Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition

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Mysticism in the Hebrew Scriptures

"Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." (Ex 33:11)

The Church Fathers and the mystics of the Christian tradition drank from the fountain of the biblical word because they knew that God’s revelation is the cornerstone of orthodoxy and authentic Christian living. They sought out the spiritual or mystical sense of the Bible because of their conviction—so aptly expressed by Thomas Aquinas—that the scriptures are the heart of Christ as they reveal it.

Not a few in the Christian tradition also found in God’s revealed word paradigms of mystical consciousness. It was widely held, for example, that before the sin of Adam and Eve, our “first parents” enjoyed God’s intimate presence without interruption and loved all creatures in God and God in all creatures. Their graced condition endowed them with a mystical knowledge and love of God far beyond “ordinary” faith—but still short of the beatific vision.

Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and other patriarchs of the Old Testament were understood to have experienced God’s intimate call, had their faith tested, wrestled with and were blessed by God, and spoke to God as to a personal friend. Often they were afraid and speechless in his presence, but visibly transformed by their encounters, drawn to him as their greatest good, and convinced that he was with his people in all they did and underwent.

The scriptures attest that Moses and Jacob met God face-to-face—with some qualifications as to how directly they gazed into his face (Gen 32:30; Ex 33:11, 23; Num 12:7; Deut 34:10). Hagar, Sarai’s Egyptian maid, was perplexed after God spoke to her and asked, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” (Gen 16:13). Jacob boasted that he had wrestled with God and survived—an
Mysticism in the New Testament

"For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (2 Cor 4:6)

Jesus Christ is the foundation of all Christian mysticism. Because of the permanent union of a human nature with the Divine Person of the Word, Jesus Christ possessed not only a divine knowledge but also an immediate, direct, and unique human knowledge of the Father, of himself as the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ trinitarian consciousness can be called a mystical consciousness in at least an analogous sense. Moreover, the hypostatic union of Jesus’ human and divine natures is the ground and goal of the mystical life: the ability for perfect, total surrender in love to the God who wishes us to be fully united with him.

The New Testament claims that “no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:27). This Testament witnesses to Jesus as having spoken of his intimate, full, personal, filial loving knowledge of his Father (Jn 7:29; 8:55). He knew that he had come from the Father (Jn 5:23) and would return to him (Jn 8:14). The oneness he enjoyed with his Father dominated his consciousness. He heard his Father’s word (Jn 8:26), knew his will (Jn 5:30), and saw him working (Jn 5:19). So intimate was Jesus’ relationship with his Father that the Father showed him everything he did (Jn 5:20).

In short, Jesus “knew” the Father in the fully biblical sense of the word: experiential loving knowledge. Not only did he lovingly know the Father at a level never known before but he could also enable others to share in his experience of the Father (Mt 11:27; Jn 1:18). Because he is God’s Word, light, and life in the absolute sense, he
Origen
(ca. 185–254)

"Let us enter the contest to win perfectly not only outward martyrdom, but also the martyrdom that is in secret, so that we too may utter the apostolic cry: 'For it is our boast, the martyrdom of our conscience that we have behaved in the world . . . with holiness and godly sincerity.'"¹

The oldest of seven children of fervent Christian parents, Origen, "man of steel," was probably born in Alexandria, Egypt, at the height of the Roman persecutions. Leonides, his father, educated him and was martyred for the faith by the Roman emperor Severus in 202, when Origen was in his teens. Only his mother's ingenuity in hiding his clothing prevented Origen from impulsively following his father to martyrdom. Origen expressed his constant desire for martyrdom in a letter to his father, which became the first draft of one of his treatises, An Exhortation to Martyrdom. As he writes, "I pray that when you are at the gates of death, or rather, freedom, especially if tortures are brought (for it is impossible to hope that you will not suffer this from the will of the opposing powers), you will use such words as these, 'It is clear to the Lord in His holy knowledge that though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring sufferings in my body, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear Him' (2 Macc. 6:30)."²

Spared his father's fate, he proceeded to satisfy his own unquenchable thirst for martyrdom by a life of extreme penances. For example, he took literally the biblical text concerning "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12), and castrated himself, thus providing much fodder for his future enemies.

