

## Review Article

# MYSTICAL THEOLOGY *REDIVIVUS*?

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MYSTICAL THEOLOGY: THE SCIENCE OF LOVE. By William Johnston, S.J. London: Harper Collins, 1995. Pp. 374.

About ten years ago, when Fr. William Johnston was part of the team of directors of the Jesuit Tertianship in Manila, he and I were conversing about the headaches of an author's life — a topic of little interest to anyone except authors. He was then working on a new book (perhaps it was *Silent Music*) and I asked him what his topic was. To my surprise he answered: "The topic is the same as all my other books. I always write about the same thing." To a linear thinker like myself — for whom each book has a distinct topic, and who would be uneasy about writing the same book twice — Fr. Johnston's answer was puzzling and thought-provoking. While I did not ask him then to explain, I think I now understand what he meant.

His concern through nine books, from *The Mysticism of "The Cloud of Unknowing"* to *Letters to Contemplatives*, has been the mystical life in Christian tradition. What has given his writing its distinctive flavor is his interest in Oriental mysticism and its link to the great Christian mystical writers. Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1925, he has been a missionary in Japan since 1951. Thus his major Oriental interest has been in Zen Buddhism, about which he writes with considerable sympathy, and with a real concern to open up to Christians the treasures of Zen prayer.

If the above paragraph captures the "same thing" to which Fr. Johnston was referring many years ago, then I think it could

be said that his tenth original book, *Mystical Theology*, (there are also four translations from Japanese, including the famous *Silence* by Shusaku Endo) is also about the same thing, although again (as in his previous works) from a fresh perspective. At the same time, it could be said that the new book is, in size (374 pages) and scope, his *magnum opus*. His purpose here is to "rewrite mystical theology for the men and women of the twenty-first century" (p. 3). While mystical theology as a part of Christian reflection goes back to the patristic age, "After the Second Vatican Council [it] ceased to be taught in Catholic seminaries and departments of theology. The changed circumstances in the whole world seemed to render it irrelevant."

It is obvious from the present work that Fr. Johnston does not consider mystical theology irrelevant in our day — but also that he feels a fresh approach is needed, one that speaks to the concerns of prayerful women and men of today. In essence, he sees four challenging questions or areas of concern for any relevant mystical theology today: the emerging role of the laity, Asian religious traditions; modern science; and the social dimension of the gospel (pp. 10-11). In later pages all of these, save perhaps for modern science, are treated extensively. Before considering his treatment, however, (in Section III below), let us first consider two basic themes in Sections I and II.

## 1. THE MEANING OF MYSTICISM AND OF MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

The terms 'mystical' and 'mysticism' are quite obscure for most modern readers. Johnston shows (following Louis Bouyer) that they are used by the Church Fathers by derivation from the word 'mystery', which refers to something hidden, concealed, not accessible to ordinary human experience and understanding. Bouyer sees the Scriptures as mysterious, mystical, because they contain the Pauline mystery of Christ, and the Eucharist, because it is the Paschal mystery of faith. But there is another Patristic sense: "The third use of mystical is in connection with a religious experience: a spiritual, as opposed to a carnal, experience is called mystical. Probably Origen was the first to use mystical in this third sense" (p. 35). And it is this third sense with which Johnston (and the tradition) is concerned when he speaks of

mysticism.

Appropriately enough, the precise meaning of the term is rather mysterious. Perhaps the closest Johnston comes to clarifying the mystery is on p. 340, when he says the "theology of the Church Fathers . . . came from their mystical experience. Their doctrine of the Trinity did not come simply from books — though they did study assiduously — but more importantly from what they saw. Like Ignatius (Loyola) they could say that if there was no Scripture to teach these matters of faith they would be resolved to die for them solely because of what they had seen." So mysticism, mystical knowledge is a direct, non-conceptual knowledge of the faith and of the revealing God. It is quite similar, I would say, to St. Thomas' "knowledge by connaturality": the experiential knowledge which, on the human plane, leads a wife to say: "I *know* my husband. I *know* he loves me."

