

Introduction to Mystical Theology

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Mystical theology is the science which treats of experiences or states of the soul which cannot be produced by human effort even with the ordinary aid of Divine grace. It comprises among its subjects all extraordinary forms of prayer, the higher forms of contemplation in all their varieties, private revelations, visions, and the union growing out of these between God and the soul, known as the mystical union.

As the science of all that is extraordinary in the relations between the Divinity and the human spirit, mystical theology is the complement of ascetical theology, which treats of Christian perfection and of its acquisition by the practice of virtue, particularly by the observance of the evangelical counsels.

The contents of mystical theology are doctrinal as well as experimental, as it records the experiences of those select souls who are mystically favoured, and sets forth rules for their guidance, based on the authority of the Scriptures, and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, and on the explanations of eminent mystics. Its rules and precepts are formulated for those who have occasion to direct souls in the ways of mysticism, so as to preserve them from error while directing the spiritual journey of those under their tutelage. Therefore, mystical theology takes cognizance of heretical systems of prayer like Quietism or self illusion or deception of souls that mistake powers of darkness for the light. In this aspect, mysticism necessitates inquiry into occult practices and diabolism. Mystical theology is imparted by spiritual masters in their personal direction of souls. It may be inculcated, as in seminaries and novitiates, by special conferences and courses of spiritual reading.

Preliminary to the study of mystical theology is a knowledge of the four ordinary forms of prayer: vocal, mental, affective, and the prayer of simplicity. The last two, notably the prayer of simplicity, border on the mystical. Prayer is often called active or acquired contemplation to distinguish it from passive or higher contemplation, in which mystical union really consists.

Mystical theology begins by reviewing the various descriptions of extraordinary contemplation, contained in the works of mystics and of writers on mystical subjects. It also is concerned with identifying each phase of higher contemplation, to determine whether it consists of an enlargement or elevation of knowledge, or of absorption in the Divine vision. Sometimes, the cherubic, i.e., intellectual element predominates. At other times, the seraphic, i.e., affective, element predominates.

Mystical theology sets forth objects of contemplation: God, His Attributes, the Incarnation, and all the Sacred Mysteries of the Life of Christ; His presence in the Eucharist; the supernatural order; every creature of God in the natural order, animate or inanimate, particularly the Blessed Virgin, the angels, the saints, Providence, the Church.

In analyzing the causes of contemplation, what may be called its psychology is also analyzed and proved. On God's part, grace is considered a principle, or cause, of contemplation. It includes the special or unusual graces (*gratis dato*), as well as ordinary graces, the virtues, theological as well as moral, the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Mystical theology also dwells on the fruits of contemplation: the elevation of spirit, joy, charity, zeal; the influences that may contribute to its duration, interruption, or cessation. Mystical theology may also treat of preliminary or preparatory dispositions for contemplation, of natural or moral aptitude, solitude, prayer, mortification or self-denial, corporal and spiritual, as a means of soul-purification. However, these topics, however, belong more properly to the domain of ascetical theology.

Mystical theology is concerned with the study of the processes of active and passive purification through which a soul must pass to reach the mystical union. The active processes are also treated in ascetical theology. Yet, they also concern mystical theology because these processes of purification lead to contemplation. They comprise: purity of conscience, or aversion to sin; purity of heart, the heart being taken as the symbol of the affections, which to be pure must be free of attachments to anything that does not lead to God; purity of the spirit, i.e. of the imagination and memory; and purity of action. It is to these processes that the well-known term 'night' is applied by St. John of the Cross, since they imply three things which are as night to the soul in so far as they are beyond or contrary to its own lights, viz., the privation of pleasure, faith as substituted for human knowledge, and God as incomprehensible, or darkness, to the unaided soul. Passive purifications are the trials encountered by souls in preparation for contemplation. Such passive purifications are called desolation, or dryness, and weariness. Sometimes they proceed from God and sometimes they proceed from the Evil Spirit. Hence, rules for the discernment of spirits are set down to enable directors to determine their source and to apply proper means of relief.

These passive purifications affect the soul when every other object of contemplation is withdrawn from it, except its own sins, defects, frailties, which are revealed to it in all their enormity. They put the soul in the 'obscure night,' as St. John of the Cross calls it. In this state the soul experiences many trials and temptations, even to infidelity and despair. These fruits are the purification of love, until the soul is so inflamed with love of God that it feels as if wounded and languishes with the desire to love Him still more intensely.

Scaramelli follows this classification of the experiences of the soul as it advances in the mystical union with God, effected by this extraordinary form of prayer. Scaramelli classifies these experiences as: the prayer of recollection; the prayer of spiritual silence; the prayer of quiet; the inebriation of love; the spiritual sleep; the anguish of love; the

mystical union of love, and its degrees from simple to perfect union and spiritual marriage.

In this union the soul experiences various spiritual impressions, which mystical writers try to describe in the terminology used to describe sense impressions, as if the soul could see, hear, touch, or enjoy the savour or odour of the Divinity. Ecstatic union with God is a further degree of prayer. This and the state of rapture require careful observation to be sure that the Evil One has no share in them. Here again mystical writers treat at length the deceits, snares, and other arts practiced by the Evil One to lead souls astray in the quest for the mystical union.

Finally, contemplation leads to a union so intimate and so strong that it can be expressed only by the terms 'spiritual marriage.' Mystical theology also treats of miracles, prophecies, revelations, and visions.

