

Introduction

THE RELEVANCE OF THE topic, corroborated by much research received by the academic community at several levels and by a significant number of texts approved for publication, not only in Brazil but overseas, demonstrates that the subject of mysticism is, undoubtedly, a major concern for the scientific study of theology and religion.

Our own current time, identified by different designations such as modernity, late modernity, hypermodernity, and postmodernity, among others, reflects significant transformations. It is not so much an era of changes as it is a change of era that is taking place in the Western world, with profound implications for human life, its configuration and its context.¹

One of the most profound impacts of this change of era was most certainly on religion. If during the Enlightenment human reason began to gain stature and became the fundamental principle ruling human life, and established itself as the indisputable canon of truth, today the change is taking another form. The crisis of modernity was followed by a new state of things, which human knowledge is still far from having definitively assimilated. And it is in the twentieth century that this new process is most clearly seen.

Religion suffered the consequences of this new vision of the world introduced by modernity. In this vision, in order for something to be considered legitimate, it had to submit to the process of rational understanding that characterizes the thinking being. The critique and questioning of tradition and authority grew and strengthened. A new human organization emerged that implied abandoning the old one, which was proclaimed to be based on fanaticism, superstition, and intolerance.²

1. Cf. *Documento de Aparecida*, the concluding text of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate, 2007.

2. Cf. Castiñera, *A experiência de Deus na pós-modernidade*.

Thus we will consider the period of history that encompasses the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and extends into the twentieth. Its characteristics were an increase in the autonomy of the human being, great scientific advances, and the use of reason to explain what previously belonged in the domain of beliefs. The human being—and no longer God, as in medieval times—became the being at the center of the universe, at the center of phenomena and events. Human beings were now characterized by a mature consciousness and were subjects of their own history. With emancipation, such subjects became responsible for their own happiness (which was fully and exclusively dependent upon their action and reflection).³

Historical Christianity—indisputably the hegemonic and majority religion in the West—saw emerging around it, and even within its ranks, such phenomena as theism, secularism, atheism, and agnosticism. This atmosphere of rejection had a scope that was more than external. It affected the very structure of individualistic thinking, the mental categories of the believers themselves. To them it seemed that the only options were either to reject the modern world and shelter themselves in their faith or to enter into dialogue with the Enlightenment thinking and, apologetically, accept the modern mindset (or at least develop a greater degree of tolerance for the deviations that were invading their sphere of life and knowledge).⁴

Yet religion was not banished from the human horizon as intended by the masters of suspicion. The same Enlightenment thinkers who so criticized the superstitious and magical aspects of the Christian religion now capitulated before the force of transcendence as an essential element of humanity, while looking for a model of God and religion more in line with their mechanistic vision of the physically and technically perfect world emerging from the new sciences. Thus the concept of God began to receive designations such as “the great watchmaker” and “the supreme architect or geometrician” in response to the theoretical necessity arising from a rationalistic vision of the world.⁵

Religion became something belonging exclusively to the inner life of human consciousness, without mediation or intermediary. It came to inhabit a private sphere in which each person believes and welcomes the truths presented, appreciating and discerning them through the prism of reason.

3. See Carrara, “A experiência cristã de Deus,” 11–12.

4. See Moingt, *Dieu qui vient à l'homme*, for a brilliant analysis of the process of secularization in the Western world. See also Castiñera, *A experiência de Deus na pós-modernidade*, 25.

5. Castiñera, *A experiência de Deus na pós-modernidade*, 26.

According to some of the great philosophers who considered this epochal change, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, the meaning of universal history was undergoing deconstruction and being replaced by a new structure—that of individual history, where its subject reacts to concrete historical circumstances by working out syntheses that are continually being renewed, while refusing to be ruled by established and permanent norms. Knowledge becomes fragmented into several specialties, and occurrences become dependent and relative, according to the particular event, the dialogue and interpretations it provokes, and the understanding of each individual.

