

Materials for Oblate Meeting – 10-09-2022 – Medieval Mystics

Reading and Reflection Questions

From “Chapter 7 – The Mystical Paradoxes,” from Carl McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2010 / 2021)

CHAPTER 7

The Mystical Paradoxes

You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.

EXODUS 33:20

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

MATTHEW 5:8

Think without thinking.

FRANCISCO DE OSUNA²¹

Paradox, physicist Neils Bohr tells us, explodes our everyday linear concept of truth and falsehood by positing two

qualities that exist on a single continuum. “The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement,” he claims. “But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.” Paradox thus points us to the mysterious place where two or more profound truths pull against each other in a tension that cannot be resolved by the clever machinations of the rational mind. Mysticism is all about paradox. It’s all about the ways in which God and faith always seem to be pulling us in two directions at once. In the words of the French Orthodox theologian Jean-Yves Leloup, “God has no name and God has every name. God has none of the things that exist and God is everything. One knows God only through not knowing. Every affirmation, like every negation, remains on this side of God’s transcendence.”²²

Paradox is not always warmly received by those who want their faith to be watertight and easy to control. If you

have invested your heart and soul in the idea that God makes everything neat and tidy and your job is simply to obey the rules, then you will have no room for paradoxical statements in your spirituality. After all, if the goal is an unassailable faith, then seemingly contradictory truths must be eliminated.

But for those who regard faith as a relationship rather than a belief system, paradox is not nearly so threatening. When faith is large enough to encompass “unknowing” rather than mere certitude, paradox can be a source of joy and wonder rather than fear or doubt. A spiritual paradox may provide evidence that God is bigger than our limited human capacity for reason and logic. Is the kingdom of heaven within or among us... or not of this world (Luke 17:21; John 18:36)? Are we justified by faith apart from works... or is faith without works dead (Romans 3:28; James 2:26)? These seeming

inconsistencies may pose a challenge to some, but a source of delight to others—not because they introduce an element of chaos into the landscape of faith, but because they point to an ultimate mystery that is beyond human control, beyond what passes for “common sense.”

Saint Paul made a common-sense observation when he noted: “When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (I Corinthians 13:11). The spirituality of paradox represents precisely the kind of mature faith to which Paul is alluding. When my faith offers me equivalent truths that pull me in different directions, I see this as an invitation and a challenge. Rather than pretending that these inconsistencies or seeming contradictions don’t exist or don’t matter, I feel encouraged to approach the mysteries of God in a spirit of humility, recognizing that no one will ever reduce God to the level of human reason. In saying

that mysticism is about paradox, I'm not suggesting that Christian mysticism is a series of word puzzles or locks to be picked. I'm simply pointing out that, again and again, mysticism requires you to take a step back and look at the truths of your faith from a larger, more inclusive perspective. Doing so, in many cases, brings you to the very threshold of mystery. At that place, on the frontier where human reason shades off into divine unknowing, you may find a resolution to the paradox, or at least a sense of acceptance that can help you assent to the apparent contradictions in your spiritual life. But if God remains inscrutably beyond the farthest reaches of the most brilliant human mind, sooner or later we can expect to stumble across paradoxes that simply cannot be resolved. These insoluble paradoxes are the core of faith. They invite you, like Zen *koans*, to surrender the hubris that lurks beneath your apparent understanding and

which the Christian faith operates in the world. Meanwhile, a paradox does not negate orthodoxy, but rather exists "alongside" it. Paradox represents the breathing room in which the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit occurs. The paradoxes of faith invite you into a deep unknowing—that place beyond the reach of human reason, not *pre*-rational, but *trans*-rational—where God wishes to meet you without the pomp and noise of your finite, gotta-be-in-control mind getting in the way.

THE MYSTICAL PARADOXES

Some of the paradoxes that characterize Christian mysticism are central to Christianity as a whole; others are uniquely the province of mystical spirituality. Some are easy to resolve; others are like tenacious vines that simply refuse to yield, even when we hack at them with the blade of human reason.

he had to work fourteen long years for Rachel's hand in marriage. We want every love story to have a happy ending, and we sigh with disappointment when—as with Romeo and Juliet—it doesn't work out.

Christianity teaches that human beings are, by nature, meant to love and be loved by God. This can lead to endless bliss and ever-unfolding joy in a heavenly communion that can begin here and now and will embrace all of eternity. But this outcome is by no means automatic. God is a very polite and rather shy lover, and he never forces himself on you. If you want his love, you have to declare to him, and to yourself, and indeed to the world, just what it is you seek.

Of course, this declaration of love can take different forms. Many seek God simply by following the program laid out for them by their church: they read the Bible, they worship every Sunday, they tithe, they volunteer in programs to care for

control. A God you cannot comprehend is a God you cannot manipulate. This, I believe, is a God of true grace, a God worthy of worship.

