Thinking about an unfathomable God

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WE HAVE AN IMPORTANT DECISION to make at the start of this article. Are we going to focus on what mystical writers have to say as they find themselves encountered by God (mystical theology)? Or are we going to try to understand, theologically, what is going on when that encounter takes place (theology of mysticism)? Undoubtedly the former would be the more profound project, but given the vast range of mystical teaching about divine life and its impact within all life, we could not hope to do it justice in a brief essay. What we *can* do is to give an account of the mystical life in Christian theological terms.

Of course we have the usual problem of specifying exactly what we mean when we say 'mysticism'. And we have to recognize that what we mean by that word will be determined by the kind of discipline in which we speak of it. The danger with a theological approach is that the theology will somehow become narrowly prescriptive, forcing actual historical phenomena and texts into notional *a priori* categories. Indeed there are many good reasons why mysticism and spirituality can be studied from broadly interdisciplinary and generally anthropological points of view. Philip Sheldrake continues his exemplary work as nuanced guide to the various perspectives on these questions.[1]

But suppose for a moment that Christians wondered whether God might be saying or doing something among them by means of the mystical life in all its various dimensions. In such a case, theology would give us the conceptual tools and vocabulary to investigate that possibility because it provides us with a way to talk about the divine agent of mystical encounter. If, by contrast, we were to try thinking about mysticism in terms of psychology or even a generously transcendental philosophy, we would necessarily be speaking about states of individual human interiority – which, apart from *some* theological framework or other, would not tell us much about God. Furthermore, it is only fairly recently in the history of Christian mysticism that mystical writers have been terribly interested in their own inner feelings or experiences, in and of themselves.[2] Indeed, a number of scholars have now suggested fairly convincingly that our

modern conception of mysticism as something primarily to do with unusual states of inner life is definitely askew.[3] The reason why mystics or contemplatives have spoken of their inner consciousness at all is because they have been trying to articulate something of the transforming power of God – and the self is just one of those aspects of transformed reality that mystics have been able to point to as a sign or trace of God's hidden and transforming presence in the whole cosmos.

So, counter-intuitive as it might seem, I want to suggest a theological exploration of the mystical life that tries to hold at bay the usual conception of mysticism as having primarily to do with anyone's 'inner' life. I believe this will turn out not only to be more productive theologically, that is, it will enable us to focus more directly on what God might be saying and doing by means of the mystical life; but it will also be more accurate historically and more in keeping with the intentions of Christian mystical writers who worked so hard to express something that would direct the loving attention of their communities not to themselves but to God.

The mystical: the hidden presence of God

The word 'mystical' derives from the Greek verb *muein*, to close, as in, to close the eyes. It was used in the Hellenistic world by the so-called mystery religions; for them, the mystical (*ta mustika*) was the secret ritual actions of the cults.[4] But by the time Christians began using the term and its correlates, it had a more generic sense of whatever was hidden. Clement and Origen of Alexandria were among the earliest Christian writers to use it regularly. They did so not regarding ritual secrets but, interestingly, with respect to the hidden depths of the Scriptures. The incarnation of the Logos, in the view of the great Alexandrians, gives the world a crucial glimpse of the universal cosmic Word in visible form. The life, death and resurrection of Christ, then, makes possible a new perception of the inner meaning of the same Word of God dwelling hidden in the depths of Scripture (and also in history and the created order as a whole). Christ is the revelation of this inner meaning, because in him the fullness of God's plan of salvation is spelled out.

So for the Alexandrians there is a double sense of the mystical. There is the hidden or mystical depth of meaning in Scriptures; and this they explore in their characteristically figural or allegorical exegesis, in which Christ is the hermeneutical key which unlocks this mystical meaning. Origen, for example, in his famous *Homily twenty-seven on*

the Book of Numbers, contemplates the journey of the children of Israel through the desert; Origen reads (allegorically) into the mystical depths of the story to help understand the journey of Christians to the Father. This mystical quality to Scripture, however, itself springs from a yet deeper hiddenness which is its true source. For this sense of a mystical depth in Scripture is only the sign of *the* Mystery, the *musterion* in St Paul's language, 'which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed' (Rom 16:26). This is the ultimate mystical ground: God's infinite love, unfathomably expressed in finite historical circumstance. And it is this ever-giving divine 'more' which is the hidden spring of all the mystical depths and hidden meanings in the Scriptures and in the cognate Book of the Creatures.

