

# Mysticism

Inaugural Lecture

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May I first express my gratitude to the Principal and Vice-Principal for inviting me to speak to you. May I also add that my rather unusual past gives me neither reason nor background to give you the lecture with which I have come tonight. The only reason why I feel I can speak on the subject is that no-one, whatever his persuasion, and whatever the way he leads his life, can escape this problem of Mysticism. There is a “Mystique” of the atheist as much as there is a “Mystique” of the believer.

The first problem that occurs when you intend to speak on Mysticism, is to define it; and this is perhaps one of the most difficult things to do. Because Mysticism is understood in different ways. Usually, and in practice, Mysticism is thought of as an experience of things transcendental or things which are not of the field of pure intellection. And the stress is laid usually on the word “experience”. This is both true and the danger of it because, if it is true that the mystical life is an experience, it is extremely dangerous to reduce the mystical life to one’s own experience. If one does so, one runs the risk of equating the mystical experience for all intents and purposes with the kind of experience one tends to derive from taking drugs, or from psychological states that can be induced. And one moves out of any kind of objective criteria.

I would like to insist on this in a few moments. I wish only to say that this is not the only way in which one can define Mysticism. The mystical life can be defined not only as an experience, but also acquiring a personal knowledge, possessing a personal knowledge, and therefore an experience of something which is greater than one’s own self, which is an experience belonging to many, or to all. The difference between these two approaches is that in the first place, in the centre of all things, stands the experience; in the other case what is central is the fact that I become aware of something greater than me, the centre being that realm into which I move.

When I said that there is an analogy between the attitude of one who goes into mysticism with an intention of becoming possessed of an experience, and those who try the same thing by means of drugs, I think I must qualify it. What is common between drug-taking and the search for an experience is first of all, the self-centredness. When one looks for experience in drug-taking, or when one tries to engineer states of consciousness, one always tries to come into possession of an experience that is enjoyable, and that will last as long as possible. One uses the experience for oneself.

True mysticism, as we find it in the saints, in the great heroes of the Spirit, is not self-centred. It is always incidental. It is part of a total life, the aim of which is not the experience itself. What is characteristic again of the induced forms of experience, is first of all that they are transitory. When one takes a drug, when one, by psychological technique, induces a state of consciousness, or an emotional state, it lasts as long as it can last, and as long as the drug continues its effect, or as long as the inducing power holds our soul in its grip. And then it fades away and it ceases; it comes to a complete end. And the only way in which one can recapture it is to put oneself in the same outward conditions.

The second thing concerning these induced states, is that they are incommunicable. This is also an important feature. When a person takes drugs or enters into some sort of psychological trance, it is an experience which is possessed by its victim, but can not be conveyed to anyone else. These two characteristics are important in a way for a Christian believer, because the two characteristics are similar with what we find with/in sin in general.

First of all, sin is always self-centred: it is centred on myself. The aim of sin is to secure some sort of experience, some sort of pleasure or state, which I will, or hope to enjoy. On the other hand it lasts a short time and it dies out. And thirdly, it is incommunicable as the

experience of drug-taking is. I think it is important to notice that, because what makes it sinful is obviously not the experience, but the self-centredness of it, the fact that the aim of it is nothing but enjoyment. It has no other purpose. And also the fact that it is repetitive by its very nature, — it can be nothing else but repetitive because it wears off and to be recaptured it must be gone through again. It is not something that leaves results, that bears fruits which can in themselves make sense, and are worth possessing. This is why sin is so dull and so repetitive. This is why people go back eternally to the same thing. And it has also the characteristic: it wears off gradually, and it becomes duller and duller, which means that one has got to increase either the quality or the quantity of it.

I remember someone who used to drink quite a lot, and when I say quite a lot, I mean it. This person came to ask me what could be done to stop him drinking so much. To begin with I tried to explain what I have just said, that it is a self-centred, and therefore selfish and a wrong attitude. But then I stumbled on something that gave much better results than my theological lucubration, I said “All right, if you want to sin, then sin intelligently. That is, sin so as to enjoy it.” So the person who had come to see me thought it was a grand idea, and it gave a sort of moral right to go into drinking to the hilt. But then, when we went into a more attentive examination of the thing, we discovered what I meant, and what was not at all so pleasant as this. What I said in fact was this: “Watch yourself drinking. You will see that your first gulp is pure delight. The second gulp is nice. Then a few more come which are pleasurable. But then the pleasure ceases. Your sense of taste is blurred, so that you try to drink more or to eat peanuts, or to do something of that kind, in order to revive the sense of it. But whatever you do after half a glass or a glass, or perhaps a little bit more or a little bit less, according to your capacities, a moment comes when you drink only with the hope that a moment will come when quantity, power of impact, change of wine, peanuts and cucumbers will revive in you the ability to enjoy it. And you do not come to this point. Once you have made the discovery then immediately, enjoy your sin. All right, you will enjoy it for three gulps, and then put your glass aside.” The ex-

