

Christ-mysticism in Paul

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INTEREST IN THE PHENOMENON OF MYSTICISM is one of the major characteristics of the twenty-first century. This can be seen both at a scholarly and at a popular level. The number of books on the subject is almost overwhelming; ancient spiritual classics are now published in critical editions; and courses for the study of mysticism are increasing at university level world-wide. It is as though humanity is waking up, and re-claiming its mystical heritage. This awakening can be seen in recent studies of New Testament texts; and it is the mysticism of one New Testament author, St Paul, which constitutes the subject of this article. In order to proceed with a discussion of Pauline mysticism, it is necessary, firstly, to come to an understanding of what is meant by 'mysticism'. Following this, there will be a brief examination of the methodological explosion that has taken place in New Testament studies, from within the framework of postmodernism. And thirdly, the main section of the article will concentrate on Pauline mysticism, with particular attention given to the 'in Christ' formulation.

The nature of mysticism

What is meant by 'mysticism'? It is undoubtedly the case that any attempt to define the term is fraught with difficulties, given the equivocal meanings attributed to the word, both in ordinary speech and in scholarly analysis. The problem is aggravated further by the fact that mysticism is often associated with abnormal phenomena, pathological states and religious sentimentality. Confusion with respect to definition leads to prejudice which precludes proper investigation and scientific inquiry. Fortunately, with the renewed interest in the subject, greater attention is now being given to a correct definition of mysticism.

In his classic treatment of the subject, Dean Inge listed twenty-six definitions of mysticism; yet in the final summing-up of his research, nearly fifty years later, he succinctly encapsulates his formulation as follows: 'Mysticism means communion with God, that is to say with a being conceived as the supreme and ultimate reality.'¹ Underhill, the well-known twentieth-century writer on mysticism, describes the phenomenon as 'the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order'.² In

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more recent scholarship, the idea of 'consciousness of the *presence* of God' is brought to the fore.³ By way of summary, I would suggest that mysticism can be defined as *consciousness of union with the Divine*, or the *Ground of Being*, or *Ultimate Reality*, depending on the type of mysticism under investigation, and whether its predilections are theistic or monistic.⁴ A few more points are worthy of inclusion at this stage, in order to sharpen the focus with respect to understanding mysticism. Firstly, mysticism refers also to a *way of life*, in which the purifying, illuminating and transforming power of God is experienced, effecting a transmutation of the mystic's entire being and consciousness. Secondly, although certain extraordinary features may accompany the mystical state, for example, ecstasy, visions or trance, such epiphenomena are not to be seen as essential elements of mysticism.⁵ Finally, mysticism cannot be equated with spirituality.⁶ While closely related, the latter has a broader meaning, relating to the meaning and values to which we subscribe.⁷

In the following discussion of Pauline literature, the primary focus of attention is consciousness of union with the divine. Bearing the foregoing in mind, a brief analysis of postmodernism and current New Testament scholarship is now offered, in order to highlight the 'return' of a mystical hermeneutic, and the particular contribution of Paul to our understanding of biblical mysticism.

Postmodernism and New Testament scholarship

Postmodernism is in danger of becoming something of a buzz word, yet its relevance cannot be overestimated, particularly in the light of the heterodox methodological explosion that has taken place in New Testament scholarship. What is meant by postmodernism? Firstly, postmodernism refers to a sea change, a gestalt shift or epistemological transformation that has taken place in philosophical, theological, political, social, artistic and economic spheres of life. Modernity, with its rationalist ideologies, mechanistic views of science, reductionist empirical theories and the attenuation or even atrophy of religious and spiritual sensitivities, has led to a truncated vision of humanity. Dissatisfied with such a scenario, constructive or revisionary versions of postmodernism⁸ offer a more inclusive, open-ended approach, which is characterized by a revalorization of spiritual and ecological values, and a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic and religious insights. It supports ecology, peace movements and feminism, and attempts to transcend patriarchy, mechanization and consumerism. At the same time, postmodernism recognizes the progress made in the modern era.⁹

