

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Early Western Mysticism

As the concept and practice of mysticism developed through the early centuries of church history, it took on a markedly different form in the West than it did in the East. While Eastern Orthodoxy stressed the divinization (*theosis*) of man and the spread of the Holy Spirit within the believer's soul (see "Mystical Forms in Eastern Orthodoxy," *Affirmation & Critique*, Vol. III, No. 4, October 1998), an altogether distinct strain of mysticism emerged in the West in which Greek philosophy was suffused into selected biblical ideas. While the Eastern Orthodox view of the mystical union of God and man adhered more closely to Scripture than that in the West, its means for experiencing this union (icons, relics, asceticism, etc.) just as certainly deviated from the Bible's clearly prescribed way. In the West, on the other hand, the Bible was flagrantly abandoned in both its understanding and in its presentation of the means of pursuing the mystical experience of God.

In the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries in the West, evidence of this brand of philosophical mysticism can be detected in the lives of such church leaders as Bernard of Clairvaux, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine. Because of Augustine's undisputed prominence and enduring influence on Christian thought, his mystical experiences are perhaps the most emblematic of early Western pursuit of God. This experience, however, was strikingly influenced by Greek philosophy—specifically, Neoplatonism.

Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism, a derivative of ancient Platonic philosophy, was popular from the third through the sixth centuries in two distinct forms: Hellenic and "Christian." The primary sources of "Christian" Neoplatonism consisted of the dialogues of Plato, the writings of Aristotle, and the Bible, differing from ancient Hellenic Platonism only in its religious orientation. By interweaving these three sources, Christian philosophers devised a metaphysical, mystical system, the goal of which was the soul's ascent to God in His most transcendent and immutable state. According to Christian Neoplatonists, the soul's consummate experience is the rare and elusive occasion when it travels, or ascends, to God in His highest definition—His immutability. This so-called Christian philosophy is constructed upon Plato's multiple hierarchies

of being. Based on this structure, the concept of God was seen as corresponding to Plato's First Principle. Neoplatonism also promoted the notion of three or four distinct hypostases, or spheres of being, each referring to a distinct level of reality among which the one God—as the First Principle—existed above all other being and intellect. As such, He was both the source and destiny of all things. The Neoplatonist viewed God as the one absolutely constant intellect from whom the human soul—itsself a type of cosmic intellect—emanated. Neoplatonism held that, ideally, the soul would ascend by degrees from a manifold sensible knowledge to a unitive intellectual knowledge—a supranoteic, mystical union with God.

The Relevancy of Neoplatonism

As a general rule, old heresies and spiritual deviations die rarely, if at all. More often they reappear, either covertly or overtly; therefore, our awareness of them can help to arm us against them. For example, "Gnostic" Christians, a combination that would have seemed inconceivable not long ago, are reemerging in recent days. Ultimately, every deviation serves us in the end by providing a "black background" for the display of God's New Testament economy. This is also true in the case of Neoplatonism, whose errors only serve to highlight even more vividly the scriptural and divinely-ordained mystical experience of God. It is wise to familiarize ourselves with Neoplatonism due to the fact that this particular deviation affords us a valuable lesson and warning concerning the dangers of mixing the Bible with traditions and culture. Augustine, for example, was thoroughly educated in philosophical thinking and, consequently, saturated with philosophical notions. He readily incorporated philosophic notions and ideals into his understanding of the Bible and his pursuit of God. The deviation of Neoplatonic mysticism illustrates the perilous result of "Christianizing" secular thought, assimilating it into the Christian understanding of orthodox biblical truths. The Bible needs no assistance from popular contemporary thought to make its message more palatable or digestible. As one's understanding of the divine revelation advances and one matures in accord with the realities conveyed in the Bible, common, traditional, and philosophical notions begin to lose their grip as the mind is increasingly renewed.

As Augustine matured in his Christian life, he gradually dropped many (though not all) of his philosophical misconceptions. In fact, he was one of the few authors who dared to retract his earlier writings; he did this in his later years in a book entitled *Retractions*. His prolific and progressively enlightened writing of over more than forty years demonstrates how Bible teachers advance in their understanding, with the effect that their latter works are often of more consequence than their earlier ones.