The concepts of secularization and progress gain greater centrality once we move from being uniquely “thought” by a God who creates us and gives us existence and movement to being “thinkers,” or self-conscious spirits, since “for one who thinks, a thinker is infinitely closer, more present and more certain than one who is thought of.”⁶

Yet, finding itself in crisis, Enlightenment reason—powerful and sovereign—questioned the whole previously ruling system of comprehension and understanding. Our era, no longer understanding itself as a domain of reason, witnesses the fragmentation of the great narratives and utopias and is forced to rethink and recast all—or almost all—the concepts that had provided their theoretical justification. The difficulty in finding an appropriate name for the current period is itself an example of its complexity. Modernity in crisis, late modernity, hypermodernity, or postmodernity? In fact, our era is definitively challenged and confronted by a crisis of its model. All that was solid vanishes in the air, and all that was certain—including questions and answers—is subject to doubt, thus shaking the image that human beings had constructed of themselves as absolute subjects and builders of their history. The prevailing feelings are those of distrust and despair. There is a nullification of history as a result of the shattering of political and religious ideals, especially throughout the twentieth century.

Realizing that they have no solid basis as previously thought, and that reason alone cannot answer their great questions about the meaning of life, human beings individually seek a new basis, detached from collective and communal systems and proposals, that would sustain their beliefs and allow them to build their identity with some consistency. But this search ends up transforming the individual into a manifold and fragmented being, possessing not one but several core identities that can be exchanged and replaced according to the needs of each person. The individualistic culture becomes a culture that each person constructs and wants to pursue alone rather than a society to which the individual or group belongs or wants to be part of.⁷

6. *Ibid.*, 41.

7. Cf. numerous books by the Polish thinker Zygmunt Bauman about this unraveling of the postmodern process.

The culture faces a crisis, and the media exacerbate it through an excess of information, making it almost impossible to evaluate and judge events. The result is their banalization, as reality is transformed into virtuality. Nowadays the real consists of images. With so much information we see a pluralism of cultures, which ends up producing subcultures and making impossible a unitary vision of history, as modernity intended.⁸ The media, as builder of opinion and identity, has a strong influence on the individual. Following the logic of consumerism, it manipulates and sells whatever image it wants. It moves societies in accordance with the pursuit of its interest, which is usually that of a small group vying for the control of the masses. After all, those who control opinions hold the power.

The motto undergirding our times could well be expressed in these words: “Human beings are those who consume, and the more they consume the happier they are.” There is a frightening increase in the availability of goods and services, an abundance of means and a scarcity of ends. Ours is an accelerated culture in which many things can be instantaneously obtained. Business deals, information, communication, and even amorous relationships can be immediately accessed with a click on a computer screen. The result is a maelstrom of questions and answers that casts aside anything that cannot be integrated into the speed cycles to which we are habituated, and that brings about a mood of impatience in human beings.⁹

“The permanent does not endure, and must always be exchanged for something newer and more modern.”¹⁰ Technology is what determines the acquisitive power of each individual. The *cogito* of Descartes, which defined the human being as a reasonable being, is replaced by a fast and inconsistent movement that aims to make of the human being a consuming being.¹¹

The twentieth century is a godless century in which even the deities are ephemeral and transitory. In identifying itself with objects of consumption, it represents the height of the postmodernization process. It rescues the transcendent but fragments it before the human being and introduces it without a face, without an identity, and without Absolutes. Religious experiences, once apparently banished by modern rationality, begin to multiply again. However, their configuration no longer consists in a relationship with a personal and Absolute God, but rather in another kind of consumption: the consumption of experiences of the senses, which, emptied of their

8. See Carrara, “A experiência cristã de Deus,” 13–14.

9. See González Buelta, *Orar em um mundo fragmentado*, and all his excellent reflections on this topic.

10. Carrara, “A experiência cristã de Deus,” 15.

11. See Lipovetsky, *Ère du vide*; Lipovetsky, *Le bonheur paradoxal*; and Lipovetsky and Charles, *Hypermodern Times*, among others.

potential to give pleasure and delight to those who seek them, are exchanged for others equally superficial.

