

Elizabeth of the Trinity: a Carmelite mystic who speaks to us today.

Part Two: A Carmelite Mystic: but what on earth is that?

This document is Part Two of the summary of an evening session given at Kensington Priory in November 2017 by Roderick Campbell Guion OCDS.

We now move on to the second question in the list that I set out at the beginning of Part One.

To start thinking of this ask yourself this question: When you hear the word mystic used to describe someone what is the picture that comes into mind? Is it:

1. Someone a bit psychic who claims to foretell the future?
2. Someone who gets a bit carried away with religion?
3. Someone who is just a bit arty and poetic?
4. Someone who lives in a bit of a different world?
5. OR IS IT SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT AND IF SO WHAT?

As someone once said: trying to define mysticism in the 21st Century is about as elusive as trying to catch water in a colander!

The truth is that if we cannot exactly say what mysticism IS - it might at least be easier to say something about what mysticism is NOT.



Bernini's famous statue of Teresa of Avila in Ecstasy can be found in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. It is undoubtedly a great work of art but it has come to define (for better or worse) what many now understand by the term mystic. The problem for this paper is that the emotion it suggests has little to do with the specifically *Christian Mystical Tradition*.

To understand why this should be so it is necessary to go back over a bit of History.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA and THE PRE- MODERN WORLD

What may be described as the Christian mystical tradition arguably starts with St Paul who underwent a dramatic personal transformation on the Damascus road. But it was not this that was the 'mystical life', but what came after, because Paul then spent the rest of his life calling the early Christians (and ourselves) to share into this same transformation that he had himself experienced. We might note two features:

1. Firstly, that this personal transformation becomes *the* central objective of the mystical life.
2. Secondly, that the royal road to this transformation was through coming to a true knowledge of self, and that this was to be brought about by emptying ourselves of all that is not God.

Most Christians, whatever their denomination, could probably agree that to be Christian is to be called to a new life in Christ; however if we are to ask *how* this actually comes about we might get some very different answers. I therefore ask your patience in noting that what now follows is a summary of the answer that might be given by someone from **the Christian mystical or contemplative tradition**.

Clearly the call to transformation issues from our Lord's teaching. From there the tradition traces a continual thread which first issuing via St Paul, then runs through the desert fathers, - through St Augustine, - through the various monastic traditions, - through the Rhineland mystics, - to reach Teresa of Avila's reform of the Carmelite Order, the order to which of course Elizabeth herself belonged.

It may come as a surprise to hear that in the early days of the Church the word mysticism in the sense that we *now* use it did not exist at all. So where did it come from?

A Greek word *mustikos* had certainly been around since the earliest day. In the Greek mystery religions that came before Christianity *mustikos* implied a sort of 'magical secret' that was disclosed to the initiate in a formal ceremony of initiation. Within early Christianity this 'magical secret' became re-focused around the idea of the revelation of meaning, which was understood to be hidden within Scripture or hidden within the Liturgy. It was understood that participation led to coming to understand something, which led to some form of transformation of how we are.

So why did this emphasis on **transformative change** evolve and change?

THE MODERN ERA

By the time of the modern era from about 1600 onwards things were changing rapidly. For religion, increasingly the challenge came from debates about Reason, when it began to seem important that the arguments presented for religion should increasingly be seen to be rational. In this new environment mysticism, with its colourful and imprecise language, seemed to be the anything but rational.

From a Reformed Protestant viewpoint mysticism did not seem to be Biblical -and was not thus constituent to their understanding of Faith. In the more eclectic Catholic and Anglican traditions theologians had by now moved from monasteries into Universities and were no longer immersed in the contemplative life. Their ideas of God were thus now being increasingly being framed in the language of the intellect.

KANT

During the period of the 18TH Century Enlightenment matters suddenly became even more complex. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant produced a consensus that became accepted amongst the 'thinking classes'. What he stated was a perfectly reasonable proposition. He said that if we could not experience something through our five senses, - seeing, hearing, touch, taste and smell – then we could have no verifiable way of KNOWING that any such thing actually existed at all.