If mysticism, then, is a direct, unmediated experience of God, — and if visions, voices and other preternatural phenomena have nothing to do with the essence of mysticism (and can be from the devil or an overactive imagination as readily as from God, as St. John of the Cross, whom Johnston follows most closely and extensively in his presentation, would also say), — what then is mystical theology? It is genuine theology, but, in Origen's happy phrase, it is a "theology of love" (p. 19; see also p. 71). Perhaps here we can see a close relationship to Anselm's definition: "*fides quaerens intellectum.*" But, if this is the way Anselm defines theology, should not *all* theology be "mystical theology"? Johnston clearly believes the answer is Yes; and he makes a good case that the Fathers of the Church, and the great theologians through the centuries, were all doing a theology of love, a theology grounded in their own personal experience of God and of Jesus, and not *only* in scriptures and doctrines. The latter were important guides and touchstones for their own experience; but, I would say, they were not merely art critics — they themselves were artists, painting the picture *they* saw.

Johnston sees, correctly I think, the Eastern Church as preserving better this ideal of an experiential "mystical" theology. Because of the intellectualist evolution of scholasticism in the West, however, it "was unable to guide people in the path of mystical prayer so that a separate branch of theology — mystical

theology — was elaborated.” This latter “arose in the mystical climate of the fourteenth century, was developed magnificently by the Spanish Carmelites in sixteenth-century Spain, and was taught in Catholic seminaries throughout the world until the Second Vatican Council” (pp. 74-75).

In our century, though, it came to be known as “ascetical and mystical theology.” Johnston quotes (p. 121) de Guibert as explaining this fusion of 17th century ascetical theology and mediaeval mystical theology as an attempt to appeal to, and to guide, both souls of genuine interior depth (mystical) and those for whom “personal effort and the methodical performances of spiritual exercises are more evident” (ascetical). In both cases it was, by contrast with dogmatic theology as it had evolved, an essentially pastoral discipline, “concerned principally with practice, with spiritual exercises, with ways of training mind and body” (*ibid.*; see also p. 37).

## 2. WHAT HAS FALLEN INTO DISUSE: MYSTICISM OR MYSTICAL THEOLOGY?

As Johnston’s whole book makes clear, he is convinced that it is not mysticism that has fallen out of favor in our day. And the popularity of his earlier books, as well as those of noted writers like Thomas Merton and Caryl Houselander and George Maloney, would suggest that there is a great hunger even today for guides who can point us to, and help us interpret, the immediate experience of God. There was a time, fifteen or twenty years ago in the Philippines, when talk of mysticism seemed irrelevant to the great social justice issues of contemporary Christianity. But even then, the best “activist” writers, notably Segundo Galilea, were insistent that social justice not grounded in a contemplative experience of Jesus was doomed to failure and irrelevance.

There are, of course, relatively few Christians in *any* age who really desire to take Jesus seriously enough to enter into an intimate relationship with Him. Indeed, this was true even when Jesus Himself was walking the roads of Galilee and Judaea. But, while Johnston speaks of “a new mysticism of social involvement” today (p. 348; cf. pp. 363-64), I think this merely reflects

the post-Vatican II stress on a faith that does justice. For those willing to take Jesus seriously, that is, the immediate experience of God in Jesus is essentially the same as that of the great mystics of the past. The very fact that Johnston himself, and Segundo Galilea, depend so heavily on John of the Cross would seem to make this clear. What has changed is the way this experience is incarnated in the lives of mature pray-ers of the present age. Like the great mystics before them, they must return from the Mount of Transfiguration to Jerusalem; like Mary Magdalene, they must share with their brethren what they have seen and heard. But the Jerusalem to which they are sent is the world of today. Their unchanging experience of God must be enfleshed in the contemporary world.

