

MYSTICISM AND CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

6th November 2010 Session II

Summary

The mystical longings, insights and experiences of contemporary spiritual seekers are being gifted to us by God, however God is imagined, in response to the particular needs of our times, just as mystical insights have been gifted to us, through devoted individuals, in centuries past. Many people have lost interest and confidence in the doctrine and dogma of institutional religion, but continue to be captivated by their sense of the Sacred and of dimensions of life beyond the physical, observable and cerebral

Mysticism and contemplation are very closely related. Mark McIntosh: *Today we use the term 'mysticism' ...[while] earlier eras referred to the most intimate and transforming encounter with God as contemplation*

Mysticism, thus understood, is a way for us to participate in transformation. A way to:

- to spiritual depth and maturity
- to compassion and generosity, and to engagement, courage and action
- to theological development
- to inspiration and hope: a way to face into the impasse, and a way, ultimately, through it.

The test of true mysticism is its fruits

A commitment to the contemplative or the mystical way, is a commitment to what Paul Tillich mourned as the *lost dimension of depth* in contemporary society.

More and more people – are discovering a path to depth, discernment, compassion, action and generosity, in a range of spiritual practices, many of them drawn from the monastic tradition.

Anne Hillman: *Whatever our way, if we follow it deeply enough, it will bring us to the same place. All well-honed spiritual paths point to a root experience of awakening that transcends what we may have heard in our religions... We can learn a lot about a path but the reality is, we have to live it. ...At depth, we live in a dynamic state of relationship – with everything...*

'Mysticism' and 'Resistance' go hand in hand. Dorothee Soelle said that *the history of mysticism is the history of the love of God* and could not conceive that this love would not be acted out, practically and politically, in the world. ... *There is no experience of God that can be so privatized that it becomes the property of one owner, the privilege of a person of leisure, the esoteric domain of the initiated.*

The connection between mysticism and resistance, contemplation and compassion, flies in the face of the concern that spirituality, with its 'inherent mysticism', is self-absorbed and inward-focused. We co-operate in the awakening of the 'mystic within' by the disciplined commitment to contemplative practice.

Martin Laird: *Contemplation is the way out of the great self-centred psychodrama! When interior silence is discovered, compassion flows ... If we deepen our inner silence, our compassion for others is deepened.*

Soelle: *The value of mystical experience is that the self's seclusion is broken open!*

Mysticism is not about escaping the harsh realities of life in a broken, suffering, damaged world. It is about opening ourselves to an experience of the Divine and of our intimate connection with the whole of life, from which compassion will grow and in which new insights and 'solutions' will emerge, among them new theological insights and possibilities.

Mark McIntosh: *Spirituality is intrinsically orientated towards theology and theology is organically emergent from spirituality*

Historically there was a damaging and well-documented fracture in this relationship between spirituality and theology. The aftershock of the medieval divorce of scholastic and mystical theology reverberates to this day but there is, perhaps, a new mood of reconciliation in the air. A new theology is arising out of contemporary spiritual and mystical experience.

For some, most including Marcus Borg, this new theology is a re-newed Christian theology.

For others though, like Beverly Lanzetta and Ann Hillman, the emergent theology of this, and coming centuries, will reflect a new, *global* spirituality – a spirituality with a common, mystical core.

A number of writers argue that we are currently living through The Second Axial Age, and that key to this transition is a newly recognised – and experienced – *global* consciousness.

Areas of need – of crisis – in which the mystic or contemplative's way of being in the world might have a particular value and practical outworking, both in terms of action and in terms of theology

- the looming ecological catastrophe
- the pervasive threat of religious conflict and violence

Sallie McFague, in her book *A New Climate for Theology* writes: *Ecological despair is one of the most difficult problems for us as we try to change – to see differently and to live differently.* But she sees the radical incarnationalism of Christian mysticism – what others, including Marcus Borg, term *panentheism* – as our source of hope in the face of despair

David Tacey: *The potential ... spirituality presents for world peace and the resolution of religious or sectarian conflict seems to be enormous, and yet such potential remains essentially unexplored.*

Frederika Halligan: *The mystics have all told us that we cannot think our way into unity.*

The exploration of a universal spirituality touches on big questions, not least those raised by unfolding horizons in cosmology, the new physics and the study of human consciousness.

Ursula King: *There is a need for a new mysticism in a new world. Creative mystics are needed to adapt the heritage of the past to the needs of a new season.*

Paul Davies: *A rational explanation for the world in the sense of a closed and complete system of logical truths is almost certainly impossible. If we wish to progress beyond, we have to embrace a different concept of 'understanding' from that of rational explanation ... the mystical path is [possibly] a way to such an understanding. Maybe [mystical experiences] provide the only route beyond the limits to which science and philosophy can take us, the only possible path to the Ultimate.*