



# IS MYSTICISM MERELY MEDIEVAL?

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SOME YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS A UNIVERSITY CHAPLAIN, I TRIED TO TALK TO STUDENTS ABOUT THE POETRY OF ST JOHN OF THE CROSS AND THE MYSTICAL WAY TO GOD. I was faced with total incomprehension and accusations of trying to drag the Church back into the Middle Ages! In particular, my students objected to my emphasis on the negative way to God. For them Jesus was their light and salvation. Their faith released them into a world of light and clarity about God. The mystical way was not something they needed.

One of my reactions was to go back to the mystical texts. I wanted to try and find out what they really meant. I discovered that much has happened in the academic world in the understanding of mystical texts, particularly over the last fifteen or twenty years. These developments force us to reconsider how we understand 'mysticism'.

We can no longer understand 'mysticism' as a form of religious experience, especially not as a form of religious experience which some special people known as 'mystics' have, while the rest of us languish somewhere on a lower level of awareness. My students, in common with most people within the mainstream Christian communities, had misunderstood what mysticism was really all about. But more than that, they, again in common with so many, had crucially misunderstood what the Christian tradition has meant by 'knowledge of God'. They had assumed that this was easy and self-evident when both Scripture and the tradition in which we stand clearly state it is not.

Human beings cannot know everything about 'the other', the other person who faces them. In our relationships with other people we have to learn to acknowledge what we cannot know. We have to respect the separateness or the transcendence of the other person. There is a secrecy about the other which we find difficult to acknowledge. At the primary level this secrecy is to do with ethics and how I behave. The source of a truly ethical relationship with another does not so much lie in my ability to know and choose what I have to do, but more in my capacity to face the other and allow the other in all their difference to face me. At that point, I – and hopefully the other person – acknowledge that the other holds within them a difference and this difference is not totally known. Not every form of human prejudice does this. Anti-Semitism is a willing disregard of what we do not know about

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Jews – Nazis *knew* that Jews were not really human and *knew* that they could prove this scientifically. Prejudice against women is a refusal to take the otherness and transcendence of women seriously. This insight is not just an insight into human relationships; it is an insight into how things are as a whole. It is an insight into how things are constructed and so also an insight into the nature of faith, a gateway to faith in the unknown one who is God. By opening ourselves to the unknown other we open ourselves to God. So it is an insight fundamental to a true faith.

Consider for a moment some of the founding moments of faith in Exodus. Here, within a historical narrative about the giving of the law, we have a mythical or archetypal account of our human condition. These are the founding myths that tell us who we are before God. What happens at the beginning of Hebrew religion is that Moses has to come to terms with the unknown nature of God. Several passages reflect this. For example, when God appointed Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses asked, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them?' (Ex 3.13). God responded, 'I am who I am' (Ex 3.14), so Moses had to go back to the people with no 'name' just, 'I AM has sent me to you.'

At another point, during the giving of the law, Moses asks to see the glory of God: 'Show me your glory, I pray' (Ex 33.18). But this is refused. God says, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you ... but you cannot see my face for no one shall see me and live' (Ex 33.19–20). There is that wonderful passage, Exodus 33.21–23, where God places Moses in a cleft of the rock, 'and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen'. And everything else stems from this. Moses and the children of Israel have to go on into the wilderness without knowing the name of the God who is leading them, nor where they are going.

There are explicit moments when the darkness of trust becomes too difficult and they rebel, asking to be taken back to the certainties of Egypt. When they are settled in the Promised Land, the same difficulty assails them. They cannot deal with a God they cannot see and regularly turn to the gods of other nations whom they believe they can see. An

unknown God who does not have a specific name ('I am who I am') and who hides himself is not easy to deal with. They have real trouble with the darkness of trust and it is to this that the prophets constantly recall them. There is little consolation in prophetic religion, little to reassure or provide comfort, nothing much to prove to you that God is. You have to remain in an attitude of trust, believing that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is God. The gods of other nations provide the consolations of religion. Israel's God was invisible.

But not only was he invisible, he was also terrifying. In the beginning God spoke. Indeed, he spoke to us and with us. That much is clear from Genesis where God comes to converse with his children in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. But even in Eden something happened which made conversation difficult. Adam admits that he found it difficult to face God and speak with him. Adam was afraid and hid from God (Gen 3.10).

But it gets worse. At the giving of the law on Mount Sinai (Ex 20) there is a complete breakdown in the conversation: 'When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die"' (vv. 18–19). The Israelites could not cope with the terrifying nature of God.

This is not the only moment of terror before God in the Old Testament – the prophets (e.g. Isaiah and Ezekiel) were only too conscious of the terrifying nature of God – nor for that matter, the New. It is no use saying that this is Old Testament religion about fear which has been replaced by the comforting good news of Jesus, for he calls his disciples to follow him into the darkness and terror of Jerusalem where they do not easily follow.

This inability to cope with the terrifying darkness of God is recorded most explicitly in the New Testament in Mark's Gospel, which ends with the words, 'And they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid' (Mk 16.8). But it is not just the resurrection which is terrifying in Mark's account but also the crucifixion. John Fenton points out that there are distinct parallels between Jesus' self-offering and the terrifying story of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. Fenton says, 'When we get to the second half of Mark's book we are told straight off, "The son of Man must suffer and everyone who

#### NOTES

1. J Fenton, *More About Mark* (London: SPCK, 2001), p. 55. This sense of terror about what God does crops up again later in the New Testament in the Letter to the Hebrews where it is clear that our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12.29).
2. Sebastian Faulks, *Human Traces* (London: Hutchinson, 2005).
3. Faulks, *Human Traces*, p. 512.
4. Henry Vaughan, 'The Night'.
5. John Donne, 'Sacred Sonnets'.