Perhaps this is the reason why Johnston speaks of a new mystical theology. Since the latter is essentially pastoral, it must speak to the needs of today. Before outlining the main points of Johnston's new mystical theology, though, let us first ask whether the discipline has really fallen into disuse. In a sense, as he points out, it clearly has. Many seminaries, he notes, no longer have a course in ascetical and mystical theology. But, if my experience at Loyola School of Theology can be taken as typical, the courses in dogma and scripture have a much more pastoral orientation than was the case when I was a student of theology some thirty years ago. Moreover, I do offer courses in Apostolic Spirituality, and in Discernment and Spiritual Direction, which are very well-attended. While they have different titles, it seems to me that what I cover is essentially the terrain which Johnston sees as constituting mystical theology.

It is true that these are now electives and not part of the core curriculum; but it is also true that there is always a waiting list of prospective enrollees. I do wonder at times if such a course should not be a part of the core seminary program. But I am not *sure* that it should be. I would wish that every future priest would have a solid grounding in pastoral spirituality. But the advantage of the present arrangement is that I have students who are really interested in exploring the spiritual life — their own and that of their future parishioners. They are not there simply because they have to complete the course in order to get ordained. If it were a core course, as perhaps it should be,

it would be a quite different course.

### 3. FATHER JOHNSTON'S SOLUTION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Perhaps the foregoing paragraphs provide a good sense of the thrust of Johnston's book. For the sake of clarity, however, let me here summarize the main points he makes, as I understand him. Then, in the final section, I can offer some comments and suggestions. The points are:

1) A mystical theology for today, and for the twenty-first century, must address the real concerns of the Church in the world of today. In support of this, Johnston quotes frequently Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), as well as more recent Church documents. As we saw above, the four major concerns he identifies are the role of the laity (especially in extensive sections on sexuality and mysticism, pp. 229-73, and on the Ignatian ideal of the "contemplative in action," pp. 330-44); the dialogue with, and mutual enrichment by, Asian religions (*passim*); modern science (much more briefly treated, but see chapter 7, "Science and Mystical Theology"); and social concern (see chapter 19, "Mysticism and Social Action" — especially pp. 351-60, where he notes three important contributions of mysticism to genuine Christian social action: detachment, non-violence, and the purification of anger).

2) At the same time, as we have seen earlier, a genuine mystical theology for today must be solidly rooted in, integrated into a long tradition which goes all the way back to the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church. To put his point another way, we are our history; if we ignore that history we are impoverished, and, as has been wisely said, are condemned to repeat its mistakes. This is why Part I of Johnston's book, covering about the first 100 pages, reviews the history of mysticism from the New Testament to the great Carmelite mystics.

3) For Johnston — and I would agree completely — the central figure in the Christian mystical tradition is St. John of the Cross. He says so explicitly on p. 3, and John's influence pervades the book. I might just add that I am convinced John of the Cross

is the greatest spiritual director the Church has known. Any director who studies, and puts into practice, his classic discussion of the reasons why incompetent directors are one of the greatest enemies of spiritual growth (*Living Flame of Love*, III, #26-62), will surely be a much better spiritual guide herself or himself.

4) Nonetheless, as point 1 above implies, the teaching of John and of the spiritual masters of the past must always be "inculturated" in our world. It must speak meaningfully to men and women of today (pp. 40, 43).

5) Finally, Johnston sees mystical theology as the center of all future theology (as it was in the Patristic age). "Will the much neglected mystical theology become the centre of all theology? Surely this is the way of the future" (p. 58).

#### 4. COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

I hope the preceding paragraphs make clear that, in my judgement, Fr. Johnston's book has said much of value for spirituality today. Let me now indicate certain questions that came to my mind as I read his inspiring (he writes from the heart and not just from the head, as befits a "theology of love") and lengthy work.