A new conception of the human being necessarily corresponds to a new conception of God. In the construction of a new subject, the idea of an Absolute God comes into question. In modernity this is because “reason demands a rupture with the idea of an Absolute God who gives meaning to earthly things. Reason takes the place of God. We see, then, that in modernity the world is reduced to mere scientific propositions in which reason accommodates to facts without attempting to transcend them.”¹²

However, in excluding God as a social reference, the modern human being begins to search for something to take this now empty place. This is being done by the same human being who, as a rational being, is the reference point for everything. The human being is, therefore, the origin, center, and final end of religion. God is a human product because the human condition is the source of religion. The denial of God restores to human beings the attributes of which they had divested themselves while unconsciously projecting them onto an imaginary being—thus restoring the boundlessness of human subjectivity that human beings had previously refused to recognize in themselves.

Yet, in this modern human being one can still identify ideals closely linked to concerns related to faith and religion, such as commitment, responsibility, and ethical consciousness. One finds the rejection of moral norms and dogmatic definitions but also the valorization of human possibility and human dignity. The entire struggle for human rights must be credited to modernity. Human beings have, at last, the opportunity to become the protagonists rather than mere observers of their own history.

In postmodernity there is a partial return to a reference to God, but under different perspectives in which other fetishes and idols share the leading role with the human being. These are individual perspectives, allowing each person to choose how, where, when, and why to pursue a religious way, according to individual desires and needs. The vision of God—and of the human being—is privatized. Behind a reassuring and secure attitude, postmodern human beings find shelter in a newly configured fanaticism. They no longer canonize and deify modern ideals but rather the more immediate things that can be owned and consumed. There follows a succession of fetishes without which they cannot live, such as computers, cell phones, tablets, cars, and all kinds of material objects and gadgets that are elevated to the status of true idols.

12. Carrara, “A experiência cristã de Deus,” 25.

The postmodern refusal of the idea of God is represented in a practical atheism derived from a spiritualistic narcissism in which the subject has no tolerance for any reference or example other than itself. In this picture no possibility exists for a committed intersubjectivity. The idea of God is not theoretically denied, as in the case of modernity, but is simply rejected or ignored. Not an outright refusal, but a disguised one based on distance and banality.¹³

The weakening of the idea of God also weakens the idea of the human being. In breaking the relationship with God, the human being is reduced to the insignificance of a disoriented humanity in the midst of a multifarious and soothing fog, and becomes a being without reference to the past, without initiatives for the present, and without perspectives for the future.

As previously stated, the human being no longer has one single identity, but several. Yet he or she is not fully defined by them, choosing just one or another of their characteristics and recombining them. Once deprived of an integral personality the human being loses such references as God and the world, and becomes just one being among many, manipulable and reified by ever-changing quasi-scientific theories. Seen only in their biological ambit, treated as mere objects, reduced to a moral relativism in which judgments are purely subjective, human beings find themselves completely fragmented and defined only by their particularities. They also lose their irreplaceable capacity to give meaning to things and, above all, to find transcendent meaning in them.

Designated as individuals rather than persons, human beings do not understand themselves from the standpoint of Otherness and relationality. They use both in a volatile, accelerated, and inconsistent way according to their needs and expectations—a complex of biological and psychological reactions without reference to a transcendent God. They are just individuals closed inside themselves, not open to communication with the other, and incapable of self-transcendence.¹⁴

Relationships established by the new postmodern subjects are, like the subjects themselves, accelerated and ephemeral. There is no longer a perspective of durability and permanence, whether in a familial, amorous, conjugal, or professional context. The same is true of the relationship with God, pursued only to satisfy immediate needs and temptations. Some new religious proposals, including some coming from self-described “churches,” bear this characteristic.¹⁵

13. *Ibid.*, 27.

14. *Ibid.*, 32. Cf. also Rahner on the human being as a being in constant self-transcendence in “Hearer of the Message,” in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 24–43.