With respect to biblical hermeneutics, there has been a shift of such magnitude that scholars are still trying to catch up with the variety of approaches that have emerged within the past decades. One of the most established methods for understanding Scripture, namely, the historical-critical method, has come under particular attack within the postmodernist era. Whilst the method has value, and there is no suggestion that it should be completely jettisoned, its weaknesses are self-evident. Despite its claims of objectivity and impartiality, the method itself originated and remained within a male-Eurocentric setting. Its positivistic and atomistic approach leads to an understanding of Scripture as an object to be dissected, rather than a life-giving and transformative text. With the rise of postmodernism, such rationalistic and reductionistic approaches are giving way to methods that enable the text to come to life as dynamic and transformative. Postmodernist trends include the reintroduction of mythology, which counteracts the flattening of thought so characteristic of a rationalist era. There is also a deeper awareness of the power of symbolism; psychological insights, particularly from a Jungian perspective, are receiving greater attention;¹⁰ and cross-cultural studies are offering diverse and rich hermeneutical keys for understanding Scripture.¹¹ Within this postmodernist ambience, the importance of spirituality and mysticism with respect to Scripture, and the New Testament in particular, has come into the limelight.¹² Within the constraints of the present article, it is only possible to discuss one such area, namely, Pauline mysticism.

Pauline mysticism

Modern Pauline christology has neglected mystical and cognate experiences as sources of doctrinal tradition. This situation may be explained partly by the fact that for decades much of Pauline theology has concentrated on 'justification by faith' in Paul, to the detriment of a mystical interpretation of his thought. Allied with this is a prejudice against mysticism which considers it as a Greek-influenced, heretical branch of Christianity. One of the charges levelled against mysticism in Paul is that it is antithetical to personal Christianity as revealed in the historical actuality of Jesus, since it minimizes the historical. Another charge is that in mysticism the transcendent God, who addresses humanity in its utter sinfulness, is replaced by the immanent divine.¹³ However, such criticisms are untenable, since mysticism in no way abrogates faith, and is not in opposition to personal Christianity. In fact, one could speak of a mysticism of the 'historical event' in which the

meaning of the historical events of Christianity are transmuted into a meta-historical realm, without denying the validity of their historical importance. Such mimetic re-enactment transforms the historical founding events of religion into deep mystical experience.

The problematic regarding mysticism in Paul has been a constant source of debate, which unfortunately cannot be taken up here.¹⁴ However, the major premise of this article is that Paul the *mystic*, not Paul the moralist, or organiser of the early churches, is the revealer of God's secret wisdom. He it is who manifests Christ as a 'radically new facet of the divine personality, thereby making known the possibility of an essentially dynamic union with the risen Jesus'.¹⁵ It is important to turn to the mysticism of Paul as a 'valid and valuable source for the exploration of Christ as the centre of a permanently contemporary experience'.¹⁶ The major threads of Paul's mysticism will be concentrated within a discussion of the expression *in Christ*.

In Christ

The expression 'in Christ' figures prominently in the letters of Paul. 'In Christ' describes succinctly the intimate relationship he has with Christ (cf Gal 2:20). It is my contention that the expression 'in Christ' is a crucial hermeneutical principle, by which other aspects of Paul's theology, such as reconciliation, salvation, eschatology, ecclesiology, etc., can be better understood. The prominence given to the expression by Paul is itself an indication of the importance that he attributes to this concept. It is important to take into account the *versatility* of the expression, since Paul uses the concept with a certain flexibility and it does not carry the same weight in every instance. For example, in certain instances 'in Christ' simply denotes 'Christian' (e.g. Rom 16:3; 16:9-10; 1 Cor 4:10; Gal 1:22). The expression also comprises ecclesiological, eschatological and corporate elements.¹⁷

The *mystical* interpretation of 'in Christ' was propagated at the turn of the century by Deissmann who postulated that the christophany on the way to Damascus was a decisive event, which replaced Paul's mysticism of performance with a mysticism of grace and brought him into a new and powerful relationship with Christ.¹⁸ This encounter was clearly a turning point of the greatest magnitude in the life of the then Saul of Tarsus. This momentous meeting with the risen Lord was for Paul an indication of God's divine and dynamic action which forever changed his life, effecting liberation in his own life: 'Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' (1 Cor 9:1). This experience was

interpreted by Paul as God's call, which henceforth undergirded his mission to the gentiles and his summons to apostleship.¹⁹

