

REFLECTION

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Special points of interest:

- Mystical Christianity is the foundation and core of the Christian tradition.
- Christianity is not primarily a set of beliefs, but a practice or a way of life.
- *Nepsis* or watchfulness is an example of early Christian practice originating in the teachings of Jesus.
- Along with other faiths Christianity is experiencing recovery of its spiritual roots.

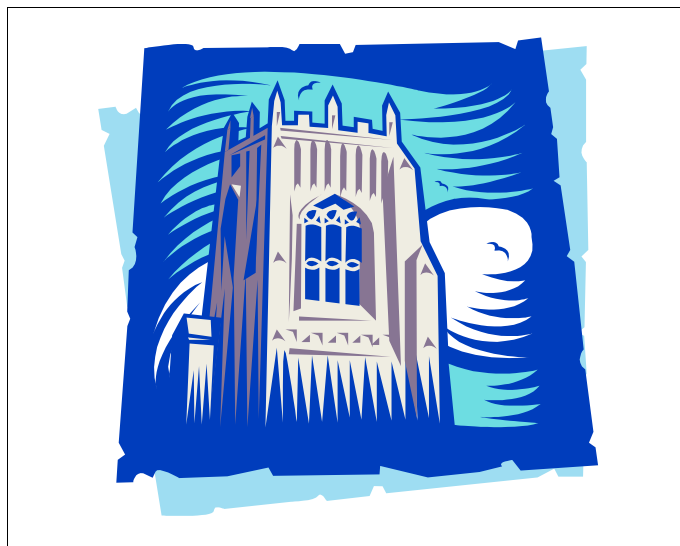
MYSTICAL CHRISTIANITY

It has been quite common in the contemporary world, especially among western theologians, to ridicule the notion of “mystical Christianity.” The prevailing assumption has been that mysticism is only an accretion, added to Christianity after-the-fact and despite its origins. Anyone who sought to introduce mystical Christianity was subject to theological disdain.

More recently, however, in light of current biblical scholarship and research into the origins of Jesus, this assumption has slowly begun to change. Marcus Borg, a well-known contemporary scholar, for example, talks openly now of the mystical and spiritual dimension not only of early Christianity, but of Jesus’ own life. In his writings, he has called Jesus a “person of Spirit.” This new attitude creates an opening today to rediscover and recover the mystical roots of Christianity.

At its heart, traditional Christianity is always a mystery, and about **the** Mystery, for the Christian faith is a mystical tradition of deep interiority. The essence of this mystery is, first, the long Semitic tradition of encounter with the divine in the affairs of ordinary human beings and within their history. Ancient Hebrew culture is saturated with this awareness.

As time progresses the mystery of the divine Presence, named and nameless, interweaving itself in human



At its heart, traditional Christianity is always about mystery.

history, becomes a personal encounter. In Jesus that encounter is so intense and so real that it makes Jesus, as Borg has said, a person of spirit, super-saturated (Anointed) with the divine Presence as Spirit.

Everything about Jesus must be seen in relationship to his own deep awareness of that Presence experienced intimately within. The encounter between the soul of Jesus and God called “Abba” (beloved Parent) is so personal, so palpable, and so intimate that it fills all the words and acts of Jesus. It is this experience which is at the heart of his teaching and his reaching out to others.

To know this inner mystery is the essence of mysticism. It is mystical Christianity

at its heart and core. Throughout his lifetime Jesus calls his students not simply to himself, but takes them personally (one could say “bodily”) into that mystery.

The Good News of Jesus is that an ordinary human being can awaken to the same reality he knows, and turn towards it. To live oriented to the deep, divine, interior Presence within, and to call it intimately, “Abba” is to begin to live in the realm of God, the reign of God; the rule of an authority at once so strong and yet so personal that it overwhelms everything else.

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MYSTICAL CHRISTIANITY

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heart it is mystical, for it not only proclaims but is itself a "Way" of initiating all who come to it into its mystery. That introduction, however, is never institutional. It is always through the mediation of its founder who lives still to make God known.

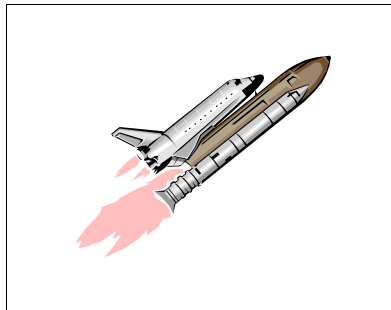
Christianity is fundamentally about a relationship not only to its living founder, but to God, the Ultimate Reality. Jesus offered his students, and still offers us today, a way forward into the Mystery of God's inner life. His offer is a gracious gift, but it is never done "to" us. It is done with us in cooperation.