15. Cf. García Rubio, *Unidade na Pluralidade*.

At issue here is a culture exclusively of sensations and rights rather than one of duties and responsibilities. It is a light culture, in which happiness is achieved when all desires are realized. But it is not achieved by all, only by those—whoever they may be—who have the means to achieve it. Individual accomplishments are all that matter. Nothing is important if the benefit cannot be seen quickly, precisely, and immediately by the individual.¹⁶

Postmodernity is, therefore, a generalized crisis with several shades. It is characterized by a prevalence of weak thinking and by an epistemological reversal brought about by a disenchantment with reason—which no longer succeeds in defining what is real, nor offers clear and indisputable foundations and principles. What prevails is contingency, discontinuity, and the provisional. A new sensibility emerges with a preference for the particular, for dispersion, specialization, and fragmentation. From a psychological point of view, postmodernity is further characterized by a loss of meaning, lived out as existential emptiness, often resulting in an escape into drugs, consumerism, and hedonism.¹⁷

In this panorama the religious crisis is undeniable, but the search for the transcendent and for principles to guide human life persists. At the same time, this search coincides with a desire for immediate personal satisfaction and for solutions to problems, and not always for authentic experience, adherence to religious principles, and affiliation with an ecclesiastic institution. The need to be sheltered and accepted leads postmodern human beings to search for a religion that touches their senses.

If in the modern period all seemed to point to a godless world without any religious perspective, in postmodernity one finds a return to the transcendent. There is an ever greater eagerness for religious practices—an incessant search for the sacred, but without the need to listen to authorities or theologians. It is a search for something that touches the human heart and makes human beings feel desired and loved.

It is in this context that new religious experiences are born and disseminated, generating movements, associations, groups, and various organizations. In this religious environment, people irremediably withdrawn from historical institutions feel free and open to the experience of the Sacred, surrounded by a deeply involving fellowship—something not easily found in other social spaces.¹⁸ It is possible to note among them the need to become, in one way or another, participants, whether passively or actively, thus rediscovering the thread of the meaning of life.

16. Cf. Lipovetsky, op. cit. Cf. also the works of Bauman cited above.

17. Cf. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*.

18. Cf. Carrara, "A experiência cristã de Deus," 48–49.

The God who is sought and reencountered through this new key to understanding is revealed by means of experience, and above all by a sense of the presence of God and of God's energy that surrounds, perfects, and pacifies. It is the divine that animates the movement of life through the cycles of nature. Nature most certainly is part of the divine. All that is real can be unified in God. And it is through the senses that one can enter into communion with God. Reason does not play a very important role in this process. Thus, several denominations and spiritualities have emerged to address the desires and needs that move all human beings engaged in such constant searching.

Completely free to choose what to believe in, human beings are pushed toward a diffuse reality. At the least sign of a crisis they look for spiritual support of several kinds and sources. With this comes a profound need to experience God—but not necessarily God as understood by official theologies and historical institutions.

In spite of scientific advances, the new discoveries did not help human beings understand the cause, the motive for their existence. Science did not succeed in effacing the desire for God in the human heart. Now the search is not for a religion but for a spirituality that may offer a path to an experience that gives meaning to life. This posture of the postmodern person provokes perplexity and amazement inside ecclesiastic structures. If on the one hand the eagerness for such an experience is a positive factor in guiding the believer to return to God and to develop a deeper faith for everyday life, on the other hand the experience sought after and desired is, most of the time, unrelated to moral norms, dogmatic truth, or institutional membership.

Our research and reflection in this book proceeds from this inquiry. Due to the changes that took place throughout the historical process summarized above, what configuration is presented by mysticism in Christianity today? While in the past the great mystics were persons linked to the institution, living out their experiences inside it and being controlled by it, in the twentieth century we see mystical men and women who claim their bond to the Christian faith and the gospel of Jesus Christ but remain outside of the church—either because they do not accept many of its instructions, or because they are not considered by the church to be full members due to their often rebellious and insubordinate behavior.

We wanted to concentrate our attention on this phenomenon, studying how, in a century such as the last, there were so many mystical personalities who could be a shining inspiration for today—precisely because of their difference and “strangeness” regarding the traditional model of what has been called mystical, as well as regarding those who live out this experience.

