

Johannine Mysticism

M. P. JOHN

It is doubtful whether the term mysticism is the right one to use in this connection, but there seems to be no other common word to emphasize the special religious approach that is intended, and there seems to be far less antagonism to that term and its associations than there was half a century ago. Mysticism has many forms and some of them are foreign to the Christian way of thinking, but this article is written with the conviction that there are certain elements in the Johannine presentation of Christianity that can be called mystical, which are of permanent value, and that we should attempt to appropriate these more than we usually do. It is not suggested that these are exclusively Johannine in the sense that none of the other New Testament writers is aware of them. In fact, stress will be laid on close similarity of certain of the Johannine concepts with those of Paul. The Gospel of John seems to have a greater fascination for the Indian mind, Christian as well as non-Christian, and that too gives an incentive for this study.

John's mysticism is not one that is exclusive, unusual or visionary. He does not think of the things about which he writes as being applicable to or available for only a few chosen or superior souls. His deep religious insight must be seen in his view of life as a whole, radiating its vitality and meaning from a centre that is God revealed in Christ, an abiding in Christ which gives meaning, purpose and perspective to the rest of life. His religion is an 'end-experience' to use a term that A. H. Maslow uses about love. It is self-explanatory and finds its meaning and purpose within itself for those who experience it. It is not something that has to do with obedience to commandments and fineness and accuracy of thought or expression primarily, but a personal relationship which is of such a transforming character that man no longer lives by an external law, but fulfils and more than fulfils the law with an inner spontaneity. Here there is a unity of the path and the end of the journey, of the means and the end, of striving and attaining of freedom and obedience.

We can see the main emphases of the Gospel if we take some of its central themes and try to understand the experiences that are suggested and draw some parallels from Paul and elsewhere. These themes may be looked at separately as a matter of convenience for study, but the experiences denoted always overlap, and must be understood as aspects of the unity of the total Christian life.

It would be generally agreed that the central aspect of mystical religion in any setting is the experience of communion with ultimate reality. Whether this is seen primarily in terms of fellowship or of union, and if in terms of union, what kind of union, will depend upon the philosophical and religious presuppositions of the mystic. In the context of religious and philosophic systems that tend to think in monistic or

pantheistic terms the highest experience will be one of union in which the sense of distinctness or separation of the individual, supposed to arise from ignorance of the true nature of the self and of reality, will be lost or overcome. This would be true in the Hindu religious philosophy of *advaita*. It is true that some of the medieval Christian mystics, in describing their experiences, used language strangely similar to that used by monistic thinkers. Yet it seems unlikely that if these mystics were to give expression to their understanding of ultimate reality in terms of philosophy they would have used a consistent monism.

In the Fourth Gospel we see the relation between God and man at its highest and best described and symbolized in three different ways, maintaining and emphasizing aspects of truth that cannot be lost sight of without in some way distorting it. The three ways can be expressed under the concepts of fellowship, union and indwelling. These three are not to be seen as distinct experiences, but different ways of looking at the same experience, different points of view being necessary to grasp something of the depth and richness of the experience.

Fellowship

In the opening words of the First Epistle of John, the writer expresses the purpose of the proclamation of the Gospel as the building up of a fellowship; the good news is invitation to enter into a fellowship which the believers have 'with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ'. That note is prominent in the final discourse and the high priestly prayer in the Gospel of John. 'If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.' 'I have called you friends.' 'I go and prepare a place for you, . . . that where I am, there ye may be also.' 'I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it; that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.'¹ These verses represent an emphasis which runs through the whole of the Gospel even though the word 'fellowship' itself is not used. The relation to God is in some Indian writings understood at four levels; being in the same world; nearness; similarity; union. The gradation represented is not found in the Gospel, but the rich diversity and range that is suggested by these words are not foreign to John.

Further a dimension of the idea of fellowship which tends to be under-valued in mysticism in general is specially emphasized in this Gospel. Fellowship is not seen as a relation between the devotee and God alone. It has its complement in the human community and human fellowship. This human fellowship is seen as founded on and flowing from the divine-human fellowship. The idea of a human fellowship that follows from the divine self-giving is realized in the Church, beginning with the closely knit group of the personal followers of Jesus. In the simile of the flock of sheep and the shepherd, in the last discourse and the high priestly prayer where the desire is expressed that 'where I am you may be also', in calling His disciples friends and brethren, and in the close correlation of the command to Peter, 'Feed my sheep' to the question, 'Lovest thou me?' we see this emphasis. The presence

¹ John 14:23; 15:15; 14:3; 17:26.

of Jesus at the wedding feast at Cana, and the concern for His mother which found expression even in the last hours of His earthly life may be referred to here as an extension of this same emphasis, even though there is no direct reference to the Church.