One reason I like the word "paradox" is that it is a first cousin to that most religious of all words, "orthodox." The prefix "ortho" means "right" or "correct;" the prefix "para" means "beside" or "alongside." What links the two is the root word "dox," which can mean "opinion" or "teaching" (as in doctrine) or "praise" (as in doxology). The praise/teaching meanings merge in a spiritual way when we consider that both of these concepts point us to God—a God whom we praise and from whom we learn.

Thus, an orthodox statement is simply something that is settled and generally accepted by the larger Christian community: God is love; we are called to repentance; the Holy Spirit is with us always. These are the ground rules by

To some, these inconsistencies and logical disconnects are evidence that Christianity is irrational or unworthy of belief. From the perspective of the mystic, however, these open-ended places are the exciting launch pads from which Christian mysticism spirals off into supra-rational and trans-rational dimensions.

Mysticism is the quest for God.

You cannot seek God unless God has found you.

Christian mysticism celebrates the passionate love that flows between humanity and God, which means that, for each of us, it represents a personal romance with our maker. And love is all about seeking a beloved, right?

Looking for true love is a central fact of being human. It's the stuff of fairy tales, date movies, and romance novels. We understand how love sustained Jacob day after day when

the needy or otherwise make the world a better place. These are all worthy pursuits, and mysticism is not opposed to any of them. But for some, ordinary religious observance often represents only the beginning of the search. A variety of contemplative practices are available to those who feel called to enter into the deeper mysteries of faith.

For mystics, seeking God is a lifelong, and pretty much full-time, pursuit that proceeds even in the midst of down-to-earth activities like working or cleaning the house. For the contemplative, this quest for divine love is a daily concern. But God, being the shy and polite God that he is, never just pops up in your life merely because you say a lot of prayers or meditate for a half-hour a day. God is God, not a formula, not the sum of an equation that will always behave predictably. So the experience of seeking God is always open-ended,

uncertain, and mysterious. What will happen if you devote your life to prayer? Who knows? Pray and see.

Augustine once said that you can seek God only because God has already found you. The point is that, even your seeking—which seems and feels as if you are taking the initiative—is actually already, on a very deep level, a *response* to God. The seeking may, paradoxically, be evidence of the finding—or, should I say, the having been found. I once had a boss who was fond of quoting a rather clichéd phrase: “Success is not a destination, it’s a journey.” Seeking God is pretty much the same.

Mysticism is about experience.

Mysticism cannot be limited to experience.

Missouri is called the “Show-Me” state, a curious and obscure nickname that, according to legend, originated when

Religion without experience is abstract and overly mental—what in popular jargon is known as “being stuck in your head.” Not only is such an attitude a religion of ideas rather than intuition, it’s also a religion built around submission, for, without direct experience, religion must rely on its ability to keep people in line through threats: “If you disobey, you will go to hell.” Religion without an experiential dimension is religion without spirituality, whose purpose is little more than moralistic control of people’s lives. This is what Karl Marx rightly derided as the opiate of the people—religion as a set of teachings designed to make people docile and submissive, while keeping them locked in fear-based beliefs.

By contrast, mysticism argues that only experienced religion is authentic. There’s a difference between *knowing about* God and *knowing God*, and this distinction is the

with-God or seeing a UFO—in and of itself proves nothing. The experience may be a self-created illusion, or perhaps merely the result of not having enough sleep. It could be drug-induced, the product of wishful thinking, or evidence of mental illness. If we insist that unusual or supernatural phenomena can be instigated by angels, logic demands that we also at least consider that unfriendly spirits with an interest in fooling us could just as likely be responsible. A vision of God that comes from a heavenly messenger sounds like a bona fide mystical experience, but such a vision could just as easily come from a less benevolent source—and be little more than an egotistical excuse to feel proud of our own spiritual “advancement.”

Not only are experiences subject to a wide variety of interpretations, there is no consistency in what a “mystical experience” looks like. In the annals of Christian history,

Missouri congressman Willard Duncan Vandiver declared: “Frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me.” Mystics would be at home in Missouri.

It may be only a short jump from “seeing is believing” to “experiencing is believing,” but that jump takes us to the heart of the mystical approach to spirituality. Most mystics may not be as skeptical as Vandiver, but neither are they credulous. Mystics want their faith to be born out of firsthand knowledge. They want their relationship with God to be grounded in their own experience and awareness, and not be just a by-product of what they have been told. When theologian Karl Rahner mused that the Christian of the future must be a mystic, he was referring to precisely this deeply felt encounter with God that transcends mere ideas or ideology.

key to understanding the difference between stuck-in-your-head religion and truly mystical spirituality. Think about the difference between knowing that you have grandparents and actually taking the time to relate to them, interact with them, and become intimate with them. Ours is an age that recognizes that experience matters more than just abstract ideology. That is why evangelical theologians like J. I. Packer and John Piper, who would probably never describe themselves as mystics, nevertheless argue that experiencing God is at the heart of the Christian way.

