

THEOLOGY AND MYSTICISM: TWO FUNDAMENTAL FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION*

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In the Introduction to his famous *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich, states that two are the main functions of theology: the function of proclaiming the Word of God and the function of defending it by answering to the needs of a particular culture. He calls the first "kerygmatic function" and the second "apologetic function". Tillich then proves that between these two functions there cannot be any incompatibility or conflict, since they are both necessary to the work of the Church. The two functions are strictly correlated: the proclamation of the Word of God should answer to the needs of a cultural situation, whereas the cultural situation needs to be open to the truths of the Word of God.

I believe that Tillich's doctrine may be easily transferred and applied to the case of the relationship between theology and mysticism: they are not two contradictory but complementary and correlative approaches to the Holy, since there is no true theology without an element of mysticism, and there is no true mysticism without an element of theology. Speculation and ecstasis are two moments of the same effort to enter into the mystery of the transcendent reality of the Divine. To prove our case we need to go back to the definitions of the categories of theology and mysticism and to the definition of the nature of these two religious experiences.

I. Definitions of theology and mysticism

By theology it is universally meant a speculative and systematic approach to the Word of God, in order to achieve a better, more profound and exhaustive understanding of it. According to the famous definition of St. Augustine, theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*.

By mysticism it is generally meant an affective, loving approach to the Holy in order to obtain a profound and possibly non-dual experience of It. According to the *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (VIII, 1136) in mysticism "the soul contemplates the truths of faith not by means of discursive meditation but through a simple insight full of love, with a sense of joyful experience and, frequently, of a contact with God."

Theology and mysticism belong to two different types of religious

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experience. To employ Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollinean and the Dionysian ways of experiencing and interpreting reality we may say that theology (even in its negative form) belongs to the first type: it is always an effort of our mind to force the reality of the Holy into our logical tools, even when we become aware of the fact that such schemes are very poor and incapable of embracing the magnificent, powerful and explosive reality of the Divine. Theology obeys to the Apollinean desire of seeing clearly and of giving definite and stable forms to the objects that we encounter in our experience of reality.

On the other hand mysticism belongs to the Dionysian type: it is an existential, vital, global participation in the reality of the Holy. This participation is the result either of a long strenuous effort of many ascetical practices (yoga, meditation, penance etc.) or of a divine grace or of both.

NB. According to Ninian Smart there are two fundamental types of religious experience: the *numinous* and the *mystical*. If we assume this classification, theology will fall into the numinous type and mysticism will fall, necessarily, into the mystical.⁽¹⁾

II. The Nature of Theology

Let us now examine more accurately the nature of these basic religious experiences, theology and mysticism. This study will enable us to see more clearly the similarities and the differences between the two and will prepare us to draw the conclusion that mysticism is not against theology but rather the highest, most perfect and conclusive function of theology.

Theology is always an intellectual affair, a work of the human mind in order to reach a fuller understanding of the Word of God.

Theology starts out with a positive step. It is the step that we take when we become aware of the existence and of some properties of the Holy: that it is wise, powerful, eternal, infinite, beautiful, strong, invisible etc.

In this first positive step if we look better into our perceptions of the Holy, we become aware that each one of them is always a partial perception, a limited perspective, a narrow description of just one side of the many, infinite perspectives and sides that it may present to our mind. In this way each name that we assign to the Holy will always express very little of its infinite reality, and may always be replaced by other names that will express something different, something new.

In human tongues there is no name capable of circumscribing the infinite ocean of the divine reality, which therefore remains properly unnamed, unsignified, uncircumscribed.⁽²⁾

1. N. Smart, *Beyond Ideology*, Collins, London 1981, p. 53.

2. "Cum hoc nomen *sapiens* de homine dicitur, quodammodo circumscribit et comprehendit rem significatam: non autem cum dicitur de Deo, sed relinquit rem significatam ut incomprehensam, et excedentem nominis significationem. Unde patet quod non secundum eandem rationem hoc nomen *sapiens* de Deo et de homine dicitur" (Thomas Aquinas, *S. Theol.* I, 13, 5).