Union

This idea of fellowship, in its deepest sense, is not distinct in this Gospel from the idea of union with Christ and God. As union is not seen as a total loss of the self in the ultimate, but as an obedience and surrender in which one finds joy and experiences an inner transformation, fellowship and union are one here. In the parable of the vine and the branches, which the late Dr. Rufus M. Jones calls 'a parable of an organic union of God and man, an interrelation by which believers live in God and God expresses Himself through them—the Divine life circulating through all who are incorporate with the central stock', we see the same emphasis again. 'Oneness with God consists in the continuous orientation of the human personality toward the Divine so that floods of God's love and power keep running into man's soul. The vast energies of God inundate the soul of man from time to time, and every moment he lives in the consciousness of receiving them. From him proceed prayers, aspirations, longings and decisions which continually keep flowing into God. Thus there is a perpetual flux of life from God to man and then again from man to God.'¹

Indwelling

This way of union is sometimes expressed in terms of 'indwelling'. The variety of expressions, Christ in us, we in Christ, Spirit in us, etc., which are used warn us against any narrow interpretation of this idea. Deissmann in his study of the Pauline phrase 'in Christ' (which and its equivalents occur 164 times in Pauline writings) has shown the centrality of this concept in Paul's thinking and also suggested that Johannine mysticism stems from this Pauline source. The importance of this concept for Paul comes out also in Schweitzer's study of Paul's 'Christ-mysticism'. It seems much more likely that both Paul and John are giving expression in their own different and more articulate ways to a common experience that was central in the life of the early Church than that the latter learnt it from the former who originated it.

Our dwelling in God and His dwelling in us cannot be described as synonymous, but these two and other similar expressions (e.g. abiding in the vine, Christ's words abiding in us, etc.) are different ways of looking at the same experience of intimate personal fellowship in and through which the individual enters a new sphere of life and experiences new and transforming power within himself. As Dr. C. H. Dodd puts it, 'It is clear that for the Evangelist . . . the idea, *ἐν Θεῷ* with its correlative, ("God in us"), stands for the most intimate union conceivable between God and men. But it clearly does not mean for him . . . an impersonal inclusion, or absorption, into the divine, conceived pantheistically; nor does it mean . . . an ecstatic possession by a divine afflatus. It is so far like the former that it involves a real community of being, a sharing of life; and it is so far like the latter that it is a dynamic relation and not a

¹ A. J. Appasamy, *What is Moksha*, p. 68.

static, producing the effects of an incursion of divine energy through which men may speak the words and do the works of God. But it is unlike both in being a personal relation with a living God, mediated through a concrete, historical personality, in whom that relation is original and perfect. It is not a question of inhering as it were adjectivally in the absolute substance . . . It is a radically personal form of life, manifested in the concrete activity of Christ in laying down His life for His friends . . . It is by becoming first the objects of this love, and then in turn the subjects of the same love, directed towards Christ and towards one another, that we become one by mutual indwelling both with Father and Son and with one another in Him ; but all this, at every stage, in terms of living action—doing the works of God, bearing fruits to His glory.¹

This relation in which unity and distinction, identification and personal existence combine is seen in a slightly different way in a concept that this Gospel employs more than once. In words like 'As the Father hath sent me, so send I you', and 'As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world', a parallelism between the relation of the disciple and Christ and that of Christ and the Father is suggested. In words like 'the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing . . . As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will' and 'He that believes in me, believes not in me, but in him who sent me', and 'He that has seen me has seen the Father', it is not so much the similarity of the relation, but the unique position of Christ as mediator that is stressed. It is worth noting that the purpose of the intermediary is not so much that of keeping God and man separate as in some of the gnostic systems but that of uniting them.