We see with great frequency the devaluation, even deterioration, of words rich in meaning. As a result they begin to be understood in erroneous and inadequate ways. That was what happened to the term *mysticism*: “Deprived of its noble original meaning, it came to connote a kind of fanaticism, with strong passional content and a large dose of irrationality.”¹⁹

Thus the word *mysticism* has remained connected to something supernatural and outside of reality, even generating some fear when mentioned or repeated. For many scholars and critics, mysticism is looked at with a certain suspicion and disdain because, according to them, it doesn’t take into consideration the human being as inserted into history. No matter how and in what environment it is mentioned or analyzed (whether Christian or atheist), it is always seen from a perspective that is “dualistic, more precisely one of opposition between the natural and the supernatural.”²⁰

One of the causes of the debasement of the real value of mysticism occurred in the seventeenth century. In that period mysticism oscillated in alarming ways. For the duration of that so-called “golden century,” it was seen as something that merited distrust and was branded as unrelated to Christianity and, above all, to Christian thought.

In fact, set in the ambit of the exceptional, of the supernatural, mysticism could only remain outside of the common and normal ground of human life, restricted to a marginal place precisely because of its extraordinariness. All this is due particularly to the endeavor by the Counter-Reformation church to control the totality of the religious, philosophical and spiritual life of the Catholic world. And it is not by chance that several voluminous treatises on mysticism were also written in that period, which today give the impression that it was a tremendously complex topic, but were intended to be a response to that effort. That the attempt failed is seen in what came afterwards—the Enlightenment and all that followed it. This explains why only now we begin to discover that in reality the first eleven centuries of Christianity conceived of mysticism in a way that was radically different from the one that has reached us.²¹

Mysticism has often been subjected to a suspicious silence and a stereotypical viewpoint. Thanks to Freud, psychoanalysis has cast much suspicion on the sanity of the mystics, considering them completely passive persons, deprived of will, desire, joy, and sadness, if not neurotic, hysterical,

19. Vaz, *Experiência mística e filosofia na tradição ocidental*, 9.

20. Vannini, *Introdução à mística*, 11.

21. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

and abnormal. They were no longer seen as equal to any other human being. They would go to isolated places, away from the world, to be in permanent contact with God, far from the problems that affect everybody else. This is an equivocal and prejudicial vision that corresponds neither to reality nor to the richness with which mysticism has graced humankind.

In studying the history of mysticism in Christianity—especially its contemporary history—through the writings of its protagonists, our intention is to demonstrate that the elements comprising the mystical experience can no longer be anathematized and devalued as has irresponsibly been done. We will try to demonstrate that the twentieth-century mystics were completely active persons, committed and engaged in the questions of their time. And if we find, throughout the history of Christianity, great mystical personalities who were religious and contemplative monks, we may equally find, on the margin of the church's calendar and canonization proceedings, men and women who lived out both a union with God and a commitment to the world in an extraordinarily integrated and luminous way. The more intimate and closer to God, the more the mystical experience demonstrates the need for it to take place in a context in which it enters into the struggle to make that context better, always taking into account the value and dignity of human life.

Karl Rahner, the greatest Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, says that “the Christian of the future will be mystical, or will be nothing.” Rahner expresses what is not so much a foresight as an affirmation of values. If on the one hand the Enlightenment—beneficially—swept away the superstitious elements of religion, on the other hand it helped make clear the mystical core of Christianity from the standpoint of the essential message of Jesus: “The kingdom of God is here and is within you.”²²

In Rahner's affirmation we may begin to understand mysticism in its real context. The inner richness and depth of Christianity must always, by nature, lead to action. This action can assume different aspects, depending on the circumstances. It may assume a markedly religious and charitable character, but it may also be realized in the social and political realm—either way it is the complete opposite of a flight from reality. There are many examples of mystics that would corroborate this affirmation, but their biographies are not well known and are often dismissed as irrelevant and unrealistically idealized.²³

It is precisely in the testimony of these mystics that we find the best way to understand mysticism and to obtain

22. *Ibid.*, 23.