But if religion divorced from personal experience is inauthentic, an entirely different set of problems arises when we focus too much on experience—the most obvious being the sheer unreliability of human understanding. We are just as good at deceiving ourselves as we are at hoodwinking one another. Having an “experience”—whether feeling one-

mystics have had visions, heard angelic voices, been caught up in ecstatic consciousness, and experienced flashes of insight or intricately detailed dreams. No two mystics have walked the same path as they forged their relationship with God. How, then, can we define mysticism as experience, when it is based on such a wide variety of phenomena? And what about the experience that never happens? Many sincere and well-meaning people, including dedicated practitioners of meditation and contemplation, have no sense of ever “experiencing” God at all, or perhaps have only the subtlest intuition or a vaguely comforting sense that God is present in their lives. Can we really say that such people are not mystics? Is mysticism only for the elite? Do some people receive mystical gifts, but other, “lesser” folks do not? This flies in the face of the teachings of Christ, who consistently tells us that the life of faith is not about who is the greater

or more powerful, but rather about who is most willing to love, care for, and serve others. So, while it appears that experience, in some form, is central to the mystical life, it is also true that mysticism is bigger than mere experience.

God is immanent.

God is transcendent.

When we ask whether mysticism is fundamentally about experience or about something beyond experience, we are looking at the God/human love story from the human point of view. Let's turn this around and try, as best we can, to think about this from God's perspective.

God is greater and more vast than the entire cosmos. But God is also present in the smallest of places—intimately involved in the dynamics of the entities that make up particle physics and string theory. So, while God is infinite,

always insisted that there is a fundamental “otherness” to God. While immanent, God is so much greater than all things and so far removed from the cosmos that it's silly to talk about him in human terms at all. God has no limits, God has no duality, God has no imperfection. This is the doctrine of *transcendence*, which confirms that God surpasses the realm of matter, energy, and human consciousness.

So which is it? Is God immanent and personal, or transcendent and infinitely far away? Can we touch the face of God, or must we remain blinded by a veil that separates us from the Ultimate Mystery? Is spirituality about finding intimacy with the God who is present, or standing in awe of the God who is so vast that we cannot consciously know him?

The answer is yes.

inspiring—and maybe even just a bit intimidating. Even if I never have visions as vivid as those of Julian of Norwich, or perform charismatic miracles like those attributed to Teresa, it enlivens my faith to believe that these phenomena are possible. But is it accurate to equate Christian mysticism only with rare, extraordinary events? Must a spiritual experience be truly *supernatural* before it can be regarded as *mystical*?

Many people of faith have said to me: “I’ll never be a mystic.” When I hear this, I usually find that they see mysticism in terms of miraculous or extraordinary events, and assume that they themselves will never have such awe-inspiring experiences. Many of those who feel this way are truly humble and down-to-earth people—just the kind of people that Jesus praised as being close to the kingdom of heaven. This strikes me as a pretty strong criticism of

in the words of author John Ortberg, he is closer than you think. Paul tells us that, in God, “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God is in us, and we are in God. This is the doctrine of *immanence*—which declares the indwelling or inherence of God. God is closer than you think; God is closer to you than you are to yourself.

A generation ago, the English writer J. B. Phillips penned a book called *Your God Is Too Small*, warning his readers not to pigeonhole God or box him in, and pointing out the psychological distortion possible when we see God as immanent. The problem with seeing God as immanent, Phillips claims, is that, by doing so, we can too easily reduce him to some sort of cosmic butler who is there to serve our needs. Indeed, when we consider the purity of God and set his divinity beside the sufferings and imperfections of the cosmos as we know it, we can see why Christianity has

Mysticism involves significant, life-transforming events and changes in consciousness.

A mystical experience may seem as insignificant as the Butterfly Effect.

Why are some lovers of God granted truly earth-shattering encounters with the divine presence, while these awe-inspiring experiences seem beyond the reach of so many others? Why do some people have gifts for spiritual healing, and some not? What are we to make of stories about how some mystics did extraordinary things—Teresa of Avila levitating, or Therese Neumann thriving for extended periods of time eating nothing other than her daily Communion?

I suppose I am like most in that I find stories of truly extraordinary mystical experiences both thrilling and

mysticism. If a person has to choose between being holy and being a mystic, I for one certainly hope that holiness wins the day.