The most extraordinary mystical experiences defy expression in human speech. God, the Author of mystical states, acts upon souls when and as He wills. Hence, the possibility of a logical or chronological development of mysticism as a science is precluded.

Before St. Theresa, mystics were concerned principally with ecstasies, visions, and revelations; she was the first to attempt a scientific analysis of the process of mystical union brought about by contemplation.

Famous Mystics Prior to the Nineteenth Century

St. Gregory I the Great (b. at Rome, c. 540; d. there, 604): "Commentaries on Job"; this book is called the Ethics of St. Gregory. The writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite did not reach the West until about 824, when they were sent to Louis the Pious by Michael the Stammerer, Emperor of Constantinople: "Opera". Hugh of St. Victor, canon regular at Paris (b. in Saxony, 1096; d. at Paris, 1141): *passim*, St. Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux (b. near Dijon, 1090; d. at Clairvaux, 1153): "On the Canticle of Canticles". Richard of St. Victor, canon regular at Paris (d. at Paris, 1173): "De contemplatione". St. Bonaventure, Minister General of the Friars Minor (b. at Bagnorea, 1221; d. at Lyons, 1274): "Journey of the Soul towards God". The "Seven Roads of Eternity", which has sometimes been attributed to him, is the work of a Friar Minor, Rudolph of Bibrach, of the fourteenth century. St. Gertrude, a Benedictine (b. at Eisleben, 1256; d. at Helfta, Saxony, 1302): Revelations. Blessed Angela of Foligno (b. at Foligno, 1248; d. there, 1309): "Life and Revelations" in "Acta SS.", I, January, 186-234; this work is one of the masterpieces of mysticism. Tauler, a Dominican (b. at Strasburg, c. 1300; d. there, 1361): "Sermons" (Leipzig, 1498). Blessed Henry Suso, a Dominican (b. at Constance, c. 1295; d. at Ulm, 1366): "Exemplar" (Augsburg, 1482). "The Book of the Nine Rocks" is not by him but by a merchant of Strasburg, the somewhat unorthodox Rulman Merswin. St. Bridget of Sweden (b. c. 1303; d. at Rome, 1373): "Revelations" (Nuremberg, 1500). Blessed Ruysbroeck, surnamed the Admirable (b. at Ruysbroeck,

1293; d. at Groenendael, 1381): "Opera omnia", Latin tr. by the Carthusian Surius (Cologne, 1692). François-Louis Blossius (de Blois), Benedictine Abbot of Liessies (b. near Liège, 1506; d. at Liessies, 1566): "Opera" (Ingolstadt, 1631).

St. Teresa (b. at Avila, 1515; d. at Aba de Tormes, 1582): "Opera" (Salamanca, 1588). St. John of the Cross, founder of the Discalced Carmelites (b. at Hontiveros, 1542; d. at Ubeda, 1591): "Opera" (Seville, 1702). Venerable Luis de Lapuente (b. at Valladolid, 1554; d. there, 1624): "Life of Father Baltasar Alvarez", confessor of St. Teresa (Madrid, 1615); "Spiritual Guide" (Valladolid, 1609); "Life of Marina de Escobar" (2 vols., Madrid, 1665-73). St. Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva (b. at Thorens, near Annecy, 1567; d. at Lyons, 1622): "Treatise on the Love of God" (Lyons, 1616). Alvarez de Paz, S.J. (b. at Toledo 1560; d. at Potosi, 1620): "De inquisitione pacis" in "Opera", III (Lyons, 1647). Philip of the Blessed Trinity, General of the Discalced Carmelites (b. at Malancène, near Avignon, 1603; d. at Naples, 1671): "Summa theologiæ mysticæ" (Lyons, 1656). Jean-Joseph Surin. Venerable Marie de l'Incarnation (b. at Tours, 1599; d. at Quebec, 1672): "Life and Letters", published by her son Dom Claude Martin, O. S. B. (Paris, 1677). Bossuet called her the "Teresa of the New World". Bossuet, Bishop of Meaux (b. at Dijon, 1627; d. at Paris, 1704): "Instruction sur les états d'oraison" (Paris, 1697). Joseph of the Holy Ghost, Definitor General of the Discalced Carmelites (d. 1639): "Cursus theologiæ mystico-scholasticæ" (6 vols., Seville, 1710-40). Emmanuel de la Reguera, S.J. (b. at Aguilâr del Campo, 1668; d. at Rome, 1747): "Praxis theologiæ mysticæ" (2 vols., Rome, 1740-45), a development of the mystical theology of Wadding (Father Godinez). Scaramelli, S.J. (b. at Rome, 1687; d. at Macerata, 1752): "Direttorio mistico" (Venice, 1754). As a description, this is the best treatise of the eighteenth century despite its too complicated classification; Voss has published a compendium of it, entitled "Directorium Mysticum" (Louvain, 1857). Schram, O.S.B. (b. at Bamberg, 1722; d. at Bainz, 1797): "Institutiones theologiæ mysticæ (Augsburg, 1777), chiefly an abridgment of la Reguera. More complete lists (176 names) will be found in Poulain, "Graces d'Oraison" (7th ed., Paris, 1911); tr., "The Graces of Interior Prayer" (London, 1910); and in Underhill, "Mysticism" (New York, 1912).