When Kant said that God is not available to be known through our five human senses, he did not necessarily mean that God did not *exist*. He simply argued that any human talk about KNOWING or EXPERIENCING an ineffable God could not in effect be verified. So mystical literature that had so paradoxically and poetically described the process of the 'experiential knowing' of an ineffable God, was in effect talking of a process that (for followers of Kant at least), could from now have no meaning.

WILLIAM JAMES

And there it might have stayed but for William James, an American philosopher turned psychologist. In his Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University in 1901 he suggested a way this dilemma might be resolved. James proposed to take this 'immeasurable/ineffable/unknowable' God that had so troubled Kant out of the equation. Instead he switched his attention to the *phenomenon* of what the mystic appeared to be experiencing.

James' approach is potentially attractive for the academic mind because the answer he sought did not have to belong to or validate any one particular religion (Christian or otherwise). He was merely trying to explain a phenomenon that was clearly observable as an aspect of human experience: in this case ECSTASY. James' had a liberal style of writing, he distrusted institutional churches and he disliked intellectuals. It is not difficult to see why his thought became popular throughout the 20th Century and indeed remains so for many today.

BUT THE PROBLEM FOR MY INVESTIGATION OF ELIZABETH AS A *MYSTIC* WAS THAT JAMES DIDN'T REALLY HELP AT ALL...

SO WHY NOT?

James' phenomenon of ECSTASY does not work as a proof test for the Christian Mystic because it really belongs to a different territory. It is true that ecstasies of the sort investigated by James are occasionally mentioned in some of the accounts written by others *about* mystics, but ecstasy was never previously understood to be a *necessary* part of the Christian contemplative journey, nor was it seen as valid evidence of actual participation within it.

RE-EVALUATIONS IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

In the last 40 years some important theologians have been looking again at mysticism and they have argued that to correct this misunderstanding it is necessary to go back to the worldview of pre-modern times. In other words we must go back to the period before all the changes of the modern era happened and ask how the mystical journey had been understood up to this time.

They noted several features that mystical writings of this earlier time broadly shared:

1. That the meaning of the language of mysticism is located within a mind-set that is significantly different from the way we generally see things in our habitual consciousness.
2. That the mystical writings we have inherited were the outcome of the **practice** rather than **theorising** of some form of transformative journey.
3. That if we are able to come to understand these writings they are designed to have a transformative effect on ourselves, the reader.

Bernard McGinn is a leading academic working in this field and is the author of the magisterial *The History of Western Christian Mysticism*. Here is his tentative definition of the mystical component in Christianity in the opening pages of Volume 1:

*I identify that the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the **preparation for**, the **consciousness of** and the **reaction to** what can be described as the **immediate or direct presence of God**¹*

So returning to the question where I asked: 'What on earth was a *Carmelite* Mystic?' I want now to look briefly at how Elizabeth of the Trinity lives out what I have been talking about above.

¹ Bernard McGinn, General Introduction, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Vol. I, (New York: Crossroads, 1994), p. xvii.

If we take McGinn's definition we can certainly say that Elizabeth's life story was a '*constant preparation for the consciousness of God*'. In her case this preparation was an ongoing movement towards a complete change of perspective, what we might call a change in the way that she saw things.

How did this come about?

So did Elizabeth have the sort of ecstatic experiences that William James claimed to be one of the defining marks of the mystic?

On the day of her first communion at the age of eleven Elizabeth certainly *experienced* herself as having entered a deeply personal relationship with Christ. There was certainly no doubt about the *reality* of this relationship for Elizabeth. However nowhere does she speak of visions, locutions or any other supernatural phenomena. We cannot of course know what she chose not to tell us, but in her extensive writings we must believe that she did not omit anything that she saw as important. Visions were not included.

To explain the *process* of transformation we can return to a model frequently found in medieval mystical literature:

The so-called *Via Triplex*, more commonly known as the Three Ways.