periment was made by this person, who had a systematic and an organised mind. And within a short time this person came and said, “Yes, it does work. I don’t drink any more because I can’t enjoy more than a few gulps. So I drink these few gulps, and a bottle of wine lasts me a week. It is a shame really.”

It is a characteristic of sin in general, but it is characteristic of addiction in general also, of all the forms of addiction. Because they are an effort, at times a very great effort, to achieve enjoyment, and they fail to give it very soon. So that if you turn to old Greek philosophy, to old Epicures, — people have an idea usually, that he is a man who gave you a right to wallow in greed, laziness and whatever pleasures you can invent. In reality he himself was the soberest possible man, for exactly the reason which I explained to this person who came to see me. You cannot enjoy it in more than small quantities. So enjoy life to the full. A little piece of bread, a few olives, a gulp of wine, a breath of air, and so forth. He was truly one of the best ascetics one can imagine, for the sake of being able to enjoy things.

Now, that is a sort of wise way of being self-centred and sinful that leads you straight into no longer being self-centred and sinful. Because the moment you become truly appreciative of the other thing, you are no longer centred on yourself, you become an artist. You become capable of considering taste, touch, sound, visual beauty and so forth, in its own merit, and enjoy it with sobriety. This is no longer the first stage of which I was speaking.

Now the same thing happens to people who try, being self-centred, try to bring all things to themselves to enjoy, also induced states of mind. One can induce states of mind in a variety of ways. You do not need to take drugs, you can use and misuse and profane things like music, like visible beauty in the same way, if instead of being capable of admiring and, shall I say, worshipping beauty, one reduces to a despicable, poor instrument of gratification. God can also be profaned in the same way, and a religious experience can also be profaned in the same way. And we do it, and very often. One could say to someone who goes to church very often and enjoys it, “Please show more respect to God and go, and do not try to enjoy Him, or to enjoy the things that have been borne around his name and around his per-

son in a quite different mood. Because I suppose you are not without realising that when you read the tremendous prayers of the great mystics, they were not written comfortably in an armchair with central heating, and a bottle of wine on the table and a cigar on the ashtray. They were wrung out of human souls in an endeavour to outgrow one's own selfishness, one's own limitation. And they expressed this struggle and this growth and this incipient communion, this discovery of something greater than themselves that made them bow down before the greatness by which they were confronted". So when we enjoy a prayer 'artistically', and this time I would put this word in inverted commas, we are sinning against the spirit of man living in those people who were so generous and who paid such high cost for what we seem to take so lightly.

The same is true also when we turn to church music, to church art, and so forth. Church music and church art were never meant to beautify the services and to beautify the churches. They were an act of worship. They expressed the fact that the people who created these things had such reverence, valued God in such a way, that the created things they tried to make worthy of Him and of the experience of Him they had. Now that is the point at which drug-addiction parts company with what I am speaking about. Because this experience, this kind of mysticism, is communicable. When we find these great men of the spirit who struggled, whether in the world or in the desert; but who struggled in the only real desert, which is the human soul, in the only real depths, in the only real tragedy which is the becoming of men, when they struggle and produce either words of prayer or sounds of music, or lines and colours, they make the experience alive for us to enter into, it was not an act of pure selfishness. It outgrows the man, and it becomes the experience of many.

I think that nowadays there are two tendencies among us, perhaps more sharply marked than, say, in the nineteenth century. On the one hand there are people who simply want to enjoy things; to gain experience that will lead them into a world hitherto unknown, — wider, deeper, more colourful, more interesting than the one in which they live. And on the other hand there are people who are prepared to pay

the cost of entering into that kind of world, but in a more creative and in a more definitive way. It is the word "definitive" I think, that is important. Creativeness depends on our ability. The fact that we choose to enter into this world in a definitive way becomes an endeavour. I have said in the beginning that sin, as well as addiction, is a transitory state that is to be renewed, re-started from zero every time we begin. True mystical experience is not a short-lived experience; it is not something that has happened, has died out, and is to be restarted. True mystical experience is a discovery of something which will bear fruit hour after hour and day after day. If for instance Saint Augustine, his discovery of God was a turning point, and started him on a quite new way. Everyone who, in the course of his life makes a decisive discovery of that kind, has to change his life. He could not remain what he was. And then the primeval experience becomes something different.. The discovery of God led to the discovery of self; and instead of looking forward to a new instalment of a delightful and enjoyable experience, it led people to a life that was honest, hard, a new endeavour with a quite different mood.

