

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Late Medieval Mysticism

The term *mysticism* now bears a range of connotations, both positive and negative; in the medieval world, however, it held a precise meaning, often also referred to as “contemplation” or “the contemplative life.” The mysticism of this period had some merits, but also some serious flaws in both theology and practice. In many respects, the mysticism of the medieval world derived from early Latin mysticism, which in turn evolved from an amalgamation of Scripture, Christian writings, and Greek philosophy. Being thus mixed in source, its errors in theology and practice were ensured.

The New Testament reveals a proper mystical experience denoting the reality that God in Christ as the Spirit is experiential to the believer. According to the New Testament view, Christ not only judicially solves the believer’s problem of sin with God but also organically saves him through regeneration, lifelong sanctification, renewing, transformation, and conformation. Later Latin mysticism often deviated in not holding strictly and solely to the God-ordained mystical experience of God as revealed in the New Testament. By incorporating with equal authority later Christian writings and by conceding any authority at all to pagan Greek philosophers, medieval mystical doctrine tended to incorporate a degree of apostasy into its theology.

The Goal of Medieval Mysticism

Advocates of mysticism in the Middle Ages believed that the soul could have direct contact with God and that it was thus possible for believers to have a conscious relationship with Him. They encouraged others with the possibility of union with God in this life, that is, a direct and intimate consciousness of the divine presence.

In pursuit of this goal, some quickly deviated from the New Testament revelation by presenting as the zenith of this union a mystical vision with a corresponding trance, a fellowship with God which was by definition ecstatic, surreal, and therefore in tension with the material realm of everyday human living. It followed, then, that this peak experience could be attained only rarely in this lifetime. Due to the influence of Greek philosophy with its dichotomous view of man, the ultimate mystical experience often became, in effect, a form of out-of-body “soul travel,” the

soul having been freed from the body through ascetic mortification.

By holding to this mystical interpretation and goal, some later medieval mystics failed to even maintain the biblical tripartite view of man firmly held both by Old Testament Jews and by the New Testament believers of the first three centuries. The Bible reveals man as a trichotomy, consisting of spirit and soul and body (Gen. 2:7; 1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 4:12), a view crucial to the proper understanding of fellowship and oneness with God. The proper New Testament mysticism includes the regeneration of the human spirit (John 3:6) with the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2) and the transformation of the entire soul (2 Cor. 3:18), conforming it to His image (Rom. 8:29). As Christ spreads and grows from the regenerated spirit into the soul, making home in the believer’s heart (Eph. 3:17), He also gives life to the believer’s mortal body (Rom. 8:11) and will ultimately transfigure and glorify it at His coming (1 Cor. 15:52). This is intended to be the daily experience of every believer and very much involves the environment of typical, everyday life.

The Theology of Medieval Mysticism

Medieval mystics at times identified their teaching as “mystical doctrine” or “mystical theology.” Such theology maintained a dual emphasis: both speculative and affective. While promoting reason and intellectual theory, it simultaneously advocated sentiment and the emotional experience of God. On this twofold premise, it constructed an intellectual paradigm for achieving a state of love, where all true being, feeling, and knowing are found.

Alongside this basic paradigm, some medieval mystical theology described three progressive stages of union between God and man. Initially, the believer experienced the habitual indwelling of God by grace within him. Second, he began to attain isolated, sporadic experiences of trance-like ecstasy. Finally, for those who through ascetic practices were able to renounce the self, there was the hope of reaching the final stage, a unitive life—extended periods of ecstatic union with God. Such a definite three-stage mystical experience, while of philosophic interest, is not according to the biblical revelation.

Some proponents of medieval mystical theology erroneously taught that this union with God could be attained only when the soul had been properly prepared, having first satisfied God's moral requirements. It taught that only after a thorough self-purgation could there be the birth of God in the soul, thus unintentionally and inadvertently supplanting the doctrine of grace.

