

# **THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL TRADITION**

**A Compilation of Articles from The Mystic's Vision**

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## **The Mystical Tradition of Christianity**

Judaism, while proudly monotheistic, never advanced to a Nondual perspective. The patriarchal figures, Abraham and Moses, were said to have spoken with God, but neither is said to have experienced *oneness with God*; that is, they never experienced the Divine identity as their own. And since orthodox Judaism refuses to abrogate the authority of the patriarchs, a strict doctrinal separation between God and His creation is maintained, and the possibility of the “union” of man and God is disavowed; though, in recent times, scattered mystics of the esoteric Hasidic and Kabbalistic schools within the Judaic tradition have taught the possibility of ‘the mystical union’ with God.

When Christianity came into existence, Judaism was rightly viewed as its foundational background, since Jesus, the founder and object of Christian worship, was born and raised in the Jewish religious tradition. We have every reason to assume, therefore, that Jesus assented to the Biblical account of Creation in the book of Genesis. However, when Jesus experienced God directly, leading him to proclaim his essential unity with God, he presented a threat to the Judaic theological doctrine of the separation of man from God, and thereby aroused the ire of the Jewish orthodoxy. It wasn't long before these religious legalists hounded and arrested Jesus and put him to death in a public manner usually reserved for enemies of the state under Roman law. Jesus had been merely an obscure Jewish mystic, but the story of his brief life and tragic death spread far and wide, and eventually inspired and raised the spiritual aspirations of generations of people all over the world.

All great religious teachers have taught according to their own intimate experience of God, their “mystical vision”—whether it is called “*samadhi*,” “*nirvana*,” “*fana*,” or “union with God.” Since there is but one ultimate Reality, which all share, each one who has experienced the Truth within has experienced that same ultimate Reality. Naturally, therefore, their teachings about it are bound to be identical. <sup>1</sup>

However, the languages and cultures of the various teachers who have lived throughout history are, no doubt, different from one another. Their personalities and life-styles are different. But their vision is one, and the path they teach to it is universal. In the mystical experience, which transcends all religious traditions and cultures and languages, the Christian, the Buddhist, the Muslim, and the Vedantist alike come to the same realization: They realize the oneness of their own soul and God, the Soul of the universe. It is this very experience, which prompted Jesus, the originator of Christianity, to explain at various times to his disciples that he had known the great Unity in which he and the Father of the universe are one:

“If you knew who I am,” he said, “you would also know the Father. Knowing me, you know Him; seeing me, you see Him. Do you not understand that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? It is the Father who dwells in me doing His own work. Understand me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”<sup>2</sup>

This was not a personal vanity on the part of Jesus; this was a universally realizable and applicable theological perspective. This is the truth that Vedanta speaks of as “Nondualism.” The term, “Unity,” is, of course, the same in meaning; but it seems that the declaration, “not-two” is more powerfully emphatic than a mere assertion of oneness. Indeed, the word, “Unity” is often used by religionists who apply it to God, but who have not even considered the thought that they themselves are logically included in an *absolute* Unity. Nondualism, the philosophy of absolute Unity, is the central teaching, not only of Vedanta, but of all genuine seers of Truth. This position is embodied in the Vedantic assertion, *tat twam asi*, “That thou art.”

Once we begin to look at the teachings of Jesus in the light of his “mystical” experience of Unity, we begin to have a much clearer perspective on all the aspects of his teachings. His teachings, like those of the various Vedantic sages who’ve taught throughout the ages, is that the soul of man is none other than the one Divinity, none other than God; and that this Divine Identity can be experienced and known through the revelation that occurs inwardly, by the grace of God, to those who prepare and purify their minds and hearts to receive it. The words of Jesus are so well known to us from our childhood that, perhaps, they have lost their meaning through our over familiarity with them. He attempted to explain to us, with the words, “I and the Father are one,” that the “I,” our own inner awareness of self, is none other than the one Self, the one Awareness, the Lord and Father of us all.

Why, then, are we so unable to see it? Why should it be so hard for us to attain to that purity of heart, which Jesus declared so essential to Its vision? Probably

because we have not really tried—not the way Jesus did, going off into the wilderness, jeopardizing everything else in his life for this one aim, focusing completely and entirely on attaining the vision of God. Not the way the Buddha did. Not the way all those who have experienced God, the one Self, have done. Perhaps we're not ready for such a concentrated effort just yet. Perhaps we have other desires yet to dispense with before we will be free enough to seek so high a goal. For us, perhaps, there is yet much to be done to soften the heart, so that we are pure enough to hear the call of Divine Grace. It is to such as us, for whom much yet needs to be accomplished toward the attainment of a "pure heart," that Jesus spoke.

All of what Jesus taught to his disciples was by way of explaining to them that his real nature, and that of all men, is Divine; and that the reality of this could be realized directly. Let us look to his own words to corroborate this: In the Gospel book of John, he laments to God, "O righteous Father, the world has not known Thee. But I have known Thee."<sup>3</sup> And, as he sat among the orthodox religionists in the Jewish temple, he said, "You say that He is your God, yet you have not known Him. But I have known Him."<sup>4</sup> Jesus had "known" God directly at the time of his initiation by John the Baptist, and probably more deeply during his time in the wilderness; and that experience had separated him and effectively isolated him from his brothers, because he alone among his contemporaries seemed to possess this rare certain knowledge of the truth of all existence.