I remember someone who told me that being in love is an immensely humbling experience. Well, there is something of that kind in every mystical experience. When one is loved, unless one is vain, proud, in one word, stupid in one of the many ways in which we can be, one cannot think that it is the normal thing "am I not so loveable? and therefore what is there to surprise me that I am loved?" The discovery that someone can love you makes you feel humble. It makes you perceive the fact that love being so great a thing, so precious, so incredible and undeserved a gift, you can receive it only in a worshipful, reverent way, and that you can only feel at the same time infinitely small, and infinitely great, but not big, not proud, not vain.

The same happens with the discovery of God. Those people who have described it, have described the way in which they were overwhelmed by a meeting with love, beauty, greatness. But then they describe also the way in which they felt impelled to live in such a way as to be worthy in all humility and faithfulness of having been found, and discovered, and given what they were given.

I would like to describe very shortly the way in which an Egyptian saint, Macarius of Egypt, speaks of it. He wrote about it when he was already an old man who knew God through prayer and within a strict and earnest ascetic life; and he recalls something that had happened to him. He said, "In our ascent to God we come to a point — which he calls, for reasons which are beyond our subject now, — the twelfth rung of the stair. You come to a point when you of a sudden, in complete silence of all that is in you: your body, your mind, your emotions, when you are confronted with the divine — with God. At that moment, he says, you are no longer master of either your thoughts or your feelings or of your will. You are just all EYE. You look with all your being, you perceive with all that in you is capable of perception. And he says, that state is such fulfilment that it would be sufficient for a man to stay in that situation. But he says, what you discover at that moment, is that God is Love, and you could not possibly remain in that state, see within the depths of the divine love that others need it and do not possess it. And the moment you have come to the sense that you are prepared to abandon your transcendental, mystical experience, what could be life and joy and meat for you for ever, because of love, God who is love, makes you partaker of the love of sacrifice. He steps back and brings you down to the realm of men. But then you have lost your primeval experience.

What is important in this example is the fact that an experience that could fill a man's life, that could be self-sufficient for ever, leads a man to an act of unselfishness. Because he discovers the God, who is love, and he cannot remain in men that belong to this God unless he expresses love in acts of love; which means sacrificing himself. This is exactly the opposite of what I tried to express before, when I said that so many are looking for an experience and would hug it, would keep it, would not let it go, if they only could keep it and renew it unceasingly. Take all the examples we have, beginning with Quincy about smoking opium. And if you want to use the word "opium" in another context, the way in which so many people use religion, forms of worship, and so forth, as if it were opium, to use the words of Karl Marx. But in the given case what you find is that the man is prepared to lose his most

precious possession, because his precious possession does not allow him to be selfish, self-centred. And then begins what Macarius calls "the realm of Faith". What he means by this is that when you have stepped back from this experience which is life eternal, already possessed, already carrying you; then what is left is the certainty of it. At the same time the fact that it has faded away and is no longer an experience within which you are. Then faith appears in its purity; in the sense in which it is described by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews: the certainty of things unseen. What is no longer the object of contemplation; what is no longer love possessed, but the certainty that it exists, that it is there, that it can come back, but that it is willingly, freely discarded in an act of love which is more important than the possession of the experience. This is, I believe, the touchstone of a true mystical experience. The fact that we prove that is, because we have discovered the greatness of value, the infinite beauty of it, that we are prepared to lose it, to make it possible for another one, let it be one only person to hear about it and to start a search for it. Any other form of mystical experience is a fake, is something which is centred on one's own self, and will never have any other depths than the depths of self. I do not mean the depths of man, whose heart is deep, whose person is so deep that only God can be adequate to men as a fulfilment; but the shallow depth of the self-centred, the cramped little self. This means that in terms of all the life, any physical or emotional or intellectual experience that we try to keep, to hug, not to allow to escape is a sin and a mistake. It is missing the mark, because it means that we will be the losers anyhow. Because what we possess for ourselves, for our own sake, is something which makes us poorer and not richer.