Paul and John agree in emphasizing the centrality of this experience of union with Christ. The core of Paul's religious experience has been rightly called Christ-mysticism. It is a fellowship with a living, present Christ and not a doctrine about Him. That fellowship is one which calls forth the total response of obedience and surrender from the believer, and which at the same time transforms him inwardly and gives him an experience of peace and strength unknown before.

Eternal Life

Eternal life is another of the concepts which we must look at very briefly in this connection. The use of this term, rather than 'Kingdom of God' of the synoptic Gospels, is an indication of the intention of the Evangelist to present the Christian faith as essentially an inward reality. What is nearer to one than life ? Eternal life in John is not a possession of man as man, but a gift that comes through fellowship with God. The possibility of the loss of life, the danger of missing it, is repeatedly emphasized in this Gospel.² Jesus calls Himself resurrection and life, and affirms that those who believe in Him have already in some measure passed out of the experience of death into that of the new life that overcomes death. In John resurrection 'may take place before bodily death, and has for its result the possession of eternal life here and now.'³

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Fourth Gospel*, p. 197.

² John 3:16 ; 5:21 ; 6:53, etc.

³ Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

Some scholars have found it necessary to draw a sharp distinction between life after death and eternal life.¹ It is clear that these terms can be given mutually excluding contents, one based on and inseparably associated with succession in time and personal, individual fulfilment, and the other on eternity as timeless, and individuality as something to be overcome. Such a contrast is foreign to John's way of thinking. He sees time not as lost in eternity, but as fulfilled in it. Three positions have to be held together if we are to be true to this Gospel as a whole with its Hebraic background and Greek expression and its real emphasis on the actuality of the incarnation. The time process is real. It is closely related to eternity. Eternity must be seen as including rather than excluding time; time is not a 'shadow' of eternity.²

Once again we can note how close John and Paul are in their thinking. For Paul 'the Christian has already been raised with Christ; already he has passed from death to life; even now he is living eternally. Hence the resurrection of the hereafter is simply God's seal set upon the life in Christ which the believer now possesses.'³

The idea of eternal life as a present possession may be compared and contrasted with the conception of *jivan mukta* in Hinduism and that of *Bodhisattva* in Buddhism. The terms refer to those who have achieved the end of life in a full sense, are above the limitations of this life and are supposed to be incapable of any faults. Even though there are some verses in the First Epistle of John which may seem to approximate to these concepts, John does not accept the idea that man ever finally attains the end of life here so as to be infallible. Man remains liable to fail, in spite of his sharing in eternal life.⁴

The Johannine and Pauline view that eternal life, life in its fullness, can be experienced here and now has parallels in some mystics who see in their mystic experiences the ultimate and final end of life. What is rare outside the Christian faith is the combination of this valuing of the present experiences of fellowship with God and an intense longing for a fuller and deeper relationship that is still to come. 'Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is,'⁵ is perhaps the best text that we can quote as an example of this twofold view. It is true that eschatology of the apocalyptic type that we see in the Thessalonian epistles and some sections of the synoptic Gospels is not prominent in this Gospel, but in the words of Jesus to Nathanael we have an echo of the same. The fulfilment that is expected on the one hand avoids the crude materialistic dreams and on the other delivers the believer from satisfaction with the present and from an engrossing concern for immediate experience.

Another point which we may mention in passing is the close correlation of love and life which comes out more explicitly in the First Epistle than in the Gospel, with which we can compare the emphasis that psychology now places on the relation of love as a basic necessity for healthy personal existence. What interests us here is primarily not

¹ Cf. Nairne, *Eternal Life Here and Now*, p. 33.

² Howard, *Christianity According to St. John*, p. 124.

³ Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, p. 267.

⁴ 1 John 3:19; cf. 1:18.

⁵ 1 John 3:2.

that modern thinking in the realm of psychology emphasizes some aspect of truth long stressed by Christianity, but that here too John comes to see life as one whole in which the dichotomy of internal and external, of duty and desire, of free grace and human merit, of divine demand and human fullness is overcome.

Knowledge and Love

The meaning given to the word *knowledge* in this Gospel is another example of the deep and integrated view of life that the Evangelist holds and which we have said is the essence of his mysticism. The knowledge of the Father and the Son which is eternal life and the knowledge of the truth that makes men free is not mere intellectual knowledge. It is the knowledge that follows from self-committal.¹ Dodd has said that in Greek thought 'to know God means to contemplate the ultimate reality *to ontōs on* in its changeless essence. For the Hebrew, to know God is to acknowledge Him in His works and respond to His claims.'² For John knowledge of God is more than both, for it is the transforming fellowship with God to which man is called, and in which he finds a life that overcomes death, because of its relation to the eternal God. The significance of Jesus' words about calling his disciples no longer servants but friends must also be sought in this experience.