To begin with, the frequent references to Oriental prayer traditions, and to the ways in which a knowledge of them can enrich the prayer of the follower of Jesus, are a striking and valuable feature of Johnston's book. But it is not always completely clear how the connection is to be made, especially since he insists, rightly, (see p. 26), that a personal God and the primary role of His grace in our sanctification are distinctive and distinguishing marks of Christian mysticism. A stylistic problem related to this is his frequent use of terms in Greek, Latin, Chinese, and Japanese — often without providing a translation. I felt fortunate that I knew Latin and Greek, but most of Johnston's readers will not be so blessed. And the Chinese, Japanese, and occasionally Korean characters left me wondering what insights I was missing.

Another point that came to my mind was this: in his discussion of sexuality and mysticism (see, for example, pp. 271-77), I found myself wishing that married pray-ers had been consulted. While I can discourse at length and experientially on the beauties and

challenges of celibacy, I am scarcely in a position to do an experiential theology of marital sexuality. I do have some second-hand knowledge, of course, and I acquire more the longer I hear confessions and direct married people, but if one wishes to speak on the beauties of the Holy Land, there is no substitute for actually having been there!

This may be related to a more general observation. Anyone who reads this book, or who has read Johnston's earlier works, cannot help but realize that he is one of the great optimists among spiritual writers today. So much so that he can, at times, seem utopian. His confident assurance, for example, that mystical theology will be the center of all future theology (p. 58), and his comments on marital sexuality as noted in the preceding paragraph, may need to be seasoned with a holy realism if they are to be taken seriously. While the optimism is particularly welcome in a day when only the bad news makes the headlines of our newspapers, we do have to factor in the continuing reality of original sin in the Christian vision.

Finally, as I read this lengthy book, I often found myself wondering who, precisely, Fr. Johnston envisioned as his readers. The focus of the book was not very clear to me. As a basic text for a seminary course on mystical theology, there seems to be too much detail on too many topics. At the same time, there seems to be too little detail for a more learned audience. One example which struck me, since I teach a course in the philosophy of language, was his treatment (p. 48) in a single paragraph of the Thomistic doctrine of analogy. As Johnston notes, Thomas' achievement was crucial for a solid Christian mystical theology. With my background, I found what he says in the one paragraph quite accurate — but I could not help wondering how many readers would have my background. Similarly, what he says about *discerning* mystical phenomena, after a lengthy section *describing* them (pp. 137-50), is solid but quite brief and found in various places (pp. 150-53; cf. p. 177 and pp. 316-20).

##### 5. CONCLUSION: WHO SHOULD READ *MYSTICAL THEOLOGY*?

Who, then, are the readers Johnston has in mind? I felt I found



an answer to my puzzlement in the "Acknowledgements" at the end of the book. He tells us there (p. 368) of his gratitude to "James Heisig and the scholars of the Institute of Religion and Culture at Nanzan University with whom this book was discussed as a seminar." He also thanks the editors of three periodicals "for permission to reprint material already published in these." So the book came out of a seminar, and includes material already published in article form. This is, of course, quite legitimate. But it may explain why I felt the same topics came up again and again, usually without reference to, or connection with, earlier discussions. And that is perhaps why I felt the focus was not always clear.

I honestly feel, though, as I have tried to make clear in the preceding sections of this article, that the book is a valuable contribution to the inculturation and modernization of mystical theology. How, then, could it be used most fruitfully? Two possibilities come to mind: (a), it would be a good reference book in the hands of a good teacher of mystical theology or apostolic spirituality, particularly one working in the Orient. Such a teacher could explain the essential ideas, select the topics on which to focus with her or his particular students, and bring together the discussions on a particular theme from various parts of the book. And (b), the book could be useful *topically* for the interested general reader. He or she could, for example, profit much by tracing a topic — for example, the historical development of Christian mysticism and/or mystical theology — with the help of the index at the back of the book.

To conclude, then, I think we can be grateful that Fr. Bill Johnston is still writing about the "same thing," and doing so with enthusiasm and freshness of perspective.