If you want an example — and I apologise for the quality of my examples, but they are on my scale — look what happens to someone who tries to possess something, to hold something. Supposing you are given the most precious piece of gold in your hand. You shut your hand, and you now are in possession of this precious piece of gold. And you think you are rich. You are not. You have a piece of gold, and you have lost a hand. Because this hand you can't use any more. What can you do with it? You can open it. So there you are,

you are rich. If you are unfortunate enough to have a second precious piece in the other hand, there you are, you walk through life maybe you could as well have been born a thalidomide child. There is a Persian story about this, which I think is very telling. A man comes back, a rich, wealthy man comes back home stripped almost to the skin of all he had when he left his home. His friends around him said, "Goodness, what has happened to you?" "I was surprised by robbers," he said. "But couldn't you defend yourself?" "How could I," said the man with indignation, "I had a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other. What could I do with my hands?" Well these examples, the story sounds quite stupid, but it is not anymore stupid than we are every day of our life; when in order to have something in our hand, we become mean. This is what happens to someone who tries to possess and not to let escape, any kind of experience. That may be an experience of friendship, an experience of love, an experience of God, an experience of art, whatever experience you have, as long as you close your hands on it you make yourself a prisoner of the experience, and not an owner of it. Because indeed, if you had a piece of a coin, let it be a farthing or a golden coin in your hand, and you open slightly one or two fingers, you can see that it is still there. But if you do that with the kind of experience which we call mystical; if you only open your hand you discover there is nothing in it, except that you have your fist clenched and you are walking about both without experience and without your treasure, and without your hands. I think that is extremely important because sin is a miscalculation: selfishness is a miscalculation. All these ways in which we want to possess are always a miscalculation. Because in the end we possess nothing, and we have lost even what we imagined we possessed and have.

So that, what is characteristic of true mysticism is not the continued experience, the continued lapping up of the cream. What is characteristic is this: first of all that there was a genuine experience which was not induced by artificial methods; that something happened which was within a relationship. That happened and was not man-made. The other thing is that this experience is of such quality, of such kind that it is not simply conveyable by descriptive methods. Mystery, mysticism, are

words which are rooted in a Greek word which means be silent, or be dumbfounded: *Muoin*, which gives the French word "muet".

It is the kind of thing that is beyond intellectual description, that cannot be simply conveyed from the one to another in itself, but which can be shared in other ways. When you have learnt, in the experience of Macarius, that God is love, you can convey that God is love, by a life of true, unselfish, sacrificial love. There are ways of conveying it, but not the thing itself, out an image of the way in which it can be discovered and lived.

So that if we feel that we wish to lead a life in which mysticism has a place, we must start at the other end. We must start by the recognition that any form of self-centredness and of selfishness is a way in which we will become so small and so cramped, so shut up, that nothing will ever make us great enough to take in anything except our own, poor, little self. And that is a whole programme in itself, because to learn to free oneself from selfishness in order to become great enough for the torrent of life, for the stream of life, for all the breadth and depth of it, is a hard work. Anyone who wishes to learn anything about the mystical life, must begin there. To discover that things are greater than him, and that a relationship with things greater, always begins in an act of worship; an act in which we give true and great value to those things which are greater than we are, and are prepared to serve them. The formula which boys and young men of my generation heard more than once in their childhood was; that your life is of no interest, is of no value. It will acquire value only through what you are prepared to give it for. What you are prepared to live for and to die for, gives the measure and the value of one's life. But this is again true mystical or ascetical approach, that can lead to true mystical experience.

I am not here to make a sermon or an appeal, but I think that anyone who wishes to live should learn this unselfishness in order to outgrow oneself, and to enter into a much wider and deeper communion with total life. Now, this total life, for a believer, includes the visible and the invisible. It includes prayer as much as it includes human relationships. Unless we learn that life is not a two-dimensional system, held prisoner in the two coordinates of time and space, that life has got a third di-

mension of eternity and immensity, we will reduce it to only the visible and the tangible. Even in our human relationships, it will be the visible and the tangible in those people who surround us, however deeply we think we go into this relationship. But what we always will miss is the only value that can give and hold for us true mystical experience. It is the unseen neighbour, the one who is too great for time and space: the Lord God Himself, who can be

both the root of all experience, and the one who claims all allegiance, and who can teach us that sacrificial love which will give us the possibility no longer to be limited, cramped selves, but to expand in immensity and in eternity. This is all I am capable of saying on a subject which I find immensely difficult and arduous and I hope you will derive a few thoughts from what I have tried to convey.

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