There is however, as Thomas Aquinas points out, a name that is more apt than any other name to express the reality of God, that is the name of *being*. This privilege is due to three main reasons: 1) "being" is the most universal of all names: it embraces everything; 2) it designates directly not a mode of being but being itself; 3) it qualifies God as actual, since it is a verbal, an existential name. For such reasons John Damascene says that "He who is", which signifies the infinite and uncircumscribed ocean of God's substance, is the most perfect of the divine names.⁽³⁾ But even this name expresses very little of the divine reality, first of all because our idea of being is extremely poor, and secondly because God transcends not only unity, beauty, mercy, justice, substance etc. but also being itself: as Dionysius the Areopagite says again and again: He is *super-esse*.

In conclusion, "in so far as our concepts allow us to know the divine essence, they are drawn into its abyss; in God their meaning transcends every human conception. The divine essence is grasped but it does not surrender itself to our mind; it is known but its mystery remains intact, inviolate, inaccessible. At the very same moment in which we know it, it escapes our seizure and infinitely surmounts our knowledge".⁽⁴⁾

At this point theology is forced to take a second step that moves in the opposite direction of the first: it is the step of the negative way (which will result in *negative theology*). At this stage the theologian submits to a further, more accurate and severe scrutiny of his theological language; he verifies and criticizes it; he rejects either partially or totally each one of the names and statements he has previously applied to the Holy, since none of them is apt to describe its infinite, sublime, transcendent reality. If we compare what we mean by being, by substance, by cause, person, goodness, knowledge, freedom, wisdom, virtue etc, when we use such names for creatures, with what we should mean when we apply them to God, we discover that the meaning cannot be the same. The situation of God is so different from the situation of creatures, that one may rightly claim that God cannot fall under the categories of being, cause, substance, knowledge, freedom, goodness, virtue etc. When they are applied to God these names become mere pointers for looking in certain directions. But if we try to discover what is hidden behind the veils of these names we will search in vain: we will not find anything at all. The face of the Holy will not be shown

3. "Hoc nomen *Qui est* triplici ratione est maxime proprium nomen Dei. Primo quidem, propter sui significationem. Non enim significat formam aliquam, sed ipsum esse. Unde, cum esse Dei sit ipsa eius essentia, et hoc nulli alii conveniat, manifestum est quod inter alia nomina hoc maxime proprie nominat Deum: unumquodque enim denominatur a sua forma. Secundo, propter eius universalitatem (. . .) Quolibet enim alio nomine determinatur aliquis modus substantiae rei: sed hoc nomen *Qui est* nullum modum essendi determinat, sed se habet indeterminate ad omnes; et ideo nominat ipsum pelagus substantiae infinitum. Tertio vero, ex eius consignificatione. Significat enim esse in praesenti: et hoc maxime proprie de Deo dicitur, cuius esse non ovit praeteritum vel futurum" (Thomas Aquinas, *S. Theol.* I, 13, 11).

4. J. Maritain, *Degrés du savoir*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, p.453.

either by the symbol of being or of substance or of cause or of unity or of person etc. And the more we press these symbols in order to reach some understanding of the Holy, the more we become aware that he escapes our knowledge and that he remains necessarily unknowable. At this point our mind falls in the dark night of ignorance. "Illud est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo quod sciat se Deum nescire, in quantum cognoscit illud quod Deus est, omne ipsum quod de Deo intellegimus, excedere".⁵

But theology will not be satisfied with the results of the negative way. This way is a step that needs to be taken in order to avoid misuses of theological language and to escape the extremely common danger of anthropomorphism, but cannot be the final step.

At the end of the negative way we become perfectly aware of our ignorance: that we are not endowed with any logical or semantical tool apt to describe God's reality. Therefore, He remains inaccessible, unknowable, ineffable. And yet we feel that we cannot keep silent before Him, since it is our duty to proclaim his glory and to praise his majesty.