As we willingly walk the path Jesus opens up for us, we move forward with him through his own expert experience into the divine Mystery, into the intimate relationship

with God that Jesus knew. This journey is always mysterious, for it takes us into an infinite territory; into the yawning infinitude of the divine abyss. Christian men and women of spirit, the mystics, are astronauts who explore the infinite depths of the divine abyss.

L. Bauman

See Marcus Borg's *Jesus a New Vision*, and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* NY: Harper and Row, 1987, 1994.



The mystics are astronauts who explore the infinite depths of the divine abyss.

CHRISTIANITY IS A PRACTICE

If Christianity is not mystical, then it is nothing at all, or at least there is little or nothing left of its origins.

Typically, we think of Christianity as a set of beliefs, a belief system or a creed. A Christian is one who subscribes to the beliefs of the faith (for example, the belief that Jesus is the Son of God). Faith, then, is seen to be belief in propositions or statements made about God, Jesus, or the Bible.

Suppose, however, this whole approach is wrong from the start. Suppose the truth of Christianity is not a set of beliefs at all, but a **praxis** (a spiritual discipline or practice, or a practical way of life). One would learn the truth of Christianity, then, not by holding certain beliefs, but by practicing its principles. This would be similar to learning how to ride a bike. One would only know about bicycle riding by getting on it, trying it out, falling off, but eventually learning to stay up. Once bicycle riding was learned, the "truth" of it could never be transmitted in mere words. It simply wouldn't work. Nothing would

be communicated of any real substance by words alone.

A seasoned "rider" (a believer in riding bicycles, or better, a practitioner of riding) could only really help another new rider to get up on the bicycle. Then, to encourage the new rider to stay on with practical instructions, dust them off and care for them when they fell off, and in the end encourage them to get back on to try once more. Only in this way is the "truth" of bicycle riding communicated.

Let's imagine then that Christianity is just such a truth. It is a way of life that must be learned in the same manner. It cannot be passed on through creed or belief systems in any fundamental way, in the same way that the knowledge of bicycle riding

cannot be passed on in books or beliefs about bicycles. Christianity, the way of life and coming to know God taught by Jesus, then, is the same. It is not a system of beliefs, but a practical way of living that enables one to know God at the depths of the heart, and to live out this knowledge in the midst of life.

This is what Jesus knew and taught. This is what Jesus went to crucifixion to affirm. This was the life that was brought into being through his death and given back as a gift of Spirit, an interior presence to us, his students.



The practice of Christian truth is like riding a bicycle.

PRAXIS: THE ART OF WATCHFULNESS

The Explanation:

There are many terms Jesus uses for the spiritual practices he teaches. These are linked together in interesting ways. The first is the term *metanoia* (often translated “repentance”), which is an inner turning or reorientation of one’s whole being in the direction of the realm of God. The second is the term wakefulness (*gregoreo*) which is a state of being increasingly awake and aware of the presence of God. The third is watchfulness (*agupnia, nepsis*) which is both an inner state of being and a spiritual discipline or practice.



The inner eye of watchfulness (*nepsis*).

To practice watchfulness one must know and practice the first two states. Only then can the third come into being. To be watchful is to pay close attention to life in order to detect and discern the divine presence, active and working, in and through the details of life. Watchfulness is a state of inner attention both to your own being, to outer events taking place around you, and your responses to them. It is called a practice of double awareness. It is easy to lose attention, go back to sleep and fall out of inner orientation to the Spirit. We must practice constantly. (See Jesus’ teaching, Matt. 25:1-13 and Mark 13:33-37)

The Practice:

1. Go through your day reminding yourself that you actually have two inner orientations—like cross-hairs on a rifle—a horizontal and a vertical. These help you to train your inner eye on where the human and divine intersect.
2. Live out your life in the normal manner, keeping these inner cross-hairs on the target of each moment.
3. Watch for “signs of the divine presence, not in extraordinary events, but in an awareness of the divine presence in the ordinary itself.
4. Respond to that Presence as you would to a friend. In each moment acknowledge the divine presence within the ordinary, responding to it with deep compassion.

BOOK REVIEWS

Often people who wish to explore the mystical dimension of Christianity are in need of some direction about where to find in-depth information. There are many fine books currently available, but two are critical.

Lost Christianity: A Journey of Rediscovery to the Center of Christian Experience. by Jacob Needleman. Rockport, Mass: Element Books, 1993.