Augustine's Neoplatonism

Augustine's reputation for lucidly enunciating Christian belief is considerable and enduring. He soundly articulated the truth of the Trinity, defeated Manichaeism (a pagan philosophy), exposed the Donatists (an intolerant, legalistic branch of the church), and drove the final nail into the coffin of Roman paganism. His service to the church was tireless and effective, and his writings have had a profound effect on Christian thinking for a millennium—still exerting an influence today. It is for this very reason, that is, the high acclaim and esteem in which he and his writings are held, that his Neoplatonic views of mysticism should be examined. Although Augustine consistently condemned pagan Neoplatonism and later revised or retracted many of his own christianized Neoplatonic teachings, his earlier writings describing his mystical experiences are still widely read, often without scrutiny, being generally held forth as a normative spiritual pilgrimage for believers.

Augustine's early Neoplatonic teachings led him into two "mystical" experiences which he considered extraordinary. He viewed these vision-filled experiences as the peak of his Christian experience and the ultimate goal of his spiritual pursuit. From the age of nineteen, Augustine became powerfully attracted to Platonic philosophy, and by his early thirties, he had developed into a master of philosophical rhetoric. After his conversion, he retired from his professional career as a teacher of philosophy and withdrew to the country with some close friends who were also philosophically minded. Their intention was to devote themselves to studying and conversing together in matters of philosophy and religion. Augustine's Christian mother, Monica, as well as his son joined him at the country estate of Veracudos. It was there that Augustine refined his construct of the soul's mystical experience of God.

Augustine and his companions found that their former philosophical notions easily could be assimilated into their new framework of Christian thought. According to their Neoplatonic Christian philosophy, the human soul which had proceeded from God, the First Principle, had fallen. The fall of Adam was thus a fall from the divine into the material. Since matter was inherently evil and corrupted, it

followed that the greater the soul's involvement with the material realm, the greater its separation from God, thus necessitating redemption. Christ's death on the cross served to empower the soul to shed its passionate and appetitive impulses. As the Christian matured, thus empowered, he abandoned the material and increasingly cultivated the soul's rational and divine potentials. Based on this premise, Augustine's Neoplatonic model of salvation included an initial step of "conversion" followed by a systematic procession of successive steps of the soul's ascent from matter to reason: the soul proceeded upward, ultimately reaching God—the *Logos*, the highest reason. The process and goal of salvation thus were seen to focus on this ascent from the material world to the divine realm. This version of the mystical experience of God was clearly a confluence of philosophy and Scripture—a set of postulated norms whose influence pervaded Christian thought throughout the Middle Ages.

Augustine had two metaphysical, "mystical" experiences which, taken together, he considered to be the zenith of his Christian life. Those two experiences, one with his mother shortly before her death and the other soon afterward, became the benchmark by which he measured and evaluated all his subsequent spirituality. Augustine's own words in his *Confessions* provide a clear glimpse into his notion of the ideal mystical experience of God.

In order to attain the consummate experience of God, Augustine sought first to identify God's most sublime attribute. Augustine felt that God's most sublime quality was His immutability. Thus, to know God in His incorruptibility was to have the purest, most transcendent spiritual experience possible. Of this, he said,

I thought not of Thee, O God, under the figure of a human body....But what else to conceive Thee I knew not. And I, a man, and such a man, sought to conceive of Thee the sovereign, only, true God: and I did in my inmost soul believe that Thou wert incorruptible, and uninjurable, and unchangeable. (104)

He went on to explain,

Thee therefore, whatsoever Thou wert, I confessed to be incorruptible. For never soul was, nor shall be, able to conceive any thing which may be better than Thou....Where then I saw the incorruptible to be preferable to the corruptible, there ought I to seek for Thee. (108)

His Neoplatonic concept of the soul permeated his view of genuine Christian mystical experience, as is evident in passages such as the following: "...and that this offspring of Thy Substance was the soul, which being enthralled, defiled, corrupted, Thy Word, free, pure, and whole, might relieve..." (106).