After their possessions were confiscated, Origen supported himself and his family by starting a school for grammar. Soon thereafter,
Gregory of Nyssa
(ca. 335–95)

"Never to reach satiety of desiring is truly to see God."1

One of the four great fathers of the Eastern Church, St. Gregory of Nyssa—"the first systematic theologian of negative theology" (what God is not)—was born into an illustrious Christian family in Caesarea, Cappadocia, around 335 during the Diocletian persecution. His father was St. Basil, the elder; his sister, St. Macrina; his brothers, St. Basil the Great and St. Peter of Sebaste. Ordained as lector and destined for the priesthood, Gregory soon left this course to embrace the ideals of pagan humanism revived by Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate. He married and pursued his father's career as a rhetorician.

Around 358, Basil the Great tried but failed to persuade his brother to go to Pontus, where Gregory of Nazianzus had settled at the Annesis monastery, but pressure from other family members seemingly caused him to change his mind. In 372, two years after he became bishop of Caesarea, Gregory was appointed bishop of Nyssa to help him in his disputes with the anti-Nicene emperor Valens. He continued to live with his wife, Theosebeia, as with a sister, even after he became bishop. In 374, the emperor banished Gregory from Nyssa. During this period of exile, Gregory underwent a powerful religious conversion, helped Basil with his monastic foundations in Cappadocia, and wrote the Treatise on Virginity.

Western mysticism began in the fourth-century monasticism fostered in large part by bishops who emphasized asceticism and virginity. It almost alone provided the context for the knowledge of scripture and the life of prayer and penance requisite for direct contact with God. In fact, the power of Western mysticism comes from its deliberate eroticizing of the relation between the human virgin and the divine Bridegroom, as if absorption of the erotic element into the
Evagrius Ponticus
(345–99)

“If you are a theologian, one who has experiential knowledge of God, you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian.”

Evagrius was born in Ibora, Pontus, or modern-day Iverönü, Turkey. His father was a “chorbishop”—a country bishop of somewhat restricted powers who traveled about to minister to the various churches under his jurisdiction. Evagrius came to enjoy the company and the esteem of the great Cappadocian fathers. Saint Basil the Great ordained him lector; St. Gregory of Nazianzus ordained him deacon.

Constantinople naturally attracted the brilliant, urbane Evagrius. There he attained great social prominence, especially as the “destroyer of the twaddle of the [anti-Nicene] heretics.” But he gradually lost his religious fervor and fell in love with the wife of a prominent member of society. Warned in a dream about the danger to his soul, he left promptly for Jerusalem, where he became the disciple of Melania the Elder. She was an ascetic Roman woman, well-read in Origen, who ran a hospice for Christian pilgrims on the Mount of Olives. After an illness, he went to live with a community of Origenist monks in Nitria, Egypt.

Because Constantine the Great (d. 337) bestowed imperial favors upon the Christian faith, he unwittingly eliminated the opportunity for the ideal following of Christ, namely, martyrdom. Thus, many Christians now sought the “white,” or bloodless, martyrdom of the monastic life. The monks replaced the martyrs as the warriors of the Christian life.

At Nitria, Evagrius became a severe ascetic, though his intellectual life continued, resulting in a body of writings. In addition to this work, he became widely known for his prudent and loving spiritual direction. Occasionally, he went to Alexandria, where he used his
Augustine of Hippo
(354–430)

"You stir us to take pleasure in praising you, because you made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Augustine is the most significant formative personality in the history of the Western Christian tradition. His 113 books, 800 sermons, and 250 letters left an indelible mark on the shape, scope, direction, range, and development of that tradition. Excelling as a doctrinal and speculative theologian, a Church leader, a monastic founder, a preacher, and a polemicist, he has been called the "prince of mystics" because of his profound understanding of the mystical element in Christianity.

Describing both his exterior and interior journey, Augustine's *Confessions* gave the West its first autobiography. The highly sophisticated way in which he described the interaction between God's action at the depths of the human soul and a person's psychological makeup may explain why his text has been one of the most widely read books in the Christian West. The account in book VIII of his conversion remains one of the most stirring in Christian history.

Augustine was born in Thagaste, a small town in the Souk-Ahras region of Algeria near the Tunisian border, of a pagan father (baptized on his deathbed) and a zealous Christian mother. Educated in the classics at Madaura and trained as a professional rhetorician at Carthage, he eventually went to Rome and then to Milan to further his career as a rhetorician.

Even as a teenager and as a young man, Augustine had been attracted to wisdom and the search for truth. But he also experienced that his self-love and his strong sensuality conflicted with his ardent desire to seek eternal Beauty and to live accordingly. The Manicheans' uncompromising dualism, their claim to possess hidden truths of universal validity and to be able to prove Christian truths from rea-