23. See Schneider, *Teología como biografía*.

reliable information about the nature and content of this singular type of experience. In truth, they are the first theoreticians of their own experience. And it is by acknowledging as authentic their experiential testimony (the experiential is the domain of strictly personal experience, but in obedience to a definite structure, while the experimental is the realm of scientific experience with its conditions and rules) and by accepting, in principle, their proposed interpretation that the studious mystics can define the object of their own investigation. For its part, this investigation is necessarily multidisciplinary, since the mystical experience is a holistic phenomenon in which all aspects of the complex human reality are integrated.²⁴

Such an experience occurs in the life history of the human being and gives rise to the encounter with the Absolute other. This experience “annuls” the distance between them. The affirmation that mystics do not enter into their own (social, political, economic, and religious) context turns out to be inconsistent. This transformation involves the whole being of those who experience it, completely changing their knowledge and desires within the reality in which they live, so that they can act in a way that surpasses the relativity of the facts and objects that surround them and arrive at the deepest core of the conception of the human being and the world.

Some scholars affirm that from this standpoint it is possible “to exclude from the mystical experience a whole series of extraordinary and abnormal phenomena, spontaneous or induced, that can accompany mystical states but are not only distinct but also separate from them, and that in general are the object of strict regulation and criticism by the authentic mystics themselves.”²⁵ They are excluded, or at least relativized, because the most important thing is not the extraordinary phenomenon but the positive fruits that the mystical experience produces and illuminates.

Individual mystical experiences will be, then, the basis for highlighting recurrent characteristics with universal import. They possess a large variety of terms that gravitate around two poles—the subjective and the objective. It can be said that the mystical experience is “represented by the triangle ‘mystic-mystical-Mystery.’ The mystical experience, in its original meaning, places itself in the interior of this triangle: in the experiential intentionality which unites the mystic as novice with the Absolute as Mystery; and in the language with which, in a second moment of recollection and reflection, the

24. Vaz, *Experiência mística e filosofia na tradição ocidental*, 15.

25. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

experience is named as mystical and offers itself as the object of theoretical explanations of a different nature.”²⁶

Anthropology, which embraces mysticism in its originality, points to the need for an anthropological conception capable of interpreting mystical phenomena correctly. This is seen throughout its historical-literary process, where the real value of mysticism was often reduced to a mere declaration or to supernatural sensations. The indisputable originality of the mystical experience, as reflected in the authentic and irrefutable testimony of the great mystics, shows itself to be irreducible to narrow reductionist presuppositions. The mystical experience is original anthropological data. Thus its interpretation demands a conception of the structure of the human being capable of accounting for its originality.²⁷

Thus, we can say that mysticism is grounded in anthropological data that involves human beings. It opens them to receptivity to the transcendent, and consequently guides them in all their relational aspects, making them active participants in the context in which they live. This is because the anthropological place of the mystical experience corresponds exactly to the intentional space of the dialectical transition from categories of structure to categories of relationship, or from the being-in-itself to the subject as being-for-the-other, for Otherness and its service through charity.²⁸

Human beings open themselves to the world in a first relational moment expressed through the category of objectivity, and may open themselves to the other, and to history, on a second relational level that expresses itself through the category of intersubjectivity. Finally they can open themselves to the Absolute, on a third and higher relational level that expresses itself through the category of Transcendence.²⁹ True mystics are those who live in profound contact with all relational levels of the human being. This contact, however, does not make them passive beings removed from others but rather beings who are active within their own history.

Throughout this twofold movement—toward oneself, toward the other—the mystical experience appropriately finds its own anthropological place. It can be identified as a fertile tension between being and manifestation, that is, between human beings in their finitude and in their particular situations, and the profound dynamism in the direction of the Absolute that engenders their self-manifestation.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 18. See also Schneider, *Teología como biografía*.

28. Vaz, *Experiência mística e filosofia na tradição ocidental*, 23.

29. Ibid., 24.

This paroxysm occurs in an emergence of the Absolute, who, being the ultimate limit of the intentional movement of the subject, is for this very reason present at the origin and during the course of this movement and formally present in the acts of intelligence and will through which the subject expresses himself or herself. Here, in the *apex mentis*, the intuition and fruition of the Absolute occur, configuring the highest act in the life of the spirit: the mystical experience.³⁰

The mystical experience cannot be separated from anthropological data, since both are profoundly unified in arriving at the diverse relations that involve the whole human being, according to the environment where he or she lives. But, drowning as it is in a sea of all-controlling psychologies, it becomes in reality a substantively mysterious object and at the same time an instigation to theological research. From a historical perspective, the misunderstanding and condemnation of mysticism at the end of the seventeenth century, with its effective disappearance from the living texture of the culture, correspond fully to the misunderstanding and condemnation of its meaning and its allusions.³¹