Among some medieval mystical writers, there was a fascination with the stages of spiritual progress. For example, Teresa of Avila described four stages of prayer, the first being difficult, dry, and unrewarding. The fourth and ultimate stage was a totally overwhelming experience of great joy which could be reached only after a protracted session of prayer. In this final stage the soul went into a swoon, fainting away, and losing all consciousness of the body. John of the Cross, a contemporary of Teresa, added that only after the soul had been thoroughly purged of every negative experience was it capable of an ultimate union with God. While such ideas sound spiritual, they do not originate in Scripture. Rather, they exemplify an error common to many mystical writers throughout the ages; that is, they make their individual experiences, rather than Scripture, the norm.

Some aspects of medieval mystical theology were also very much involved with the Scholastic movement, the prevalent theological force of that period. Scholasticism attempted to formulate a comprehensive theology, incorporating into Christian philosophy and theology the patristic writings and elements of classical Roman and Greek philosophy. Scholasticism thus deviated in adding to Scripture, with equal weight, the later Christian writings, non-Christian philosophies, and notions arising from natural reason and thought. Many mystical writers' teachings are therefore at times marvelously scriptural, but more often obscured with unscriptural thought and philosophy.

The Practice of Medieval Mysticism

By the onset of medieval mysticism, the practice of monasticism had become formulaic and often worldly. Much of the increased interest in mysticism at the time was actually a reaction to the decline of monasticism, and an attempt to revive it. The practice of mysticism was therefore intertwined with both asceticism and monasticism.

Two of the popular terms among medieval mystics were self-renunciation and self-purgation, for these summed up

their notion of the ascetic prerequisite to any mystical experience. The mystical experience could be attained solely through the self-surrender found in the ascetic regimen that accompanied monastic discipline. Asceticism for self-conquest was the only sure path toward fellowship with God. It is of little surprise, then, that many mystical writers belonged to a monastic order, as the monastery was the laboratory for self-renunciation.

Following self-purgation came the stage of illumination, which led in turn to union with God. In other words, the believer's asceticism (self-renunciation) produced visions (illumination) which led to ecstasy (union). It could be expected that after prolonged self-deprivation, one would begin to see visions accompanied by voices, along with

what the mystics sometimes called dark nights of introspection. Yet these ecstatic experiences of illumination and union were quite likely the result of ascetic practices upon the soul. The apostle Paul, however, made it clear that asceticism has no real value in genuine spirituality. He warned the Colossians to beware of those who would defraud them of their "prize" of the enjoyment of Christ by means of ascetic regulations, such as, "Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch" (Col. 2:21). He further cautioned them that such "severe treatment of the body," while appearing spiritual, was "not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh" (v. 23).

The Impact of Medieval Mysticism

Medieval mysticism may have been nurtured in the monasteries, but due to the frequent revivalistic preaching tours conducted by monks from village to village, its ascetic practices with their resultant extremes soon infiltrated society. The twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries saw the rise of passion, miracle, and morality dramas; stained glass windows, frescoes, mosaics, tapestries, ivory and wood carvings, and metalwork depicting Bible stories; and imposing Gothic cathedrals intended to direct worshippers' thoughts heavenward. This period also saw the creation and popularization of new male and female monastic orders, such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictines, Anchorites, and Beguines. Coupled with the frequent preaching tours and the revival of interest in the Gospels (especially the "hard sayings"), a religious climate and appetite were fostered among the populace. Soon, simple believers began to seek the ecstasies, raptures, visions, voices, trances, and emotion previously known primarily by the mystics in convents and monasteries.

Asceticism has no real value in genuine spirituality. The apostle Paul warned the Colossians to beware of those who would defraud them of their "prize" of the enjoyment of Christ by means of ascetic regulations.

Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1433) exemplifies such a believer. As a married woman with fourteen children, she began to frequent the parish church. There, she heard sermons which focused on certain difficult passages from the Gospels, such as “He who loves father or mother...son or daughter above Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:37) and “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and moreover, even his own soul-life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). Kempe regularly attended the mass, often fasted, occasionally wore a hair shirt, said the rosary, and gave alms. Before long, she began having visions in which she “talked” with Jesus, Mary, and a number of saints. In one such encounter during the mass, Jesus reportedly told her that while her practices were good, they were for mere beginners and that she needed to advance to more serious habits. Soon afterward, Kempe began sobbing uncontrollably during the mass, routinely breaking out in shouts of emotion. At one point she even abandoned her husband and fourteen children for a three-year pilgrimage to the Middle East and Russia.

Some medieval women became Anchorites, cloistering themselves in small cathedral annexes in order to pray themselves into trances and experience visions. Others were married women who took vows of chastity. Still others gave their entire family income to the poor and thrust their families into poverty. Husbands and wives embarked on lengthy, often suicidal pilgrimages on which sojourners were often robbed, murdered, or enslaved. Even more extreme was the commonly held notion that the bodies and relics of saints could transmit God’s grace and life to the believers. These bodies were often exhumed, paraded through town, dismembered in “reverence,” and distributed among a number of villages for worship.

The Problems of Medieval Mysticism

By esteeming individual experience above Scripture, medieval mysticism made the believer’s mystical *experience* the norm, rather than the *truth* presented in the Bible. When convenient and concordant with their practice, the mystics cited Scripture for validation. Yet whenever Scripture turned out to be contrary to their subjective mysticism, it was conveniently disregarded. Thus, experience became authoritative and revelatory, and Scripture was made subservient to mystical experiences.

Ethereal mystical experiences such as ecstasies, trances, voices, visions, and raptures also came to be regarded by

some as the climax, the culmination, of the Christian life. While the New Testament does speak of such experiences on rare occasions (e.g., Paul hearing Jesus’ voice in Acts 9 and Peter falling into a trance while praying in Acts 10), they do not occupy a major *portion* or, even more importantly, a major *emphasis* in Scripture. Nor does the Bible attempt to tell us how to achieve these elusive experiences. If such experiences were either the norm or the goal of Christian living, the Bible would surely have delineated the pathway for us to reach such a goal. Rather, the central, consistent theme of the New Testament, the path presented to believers, is the everyday, all-day experience of the indwelling Christ.

The central, consistent theme of the New Testament, the path presented to believers, is the everyday, all-day experience of the indwelling Christ.

As the believers walk in spirit, Christ makes His home in their hearts, sanctifies them, and transforms them into His image, enabling them to be built up with others as

His corporate expression, culminating in the New Jerusalem.

By imposing on seeking believers the prerequisite of self-purgation in order to achieve union with God, the scriptural foundation of grace also is undermined by a foundation of works. The ascetic assortment of rules for “renunciation” and “self-purgation” are contrary to the Scripture’s portrayal of the Christian’s union with God, a union based eternally on the prerequisite of the grace of Christ, not our own efforts or merit.

While many medieval mystics read the Bible, there seemed to have been a greater emphasis on certain portions. During the sixth to tenth centuries, those who were literate concentrated primarily on the Old Testament. The eleventh through fifteenth centuries saw a rebirth of interest in the Gospels, particularly the “harder sayings” which seemed to correspond to the monastic lifestyle, and it was not until the Reformation that interest in the Epistles was rekindled. This partial and unbalanced reading of Scripture inevitably led to unbalanced spiritual pursuit.

Had the New Testament teaching of the apostles been adequately maintained and emphasized earlier in the Middle Ages, God’s New Testament economy with its genuine experience of the dispensing of the Triune God would have come to light more quickly. A more adequate knowledge of Scripture, including the Epistles, would have better helped the Christians of that era to pursue the genuine oneness with God revealed by the apostles, a oneness which fulfills His eternal purpose.

by Gary Evans