*'we must not allow our faith to be locked into a reductionist view of God and forget his true nature, his terrifying beauty and otherness'*

►wants to be a follower must also suffer". Everyone will be salted with fire.<sup>1</sup>

Unseen. Unknown. Other. Terrifying. What is this about? It's about a lot of things, one of which is human consciousness. Human consciousness is enormous and profound. It is aware of death, tragedy, joy and the overwhelming weal and woe of being alive now. It is aware of the invisibility and terror of being alive. The trouble with religious people is that much of their religion is a way of not facing that invisibility and terror.

I've been reading *Human Traces*, Sebastian Faulks's excellent novel<sup>2</sup> The book is an attempt to look at the history of what it means to be mad, and in the process it conveys something of the enormity of being alive, something of the horror and the holiness of it all. At several points in the novel the principal character, Thomas, is like Moses (and the book is full of biblical references) for he stands before the terrible invisibility of things, especially the inscrutability of madness, but also the death of those he loves, and speaks of their holiness. This happens at several points in the novel but most markedly when he gives a paper that summarises his life's quest for cures to human madness – a life's quest which has seen very little in the way of results. He talks about the insoluble knots and mysteries of life being resolved not by finding an 'answer' but by developing 'a different perspective'. He concludes, 'I ask you to believe that we are the most fortunate species ever to have lived or that it is possible to conceive of existing – ever, in this universe or in any other; and that it is our duty each day therefore to appreciate our astonishing good fortune by caring for the insane who pay the price for all of us, and by turning our healthy lives, so near as we can manage it, day by day, into an extended rapture.'<sup>3</sup>

This is a basic faith perspective, although Thomas avows that he is an unbeliever. Thomas's hearers', and even his closest colleagues, do not accept his paper, because they cannot cope with the terror of the unknown. They insist on answers.

My point is that people know this. They know that Thomas is right. Somewhere, sometimes overtly, sometimes secretly, human consciousness knows how terrible it is to be alive. It knows something of the unknown and it also knows something of its refusal to face that terror. But human beings stop there for they cannot make sense of it, they do not know enough.

Above all they do not know just how all of what they experience and know is reflected in Scripture, in the founding myths of Exodus, and above all in the terrifying story of Jesus. That would make sense of it (or at least 'faith sense') and enable them to turn their lives into an extended rapture.

One of the reasons why they have not made the jump between what they secretly (or not so secretly) know about life and what the tradition of faith says about life, why they have not seen that the terror and invisibility of life that they have experienced and what Christians have been talking about for 2,000 years are the same things, is because we – the supposed guardians of the unknown, the invisible and the terrifying – have not made that connection for them. Why is this? Why have we failed to bring people out of darkness? The answer is straightforward: we have not opened ourselves sufficiently to that terror and beauty which is God and spoken to them about it. We have not made the links for them. We have stopped before the insoluble knots and mysteries of life and looked for answers instead of rapture. We have not been guardians of the terror and the invisibility but have gone off into shallow 'truths'. By doing this we have short-changed ourselves and everybody else. We have thought that all people have wanted is consolation (perhaps because we have wanted that ourselves too much) when what they have actually needed is the otherness and the fierce beauty of God. They want to know that he, God, is. But all we have said is, 'There, there.' We have been false prophets. The gospel we have been preaching has been nowhere near profound, radical or 'mystical' enough. My belief has always been that the root reason for this is because our own interiority has not been deep enough.

Nor, contrary to what you might think, is any of this a threat or a difficulty. The real threat comes when we allow our faith to be locked into a reductionist view of God and forget his true nature, his terrifying beauty and otherness. The danger is we reduce God to the level of an effective supermarket product and make him an acceptable and nicely packaged part of Western culture, and the Church with it. We have risked turning faith into something we can sell and set about marketing that product as if it were simply another thing that any well-heeled Western man and woman should have. In this way, God becomes totally harmless.

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Remembering that God is wholly other, terrifyingly different in quality as well as degree, is entirely liberating because it sets Christian believing free from a consumerist mentality and gives God the opportunity to speak a saving and liberating word to the culture we inhabit.

In the end, this is what the mystical tradition is speaking of and precisely why it is so essential to recover that tradition for this generation. Mysticism is *not* merely medieval. Henry Vaughan in his poem 'The Night', says,

'Wise Nicodemus saw such light  
As made him know his God by night ...  
There is in God (some say)  
A deep, but dazzling darkness ...'<sup>4</sup>

This dazzling is really a realisation that we are caught up in the outpouring of God in creation. This is a form of 'extended rapture', a form of being awakened to, overwhelmed, not just by but actually *within* the outpouring that is God. We are a part of that self-emptying, that self-outpouring. Acknowledging, being aware of and co-operating with that is the rapture of which Thomas speaks in *Human Traces* and of which the mystics spoke and of which John Donne speaks when he says,

'Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seek to  
mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,  
and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make  
me new.  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chast, except you ravish me.'<sup>5</sup> ■