

The Lure of Mysticism

Everyone Wants to Experience God – Only Christians Can

by Johan D.Tangelder

Since the beginning of the “unsettled times” in the 1960s, seeking-oriented spirituality has shown a growing interest in Eastern religions, mysticism in particular, especially among young people searching for answers, for a way out of the confusion and alienation they see all around them. Eastern mysticism has even been called a “youth religion.” Some say the Beatles began this new religious trend, both in their music and in their personal lives. In 1964, one of their press agents said, “they are so anti-Christ they shock me, which isn’t an easy thing.” Four years later, the Beatles were in India seeking spiritual peace through an ancient but a modernized version of Hinduism taught by the “giggling guru” Maharashi Mahesh Yogi.

Zen Buddhism

Another mystic religion, Zen Buddhism, also began to attract many followers. Zen became the answer for those who search for a religious experience in a secular age. In the words of a Japanese Zen Buddhist:

Zen has no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined, and, last of all, Zen has no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else and whose immortality is a matter of intense concern.

The heart of Zen is the teaching of the direct experience of enlightenment (Satori), i.e., the unfolding of the inner mind. Zen is anti-intellectual and existential, appealing to religious seekers turned

off by what they perceive as rationalized, dogma-ridden, traditional Christianity.

The leading popularizer of Eastern religions in the West was Alan Watts, one-time Anglican counselor, who taught for many years at the San Francisco's School of Asian Studies and wrote seven books on Zen before he was thirty-five years old. Some even called him the "Norman Vincent Peale of Buddhism."

The Drug Culture

By the 1970s drugs had become a powerful medium for religious peace seekers. Os Guinness notes that for some people "drugs...attained almost sacramental importance." A few psychedelic churches were founded based on drug experiences. For example, the Neo-American Church professed a frank "drop out and turn on" otherworldliness.

Novelist and essayist Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), who turned in the 1930s to eastern religions for his spiritual nourishment, called the use of drugs "instant religion." After Huxley had his first drug trip, he testified: "I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation - the miracle, moment by moment of naked existence." He advocated drug use to gain a biochemical mystical experience - a union with the universe. Francis Schaeffer called Huxley "the father of the modern cult of drug taking." Huxley believed one could give healthy people drugs to help them realize an optimistic experience. He also made his wife promise to give him LSD when he was dying so he could die in the midst of a trip.

Timothy Leary became the drug culture's high priest and its messiah. He promoted psychedelics as the new evolutionary religion. For him turning on was not just for kicks but a sacred rite. He said, "The LSD trip is a religious pilgrimage." He encouraged people to start their own religion, to write their own bible, and to write their own Ten Commandments. He also asserted, "Every religion in history was founded on the basis of some flipped - out visionary trip." Dr. Allan Y.Cohen, a well-known authority on drug abuse, wrote in 1970:

There is an increasing interest in mysticism, a greater fascination with the direct experience of God...For three years I used LSD and other psychedelic substances, feeling that these drugs

could lead one close to the experience of God as higher consciousness.

After Dr. Cohen had seen the failure of the drug approach, he settled for a spiritual technique, taught by Avatar Meher Baba, an Indian guru.

How real are the religious experiences achieved through drugs? LSD and other psychedelic substances influenced experiences don't prove anything. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out in *Healing and the Scriptures* that various drugs tell us nothing about the being of God. This is true, of course. I believe drugs to be tools of Satan.

Mysticism Defined

What is mysticism? It is nearly impossible to define it. Some claim it is consciousness of an unseen world, a longing to be in contact with it, and a search for a sense of utter certainty and boundless joy. Others understand it as a journey of the soul with God, a manifestation of, and the result of, and the desire for immediate and direct knowledge of God in a much easier way than taught in the Bible. In popular thinking, it is a synonym for other worldliness and a religious viewpoint which is not interested in doctrine or outward forms of religious observance.

The Origin of the Word

The origin of the word mysticism has its roots in ancient mystery religions in which a certain insight was reserved for the initiated only. A mystic has been initiated into these mysteries and has gained special knowledge of "divine things." Through these mysteries the mystic gained a secret wisdom which he was not allowed to divulge. Mysticism, therefore, presupposes mystery. And the latter comes from the Greek word *muo*, to shut or close the lips or eyes. A mystic then is some who is "privy to wisdom closed others."

The God of the Mystics

In mysticism God can only be known through intuition and meditation. But these experiences do not lead to the God who has revealed Himself through the Bible. British mystic Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) said it is a matter of indifference to a mystic whether union with God is conceived to be “the God of Christianity, the Word-Soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy.” Yet she believed the highest form of mysticism is located in Christianity. She thought that Christ was a mystic whose highest mystical experiences occurred at His baptism, transfiguration, and resurrection.

Experience

Mysticism is individualistic to the extreme. Mystics concentrated on themselves. Their experiences are their authority, sources of revelation, and truth. This makes it so difficult to reach the mystics with the gospel as they claim to have “seen” the truth, and insist, “You can’t deny my spiritual experience.” But not all mystics “see” the same things, or have identical experiences. Mystical experiences are as varied as people.

Mysticism has influenced also Christians. In our age, many are tempted to stress experience as normative for faith and practice. Even in defense of the faith Christians tend to appeal to experience. At a conference of ministers led by Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd - Jones, during a heated discussion, one minister got up and remarked, “I don’t care what they say, nothing can ever touch my experience.” Jones told the man, “My dear friend, you have thrown away the key if you base the defense of the faith all on your experience.” And he explained that our faith is founded on the great objective truths and facts of history, on the fulfillment of a prophecy and the facts of the Church.