Augustine interpreted the entirety of his Christian experience according to Neoplatonism. His views of hierarchies of being as well as differing levels of reality, each progressing in stages out from contact with matter upward into God's immutability, can be seen in his descriptions of these two experiences. Of one, he wrote:

And being thence admonished to return to myself, I entered even into my inward self, Thou being my Guide: and able I was, for Thou wert become my Helper. And I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable....Nor was it above my soul...but above to my soul, because It made me; and I below It, because I was made by It. (117)

Augustine went on to describe visions of God as "beams of light" (117) and of God in His infinity and incorruptibility. These celestial visions reinforced his Neoplatonic view of the defilement and inherent evil of the material, physical world. Reflecting on this perceived contrast and conflict, he wrote:

And yet did I not press on to enjoy my God; but was borne up to Thee by Thy beauty, and soon borne down from Thee by mine own weight, sinking with sorrow into these inferior things....for that the body which is corrupted presseth down the soul, and the earthly tabernacle weigheth down the mind that museth upon many things....I had found the unchangeable and true Eternity of Truth above my changeable mind. And thus by degrees I passed from bodies to the soul, which through the bodily senses perceives; and thence to its inward faculty. (121)

Later, lamenting the constraints of his physical existence, he said, "We wallow in flesh and blood" (140-141). Augustine freely admitted the influence of Platonic philosophy on his spiritual pursuit. He explained,

But having then read those books of the Platonists, and thence been taught to search for incorporeal truth, I saw Thy invisible things...being assured 'That Thou wert, and wert infinite, and yet not diffused in space, finite or infinite.' (124)

Augustine also described a second "Christian" Neoplatonic experience which he had while engaged in conversation with his mother. He recounted that he and his mother

did by degrees pass through all things bodily, even the very heaven whence sun and moon and stars shine upon the earth; yea, we were soaring higher yet, by inward musing...and we came to our own minds, and went beyond them, that we might arrive at that region of never-failing plenty. (165)

His mother, like Augustine, spoke of "despising earthly happiness," "the contempt of this life," and "the blessing of death" (166-167). Augustine shared her disdain for created, human passions. As a case in point, after his mother died he was alarmed to find himself sensing grief and pain:

And being very much displeased that these human things had such power over me, which in the due order and appointment of our natural condition must needs come to pass, with a new grief I grieved for my grief, and was thus worn by a double sorrow. (169)

Augustine's mystical experiences and views, generally and primarily, were heavily influenced by his Neoplatonic bias. Since he viewed the immutability of God as His consummate, most exalted attribute, he also viewed the believer's apprehension of His immutability as the pinnacle of Christian experience. This sublime experience was perceived as the means of the soul's escape from the material world and its ascent by degrees into God. As such, a certain disdain and even despising of the created, material world and all human things was common in marked contrast to the genuine, biblical presentation of spiritual experiences.

The Biblical Way

The early church fathers did not easily maintain a faithful allegiance to the apostles' New Testament teaching. Often in their attempts to vindicate or explain what the apostles had said, they either embellished and interpreted these pure, fundamental teachings with their own original ideas, or alternatively, they drew upon their cultural or philosophical pasts. Their motives may have been noble, but the result was a Christian life and church life that increasingly deviated from the God-ordained way prescribed in Scripture. Augustine certainly fell victim to this error in his pursuit of spiritual experience; he was governed more by Neoplatonism than by New Testament Scripture. A careful reading of his *Confessions* reveals that whenever he cites Scripture, he does so selectively and with the effect of portraying God as the God of the Old Testament, removed and aloof from the believer rather than as the intimate, indwelling, transforming, life-giving Spirit of the New Testament. As we come to the Lord in His Word, we must diligently exercise to turn our hearts to Him, to be open to Him, and to be willing to be emptied of preconceived notions and influences of modern philosophy, culture, and fashionable, present-day attitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3).