At this point we cannot merely say that we lack adequate symbols for expressing his reality. Most certainly, ours are poor symbols, but we may work out useful techniques in order to improve and refine them. We may introduce qualifiers such as "infinite" (infinite being, infinite substance, infinite wisdom etc.), "first" (first cause, first principle etc.), "highest" (highest being, highest substance, highest cause etc.), "all" (allpowerful, allgood etc.), "ever" (everlasting etc.), "omni" (omniscient, omnipotent etc.). By means of these qualifiers we obtain the surprising result that on the semantic level we come much closer to the reality of God than on the logical level. We create semantic expressions that may be perfectly apt to signify the reality of the Holy, while none of our conceptual tools will ever be able to encompass it. Thanks to our linguistic creations we may speak properly and truthfully of Him who is unknowable. In this way, what we express of God may become so perfectly true and adequate that even the choirs of the Angels would have no difficulty to subscribe our statements and to borrow our language for praising God's majesty.

This is the final step of theology: it is the step of the eminent way. Through this way theology tries to get beyond the darkness in which the Holy is experienced as unknowable and ineffable and, as we have seen, it accomplishes the marvellous achievement of giving a truthful picture of the One who actually remains always unknowable. The eminent way has the magic power of speaking positively and properly of the One whom no human mind has ever or will ever see and know.

III. The Nature of Mystical Experience

Mysticism provides an entirely different experience of the Holy from that of theology: it is not an experience of the mind but of the heart; an

5. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia* 7, 5 ad 14; cfr *In Boetium de Trinitate* 1, 2 ad 1.

experience which is not conveyed through concepts, ideas, definitions clear statements or negations, but rather through feelings, acts of desire and of love.

As theology also mysticism takes two main forms: a positive and negative one. In the first, the Holy is experienced as present; whereas in the second is experienced as absent. The positive form of mystical experience is characteristic of Christian (and Muslim) mysticism; the negative form is proper of Buddhist mysticism.⁽⁶⁾

As Professor N. Smart points out, these two types of mysticism involve a substantially different ontology: Christian mysticism involves an ontology of being, whereas Buddhist mysticism involves an ontology of non-being. "It is a bright dark substance which the Christian finds, exuding a kind of love in the melting union, touching inward the very apex or depth of the soul of a person, providing a foretaste of the beatific vision and yet somehow constituting no vision but rather a kind of uniting, a merging, a birth of Christ in the soul".⁽⁷⁾ On the contrary, Buddhist mysticism "does not blend pure-consciousness with ideas of God or divine Substance. It does not interpret the highest stages of meditation with any foretaste of the beatific vision of God such as the blessed enjoy in heaven; nor does it see in pure consciousness the Ground of Being or the sacred Brahman-Atman".⁽⁸⁾ For the Buddhist mystic the Holy is Nirvana, and "Nirvana, to put it in a concrete fashion, is not Creator or supreme Object of Worship. It is not a personal Being. It cannot even in the Theravada, and very doubtfully in the Greater Vehicle, be thought of as Ground of Being. It is the *summum bonum*. But it is not the origin of the world, the Logos. One cannot thus write 'in the beginning was Nirvana' or that 'Nirvana is God'".⁽⁹⁾

Notwithstanding the abysmal differences that exist between the mystical experiences of the Christian and the Buddhist believer, N. Smart does not hesitate to consider them as two complementary experiences. "In both faiths there is a kind of emptiness, but the styles of emptiness emerge from differing backgrounds and conceptions. But this is one of the ways in which there is a certain complementarity between the religion of the Buddha and the religion concerning Christ. The one transcends the search for individual security and seeks to banish it by dissolving all identities. The other accepts the search for security and the need for meaningful identity, but binds the believer, in identity to one for whom one should lose one's soul in order to save it".⁽¹⁰⁾ "In some ways the impulses towards the