In this volume, the renowned scholar of comparative religion, Jacob Needleman, examines the mystical and esoteric core of early Christianity, and what’s been lost to us in the modern era. He does research in three areas, using exchanges with contemporary representatives of the ancient tradition and by

gathering together ancient texts and writings for the modern practitioners of essential Christianity.

Needleman demonstrates that a more effective contemplative tradition existed in the early church and continues today in the lives of extraordinary people whose stories he retells in the course of his own personal explorations into the realms of the spirit.

A Different Christianity: Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought. by Robin Amis. NY: SUNY Press, 1995.

If Needleman’s book is about the theory of early Christian esotericism, Amis’ book is about the practice. This text presents the esoteric core of early Christian faith

and its desire to illuminate and heal the inner life. Explaining the spiritual psychology of early Christianity, the author uses current practices still available in eastern Orthodoxy (in particular the Greek Orthodox Church and the monastic tradition of Mt. Athos) as examples.

This book is useful to the practitioner, as well as to the student. There is some repetition in the text and often a lack of organization of this complex material, but these do not detract from the overall usefulness of this text for the serious seeker of mystical Christianity.

(These books are available on the Internet through www.amazon.com.)

“Watchfulness is a state of inner attention both to your own being, to outer events taking place around you, and your responses to them.”



PRAXIS

*The Christian Contemplative
Tradition*

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THIS JOURNAL IS A
RESOURCE FOR
SPIRITUAL PILGRIMS,
THOSE IN SPIRITUAL
DIRECTION, AND
THOSE GIVING
GUIDANCE AS
DIRECTORS.

READINGS FOR REFLECTION

PSALM 63

O God, you are my God, eagerly I seek for you, my soul thirsts for you,
My whole being longs for you in this dry and barren land where there is no water.
I lift my eyes and behold I see you standing in your holy place,
I gaze and see your strength, your power, and the beauty of your face.
And now I know that one small drop of goodness from your hand is better far than life itself.
I cannot stop these lips from praising you.
So as long as life shall last for me, I will bless the name of God and lift my hands to you in prayer.
For my whole heart and soul are filled by you, and satisfied as with a feast,
that loosens tongue and lips with songs of praise.
When evening comes I go to be with you, and through the passing hours of the night
I invoke your name in prayer.
So whether day or night, it matters not, for you are ever at my side
to guide, protect and shade as by a sheltering wing.
My soul ever clings to you in joy, your right hand reaches out and holds me fast.

L. Bauman, new translation, 1998



In early times in Japan, bamboo-and-paper lanterns were used with candles inside. A blind man, visiting a friend one night, was offered a lantern to carry home with him.

"I do not need a lantern," he said, "Darkness or light is all the same to me."

"I know you do not need a lantern to find your way," his friend replied, "but if you don't have one, someone else may run into you. So you must take it."

The blind man started off with the lantern and before he had walked very far someone ran squarely into him. "Look out where you are going!" he exclaimed to the stranger. "Can't you see this lantern?"

"Your candle has burned out, brother," replied the stranger.

Reps and Senzaki, **Zen Flesh, Zen Bones**, 146.

LECTIO DIVINA

Luke 24:13-33

READ: With space between the readings, prayerfully and quietly read this passage carefully and slowly. Allow its words to sink deep into your heart and mind.

MEDITATE: Sit quietly and imagine the scene fully, recalling the action and the words together as best you can. (*If you cannot remember, consult the text again*). Imagine yourself in this story. Make yourself one of the two disciples.

Ask yourself the following questions about the reading:

1 Why is Jesus anonymous?

- 2 How does Jesus begin a conversation with them?
- 3 What does he teach them?
- 4 What parts of their being are mentioned in this text several times?
- 5 What is the condition of those parts?
- 6 What does Jesus "do" to them or for them?
- 7 What is the effect of Jesus' action?
- 8 Why do you think Jesus disappears from their midst again?
- 9 What about them changes from this exchange?
- 10 Why?

PRAY: After you have meditated on the scene and the questions about the text, what have you learned?

Express your learning in a dialogue of inner prayer.

What needs to be expressed to God? What needs to be learned or done as a result? Express all this from your heart.

SIT: In a final time of quietness, sit in silence listening for the voice of God within, answering you back, continuing the dialogue.

Having heard with your inner ear, allow that hearing to remain open and active in the context of silence.

