

## MYSTICS AND SAINTS

Quinta Press  
Meadow View, Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire, England, SY10 7RN

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Taken from *The Expository Times*, 5.9 (June 1894): 401–404.

## Mystics and Saints.

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THE present writer published last year, in a book called *Faith and Criticism*, an essay in which he laid some stress on the harm done by mysticism, with its exit in metaphysics, to the true idea of revelation. To his great surprise he has occasionally heard that essay described and distrusted as mystical. And the reason seems to be that it insisted on personal intercourse with the personal, historic, and

living Saviour as an indispensable condition of any revelation, in the true and religious sense of the word, namely, as bearing less on God's nature than on His will and work for mankind. If that be mysticism, of course faith is essentially mystic, and so is the revelation it answers. But that is not mysticism in the word's convenient and distinctive use. As a tendency in human thought, mysticism is, first, the

reduction of religion to knowledge, to insight, to a γνῶσις, or to a philosophy, which makes contemplation or intuition the goal and essence of the perfect life. And, in the second place, it is the rejection of all mediation as a permanent element in this contemplation, and the insistence on direct contact between God and the soul in the region of ideas. It is the tendency in religion which is impatient of what is positive and historic. It promises a presence of God which is at once more real and rational than history affords. The God who directly touches a living soul can so easily be made to appear a real presence in comparison with the God who acts by a historic figure. And the God who is an object of knowledge or reason taxes the natural man less than the God who is an object of moral experience in such a reconciliation as Christ's. Hence mysticism is a favourite resort of those who resent the authority of any tradition, as well as of those whose reason is more active than soul or conscience in their religious habit. Mysticism is mostly rational in the affinities of its theology. Indeed, its religion is at bottom simply a variety of the rational process. Its true antithesis is not rationalism, but history. It is a mistake to say, as some do, that "the mystic is one who at any point in the quest for truth or God deserts his reason for a higher, or seemingly higher, guide." Mysticism is essentially rational, and tends to be rationalistic. What Hegel plants at the foundation of certainty, and calls "the intuition of thought," is the root of mysticism. The vastest speculative systems are in essence mystic. They view religion in the form of knowledge, and they tend to make light of history and of volition and mediation as essential to religion. Mysticism is not a "denial of the sufficiency of reason," even of transcendent reason. It is still the action of reason in so far as it reduces faith to some form of philosophy, subjects it to some form of science, keeps it noetic in quality, and closes it in beatific *vision*. It transplants religion from the will to the intelligence, and makes belief a matter of evidence or rational sight rather than of faith, of personal influence, and self-committal. It does not matter whether we take the more systematic mystics or the more vague and emotional. At the heart of all, mysticism is this union of two intelligences rather than two wills; and it may degenerate even into the union of two substances disguised with the name of spirits.

It regards religion as fundamentally metaphysical, as a form of the knowledge of ultimate being, a phase of natural knowledge spiritualised. This is something different from the act of faith, which is moral, not an act of knowing, not a process of the natural intelligence spiritualised, but the one true supernatural act, the one true organ of the supernatural, finding its object in no mere object of noetic perception, however present, but in a historic person equally present. His union with us is not the mystic interfusion of two substances, however rarefied and dubbed spiritual; but it is real personal intercourse, and the ground of that certainty which is the deepest of all—the certainty which rests on a moral being like our central selves. Opposed to all mysticism is the faith (but not the uncritical faith) in a historic personal Saviour, intercourse with whom is the standing condition for ever and ever of all that is properly to be called religion. The judges of Christian truth are not, in the first place, reasonable men, but redeemed men. If our Protestantism mean anything distinctive it means that. And if it be weak for the hour, it is because the habit of the hour is to accept Christ, not as the Creator of a new creature, but in so far as He can be shown to commend Himself to lovers of truth, human instincts, social ideals, or aesthetic taste. We judge and elect our Judge. The mystic, be he visionary or rationalist, measures Christ by His precious but passing utility for effecting the union of the soul with God. The Christian finds that union only and ever in Christ, the historic and exalted Christ. This difference may seem either trivial or oversubtle. We believe it is just as trivial as the displaced molecule in the brain, or the little misbehaviour of a heart-valve. And it is just as subtle as the intangible gas which in time extinguishes life.

It will further illustrate my meaning if I take up another point. It is sometimes asked how, if we insist on the reality of direct contact with the living personality of Christ, we can deal with a Romanist who declares that he has the same evidence as ourselves, in personal experience, of communion with the Virgin Mary or any of the saints. To which I should reply thus:—

1. The final certainty by which we test all, is a moral certainty. It is a matter of conscience. Conscience is the authority for truth no less than action. This is a world where truth exists ultimately for the sake of action, and we cannot there

fore have two standards. This ethical standard is the distinctly Christian, and is in flat antithesis to the pagan nature worship which speaks in this wise: "If the miracle of the soul and the world does not touch men, if through its veil they do not see the face of God, neither will they believe though one rose from the dead." Thousands of Christian believers who had seen no God in the soul disprove that.