6. In this we may find an analogy with the history of theology: positive theology, in general, is a product of the Western Church (the Latin Fathers and the Scholastics), whereas negative theology is a creation of the Eastern Church (the Greek Fathers and the Orthodox theologians).
7. N. Smart, *Beyond Ideology*, *op.cit.*, pp.132 – 133.
8. N. Smart, *op.cit.*, pp. 122 – 123.
9. N. Smart, *op.cit.*, pp. 83 – 84.
10. N. Smart, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

Transcendent both in Buddhism and in classical Christianity may have a convergence in the mystical life. The negative way of Pseudo-Dionysius is not untypically closer to the multiple negations of the Buddha. The Neoplatonic tradition in any case echoes with that of India, and there may indeed have been some real contact between the East and Alexandria, and who knows what traditions lay behind that mysterious teacher of Plotinus, Ammonius Saccas? It is nice to think, though it may alas be only wishful thinking, that there is a strand of holy thinking issuing from the Ganges into the very lifeblood of the Christian tradition, through Augustine and others".⁽¹¹⁾

One may not go along with N. Smart's suggestion concerning the dependence of Christian mysticism on the Oriental, Buddhist mysticism. But I believe that every scholar will readily accept his suggestion regarding the complementarity of the two types of mystical experience, the positive of the Christian mystics and the negative of the Buddhist mystics. In fact the relationship that takes place between the two types of mysticism is analogous to the relationship present in the two main types of theology, the positive and the negative ones. We have seen that it is a sort of dialectical relationship, a correlation: positive theology requires the corrective of the negative, whereas negative theology requires the corrective of the positive, and in the last end, both positive and negative need to be transcended into eminential theology. Some consideration like this may be suggested for the two types of mysticism: neither one should be taken as final, both negative and positive mysticism should be transcended into a form of eminential mysticism.

Let's now examine a little more in detail the nature of Christian mystical experience.

According to Charles Journet, a mystical experience is first and above all a matter of love: it is a love that believes rather than a faith that loves.⁽¹²⁾ In mystical experience the intensity of love is much greater than the evidence of the object. Actually the object is not seen, it is not grasped, understood, known. It is there, before the mind, with its aggressive, irresistible power, but it is unlike anything the human mind has ever seen and perceived: it is unlike any being, substance, life, beauty, person etc. and yet, even that little that it is able to grasp of such an extraordinary object, it is sufficient to exercise on the soul an irresistible attraction and to excite the greatest acts of love.

How is this possible? Isn't it true that *nihil volitum quin praecognitum*? This psychological law holds also for mystical experience. It is not the case that in mystical experience knowledge is absolutely, totally lacking. Some knowledge, *per speculum et in enigmate*, is there. What happens in mystical experience is that the soul is aware of the disproportion

11. N. Smart, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

12. C. Journet, *Conoscenza e inconoscenza di Dio*, it. tr., Massimo, Milano 1981, pp. 85 ss.

between its knowledge and the object known. And it is just such awareness that engenders powerful acts of desire and love for the object, the Holy, acts that are much greater, more intensive and perfect than the acts of knowledge.

We may say that in mystical experience, on the affective level occurs a phenomenon analogous to the one we have encountered on the semantic level. Treating of the eminential way we have seen that we are endowed with the extraordinary power of using linguistic symbols able to express about God levels of perfection that actually our mind is unable to grasp: our language transcends our knowledge.

The same thing happens in mystical experience: our love of God transcends our ideas. In this way, "although love, in that which concerns the objects towards which it is directed, cannot experience and reach *something different* from what it is proposed to it by knowledge, since it cannot address itself to the unknown, however, love can reach the object in a *better way* than the one that is open to the mind. Indeed, it is very possible that the object may be offered to the mind in obscure manner and notwithstanding such obscurity the will may move directly towards it, as it is in itself. This is the way, for instance, charity behaves, which, however, knows God only obscurely, in faith. Moreover, the will is inclined to desire the more ardently to see a thing in itself and to enjoy of it, the more such thing is covered and hidden by veils, since, even if the thing does not show itself in its full evidence, the veils that cover it allow to guess that in it there is much more than what they actually reveal. This *more*, which is hidden, is desired by the will more strongly, inasmuch as love unites itself to that which the mind is unable to perceive. . .".⁽¹³⁾