Augustine's emphasis on the immutability and incorruptibility of God dominated his pursuit of the mystical experience of God. While it is true that God retains an immutable quality, incorruptible in every way, it is just as certain that God is inexhaustibly rich and varied in His

attributes, and intends that His believers would appropriate Him in His fullness as their own. Paul repeatedly affirms our participation in this reality, presenting to the Ephesian believers for their experience “the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18), “the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us” (2:7), and “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8). He even prayed that they would “apprehend with all the saints what the breadth and length and height and depth are” (v. 18) in order to “be filled unto all the fullness of God” (v. 19). The genuine mystical experience of Christ portrayed in the New Testament is one of knowing God in Christ not solely in His transcendent immutability, but further, in both His divine attributes and His human virtues. There is no zenith, no tantalizing experience of any one particular attribute of God; rather, the New Testament portrays a constant, daily, even lifelong experience of the all-inclusive Christ as the life-giving Spirit making His home in the believers’ heart (v. 17).

Augustine esteemed the soul as inherently pure, emanating from God’s substance, and as such needing only to be liberated from the corrupted body in order to be able to ascend to God. The New Testament does not speak of the soul’s sublime ascent to God; rather, it speaks of God’s gracious descent into man. The New Testament reveals that God’s good pleasure is to join with man (Matt. 1:23), to live in man (Gal. 2:20), to become man’s living (Phil. 1:21), to mingle with man (Lev. 2:4; 1 Cor. 6:17), and even to incorporate Himself into man and man into Him (John 14:20) in order to form a corporate, divine organism (15:5). It is God’s good pleasure, His wonderful desire, to join Himself with man organically by first cleansing him from sin and regenerating his human spirit, then saturating his sin-damaged soul with the sanctifying and transforming Spirit throughout his human life, and ultimately changing man’s fallen body into an incorruptible one like His own at His second coming.

Finally, Augustine seriously erred in depreciating human life within the created world (which explains his fascination with and high estimation of ascetic, monastic living). As an illustration of the force of this persuasion, Augustine considered his highest victory over sin to be his decision in his mid-thirties to spend the remainder of his life in sexual abstinence. Augustine was greatly influenced by Plato’s disdain for matter and for the affairs of normal human life. Notwithstanding, the New Testament reveals a Christ who, while existing as the eternally immutable Deity, emptied and humbled Himself, taking the form of a slave (Phil. 2:6-8). It shows us a Christ who spent the first thirty years of His life in an ordinary carpenter’s home. It portrays a Christ who, in the throes of redeeming the world on the cross, took care to ensure His mother’s well-being during the remainder of her earthly life. The New Testament shows us a Christ who rose from the dead and then, even

in resurrection, bothered to fold the handkerchief that had covered His head (John 20:7). Further, the New Testament sets forth as a pattern an apostle who had learned to be content in whatever state he was (Phil. 4:11). While man may fancy escaping life’s routine and banality, God in Christ as the Spirit longs to become involved in our very human life—to be experienced by us in all our circumstances. The believer’s human living on this God-created earth has been preordained to be the venue for us to come to know the all-inclusive Christ in each of His aromatic human virtues and divine attributes. From this vantage point, it becomes clear that the genuine mystical experience of Christ is much more likely to occur in our daily living than on a “mountaintop” or in a desert monastery. It is within full reach of every seeking believer.

The genuine, biblically-portrayed mystical experience of Christ has everything to do with this earthly life. It embraces the paradox of human beings living a heavenly life on earth. True mysticism does not escape earthly life; rather, it is set within it. It is aided, propelled, and expedited by normal human living. The authentic mystical experience of Christ is the experience not simply of the eternal Logos who dwells “in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16) but, more inclusively, of the One who was Himself thoroughly incarnated as a man. He incorporated the heavenly life into the earthly life, the divinely significant into the humanly mundane. By bringing the Eternal into the temporal, He succeeded in also bringing the temporal into the Eternal. By bringing the Immortal into the mortal, He made the mortal immortal. By introducing the Incorporeal into the corporeal, He ushered the corporeal into the mystical. Christ’s work brought the Divine into the human, and our genuine mystical experience of Christ completes the cycle by actually and eternally bringing humanity into divinity. Because our God has become a God-man, the true mystical experience of Him is not effected by our liberation from the mundane into the sublime but rather by our appropriation and enjoyment of all that He is as we are engaged in the mundane. Such experiences imbue the mundane with eternal significance, for in them we are brought into oneness with the eternal One.

by Gary Evans

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