Jesus Christ and Mysticism

The current fascination with various forms of mysticism should lead Christians to self-examination. How do we perceive God? What is our relationship to Him? Is God a living reality or an abstract idea? The latter is a question of life and death. If God is merely an abstract idea than my life

become a meaningless illusion without any future hope. If God is real, I should get to know Him. But the Scriptures nowhere teaches that God gives any knowledge of Him through spiritual experiences alone. The only way I can know is through Jesus Christ. There is no other way to the house of the Heavenly Father. (John 14:6) All other ways lead to a dead end. The apostle Paul understood this truth when he wrote to the church in Corinth, “For I was resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor. 2:2) All mission work centers on Jesus Christ as the only One through whom we can be saved. (Acts 4:12) There are no refined techniques available to reach God apart from Christ, neither through reciting mantras, the use of psychedelic drugs, nor through various methods of meditation. There is no life apart from Christ. Scripture is clear: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him”(John 3:36).

The Gospel presents a totally different view of salvation than Eastern mysticism. It is through being crucified with Christ that we become free from the lures of the world (Gal. 5:24). Our relationship with Christ is intimate and loving; it is described in terms of bridegroom and bride (Eph.5:22ff). Through self-denial and in service of our fellowman we can experience the reality of our relationship with Him (cf.Jam. 3:9). True Christian mysticism is being grafted in Christ. He is the vine and we are the branches. (John 15:1ff) Paul explains this relationship as, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal.2:20). “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil.4: 13). “I want to know Christ” (Phil.3:10). Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments that since Paul “already knows Him that he wants to know Him better; it is the cry of the lover for the loved one. He wants to spend more of his time with Him, he wants to know Him more intimately and completely.”

Trinitarian Mysticism

Although the person of Christ is at the very heart of Christian mysticism, it would be wrong to conclude that the Bible knows only of a “Christ-mysticism.” We must keep this in mind as we tend to put so much stress on the work of Christ and our relationship to Him that we seem to forget Jesus’ saying, “the Father is in me, and I in the Father” (John 10:38), and when the Spirit of truth comes, “he will guide you into all truth.” (John 16:13). The Christian faith is Trinitarian. Believers participate “in the

divine life of the Trinity.”

The Divine Mystery

When we speak of God working within us, we are expressing a deeply mystical thought. The knowledge of God and His works has never been a strictly intellectual form of knowledge. How can a believer describe his relationship with God without being overawed by the mystery of it all? It is beyond our limited human understanding. We cannot put God into a box and analyze Him. The holy God, the creator of heaven and earth, is always with us. This is an amazing truth! A humbling fact! We enjoy His nearness but always with the understanding that all what we are and have in Him is not deserved but a gift of His grace.

Love for God

Os Guinness claims that the modern Christian lacks a personal experiential knowledge of God. He says what often passes for religious experience is a communal emotion felt in church services, in meetings, in singing or contrived fellowship. Yet there is a widespread hunger today for more intimacy and warmth in our relationship with God. Christians may enjoy a genuine experience of God. We can't find satisfaction apart from God. He alone can quench our spiritual thirst. In response to God's love, we must bring to God our love. When God comes first, we will no longer be preoccupied with our own salvation but with love for Him. Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind"(Matt.22:37). When we know God's love for us and love Him in response, there will be joy in Kingdom service. Examples from history abound, but I will refer only to two.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) had a deep love for God and for his fellowman in spiritual darkness. Through his ministry he saw many come to know Christ as Savior and Lord. And so he wrote:

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart

With boundless charity divine!

So shall I all my strength exert,

And love them with a zeal like Thine.

Abraham Kuyper, Dutch Calvinist theologian and political leader, warned against “mystically inclined souls who want to go their own way and fall repeatedly into all sorts of heresy and even into moral errors of various kinds.” Yet he himself was mystically inclined. He loved to speak and write about his mystical union with God. In his book *Three Little Foxes* he quotes Psalm 42:2, “My soul thirsts for God.” He comments that this is thirsting for the living God, the homesickness of the soul for fellowship with the Eternal Being. Dr. V. Hepp, noted that Kuyper’s mysticism enjoyed the confidence of the many who loved the Reformed truth. After Kuyper’s death his close friend Idenburg, who had visited him every day during his long illness, testified:

The tenderness in the depth of his soul was a great love, which in the first place went out toward God, the God of his life. How his eyes could sparkle and his words glow when he talked confidentially about the experiences of his life and the way the Lord had guided him! It was that love which made him witness, even on his deathbed, that God was his refuge and his strength, a very present help in trouble. He revealed that tenderness of his soul most clearly in his meditations. How deeply he experienced the blessedness of “being near to God.”

Reformed Christians tend to be unbalanced activists. We are busy with meetings, numerous church and kingdom causes. We have a stream of programmed activities - a sanctified hustle and bustle. We are often run off our feet and find it difficult to spend time alone with the Lord in prayer and Bible study, consequently the experiential side of our Christian faith remains foreign to us. The 17th century renowned Puritan pastor Richard Baxter observed, “We seldom read of God’s appearing by himself or his angels to any of his prophets or saints in a throng, but frequently when they are alone.” We need balanced living for the sake of our spiritual health.

Contemplative Mary and active Martha (cf. John 11) are examples for imitation. We have an obligation to contemplate on God and His Word and to lead a godly life. There is no cheap grace. Our faith should lead to practical piety. As the apostle Paul exhorted, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil.2:12ff).

Years ago Dr. J. H. Bavinck (1895-1964), a former missionary and a professor of missions at the Free University in Amsterdam, observed that there was an alarming lack in truly prophetic faith and little burning love for the cause of the Kingdom of God. I fear this is still true today. We need Biblically formed mysticism that can serve as a corrective to spiritual lethargy. Faith must be experienced and lived in the family and in the church, but also in our quiet personal walk with our covenant God. The Christian life will shrivel and wither if its devotional side is neglected.