The idea that mysticism involves only supernatural experiences is, in fact, as limited as saying that God is only transcendent. In fact, some of the most renowned mystics are those who have few, if any, extraordinary or supernatural experiences. Take Thomas Merton for example. Merton had some powerful experiences of God's presence in his life, but a skeptic could explain most of them away as little more than profound insights. The same can be said about Caryll Houselander, or Brother Lawrence, or Thérèse of Lisieux. The truth is that, sometimes, great mystics are marked, not by the supernatural light that illuminates their minds, but by a combination of very simple, almost ordinary, experiences of God's presence in their lives. These encounters, in turn, can

inspire a profound and passionate commitment to holiness, or to a life devoted to serving the poor, or to some other significant calling that embodies the subtle insights and experiences received from God. In other words, mysticism incorporates humble as well as exalted encounters with the Ultimate Mystery.

The Butterfly Effect is a concept related to chaos theory, which holds that seemingly insignificant phenomena can have amazing consequences. The classic way of illustrating this is to suggest that a butterfly in Brazil can, by the disturbance in the atmosphere caused by its wings, set into motion a chain of events that results in a tornado in Texas. We do not know how to measure the relationships between such tiny causes and huge effects. This is also true of mysticism. A single act of compassion or forgiveness can help prevent a terrible crime or a suicide. The decision to say

a prayer or spend an hour reading the Bible can lead to an insight that can literally change a person's life.

With this in mind, consider God as a force for "holy chaos." A subtle, gentle, if-you-blink-you'll-miss-it sensation of God's presence may be all the mystical experience you need (or can handle). Perhaps most mystical encounters with God operate under the principle that less is more. Perhaps those who have dramatic mystical experiences are simply less well attuned to God's presence to begin with. Unlike those who can quietly discern God's voice in the midst of mundane life, some people need to have their minds blown in order for God to get through. If we can accept that mystical experience comes in all shapes and sizes, then we must also recognize that mystical gifts touch far more people than any of us realize.

Other paradoxes in Chapter 7:

You can do nothing to "earn" the mystical life.

*If you are passive, you will be thwarting
the action of the Holy Spirit.*

God is One.

God is a Holy Trinity.

God is all-merciful.

God is uncompromising in his justice.

Mysticism is the "flight of the alone to the Alone."

*Christ is present "where two or three
are gathered" in his name.*

Christ is fully human.

Christ is fully divine.

Seek holiness.

Practice hospitality.

Seek the light.

Embrace the dark.

Plumb deeply the Christian tradition.

Embrace all positive wisdom.

Take delight in God.

Accept even suffering.

Love God's creation.

Do not love the world.

Humankind is sinful.

Humankind is invited to participate in union with God.

Live by faith.

Live the truth.

God is Father.

God is Mother.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Perfect love casts out fear.

God transcends gender.

Pray methodically.

Prayer cannot be reduced to a method.

**Authentic Christian mysticism conforms
to Biblical and church teaching.**

Mysticism is following spiritual vision to greater freedom.

Become like little children.

Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

Mysticism is an intellectual pursuit.

True mysticism is mostly about the heart.

**The mystical life is like climbing a mountain—it's a
lifelong journey to reach the place God is calling you.**

*There's nothing separating you from the love
of God—right here, right now.*

The Ultimate Mystery is silent.

*Part of being a mystic is trying to express
the ineffable through words.*

Heaven is a gift freely given.

Hell awaits those who reject divine love.

Questions for Reflection:

1. In the reading is the quote “Is spirituality about finding intimacy with the God who is present, or standing in awe of the God who is so vast that we cannot consciously know [him]? The answer is yes.” Share some examples of either/both in your own life.
 2. Select one or more of the paradoxes listed and share your thoughts about them with your group.
 3. As you hear about some of the medieval mystics, listen for what paradoxes they write about, and, share your thoughts about them with your group.
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At the Meeting:

Opening Prayer

God, through your goodness, give me yourself. You are enough for me. I cannot honor you by asking for anything less. When I do ask for less, I am never satisfied. Only in you do I have all.

- Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love (long text, Ch. 5)
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Closing Prayer (Ken sings in Latin)

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy!
Our life, our sweetness, and our hope!
To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve,
to thee do we send up our sighs,
mourning and weeping in this valley, of tears.
Turn, then, most gracious advocate,
thine eyes of mercy toward us;
and after this our exile show unto us the
blessed fruit of thy womb Jesus;
O clement, O loving, O sweet virgin Mary.

- Chant *Salve Regina*, sung from Pentecost to the first Sunday of Advent (simple tone)
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Lectio Divina

We know that our mothers bear us and bring us into this world to suffering and to death, and yet our true mother Jesus, he, all love, gives birth to us into joy and to endless life – blessed may he be! So he sustains us within himself in love and was in labor for the full time... And when he had finished and so given birth to us into bliss, not even all this could satisfy his marvelous love; and he revealed that in these exaltedly surpassing words of love: ‘If I could suffer more, I would suffer more.’

- Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love (long text, Ch. 60)