

Mysticism in the Bible

There is unquestionably a mystical note in the Bible, particularly in the N.T.

not everything that has religious or spiritual value is mystical. Admittedly, mysticism is a slippery term because it is a highly individualistic experience.

yet it has enough of a common center to be distinguishable from some other forms of religious experience.

it is not primarily moralistic, liturgical, ecclesiastical nor social activist., nor is it an ethical system, tho mystics have always insisted on moral purity as a pre-requisite to the vision of God, and is also its fruit.

it is opposite legalism, tho most mystics obey the law

mysticism in the O.T.

The basic theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is God's movement in history.

destiny and doom are epitomized in the giving and the breaking of the covenant.

to many mystics, though not all, the Eternal Now is a more congenial concept.

most Christian mystics have believed in personal survival after death but their greater concern, since they have entrusted the future to God, has been with eternal life in the Johannine sense (realized eschatology) as the blessedness of life in God here and now.

There is a great deal of difference between the vision of the prophet and the mystic.

both are experienced as forms of revelation, the imparting of wisdom not of man's conjuring up.

the difference is that the prophet proclaims to the people that which he believes YHWH requires of them.

the mystic looks to God in praise and prayer and hopes for a vision of God that will enable him to live more fruitfully and faithfully.

he/she is concerned with other people thru her love of God, but she does not usually think of herself as God's spokesman with a message to deliver to a major group in society.

the mystic finds much more interest in Jerimiah's vision of the New covenant in Jer 31:31-34 than in any of the great passages such as Isaiah's call (Is 6), etc.

the mystic protests the substitution of ceremony for the

inner reality and presence of God.

the mystic finds little in the Wisdom literature because it is God's transcendence that is emphasized. the only exception is in the concept of Wisdom which is a relatively new study.

Western mysticism, at least until recent times, has not questioned that God in ~~his~~ ^{God's} holiness is more than man or nature, yet it is ~~his~~ ^{God's} presence, not ~~his~~ ^{God's} otherness, that is most congenial to the mystical temper.

The two books in the Hebrew scriptures that do appeal to mystics is the Song of Solomon and Psalms

both in the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions the Song of Solomon is seen as an alligorical presentation of God's love for the person.

Bernard of Clairvaux and John of the Cross interpreted it this way.

however it is the Psalms that the mystic finds most rewarding.

Psalms have many themes--the transcendent holiness of God, the rewards of moral righteousness, the call to repentance and cleansing from sin, the praise of nature as God's handiwork. even tho some of these are not the mystics primary concern the language is that of deep devotion and the mystics mood is that of praise and prayer.

yet the themes most central to the mystics main concern are also to be found in the psalms.

The thirst for God (ps 42,) the affirmation of security in God's almighty care (Ps 91), the guidance of God's hand, the intimate nearness of the divine as the guardian and sustenance of the soul. (ps 139), etc.

New Testament--The synoptic gospels

the tenor of the first three gospels is not primarily mystical, though the saying that the Pure in heart will see God is certainly such.

in classical Christian mysticism there has been no question that purity of heart is demanded of the soul that would seek an intimate sense of the divine.

it would have been an utter travesty of spiritual worship to try drugs or mental exercises to induce ecstatic trance.

sayings such as "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20 and

Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Matt 28:20) give the clear implication of divine presenece

the question was Jesus a mystic? has been asked with varying answers.

the truth is, that outside the Garden of Gethsemane, we know little about his prayer yet he had every gift of the mystic and more. there is no question that he felt a deep sense of kinship with the Father (Abba)

however, he is viewed best not as a mystic, but as a prophet of Israel and a rabbinical teacher with a marvelously fresh and life giving outlook on the nature of both God and humankind.

the mysticism of Paul

It is Paul who is the first great Christian mystic.

his conversion experience is spoken of several times and it is obvious that Paul regarded this conversion with its vision of Christ as the turning point in his life and the foundation of his calling and mission.

the phenomena connected with it are much like those of mystical ecstasy, the blinding light, the voice, the sense of being caught up into heaven (II Cor 12:2-4)

many mystics don't experience this sort of thing until well along the path, not at the beginning as Paul did. Some mystics never

have visions or voices.

Paul's development can be seen in his authentic letters chronologically.

I Thessalonians shows emphasis is on divine judgement and need of penitence. Purgation is still present in this.

the next group, Corinthians, Galations and Romans have Christ as Saviour as its constant note which indicates greater spiritual maturity corresponding to the time of illumination on the classical path.

then in Phillipians, Philemon and Colossians the mystic's peace and joy through a constant sense of divine presence is visible.

Paul's theology, which has influenced the church from his time on shows marks of his jewish heritage, as in the sacrificial and atoning death of Christ, yet in larger part it rests on the inner witness of the Spirit, which he had experienced and which he believed others should experience for the transformation of life.