This experience, which springs from the spirit, nowadays appears to be

a blasphemy for the devout conscience, which does not consider itself to be an instrumental and servile conscience, based on accommodation, without the courage and honesty to look and see what is negative and hold back from it. For this reason sentimentalism constitutes the essential element of ideologies as well as religions, making them mere superstitions, and extending its influence to include mysticism, which is often confused with the nourishment of the heart, upon which, consequently, falls a righteous distrust of intelligence.³²

It is important to emphasize, more and more each day, that mysticism, understood as an experience of the spirit, is not primarily or principally sentiment, which can be precisely defined as that which does not allow the spirit to be. Vannini says that

the most complete proof of this is found in the fact that the mystic is speculative, that is, a dialectician, who has the ability to unify antitheses and to feel at home among them, while the sentimental, as is the case with all that is ideological and psychological, is fixed within his or her limitations and incapable

30. Ibid., 25.

31. See Vannini, *Introdução à mística*, 7–8.

32. Ibid., 8.

of unity. And for that reason the being and action of the sentimental are always those of eradication, the evil thinking that constitutes sentimentality operating in conformity with its own essence—since it is made of pain and evil, that is exactly what it produces.³³

In other words, the issue here is not sensations. The spirit is, above all, knowledge and integration. Movement effectively comes from an act of intelligence, which bends over the experience and, in an enlightened way, redirects everything toward its own reality. Mystics are, thus, much more than simply those who only talk about God. They are those who, without needing many words, reveal God in their lives through gestures and actions inside their own reality. This goes far beyond pure feelings. The mystics allow themselves to be fully involved by the will of God, who is no more than the perfect realization of Love, but Love in a much wider sense than what we are acquainted with. If true mystics were moved uniquely and exclusively by their feelings, they wouldn't be prepared to allow the Spirit of God to act in them, since they would be confined only to their interests.

In the realm of mysticism as it pertains to feeling, sensitivity is not denied. On the contrary, it is reinforced in such a way that the mystic ends up seeking “those satisfactions which he denies to himself in sensation.”³⁴ Thus, one is aware that “all this love and the desire to suffer for love is in fact at the service of his ardent desire for joy, that is, at the service of his own selfishness.”³⁵ The truth is that the true mystic loses “the love for his own soul, his own I, and from this emerges the spirit and the continuous and tranquil union with God in the spirit.”³⁶ From this true experience comes the determination and will to bring the same experience to others through what is lived out in the struggles of daily life, and through the will and desire that spring from the spirit, thus building an earth free of evil.

Thus, by taking into account the whole historical process of the formation of Christianity, we see that its essence lies in the affirmation that Christ is continuously being born in the heart of those who believe. That is, God is made present in the incarnation through God's Otherness, “and becomes the ever deeper Me Myself, the real I, instead of the superficial empirical ‘I.’”³⁷

This experience can be understood only from the standpoint of the indifference and emptiness produced in full in the empirical I, that is, in the

33. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

34. *Ibid.*, 26.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 27.

37. *Ibid.*, 35.

whole complex of volitions, thoughts, and feelings that characterizes us at every moment but in no way constitutes that which is essential in us, since it is ceaselessly changing. The measure of a life that is involved in this experience will be in discipleship of Jesus, in answering the call to “live as He lived.”

Such an occurrence is the Spirit, who according to the Christian faith dwells in each human being and develops in them the knowledge of God. This knowledge, which only comes through experiences, is a continuous movement bringing to maturity the encounter with the other.

Understood in Christian terms, mystics are those human beings who, in their time, achieve a profound experience of deep and loving union with God while living it out in their reality, and are henceforth impelled to transform the reality of the injustice in which they find themselves.

The three biographies and life histories that we will introduce at the end of our reflection—Dorothy Day, Etty Hillesum, and Egide van Broeckhoeven—will serve to concretely and palpably illustrate what we are trying to convey throughout this book.

SAMPLE