We may quote here the words of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the modern Hindu saint: 'Knowledge and love of God are ultimately one and the same. There is no difference between pure knowledge and pure love.'³ The Tamil saint Tirumūlar wrote: 'The ignorant say that love and God are two. No one knows that love itself is God. Whoever knows that love itself is God shall rest in love, one with God.'⁴

We can only refer in passing to the importance of the teaching on the Spirit in this Gospel. Much of what we can say would be true of Pauline writings too. The concern with the Holy Spirit here is not so much a theological concern to understand the inner essence of the deity, but a practical concern of understanding the experience of new life, of transformation, of the discovery of springs of spiritual vitality that we now experience, but which do not have their source in us. The Spirit effects the union, the fellowship, the indwelling. He is not removed from the Father or the Son, but it is He who makes them real to us, and makes us close to the life of God.

St. John's Gospel is not primarily a mystical treatise, but a Gospel. It is in many ways different from the other Gospels, but as a Gospel it attempts to record 'that which we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands' and to speak of the Word that 'became flesh and dwelt among us'. This emphasis on Jesus, on history, is one of the ways in which the Evangelist tries to avoid some of the common dangers of mystical religion, especially the tendency to lose the sense of human realities in the attempt to learn divine truths.

We have not examined in detail the passages in this Gospel that can bear a mystical interpretation, but have looked at some of the ideas that

¹ John 17:3; 8:23; cf. 7:17.

² Dodd, *Fourth Gospel*, p. 152.

³ Max Muller: *Ramakrishna, His Life and Sayings*, p. ix.

⁴ Quoted by Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*, p. 104.

the writer stresses, which, we have felt, have a mystical significance. Mysticism in the Gospel is not a matter of visions, auditions, and ecstatic experiences. It is a dimension of religious life and experience which all men who have with any degree of reality turned to God realize in its lower and elementary forms. It is an integrated experience where the contradictions of head and heart, of faith and works, of ritual and inner meaning, have lost their opposition. Here knowledge of God is eternal life; abiding in the vine produces the fruit. It is an experience of fellowship and union with God where human striving and Divine help have met and joined inseparably. Here obedience is implied in love. This Gospel can, within a dozen verses, say, 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you' and 'It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing'¹, without real contradiction.

To have life in His name, life eternal, here and now, is the end of life. It is a life in which the warring elements in our personality reach towards unity and fruition in obedience and fellowship with God, by a constant abiding in Him, by a constant listening to the voice of the true Shepherd. It is also at the same time the life of the true vine flowing through the branches, the Comforter being with us, His words abiding in us. This is life eternal to know Him. This is His truth by which we are sanctified. This is the eating of the body and the drinking of His blood whereby we have eternal life. This is the Spirit that quickeneth. This is also growing up, into the fullness of the stature of Christ.

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Christ's legacy was neither a truth nor a collection of them, nor a character and its imaginative memory, but a faith that could not stop short of giving Him the worship reserved by all the past for God alone. And what caused this? What produced this result, so amazing, so blasphemous for Jews? It was the cross, when it came home by the resurrection through the Spirit. It was then that Jesus became the matter and not merely the master of Gospel preaching. It was then that He became Christ, indeed then when He became perfected! He became the finished Saviour only in the finished salvation, and for those who worshipped Him first, all He was to them centred in the cross and radiated from there.

P. T. FORSYTH

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Christ, the Holy One, had no *karma* of evil deeds to work out. Yet He was the man of sorrows. The *karma* of others' sins He took upon Himself. He saved men, not by ignoring sin, but by identifying Himself with human need. And this cross of Christ . . . is not only the measure of Christ's love. It is also the reflection of the love of God. So we think no longer of each man working out alone the inexorable *karma* of his deeds with no real God to help. Christianity instead tells us of men linked to God and to each other, of God bearing men's burdens, and men inspired, through the thought of God's love, themselves to bear each other's burdens.

S. CAVE

¹ John 6:53, 63.