The mystical initiative comes from God: it is both an act of grace and is effected in the historical actuality of Christ. 'Human mysticism, as attraction, knowledge and experience of God, is always preceded . . . by a divine mysticism as attraction, knowledge, and experience of the human by God . . .' (cf Phil 2:7; Gal 4:9).²⁰ Much of Paul's terminology refers to an 'undeniable semantic of participation', without implying a basic 'connaturality or synergeia between the human and the divine'.²¹ This is in accordance with orthodox Christian thought which posits a clear distinction between the divine and human. The person in Christ has not lost his or her personality in another, nor does he or she feel merged into the ground of the universe, but lives uniquely in another, namely the risen and glorified Lord. Such a union is not spatial, but personal: to be in Christ indicates that the adherent is under the power and influence of the spiritual and personal Lord, who is identified with the crucified Jesus.²² A seminal contribution to the mystical interpretation of 'in Christ' comes from Schweitzer who maintains that the mystical interpretation of this phrase colours and transfigures all aspects of the basic Pauline doctrines.²³ Schweitzer is perhaps best known for his thesis that the 'in Christ' motif takes precedence over *righteousness by faith* in Paul: the latter is a subsidiary crater, formed within the main crater of the mystical doctrine of redemption by virtue of being 'in Christ'. Schweitzer's interpretation is strongly *eschatological*. He maintains that the resurrection of Christ initiated the 'last age' and that Paul sees the predestined solidarity of the elect with the Messiah drawing them already into the resurrection of Christ by virtue of their being 'in Christ'. Whilst 'the outward appearance is still of the transient world . . . the reality is already that of the eternal world'.²⁴

Mystical transformation 'in Christ' takes place at several levels. *Baptism* initiates the believer into the community of Christ; *suffering* conforms the believer into the image of Christ; and life in Christ leads to what could be called Paul's *mystical imperative*, characterized by life 'in the Spirit'. These elements of Paul's mysticism will now be examined briefly.

Baptism

Baptism initiates the believer into the *community* of Christ: the mystical being-in-Christ effects communion with each other, the *mystical body* of Christ, which comprises a new society. Baptism

establishes a fundamentally new direction in life and in addition empowers the believer to follow that direction and live henceforth a transfigured life of grace. Baptism effects a reconditioning of consciousness and a change in allegiance. The external act of being immersed in water is symbolic of an inner spiritual regeneration (1 Cor 12:13). 'The creative presence of God, a presence which permeates the created personality and can be known by reason, becomes through baptism a personal self-giving which can be answered in mutual relationship, a communion, the presence of friend to friend.'²⁵ There is a *liminal* dimension to baptism:²⁶ there is a threshold to be crossed in moving from one state of being or social status to another. There is a new and unprecedented society which arises as a result of baptism, which no longer adheres to the prevailing norms of the times. The baptismal community is clearly manifested in the sharing of a sacred, sacramental meal, an anticipation of the celestial banquet, experienced mystically in the present. Breaking bread and drinking wine in fellowship indicates that social, cultural and economic barriers are abolished in the Church.

Suffering

Paul's mysticism is inseparable from the vicissitudes of daily life. Christ-mysticism for Paul is not characterized by lofty peaks of spiritual excitement and ecstasy, visions and revelations, although these are not absent. Union with Christ is characterized by 'self-giving love, by the cross – union with Christ is nothing if it is not union with Christ in his death'.²⁷ Suffering is unavoidable, since the Christian belief and way of life run counter to the aspirations and ideals of the world. Yet spiritual fruitfulness is possible even amidst deep suffering. Human weakness is not an obstacle for God; on the contrary, it provides the ambience for divine activity. Such was Paul's experience in Corinth (2 Cor 11:23–33), and led to his doctrine of power in weakness (2 Cor 4:7–11). Paul's afflictions are presented as a didactic model in several instances: he carries death in his body, so that the life of Jesus can be manifested (2 Cor 4:10); he suffers to bring comfort to the Corinthians in order that they in turn might share Christ's sufferings (2 Cor 1:5). Paul commends the Philippians for suffering as an example to their opponents (Phil 1:29–30), and the Thessalonians for following his example in suffering (1 Thess 1:5–6). Paul's Christ-mysticism enables the believer to see that by virtue of Christ's cross and resurrection, sickness and suffering do not necessarily lead to debilitation. Paul's '... connection of an extremely negative symbol,

execution on the cross, with the most positive symbols of salvation and redemption, makes it possible to reduce avoidance reactions with respect to suffering – a presupposition of help for the weak, ill, and those in need of aid and the constructive handling of suffering in themselves'.²⁸ Particular events in the life of the Christian constitute the means by which he or she carries in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in the body (cf 2 Cor 4:10). This does not mean that the believer is lulled into a kind of platonic detachment with respect to pain and suffering; Christian faith does not sweep adherents up and out of the struggle and misery of life and into some non-involved spiritual or intellectual relationship with God. In stark contrast, the gospel shows God as sweeping out of eternity in order to be totally and passionately involved in the brokenness of life. God incarnate in Jesus is the manifestation of an infinite capacity to share and bear the cumulative weight of human pain and anguish.