Grace is his experience, the constant presence of Jesus living in him, tho he had never met the historical Jesus.

Paul thus identifies the Holy Spirit with the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God which he uses interchangeably.

the identification becomes complete when Paul says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (II Cor 3:17)

It is the Spirit that becomes for Paul the ultimate criterion of truth, and the ground of authority for the human spirit in both thought and action.

thus, the way of salvation for Paul is to be "in Christ."

his Christ mysticism is summed up in the rest of II Cor 3:18

"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

no medieval mystic could have improved on this as a consummation of the scale of perfection.

Paul also speaks of dying and rising with Christ especially II Cor 5:17, "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

this is of course, not only a prerogative of mystics, but it has long been prized by the mystical temperament and enabled the mystic to undergo the 'dark nights of the soul and spirit' and come out victoriously.

to sum up, to be in Christ connotes for Paul both an internal and external relationship, each indispensable to the other and vital to the believer.

Christ is the incarnate Lord, who had lived, died, risen again, and returned to the Father, yet as Spirit still lives eternally.

to be in Christ is to live a transformed life in faith, hope and love through the enabling grace of this incarnate, indwelling Christ.

the Gospel of John

tho Paul was the first great Christian mystic, the writer of John's gospel certainly was one also

for the writer, God is not just another name for the presence of the qualities of truth, spirit, and love but God is the supreme personal being who has not only made all things, but who continues to love, enlighten, and inspire.

this same God has been incarnate in Christ, who manifests in his own person the love of God, the light of the world, and the

eternal divine Spirit.

this concept of God undergirds the entire writing.

there is no expressly stated doctrine of the Trinity, but the groundwork is laid for one.

the emphasis for John is on the incarnation of God rather than the death of Jesus. In the son is the full manifestation of the love of God, but also the power and wisdom (Logos) of God.

this is why in John Jesus is in complete control of every situation. there is no agony in the garden, even in the crucifixion he is in control.

an important point in John is the realized eschatology. Ie, eternal life is a present experience for the believer.

with the coming of Christ, as the revealer of God and savior of the world, the "age to come" is here.

judgement is at work in the here and now, and separation is taking place between those who will and those who will not accept the salvation available in Christ.

"he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life, he does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24)

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser". . . I am the vine, you are the branches".

no other passage affords such a direct expression of the mystical union between Christ and the Christian.

this passage sums up the major notes in the fourth gospel. here we find epitomized the demands and fruits of an inward union with Christ and of outward service in his name.

these are suggested in the utter dependence of the branch upon the vine for its nourishing; the need of prayer in conformity with the will of Christ (this is what in his name means), for only that kind of prayer is effective; the glorification of the Father, not in words only but by the life one lives; the primacy of love as the basic commandment; the fullness of joy which ensues from this relationship.

this love, this hope and this self-purification through the Spirit have given vitality to Christian mysticism through the centuries.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF JEWISH MYSTICISM--KABBALAH

The kabbalah , at once strange and repellent, epitomized everything that was opposed to modern ideas of Judaism.

the word simply means, tradition, and is itself an excellent example of the paradoxical nature of mysticism.

the very doctrine which centers about the immediate personal contact with the Divine, is a highly personal and intimate form of knowledge, and is conceived as traditional wisdom.

however, the idea of jewish mys. from the start combined the conception of a knowledge which by its very nature is difficult to impart and therefore secret, with that of a knowledge which is the secret tradition of chosen spirits or adepts.

it is confined to a small elite of the chosen who impart the knowledge to their disciples.

sources of truth

there are two sources of truth to the jewish mystic.

the most important is the mystical experience itself.

this experience is seen as a continuation of the revelation given at Sinai to Moses and cannot contradict that revelation but the bible is interpreted in light of the experience, not the other way around.

2. is the Hebrew Bible, which is the revelation given by God to Israel.

however, to the mystic, this is read not only on the level of history but with a mystical understanding.

for example, the Exodus under Moses is seen as representing the movement of the soul to God

through the "wilderness" of ones own life.

philosophers would use the allegorical method to interpret the scripture and see similar things but they never gave the scripture the mystical interpretation that the Kabbalists did.

the Torah and the mystiactal experience cannot be in conflict but the mystics emphasize the experience first and then reinterpret the Bible to explain their experiences.

one major thing is that all must keep the Torah, the laws even if a mystic. this means both written and oral, as remember that it was the Pharasaic branch of Judaism that survived and began the mystiactal movement, as we will discuss later.

the Internal Unity of God

one aspect of their thought that is most important is the belief in the Unity of God and the meaning of his revelation laid down in the Torah.