On the ground of these principles, St John of the Cross gives the following advice: "You do well, o my soul, to seek Him always as *hidden*, for by acting in this way you will give glory to God and will get very close to Him by considering Him as the being that is the most high and profound than all the other beings that you are able to reach. Therefore, do not abide neither briefly nor at length in that which your powers are capable to understand, i.e., be never satisfied with that which you know of God, but rather with that which you cannot understand. Never stop in the love and enjoyment of what you know and experience of God, but love and enjoy only that of Him which you cannot understand and feel: *que eso es buscarle en fe*".⁽¹⁴⁾

Such being the nature of mysticism it is easy to see where lies its essential difference from theology: while theology makes the fullest and highest use possible of the logical and semantical tools that are accessible to a human being in order to achieve some understanding of the Holy, mysticism tries to avoid as much as possible logical and semantical tools in order to achieve a deep spiritual union with the Holy.

13. Johannes A Sancto Thoma, *De donis Spiritus Sancti*, a. 4, n. 13, ed. Vivès, t. VI, p. 638.

14. *Obras de San Juan de la Cruz*, ed. Silverio, t. III, p. 202.

IV. Complementarity of Theology and Mysticism

Mysticism and theology are, most clearly, two different experiences of the Holy, but they cannot be considered as two incompatible, alternative, contradictory experiences, as it has frequently happened in the past, rather they are two complementary approaches to the same Reality. This may be shown in several ways.

1. By looking at the object, which is the same for both theology and mysticism: it is always the Holy (Jahweh, Christ, Allah, Brahma, Nirvana etc.).

2. By looking at the subject, man. It is always a human being, very often the same human being who is the subject of both the mystical and the theological experiences. Man is not a pure spirit, a perfect intelligence. He is a spiritual subject endowed with many powers: imagination, senses, intellect, will, language, feelings etc. Only by making the best and most proper use of both his intellectual and practical powers man is able on one hand to acquire a full experience of any object and on the other hand to bring to the full perfection his own being. Therefore, theology and mysticism are for man two natural channels for obtaining both self-realization and experience of the Holy.

3. By giving a look into the history of theology. If we do so we will easily discover that there is no great theologian either in the Christian or in the Hebrew or in the Islamic traditions (to mention only those traditions with which I am familiar enough) who does not include elements of mysticism in his interpretation of the divine mysteries. We may cite the names of Philo and Moses Maimonides among the Hebrews; Avicenna, Al Ghazali and Al Hallaj among the Muslims; Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Erigena, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Eckhart, Luther etc. among the Christians.

4. By considering the nature of theology and mysticism. Theology by Aquinas is defined as an imperfect participation of the human mind in the divine science, which is the way God knows himself. Theology according to St Thomas cannot be a purely speculative affair. "Although in philosophical sciences some are speculative and other practical, sacred doctrine (i.e. theology) includes both. (...) But it is true that theology is more speculative than practical since it deals more with the divine reality than with the human acts".⁽¹⁵⁾ Actually theology is the highest of all sciences both in the theoretical and practical fields. In the theoretical, because of the excellence of its object, which transcends reason; in the practical, since its end is eternal happiness: "Finis autem huius doctrinae in quantum est practica, est beatitudo aeterna, ad quam sicut ad ultimum finem ordinantur omnes alii fines scientiarum practicarum".⁽¹⁶⁾

15. Thomas Aquinas. *S. Theol.* I, 1, 4.

16. Thomas Aquinas. *op. cit.*, I, 1, 5.

Mystical experience cannot fall outside the field of theology; rather it must be considered as a part of its “practical” aspect, indeed it is its best, highest, conclusive element.

Therefore, mysticism cannot be against theology. If mysticism does not hide itself in an absolute silence but dares to speak up and reveal something about one’s own experience of the Holy, it must humble itself to some kind of rational procedure and the use of some semantical symbol; but in a more or less sophisticated way these always pertain to theology.

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