Purpose of This Lesson

The purpose of this lesson and the issue of REFLECTION is to look at Christianity in a new way, in light of its ancient mystical roots. Many people do not see Christianity except as an institution, the official Church. They fail to see its spiritual roots, and thus, misunderstand it entirely. How could one think about Christianity differently and recover something new, a new dynamic quality? Mystical Christianity is not essentially doctrinal, it is practical: that is, a form of spiritual practice, one of which is explained in this issue.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion

1. What is your personal attitude toward Christianity as a religion? Would it change in any way if you thought of it as a mystical faith?
2. What is mysticism? How does the article on “Mystical Christianity” define it? How do you define it? What is a mystic?
3. How would it change your understanding of Jesus if you understood him to be a mystic?
4. What are the signs of mystical experience in Jesus?
5. What is the Good News (the Gospel) about? What is it for you personally?
6. What does it mean to be initiated by Jesus into the “Way?” What is the Way?
7. If Christianity is not about faith in certain beliefs (believing certain propositions), where does faith come in? Using the illustration of bicycle riding, how is faith used in that context?
8. Can you think of a spiritual truth that you have learned by practice (like learning to ride a bicycle), and not by accepting it as a doctrine?
9. What would you say to a person who asked you to teach them the “truth” about bicycle riding? How would you communicate that truth? How would you use words in this context? What is the relationship between words and experience?
10. What do you make of the Zen story about the blind man? How does it illustrate the practice of Watchfulness?
11. What is spiritual blindness? How would you define it? More importantly, how have you experienced it?



Daily Practice

Daily practice is an opportunity to put the principles of spiritual life to work, not just as an idea in your head but as a way of life. It involves work in the outer world, and work in the inner world of the heart. The following questions and guidelines are opportunities for you to be more focused in your daily practice. It would be good to share your experience with other individuals (a gathering of friends who are on the spiritual journey with you, a class who is studying together, or simply talking about what you have discovered over with a spiritual director or companion). Sharing your experience helps to ground it, making it clearer and more real to you.

- A. For a week read Psalm 63 reflectively each morning as you arise, before you start your day. Read it also before you go to sleep. This ancient prayer comes from deep, personal (mystical) experience of God. Unite your prayer with the ones who have prayed this prayer for perhaps three thousand years.

- B. The practice of Watchfulness is one that began early in Christianity – in the deserts of Egypt among the desert fathers and mothers (**Abbas** and **Ammas** as they were called). It is important for you to understand the terms **metanoia** and wakefulness and to see them in light of Jesus’ teachings from Matt. 25: 1-13 and Mark 13:33-37. First read these passages and then think about the three terms listed in the article and what they mean to you. Journal your insights. Follow the four steps in the practice of watchfulness outlined in the article **PRAXIS**. What happens in this experience through the exercise? How do you experience the divine Presence? Is the quality of your experience any different than it was before? How? Write this material in a journal that you keep, and share it, if you can.
- C. *Lectio Divina* is a venerable practice of Christian prayer grounded in Scripture. It has been used from earliest Christian times forward as a method of meditation. It is possible to practice this form both personally and privately, but also as a group practice. In group practice, read the passage from St. Luke’s Gospel twice slowly and deliberately with silence between the two readings. After the reading begin the meditation by having the reader of the Scripture read each question slowly, allowing a period of silence (perhaps up to a minute) between each of the questions. Once the questions have been read and pondered, sit in silence for a period of ten to twenty minutes allow people to complete the next two steps (pray and sit). End the silence with a bell (if you have one), and then allow each individual an opportunity to share their experiences and insight from the exercise of *Lectio Divina*.
- D. This next exercise is a thought experiment involving **Nepsis** (the inner eye of watchfulness). Some traditions think of this form of watching as related to the “third eye,” meaning that there is another form of perception (a seeing sense) that exists at the level of the heart. This eye can be opened to see, and if one is trained it can be used constantly to search within or to “see” (intuitively) realities beyond one’s own body or being. Have you ever experienced this? In what way? Would you connect it with intuition, or some other extra-sensory ability? You might want to journal your experiences, and then share this information in the group or with a friend. Explore this ability in yourself through daily self-observation.



Further Reading for Reflection and Conversation

...The old debate between reason and revelation, reason and belief, continues up to the present day without either side suspecting that what is at issue is the activation within the being of man of an entirely new faculty of attention.