It is important to see, then, that in these early Christian eras, the mystical refers not primarily to any inner states of individual feeling or experience but firstly to the unfathomable depths of divine life, and secondly to the revealed yet ever-veiled expressions of that divine giving, namely the Scriptures and the created order. The incarnation draws Jesus' followers into a new perception of God's Word: as their lives are attuned by the Holy Spirit to the incarnate pattern of the Word, so they are enabled to perceive the mystical presence of the same Word in the Scriptures (and by extension in the creation, and eventually also the liturgy). These mystical traces of God's overflowing generosity are hidden from the world in general, because the world is unable to perceive the unfathomable giving love of God; its mind tends to be distorted by meanness, fear and acquisitiveness.

For this reason, Origen begins the Prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* with a stern warning to those who have not yet grown up to the full stature of Christ:

> if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach . . . [the Song], to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal.[5]

Origen's evocative phrase about knowing 'how to hear love's language' points to an important consideration. In Origen's view, repentance, conversion and formation are crucial elements in the Church's mystical work. The Church as an organ or sacrament of the resurrection of Christ is the locus of the Spirit's activity, opening the world's heart and mind

to the vision of God in Christ. It is in this sense, of learning 'how to hear love's language', that individual members of the Church would inevitably attend to their own spiritual growth, and even perhaps to the healing and transforming Christ, mystically present within them. But attention to the inner experience of spiritual growth is clearly not for its own sake, but in order to discern one's readiness for participation in the communal mystical task. One cannot share in the Church's mystical work of perceiving and announcing the hidden depths of God's love by means of exegesis, worship and the iconic activity of discipleship, if one's own heart is frantically in search of gratification or one's mind is closed to all but manipulable, technical data.

Thus Basil the Great elucidates the need for spiritual growth in order for contemplation to become possible; there must be a habit of mind in the would-be contemplative that is truly open to the mystical depths of God's infinite holiness and love. Commenting on John 14, Basil notes:

> By 'world' . . . [Christ] means those who are tied down by a material and carnal life, and restrict truth to what is seen by their eyes. They refuse to believe in the resurrection, and become unable to see the Lord with the eyes of their hearts . . . A carnal man's mind is not trained in contemplation, but remains buried in the mud of fleshly lusts, powerless to look up and see the spiritual light of the truth. So the 'world' – life enslaved by carnal passions – can no more receive the grace of the Spirit than a weak eye can look at the light of a sunbeam. First the Lord cleansed His disciples' lives through His teaching, and then He gave them the ability to both see and contemplate the Spirit.[6]

In this passage, Basil explicitly roots the contemplative or mystical life directly in the trinitarian missions of the Son and the Spirit. Their sanctifying work re-creates the hearts and minds of believers, equipping them to live into the mystical depths of divine love and thereby to enact a preliminary sign of this new divine life which God intends for the whole world. As Olivier Clément puts it in his luminous book *The roots of Christian mysticism*, 'in its deepest understanding the Church is nothing other than the world in the course of transfiguration, the world that in Christ reflects the light of paradise'.[7]

The point of all this is to suggest that the mystical life is in the deepest sense the hidden presence of God's desire for the whole world to share in the divine communion. This means that the Church is the provisional locus of this transfiguring journey into the mystical depths of divine life; and that individuals are drawn into this mystical life as

they participate in the Church's task of making the world translucent to God again – helping the world to contemplate the immensity of God's call to it by re-configuring its worldly heart through the disciplines of exegesis, worship and communal discipleship. In this view, the mystical is a dimension present in every facet of ecclesial life, and is not therefore necessarily related to individual quests for self-transcendence or to any particular experiential states. Indeed Basil, as we have just seen, suggests that the capacity to encounter the mystery of God hidden in the world is a direct outgrowth of Christ's resurrection and is best discerned and tested by its affinity for a life of companionship with the risen Christ.

The resurrection as threshold of mystical life

In situating a theology of mysticism in the context of Jesus' resurrection I want merely to make two points: first and most importantly, that mysticism is the result of God's strange manner of self-expression (strange to us at present anyway); and secondly, that learning to recognize this peculiar divine presence entails a deepening likeness to it, even a sharing in it.

As we all know, the resurrection appearance stories in the gospels almost invariably suggest a strange hiddenness about the risen Christ. The disciples often have difficulty recognizing him or are in various ways disturbed or frightened by a presence they cannot seem to encounter in their normal way. In the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), for example, Jesus is physically present with the two dispirited disciples as they trudge along, but his anonymous and unrecognized presence with them perfectly parallels their own laborious but unperceiving rehearsal of all the data about Jesus' earthly ministry. Light only begins to dawn as the strange figure reaches through the disciples' empirical blindness and draws them into a corporate and communal event of mystical exegesis: 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures' (24:27). The disciples who had earlier found the stranger somewhat dim and perhaps even a bit tiresome ('are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know. . .'), now find themselves beginning to long for his companionship ('they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us."').