At the heart of Paul's teaching, therefore, is the conviction that identification with Christ leads to sharing in his cross and resurrection and the transfiguration of pain and suffering. Although suffering exists it has lost its enslaving power (cf Rom 8:35–39). Acceptance of one's personal 'crucifixion' epitomizes the summation of a life which consistently seeks to be divested of self, a primary component of the mystical path.

Mystical imperative

Paul's mysticism cannot be divorced from his emphasis on the ethical dimension. Believers are now free and their freedom is 'in the spirit' (Rom 8:1–2); yet this freedom does not mean licence. Whilst free, the community is now at the service of one another (1 Cor 10:23–24); love is the aim (Gal 5:13–14; 1 Cor 14:1). The moral imperative of the new life is directly opposed to ego-inflation, and to the contrary, emphasizes *conformity to Christ*. Abandoning the desires of the empirical ego, the believer is transformed into the image of Christ, so that he or she can truly say, 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2:20). There is a similarity here with the Buddhist concept of 'no-self' – *anatta*. To pursue the Buddhist analogy, the *muni* – the wise one – is he who is 'ego-less'; he practises 'due nothingness', acting by not acting at all, not even knowing his non-action, because there is no longer a self.²⁹ This leads to inner tranquillity and humility, living in the world in gentleness and quietude. Spiritually poor, the one who is divested of self possesses the entire wealth of divinity. As a result of this, the adherent is at the service of others: '... the task of psychological and moral development is to

move steadily toward a greater understanding of who one is in relation to self and others, identified as a movement from self-absorption to self-transcendence'.³⁰ The interface of mystical experience and social involvement is of the utmost importance. 'It is because of where believers are (in Christ), empowered by the gift of the Spirit, that human life in accord with God's holy will ensues.'³¹

In-the-Spirit

Although Paul's statement, 'The Lord is the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:17), gives the impression that there is identification between Christ and the Spirit, it is necessary to be aware of the nuances encapsulated here. Whilst Christ and the Spirit are ineluctably linked in Paul, nevertheless, being 'in the Spirit' depends upon being 'in Christ'. The latter belongs to the objective state of salvation, whilst the former denotes the implementation of this salvific state, viz., the appropriation of the gifts and power of redemption. The ascended Christ imparts his life and power to the Church through the Spirit. Henceforth, the followers of Christ are to be 'spiritual – the meaning of the resurrection is to be 'seized by the life-giving Spirit' and to experience 'the "powers of the world to come" (Heb 6:5) in our own living and dying'.³² Paul urges his readers to 'walk in the Spirit' (Gal 5:6), 'live in the Spirit' (Gal 5:25), 'speak in the Spirit' (1 Cor 14:2) and to manifest the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). To be 'in the Spirit' is a characteristic of the new life, and a foretaste of the new existence which has been effected by Christ through his death and resurrection. The relationship of the believer to God and to Jesus takes place in the Spirit; hence the *trinitarian* nature of Paul's mysticism comes clearly to the fore. The mystery of the Trinity should not be left to the intellectual disputes of theologians, but should be seen as reflected in the pristine message of the gospel, and in Paul's elucidation of the new life of grace.³³

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, the following points can be made; firstly, instead of mysticism being viewed with unequivocal scepticism, it can be seen as a powerful hermeneutical key for understanding Scripture; secondly, Scripture is the foundation for mysticism and for a mystical way of life; thirdly, a new lucidity and power accrues from the realization that the heart of Paul's Gospel is *union with God in Christ*, both at an individual and at a collective level. 'In Christ' there is one reality (Gal 3:28), one body (Rom 12:5) and new life – lived in a new manner, a manner determined by the Lord, in the radius of his life-

giving love, in which believers are now empowered (2 Cor:14) and in which they are already rooted and founded (Eph 3:17). Pauline mysticism, as cogently expressed in the 'in Christ' formulation, illustrates what it means to be conformed to Christ. This is the highest aspiration and attainment of human life, and effects 'Christification' – and 'deification' – whereby the believer enters into and lives the very life of the Trinity.

