

The Search For Authentic Spirituality

Is Medieval Mysticism a Model for Contemporary Spirituality?

by

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George Barna, the well-known evangelical sociologist and pollster, recently reported that America is becoming more spiritual and less Biblical. While embracing new and various forms of spirituality, Americans are, at the same time, forsaking a world-view that is based in Scripture. Books on angels, dreams, and spirituality abound and popular TV shows, like Oprah, offer its viewers spiritual fulfillment apart from Christianity and the Bible. Even Christian books on spirituality tend to be light on Biblical truth and some have obviously borrowed concepts from secular psychology, from New Age writers and from other religions such as Buddhism and Zen.

As a part of this trend, many today are looking to the medieval mystics as models of spirituality. But although many of the mystics are to be admired for their sincerity and devotion, their experiences and writings must be read with caution and discernment. Living in an era when the Bible was subordinated to the pope and tradition, they shared in this lax attitude toward Scripture, giving priority to their own spiritual experiences. Commenting on medieval mysticism and its neglect of Scripture, Hans Kung, the most widely read Catholic theologian in the world today, says,

These new revelations not only overshadowed the Bible and the Gospel, but also Him whom the Gospel proclaims and to whom the Bible bears witness. It is striking how rarely Christ appeared in all these “revelations,” “apparitions,” and “wonders.” Catholics who followed in the wake of every new “revelation,” which often turned out to be fantasy or deceit, and indulged their desire for sensation by

looking for the latest reports of miracles—and yet who had never once in their whole lives read the Scriptures from cover to cover.¹

Medieval mysticism stood somewhere between the evangelical revival groups of the Middle Ages and the church hierarchy. Like the Waldenses, Albigenses, and Cathari, mysticism arose in reaction to the lifeless, outward forms of the medieval church. However, in contrast to the evangelical revival groups, the mystics gave their ultimate allegiance to the pope and the institutional church, not to Scripture. Those who did utilize Scripture were bound to the allegorical method of interpretation by which Scripture can be made to say whatever the interpreter wants it to say. These attitudes resulted in many unbiblical practices and experiences being embraced by the mystics.

For example, the goal of the mystic was a union of the human soul with God where those who achieve this mystical union “swim in the wild waves of the ocean of God’s being.”² This mystical union could only be achieved in a state of quietness and contemplation, “the quiet dark in which all who love God lose themselves,” as one mystic put it. As aids in achieving this state of contemplation, various postures and techniques for prayer and meditation were emphasized. Some were quite remarkable. Gregory Palamas, a 13th century monk, stressed quietness and stillness in the pursuit of this union with God. As an aid to concentration, he recommended that the chin rest on the chest with the eyes fixed on the navel.³

An unhealthy preoccupation with suffering was characteristic of medieval mysticism. Some mystics, such as Julian of Norwich, prayed to be deathly sick, thinking that through such suffering they could better identify with Christ in His sufferings. Not having an opportunity to suffer for Christ, as did the early Christian martyrs, many pursued a self-inflicted martyrdom. Henry Suso, who gained fame for his sanctity and devotion, wore an

undergarment studded with 150 sharp tacks that, he said, felt as if he were lying in a nest of wasps.⁴ He also made a wooden cross to which he affixed thirty spikes and on this he lay every night for eight years. This unhealthy preoccupation with suffering, and the belief that it produced a cleansing effect on the soul, gave rise to writings such as *The Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross.

Medieval mysticism also rejected reason and rational thinking as hindrances to the soul being united with God. For example, an anonymous 6th century Syrian monk, authored a popular book entitled *Mystike Theologia* in which he said,

I counsel thee in the earnest exercise of mystic contemplation, that you leave the senses and activities of the intellect and all that the senses or intellect can perceive. Having laid your understanding to rest, strain as far as you can toward a union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain. So shall you be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which surpasses all existence.⁵

Neither Jesus or Paul, of course, advocated the rejection of the intellect or rational thinking. Jesus said that we are to love God with all our . . . *minds* (Matt. 22:37). Paul's mode of operation in fulfilling his call to the Gentiles involved the use of logical thinking as he *reasoned daily* in the synagogues and in the school of Tyrannus concerning the identity of Jesus (Acts 17:2-3; 19:9-10). It is the carnal mind that is against God, not the mind *per se*. The answer is not to reject the mind and rational thinking, but to renew the mind in God's word as Paul admonishes in Rom. 12:2. God's word and Spirit will often transcend human reason but will never violate it or seek to eliminate it.

Medieval mysticism is obviously out of touch with Jesus and the New Testament. Jesus, for example, does not advocate any form of mystical prayer. He did not teach any postures or techniques for prayer and

meditation. Neither is there any mention of silence or contemplation. He, rather, emphasizes a relational approach to God in which prayer is simple conversation with a loving, benevolent being whom He calls *Abba*, an endearing term used only by children for the father in the Jewish household. For Jesus, oneness with God is not a mystical union of one's being with God, but a practical oneness of will and purpose.

Neither does Jesus call His followers to withdraw from the world into solitude and contemplation. Instead, He promises a baptism in the Holy Spirit that will empower them to prophetically engage the world as His witnesses. Neither does He teach progressive stages of cleansing through darkness and suffering, but, rather, emphasizes the word of God as the primary agent of cleansing. In Jn. 15:3, for example, He says to His disciples, *You are already clean through the word I have spoken to you.* In Jn. 17:17, He prays to the Father, *Sanctify them by Your truth, Your word is truth.*

Medieval mysticism, in fact, seems to have more in common with the mysticism of the East than it does with Biblical Christianity. This is why Kung says,

And yet we must realize that mysticism is not a specifically Christian phenomenon. Not only is mysticism older than Christianity; it also comes from far away. Mystical religion had already come into being at a very early stage – in the late Vedan period – in India.⁶

Although one can be inspired by the sincerity and devotion of many of the mystics, their approaches to spirituality must be read with caution and carefully compared with Scripture. For the most part, Luther, Zwingli and other reformers of the 16th century, including the charismatic Anabaptists, rejected medieval mysticism, primarily because of its neglect of Scripture. Instead of looking to the mystics for guidance in spirituality, they sought to

model their lives after Jesus and the New Testament. We would be wise to follow their example.

¹ Hans Kung, *The Church* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1976), 257-58.

² Schaff, vol. 6 of *History of the Christian Church*, 276.

³ Lane, *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith*, 64.

⁴ Schaff, vol. 6 of *History of the Christian Church*, 263-64.

⁵ Tony Lane, *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 56.

⁶ Hans Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, 448.

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