Jewish mysticism in its various forms represents an attempt to interpret this unity and concentrates of the living God who manifests himself in the acts of creation, revelation and redemption.

pushed to the extreme, this mysitcal meditation gave birth to the idea of a sphere, a whole realm of divinity, which underlies the world of our sense data and which is paretent and active in all that exists.

this is what the Kabbalists call The World of the Sefiroth

the idea is that no cratuare dcan take aim at the unknown, the hidden God.

in the last resort, every cognition of God is based on a form of relation between Him and His creature, ie., on a manifestation of Gopd in something else, and not on a relation between Him and Himself.

the dualism embedded in these two aspects of the one God, both of which are theologically speaking, possible ways of aiming at the divinity, has deeply preoccupied the Jewish mystics.

as a rule, the Kabbalists were concerned to find a formula which should give as little offense as possible to the philosophers.

God in himself cannot be known for he is an absolute being so his very nature is incapable of becoming the subject of a revelation to others.

this God is not the God of the canonical writings.

rather, the sacred writings refer to some aspect of His manifestation on the side of Creation.

it follows that while the living God the God of religion of whom these writings bear witness, has innumerable names, the God who is hidden in His own self, can only be named in a metaphorical sense and with the help of words which, mystically speaking, are not areal names at all.

the favorite formula for the spanish Kabbalists are speculative paraphrases like "Root of all Roots", "Great Reality", "indifferent Unity", and most especially "En Sof", which reveals the impersonal character of this aspect of the hidden God from the standpoint of man most clearly.

En Sof signifies the infinite or "that which is infinite"

it is clear that with this postulate of an impersonal basic reality in kGod, which becomes a person--or appears as a person--only in the process of creation and revelation, Kabbalism abandons the personalistic basis of the Biblical conception of God.

the mystic strives to assure himself of the living presence of God, the God of the Bible, the God who has attributes like goodness, wisdom, etc., but at the same time he is unwilling to renounce the idea of the hidden God who remains eternally unknowable in the depths of His own self, or the depths of his nothingness.

this hidden God may be w/o special attributes--the living God of whom the Revelation speaks,

with whom all religion is concerned, must have attributes, which on another plane represent also the mystics's own scale of moral values: God is good, severe, merciful, just, etc.

the kabbalists do not even recoil before the inference that in a higher sense there is a root of evil even in God.

the benevolence of God is to the mystic not simply the negation of evil, but a whole sphere of divine light in which God manifests Himself under this particular aspect.

These spheres of the Sefirot, which are often described with the aid of mythical metaphors and provide the key for a kind of mystical topography of the Divine realm, are themselves nothing but stages in the revelation of God's creative power.

every attribute represents a given stage, including the attribute of severity and stern judgement, which mystical speculation has connected with the source of evil in God.

the mystic then contemplates or meditates on each of these sefirot and thus proceeds to the conception of God as the union and the root of all these contradictions.

Thus the mystic conceives of God as the absolute Being and the absolute becoming; thus the hidden God of whom nothing is known to us, and the living God of religious experience and revelation, are one and the same.

LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION

how does one give expression to mystical knowledge which by its very nature is related to a sphere where speech and expression are excluded?

Jewish mysticism has two unusual characteristics as compared with other mysticism.

first is the striking restraint observed by the Kabbalists in referring to the supreme experience

and secondly, their metaphysically positive attitude towards language as God's own instrument.

first, if you compare the writings of the Jewish mystics with others one notices that not only is the form different in which these experiences are expressed, but the will to express them and to impart the knowledge of them is lacking.

spiritual autobiographies of great mystics are entirely missing.

it is these that give the great pearls of understanding psychologically what the mystic goes through.

the Kabbalists no such thing

they aim at describing the realm of Divinity and the other objects of the contemplation in an impersonal way.

they are deeply averse to letting their own personalities intrude into the picture.

it is possible that this dislike of a too personal indulgence in self-expression may have been caused by the fact among others that the Jews retained a particularly vivid sense of the incongruity between mystical experience and that idea of God which stresses the aspects of Creator, King and Law-giver.

the one exception to this impersonal approach is the Hasidic movement of Baal Shem Tov beginning in 18th cent. Poland.

We will get to that in the last lecture.

the attitude towards language

the second distinguishing thing is that for the Kabbalist, Hebrew is a Holy tongue, not simply a means of expressing certain thoughts.

this reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world; in other words, it has a mystical value.

all creation--and this is an important principle of most Kabbalists--is, from the point of view of God, nothing but an expression of His hidden self that begins and ends by giving itself a name, the holy name of God, the perpetual act of creation

all that lives is an expression of God's language--and what is it that revelation can reveal in the last resort if not the name of God.

so, what is Jewish Mysticism?