Finally, it is in the communal eucharistic moment of the breaking of the bread that the mystical identity of the stranger is revealed. The Church's activities of exegesis and worship seem to be the media in which the risen fullness of Christ bestows himself, training the minds and hearts of the community in a new kind of perception. As if to

confirm such a possibility, the Emmaus story culminates in a mystical epiphany in which the apparently graspable, empirical presence of Christ is withdrawn in favour of an encounter in the broken and evocative language of signs that can only signify by pointing always beyond themselves – the heart-filling wonder of scriptures and bread broken open by a meaning that cannot be contained.

If the world had something it could subject to its present grasp, it would never journey *on* into God; and if the world did not have transforming practices in which to participate presently, it could never have a way of opening its heart and mind *now* to the unfathomability of the divine life. Ungraspability held together with a wholly participable love are at the core of the paschal mystery itself, and they are, not coincidentally I believe, constituent features of the Christian mystical life. If the death and resurrection of Jesus is God's way of opening a doorway from our existence into the divine companionship, then humankind will need a way of practising death-and-resurrection. The ordinary way of this eastering within the world is holy baptism, and the mystical life, I am suggesting, is at heart a particularly intense and intentional journey into the heart of the baptismal mystery.

Trinitarian super-abundance

Throughout the gospels we see Jesus teaching and enacting a dying to self, and we also see him exposing his friends to a strangely radiant fullness of life (think of all those meals, feedings and parables of startlingly unexpected plenty). He does this by prying the disciples loose from an anxious and possessive grasp upon life, by coaxing them into a new confidence in himself and the Father and by opening them to an immensity of divine abundance beyond all conception. The dynamic of the paschal mystery is implicit in all this, and it frames a recognizably mystical path: an apophasis that carries one beyond all limits and draws one into an inexhaustibly joyful aliveness.

I think we have an important clue here about the central mystical trope, the incomprehensibility of God. For Jesus seems to be drawing the disciples to stand not before a bare infinity whose only human correlate is an endlessly undifferentiated pure consciousness. Rather, the resurrection confronts the disciples with the transforming forgiveness of the one whom they had betrayed. His healing of their memories and re-creation of their identities leads them to a new understanding of the radical self-sharing and love by which he lived and died and rose again.[8] It is important that the mystical has to do, therefore, not with an abstract divine hiddenness, as though mystical life were simply

inevitable given the Creator-creature distinction. What is hidden is precisely this abundance of God, the divine generosity and out-pouring and prodigality – traced out by the resurrection – that human cultures shaped by fear and necessity can only see as inexplicably foolish and weak. The resurrection appearances might almost be read as constituting a kind of mystical praxis (an allegorical life?), training the disciples' vision to sense intuitively the infinite love that is Jesus' relationship to the Father.

And of course the full outpouring of this trinitarian relationship is accomplished at the climax of the resurrection appearances with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The mystical training that draws believers into the deathless relationship of Jesus with the Father is only possible as believers' lives are re-configured by an immediate sharing in that very Love itself, God the Holy Spirit. This work of the Holy Spirit, the One who 'will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16:14), is perhaps the most characteristic dynamic of the Christian mystical path: the actualizing and realizing of Christ's life within believers, unveiling and disclosing the hidden depths within all the Word's visible forms, and so bringing believers into the very ground of the Word, his unfathomable relationship with the Father, 'All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that the Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16:15).

I am suggesting, then, that one might account for Christian mysticism theologically by considering it as an extension of Christ's resurrection – an ongoing pattern of divine life by which God continues to speak the paschal mystery into the heart of the world, and so draw the world transfiguringly into the trinitarian embrace. I do not of course mean to imply by this that all Christian mystical thought is necessarily going to take up either the resurrection or the Trinity either explicitly or implicitly. My proposal is only that these mysteries of Christian faith seem to provide a capacious and fruitful theological framework for thinking about what God may be up to by giving us a world invested with a mystical dimension. In this sense the mystical is inevitably eschatological, for it is one way (I have been arguing) by which God is prying open the world as it now appears to a little more of the full glory of divine communion. Mystical writers like Augustine and Bonaventure sometimes tried, with varying success, to hint at this mystical 'quickening' of history – with believers and mystics at the heart of the world, enabling through their prayer the very patterns of history to the divine presence, and so bringing to birth the full luminosity of divine providence.[9]

