avila, *The interior castle*, translated Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) [VI:1:1], p 108; cf. Song of Songs.

7 *Ibid.*, VI:11:5.

8 See, for example, Mark McIntosh, *Mystical theology: the integrity of spirituality and theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

9 Perhaps the most cogent and compelling scholarly discussion of this concern is contained in Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, gender and Christian mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

10 Cf. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 8:5.

11 See especially Bernard McGinn's magisterial series on the history of western Christian mysticism, *The presence of God*, three volumes of which, *The foundations of mysticism*, *The growth of mysticism* and *The flowering of mysticism* are currently available.