2. But we do not go far in a serious way into moral certainties till we discover the sense and certainty of guilt. Kant will soon take us there; however many Kantians may refuse to follow, who have more sympathy with his intellectual agnosticism than with his moral sense.

3. But if we are not to be left there, we must pass in our moral experience to the deeper and still more earnest sense of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of a world reconciled, a redemption, and atonement

4. And there lies the world's last ethical certainty, the basis of all ethic which is at once humane and imperative—in a religious experience, the experience of guilt abolished by holy love. It is not the moral philosopher, nor the poetic Stoic, like Emerson, with his lucid but limited moral insight; it is not the man of mere insight or genius at all, however fine or holy, who is in possession of the fundamental moral experience, and the ultimate certainty of the soul. It is the man who really experiences the redemption of his conscience from guilt. The true foundation of modern ethics, and especially of the ethics of the future, was laid in the restoration of evangelical Christianity at the Reformation, and then faith became a new power and fashion of life, and the grace-renewed will displaced the illuminated mind as the highest thing in man.

5. But to take the next step, this experience, in the great volume of competent testimony, is inseparable from the experience of the living presence and action of the historic Jesus as the Redeemer. Wherever that has been denied, the habit of thinking or speaking of guilt or deliverance from it has decayed; and religion is founded upon philosophic axioms and various intuitions, instead of moral experience of the most serious, profound, and passionate sort. The experience of redemption, and of Christ as the living Redeemer, are one and the same experience, one and the same act. We know our guilt and our pardon in the

act of faith by which we realise the nature and presence of the Redeemer. He is identical with our very ultimate conscience and our final moral certainty.

6. He becomes, therefore, for us the test of all else. He is, in this capacity, the evangelical seat of authority. The seat of authority for the whole human conscience, and therefore the whole of human history, especially in the future, is the Redeemer. The ideal has often as much power to mock as to allure. The moral imperative may damn as many as it inspires. Neither ideal nor imperative can save—not even Christ as the ideal. Authority invests a dying king. Our Lord is our Redeemer. Conscience itself is but an occasional voice from this everlasting throne of the cross.

Of no saint or virgin, even in Catholic experience of their presence, has this been said. Nor could it be said without stepping, in the very statement, outside the Christian pale. The saints that are invoked are not prayed to in the sense in which the Saviour is. They may be auxiliaries in certain crises, but they are not the redeemers of the soul in its grand crisis, either individually or historically. The statements made about the presence and visitation of the saints must be brought to the test of our certainty in Christ. And if denied, they must be denied on the ground of that certainty and its implications.

7. The question under notice takes account of nothing beyond the mere subjective intensity or vividness of an experience. That goes for little in reality; though in an age when mere impression is prized, as it is to-day, it goes for far too much. It is not a question of subjective vehemence in the experience. It may be conceded that the experience of the visitation of saints felt by some Catholics has been much more intense than the experience which far better people in Protestantism have had of the Saviour. And, indeed, this communion of saints has in these Catholics themselves been more vividly felt than they ever realised the Saviour's nearness; and yet the reality of the Saviour's action has not been thought by that Church to be for that reason less than the action of saints. It is not a question of the vividness of the experience, but of the nature of it; and especially its ethical quality, its historic origin, and its effect on the conscience in connexion with guilt. And when that is realised, when we turn from the amount of an impression or the vividness of an experience to

its moral nature and result (as Protestants should who have not unlearned the soul of their own faith), then the question which seemed intellectually so plausible will display its religious inexperience. In a word, the criterion is not subjective, mystical, individual, and intense, but objective, historic, positive, universal, and morally imperative where the deep decisions lie in a soul that is thorough with itself.

8. It is really a question which turns chiefly on the difference in kind in the objects of the experience. The most entrancing sense of the Virgin's glory is, after all, an aesthetic impression. It is not ethical in the sense in which the Redeemer's presence is. It is the impression of a vaguely glorious, spiritual presence; it is not the response to a Saviour's power. It is a state of the religious imagination rather than of the conscience. It is something the soul possesses, not something which possesses the soul. It tends to ecstasy rather than to assurance, to delight and comfort us rather than to remake and control us. It does not place us in the grasp of a mighty personality who has the right to our whole life, yea, to the conscience by which we stand against all the world. How can it? We

know less than we crave to know about the historic personality of Jesus, but we know vastly less about the personality of His mother. We can establish mystic relations with her enlarged and glorified image, but we have nothing like the character, and especially the death, of Christ, which seizes us in a moral grasp and opens a heaven for the conscience more than for the imagination and the heart. This mystic devotion is not surprising in an age when women are asserting and securing a position they have never had before both in life, faith, and unfaith. But for their own sakes it must be corrected from sources more ethical and historic. It is not in Catholic lands, the lands of the religious imagination, that their new career has become possible. Woman worship means woman slavery. They have won what they have in lands where the Christian faith was more Protestant and moral, less of the imagination and more of the conscience, less mystic and more ethical, less inspired by the beatific vision and the sweetness of charity, and more controlled by the love of truth, the righteousness of faith, and the cleansing of the conscience, by the certainty of forgiveness in Christ alone.