“The early Fathers observing what happened to them when they were in a state of prayer”: this was the answer Metropolitan Anthony gave to me when I asked about the origin of Christian methods of spiritual struggle involving such elements as posture, breathing, bodily sensing—those elements of the “lost Christianity” which so many people are now seeking:

*— The “state of prayer”: why did he call it a **state**? Is observation, knowledge of oneself only possible in a certain inner state? Is knowledge that we gain in other states subject to distortion by our emotions and thoughts? Is prayer a special struggle, a seeking, a condition of attention? If so, no wonder **gnosis** is “hidden”; no wonder the Alexandrine Fathers speak of it so guardedly, and no wonder that it never entered the mainstream of the Christian doctrine as it spread throughout the people of the world. Salvational knowledge can only be acquired in a specific state of consciousness!*

*No wonder the idea of dogma, which has become such a negative word for most modern people, developed in the way it did. Mystery exists, the basic truths of the teaching exist, but they are hidden from us. But then, how did dogma become such an oppressive element for so many Christians? How did it change from being a system of ideas to guide one’s search for relationship with the Higher into a rigid set of assertions that provoke the reaction of belief or disbelief? (Jacob Needleman. **Lost Christianity: A Journey of Rediscovery to the Center of Christian Experience**. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980, 42-43).*

These observations by Needleman raise interesting issue about not only the origins of Christianity, but also the experience of it both then and now. What happens to us in deep states of prayer? We need to observe these and record what occurs. What is true self-observation and self-knowledge? How does it come and where does it come from? What is doctrine and dogma and is it “salvational”? Why is some teaching hidden and personal (as Jesus taught), and other teaching public? What is the meaning of Needleman’s last sentence?

Purpose of This Lesson

The purpose of this lesson is to help individuals and folks in a group study look at Christianity in a new way, in light of its ancient mystical roots. This study will obviously raise many questions for the average Christian. In some respects it may be unlike anything he or she has encountered before, except perhaps in other faith traditions. Your task as a mentor is to assist individuals in thinking about Christianity differently, and urging them to practice their faith (rather than simply have opinions about it) so that they can experience this new dynamic quality. Leading them in a balance of reflection, discussion and practice will be critical to your work as a mentor.

Methods for Using This Lesson

METHOD A: Perhaps the ideal method is, after an initial introductory session where people introduce themselves, to say why they have entered this group. Then you are able to lay out the methodology for work that is to be done. Have each member of the group work with the material a week ahead for the next class gathering. This would give individuals time to read, reflect, journal, and move through the various exercises. Choose a place to begin. Perhaps that would be with one of the practices, a reading from the Reflection volume, or one of the questions for group discussion. Allow individuals to share from their writing, insights, and experience. Keep the group moving, but allow time for the discussion to go deeply enough. This issue or lesson could take 2-4 weeks to complete if done thoroughly.

METHOD B: At the initial session pass out the Reflection issue for this lesson. Ask people to take time to read the article "Christianity is a Practice" to themselves for several moments. After reading, pass out the Study Guide and begin to discuss the Questions for Reflection (7-9) found in the study guide. Allow time for a full discussion to develop. Following the discussion, point out that the issue directed toward another topic, mystical Christianity. Ask them in the following week to read the rest of the Journal and to write out answers to the questions from the Study Guide. If more material is needed for the initial study, read the Zen story on page four of the Journal and ask people to comment on its meaning. Note that this story is related to the spiritual practice of "watchfulness," which they will learn about in their reading.

Further Information About the Lesson

1. There are, of course, many viewpoints concerning religion, its origins, and its purpose. The aim of this issue of the Journal of Contemplative Reflection is to introduce a very fundamental idea, that religion is about its interiority (its spirituality or mysticism) and not merely its exterior manifestation. Most people think about religion (Christianity) only in terms of its external aspects: that is, its institutions, doctrines, liturgies, Scriptures, historical development, etc. These are part of the religious tradition, but they are not its core or cause. They are its result. The core of a religious tradition is an experience of God that is deep and personal. Such an experience was at the core of Jesus' life. It is this core which is the subject of mystical Christianity.
2. There is a clear distinction and often a tension between the interior reality of a religious faith and its exterior dimensions. Folk in the class will tend to relate to one side of that division or the other. The object here is not to polarize people into seeing themselves on one side or the other, but to see how the two sides relate, and which comes first and which is secondary. Contemplative (or spiritual) life is about understanding this priority and balancing the one with the other.
3. As a mentor you might want to read Needleman's book, or go through the SMART CURRICULUM series, "What is Spirituality?" to assist you in understanding these distinctions. It might also be important for the study group to work through the same six-part SMART CURRICULUM series themselves and with you.
4. During the study of this particular issue be sure to devote one of the class sessions to doing the *Lectio Divina* that is offered as a group exercise, even though some may have done it on their own as well.