There is a need for mystics whose proximity to the text allows for a fresh understanding of the mystical roots of Scripture. This is particularly true in the academy. For far too long biblical scholars have been merely 'curators', whose subject matter is locked up into an all too distant historical realm. The text is no longer seen as religious, sacred and life-giving, but purely as an object to be analysed, dissected and deconstructed. By returning to its mystical roots, and rediscovering its mystical heritage, Christianity will once again be empowered to effect change and transformation at all levels of society and contribute to an evolution of consciousness in this new millennium.

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NOTES

- 1 W. Inge, *Mysticism in religion* (London: Rider & Company, 1947), p 8.
- 2 E. Underhill, *Mysticism. A study in the nature of man's spiritual consciousness* (New York: Dutton, [1911]/1961), p xiv.
- 3 B. McGinn, *The foundations of mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1991), p xiv.
- 4 C. Kourie, 'Mysticism: a survey of recent issues', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 5 (1992), pp 83–103.
- 5 See, for example, John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book 2, chapter 22.
- 6 A. E. McGrath, *Christian spirituality: an introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). It is important to keep a clear distinction between the terms 'mysticism' and 'spirituality'; in this respect McGrath does not help the discussion by displacing 'mysticism' with 'spirituality'.
- 7 S. Schneiders, 'Theology and spirituality: strangers, rivals or partners?', *Horizons* 13 (2) (1986), pp 253–274.
- 8 D. Griffin, *Sacred interconnections: postmodern spirituality, political economy and art* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), p x.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 J. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: a psychological commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).
- 11 R. Ravindra, *The yoga of the Christ in the Gospel according to John* (Dorset: Element, 1990).

- 12 B. Thurston, 'The study of the New Testament and the study of Christian spirituality: some reflections', *Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* 8 (2) (2000), 1–6.
- 13 Paradigmatic of such views is a certain strand of protestantism associated with, *inter alia*, Ritschl, Troeltsch, von Harnack and the neo-orthodoxy of Barth and Brunner.
- 14 R. Penna, *Paul the apostle: wisdom and folly of the cross* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p 235ff.
- 15 D. Stanley, 'The elements of Christian mysticism exhibited by certain New Testament documents', *Studia Missionalia* 26 (1977), pp 1–35, at p 11.
- 16 G. Tavard, 'The christology of the mystics', *Theological Studies* 42 (1981), pp 561–579.
- 17 R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol 1 (London: SCM, 1971), and E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 1971).
- 18 A. Deissmann, *Die Neutestamentliche Formel 'In Christo Jesu'* (Marburg: NG Elwert, 1892), and *Paul: a study in social and religious history* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1926); translation of *Paulus: eine kultur und religionsgeschichtliche Skizze* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1911).
- 19 See D. Stanley, 'The elements of Christian mysticism exhibited by certain New Testament documents', *Studia Missionalia* 26 (1977), pp 1–35; cf D. Stanley, 'The apostle Paul as saint', *Studia Missionalia* 35 (1986), pp 71–97.
- 20 Penna, *Paul the apostle*; p 249.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p 245.
- 22 A. Wikenhauser, *Pauline mysticism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1960), p 86. Translation of *Die Christusmystik des Apostels Paulus* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956).
- 23 A. Schweitzer, *The mysticism of Paul the apostle* (London: A&C Black, 1931). Translation of *Die mystik des apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930); cf A. Thiselton, 'Biblical Classics: Schweitzer's interpretation of Paul', *The Expository Times* 90 (1979), pp 132–137.
- 24 Schweitzer, p 110.
- 25 M. Day, 'Sr Elisabeth of the Trinity and the creative presence of God', *Mount Carmel* 9 (1961), pp 12–17, p 15.
- 26 J. Crowley, 'Baptism as eschatological event', *Worship* 62 (1988), pp 293–294.
- 27 J. Dunn, *Unity and diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977), p 195.
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- 29 J. Weber and J. Vahlkampff, *The depth of humility: commentaries on the gnostic and Buddhist concept of humility* (Delhi: Eastern Book Corporation, 1993), p 128.
- 30 D. Billy and D. Orsuto, *Spirituality and morality* (New York: Paulist, 1996), p 103; cf J. Houlden, *The public face of the gospel: New Testament ideas of the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p 42.
- 31 R. Morgan, *Romans* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p 109.
- 32 J. Moltmann, *The source of life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p 16.
- 33 C. Kourie and L. Kretzschmar, *Christian spirituality in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000), p 1.