One of the clearest approaches to this theme is found throughout Aquinas in his analysis of that final state of human knowing of God we call beatitude (see especially *Summa theologiae* Ia.12, 1–13). St Thomas is here, of course, speaking of the individual soul, but he is talking about its ultimate relationship with God as a kind of knowledge precisely because (within Thomas' scheme) knowing is the activity that makes possible a full union between the reality known and the knower. The intelligible form of the thing we know comes more and more to *real*-ize our mind as we know the reality, becoming really present in us, and in a way, *as* us. So when a contemplative is by faith and revelation and grace enabled to *make real*, to realize, something of God in the mind, then in a certain sense the divine life is truly present and active in the world. We see the consummate form of this joyous state in beatitude. As Herbert McCabe puts it:

> It is an important theme of Question 12 that when, in beatitude, [someone] understands the essence of God, the mind is not realized by a form which is a likeness of God, but by God himself. God will not simply be an object of our minds, but the actual life by which our minds are what they will have become.[10]

Maximus the Confessor approaches a similar point in terms of human culture and the Christian community's acts of worship in the midst of the world. In his mystical interpretation of the liturgy, Maximus likens the Church to a soul who, at the consummate point of the Eucharist, has centred all thought on God in Christ and whose mind is now realized by God – indeed God is, in this liturgical activity, present in the world as the very energy and thought and reality of the ecclesial mind. And because the Church is a communal reality, gathering together a diverse and bitterly divided world, this mystical moment not only realizes God's presence in the world but enacts the healing and unifying of the world in God.

> Thus, as has been said, the holy Church of God is an image of God because it realizes the same union of the faithful with God. As different as they are by language, places, and customs, they are made one by it through faith. God realizes this union among the natures of things without confusing them but in lessening and bringing together their distinction . . . in a relationship and union with himself.[11]

In such a way as this, the theology of the mystical life might even begin to show something of the political significance of mysticism as an element in God's transfiguration of the world.

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NOTES

1 See Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and theology: Christian living and the doctrine of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), especially pp 83–95. For a slightly different account, see Mark McIntosh, *Mystical theology: the integrity of spirituality and theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), especially chapter one.

2 See the outstanding multi-volume history of Christian mysticism by Bernard McGinn, *The presence of God: a history of western mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991).

3 See Denys Turner, *The darkness of God: negativity in Christian mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, gender and Christian mysticism*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For an older but still seminal work, critical of the dominant anthropological approaches emphasizing individual experience (and now handsomely republished), see Anselm Stolz, *The doctrine of spiritual perfection*, original German edn, 1936 (New York: Crossroad, 2001). Stolz insightfully points out how such neo-scholastic, dogmatic practitioners of spiritual theology as Gardeil, Garrigou-Lagrange, Poulain, and Tanquerey, far from accomplishing a rigid imposition of theological categories on the spiritual life, in fact only manage to adopt, within their own categories of scholastic faculty psychology, the same dominantly psychological/experiential approach that their more recent critics most often prefer.

4 On all this see Louis Bouyer, 'Mysticism: an essay on the history of the word' in Richard Woods (ed), *Understanding mysticism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980) pp 42–55.

5 Origen, *The Song of Songs: commentary and homilies*, Ancient Christian Writers series, translated by R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman Press, n.d.), p 22.

6 St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, translated by David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), ch 22, p 84.

7 Olivier Clément, *The roots of Christian mysticism*, translated by Theodore Berkeley and Jeremy Hummerstone (New York: New City Press, 1995), p 95.

8 For enormously creative and insightful considerations of all this see Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), and the works of James Alison, among them, *Raising Abel: the recovery of the eschatological imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996). For my own attempts to develop these themes, see McIntosh, *Mysteries of faith* (Boston: Cowley, 2000), and 'The Eastering of Jesus' in *The Downside Review* 386 (January 1994), pp 44–61.

9 See here the excellent examination of this feature in Franciscan spirituality in Bernard McGinn, *The flowering of mysticism: men and women in the new mysticism – 1200–1350*, vol. III of *The presence of God: a history of western Christian mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), especially pp 93–101.

10 Herbert McCabe, 'Appendix 1: Knowledge', in his translation of St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia. 12–13, Blackfriars edn, vol 3 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), p 100.
11 Maximus the Confessor, *The Church's mystagogy*, ch 1, *Maximus Confessor: selected writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality series, translated by George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist, 1985), pp 18–78.