In medieval mystical literature, this is a metaphor used to name three formative stages in the process of transformation. We might say that these stages are the signposts or the milestones along the mystical pathway.

1. Firstly there is the Purgative Way, which cleanses the soul of all that is not conducive to the religious life.
2. Secondly there is the Illuminative Way, which prepares and conforms the soul for the reception of the divine.
3. Finally the Unitive Way finally opens up to the graced outcome, which is often described as the mystical marriage between the soul and God.

So getting back to Elizabeth's life story set out in Part One of this series, How does this story look when viewed through the lens of the Three Ways? My suggestion is as follows:

- **Purgation Stage One** for Elizabeth is the personal struggle that she has with coming to terms with her mother's absolute refusal to accept her vocation to be a Carmelite nun. She initially experienced this as an exclusion from access to her 'Beloved'. At this stage she was not therefore seeking her God *within herself*, because at this time she believed God only to be found *somewhere else*, in this case in Carmel, where of course she was not allowed to go.

- **Purgation Stage Two** was the very real 'Dark Night of the Soul' experienced during her novitiate. She had longed to be a nun, but when the initial delight had worn off, she now had to face the reality of her choice. We saw earlier how her novitiate was a challenging interface that nearly destroyed her vocation.
- **Moving on to the Illuminative Way.** With her dark challenge transcended, from January 1903 to mid 1905 she lived a period of quiet internal preparation that appears to be very akin to how the texts describe the Illuminative Way. For three years there was little of external remark in her life, but her writing of this time witnesses how her whole self-understanding shifts. The radical stimulus for this in her case was her intuition of a very personal mystical reading of the letters of St Paul.
- **So to the final stage, the union of the soul with God.** Was this union for her? It was certainly the period of the gruesome deterioration over some eighteen months from Addison's disease, which presents us with an unfathomable paradox. Coincident with what might outwardly appear to be her darkest hour, this was also the time when she received and recorded her deepest insights into union with the Divine.

But if, as Elizabeth did at the end, you feel 'inhabited by the Trinity', how do you talk about this union with the Divine, this 'seeing or knowing God' without invoking all the problems discussed earlier under Immanuel Kant?

Elizabeth's answer would be that the transformation brought about by this contemplative journey did not mean that she came to see different things –but rather that she came to see *the same things differently*.

We can summarise this into three main areas by returning to the markers that we defined earlier...

Firstly, following this pre-modern understanding of the mystical, when she says that her eyes have been opened to a new way of seeing, she means what was previously *hidden* was now made new and made clear to her. Thus scripture and contemplative texts now opened up to her, giving her a changed perspective for the understanding of her life.

Secondly, from within this new perspective when she comes to talk about the Divine she is not now referring to any sort of object that we know in our normal way. Instead the terminology used in her writing is more suggestive of a *participative relationship* to describe what she experiences.

Thirdly, like many mystics, she is consistently calling for the diminishment of self: a state of being brought to nothing. If she had previously read about this *anéantissement* elsewhere in mystical texts, for her this was now being lived out in

the painful reality of her self-wasting illness. Indeed it was whilst this was destroying her physically that she came to experience a real sense of personal nothingness. She said at this time that it was only at the point of surrender to her terrifying situation that she finally became fully open to the infinity of divine love.

In a final testimony that only came to light some 30 years after her death, she told Mère Germaine what she had seen, and literally begged her to join her in seeing the same thing too. This was her advice...

Dearly loved Mother...you are uncommonly loved...just LET yourself be loved! That is without fearing that any object will be a hindrance to it. This is because He is free to pour out His love on whomever He wishes.²

This brings us to the third question in this series: How can Elizabeth speak to us today?

This question is discussed in Part Three of these notes, to which you are now invited to turn.

² Elizabeth of the Trinity, *The Complete Works*. Vol. One, *Major Spiritual Writings*, (Washington: ICS, 1984), pp. 175-177.