Kabbalah, it must be remembered is not the name of a certain dogma or system but rather the general term applied to a whole religious movement from the time of the 2nd temple to the present.

within this movement there exists a considerable variety of religious experience.

there is little resemblance between the earliest mystical texts of the Merkabah school and the writings of the Spanish Kabbalists, who later flourished in Safed, Israel in the 16th cent.

nor is the Hasidic literature of today like any other

however, they are all connected by the various common presuppositions I am describing

the mystic, as it were forestalls the processes of history by anticipating in his own life the enjoyment of the last age."

this eschatological nature of mystical knowledge becomes of paramount importance in the writings of many Jewish mystics, from the Merkabah tracts through the Hasidic movement.

the consensus of Kabbalistic opinion regards the mystical way to God as a reversal of the procession by which we have emanated from God.

to know the stages of the creative process is also to know the stages of one's own return to the root of all existence.

in this way the interpretation of the esoteric doctrine of creation, has always formed one of the main preoccupations of Kabbalism.

it is here that Kabbalism comes nearest to Neo-Platonic thought

so, in spite of themselves, the Kabbalists did use philosophy to some degree but what many mystics felt towards philosophy was well expressed by Rabbi Moses of Burgos (late 13th cent) when he heard the philosophers praised, he used to say angrily: "You ought to know that these philosophers whose wisdom you are praising, end where we begin."

the Kabbalah certainly did not arise as a reaction against philosophical 'enlightenment' but once it was there it is true that its function was that of an opposition to it.

The Kabbalists employed the ideas and conceptions of orthodox theology, but the magic hand of mysticism opened up hidden sources of new life in the heart of many scholastic ideas and abstractions.

one excellent example is the "creation out of nothing"

orthodox theologians basically affirmed that the creation of the world by God out of something which is neither God Himself nor any kind of existence, but simply non-existent.

the mystics speak of creation out of nothing, in fact it is one of their favorite formulae.

but the Nothing of the mystic from which everything has sprung, is by no means a mere negation.

nothing, to quote a kabbalist, is infinitely more real than all other reality.

only when the soul has stripped itself of all limitation and, in mystical language, has descended into the depths of Nothing does it encounter the Divine.

in a word, it signifies the Divine itself, in its most impenetrable guise.

thus creation out of nothing to many mystics means creation out of God.

creation out of nothing thus becomes the symbol of emanation (Plato, again)

for the kabbalist every existing thing is endlessly correlated with the whole of creation; for him everything mirrors everything else.

Symbols are everywhere, in fact the whole world is a symbol, tho the symbol in itself signifies nothing it makes something transparent which is beyond all expression

the infinite shines through the finite and makes it more real rather than less.

thus mythical lore had a great revival in jewish mysticism.

the Jewish mystic lives and acts in perpetual rebellion against a world with which he strives with all his zeal to be at peace.

this brings a profound ambiguity in his outlook and explains the apparent self-contradiction inherent in many kabbalistic symbols and images.

w/o mythical language the ancient Jewish mystics would have been unable to compress into language the substance of their inner experience.

it was gnosticism one of the last great manifestations of mythology in religious thought, which lent figures of speech to the jewish mystic.

it is characteristic of kabbalistic theology that it attempts to construct and describe a world in which something of the mythical has again come to life, in terms of thought which exclude the

mythical element.

however, it is this contradiction which more than anything else explains the extraordinary success of Kabbalism in Jewish history.

the problem of evil is a case and point, the fact of the existence of evil in the world is the main touchstone of this difference between the philosophic and kabbalistic outlook.

on the whole, philosophy in Judaism sees the existence of evil as something meaningless in itself.

as Hermann Cohen states: "evil is non-existent. It is nothing but a concept derived from the concept of freedom. A power of evil exists only in myth.

to most Kabbalists as true seal bearers of the world of myth, the existence of evil is, at any rate, one of the most pressing problems, and one which keeps them continuously occupied with attempts to solve it.

they have a strong sense of the reality of evil

because of these attitudes they have unwittingly established a connection between their own strivings and the vital interests of popular belief (superstition?) and all of these concrete manifestations of Jewish life in which these fears found expression.

the dangers which myth and magic present to the religious consciousness, including that of the mystic, are clearly shown in the development of Kabbalism.

masculine doctrine

one last thing needs to be mentioned and that is there is no sign of feminine influence at all in this doctrine, it is by, of and for men.

this probably explains why there is no autobiography, no excessive emotionalism.

This exclusive masculinity for which kabbalism has paid a high price, appears to be connected with an inherent tendency to lay stress on the demonic nature of woman and the feminine element of the cosmos.

woman represents, not tenderness, but stern judgement.

the demonic is the offspring of the feminine sphere (lilith) even tho the Shekhinah is the feminine element in God that is present with all.

This contradiction does present a problem for the psychologist and historian of religion alike., but it is a fact.