This is the difficult plight of all those who have been graced with "the vision of God." It is the greatest of gifts, it is the greatest of all possible visions; and yet, because the knowledge so received is completely contrary to what all men believe regarding God and the soul, it is a terribly alienating knowledge, which brings upon its possessor the scorn and derision of all mankind. History is replete with examples of others who, having attained this saving knowledge, found the world unwilling to accept it, and ready to defend its ignorance aggressively. This circumstance is little changed today.

Because the "vision" of God was so difficult to convey to those who had not experienced it, Jesus spoke often by way of analogy or metaphor in order to make his meaning clear. He spoke of the experience of "seeing" God as entering into a realm beyond this world, a realm where only God is. In his own Aramaic language, he called this realm *malkutha*. In the Greek translation, it is *basileia*. In English, it is usually rendered as "the kingdom of God."

"His disciples asked him, "When will the kingdom come?" Jesus said, "It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of

saying ‘Here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ Rather, the kingdom of the Father is [already] spread out upon the earth, and [yet] men do not see it. <sup>5</sup>

“... Indeed, what you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.” <sup>6</sup>

“The Pharisees asked him, ‘When will the kingdom of God come?’ He said, ‘You cannot tell by signs [I.e., by observations] when the kingdom of God will come. There will be no saying, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is [experienced] within you.’” <sup>7</sup>

“Jesus said, “If those who lead you say to you, “See, the kingdom is in the sky,” then the birds of the sky will have preceded you. If they say to you, “It is in the sea,” then the fish will precede you. Rather the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you [as well]. When you come to know your Self, then you [I.e., your true nature] will be known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know your Self, you live in poverty [I.e., you live in the illusion that you are a pitiful creature far from God].” <sup>8</sup>

Another of Jesus’ metaphors utilized the terms, “Light” and “darkness” to represent the Divinity and the inherent delusion of man, respectively:

“Jesus said, ‘The world’s images are manifest to man, but the Light in them remains concealed; within the image is the Light of the Father. He becomes manifest as the images, but, as the Light, He is concealed’.” <sup>9</sup>

“He said to them, ‘There is a Light within a man of Light, and It lights up the whole world. If it does not shine [within that man], he is in darkness.’” <sup>10</sup>

*Light* and *darkness* are terms which have been used since time immemorial to represent the Divine Consciousness in man and the hazy ignorance, which obscures It. In the very first paragraph of the Gospel of John, we find an excellent explanation of these two principles, and their Greek synonyms, *Theos* and *Logos*;

“In the beginning was the Logos [the creative Power of God], and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. He [or It] was with God in the beginning. All things were made by Him; without Him nothing was made. Within Him was Life, and the Life was the Light

of man. And the Light shone in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended It not.”<sup>11</sup>

A word of explanation is necessary: These two terms, “Light and “darkness,” are also indicative of the cosmic aspects of Reality; in other words, they are not only the Divine Consciousness in man and the darkness of unknowing, but they are, at a higher level, the very Godhead and Its Power of manifestation. They are those same two principles we have so often run into, called “Brahman and Maya,” “Purusha and Prakrti,” “Shiva and Shakti.” It is the Godhead in us, which provides the Light in us; it is the manifestory principle, which, in the process of creating an individual soul-mind-body, provides us with all the obscuration necessary to keep us in the dark as to our infinite and eternal Identity.

“Jesus said, ‘If they ask you, “Where did you come from?” say to them, ‘We came from the Light, the place where the Light came into being of Its own accord and established Itself and became manifest through our image.’”

“If they ask you, ‘Are you It?’ say, ‘We are Its children, and we are the elect of the living Father.’ If they ask you, ‘What is the sign of your Father in you?’ say to them, ‘It is movement and repose.’”<sup>12</sup>

“Jesus said, ‘I am the Light; I am above all that is manifest. Everything came forth from me, and everything returns to me. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift a stone, and you will find me there.’”<sup>13</sup>

Here, Jesus identifies with the Eternal Light; but it is clear that he never intended to imply that he was uniquely and exclusively identical with It; his intention was always to convey the truth that *all* men are, in essence, the transcendent Consciousness, the very Light of God, manifest in form:

“Ye *are* the Light of the world. Let your Light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”<sup>14</sup>

Frequently he declared to his followers that they too would come to the same realization that he had experienced:

“I tell you this,” he said to them; “there are some of those standing here who will not taste death before they have seen the kingdom of God already come in full power.”<sup>15</sup>

“The heavens and the earth will be rolled up in your presence. And the one who lives from the living ONE will not see death. Have I not said: ‘whoever finds his Self is superior to the world?’”<sup>16</sup>

“Take heed of the living ONE while you are alive, lest you die and seek to see Him and be unable to do so.”<sup>17</sup>

“That which you have will save you if you bring It forth from yourselves. That which you do not have within you will destroy you.”<sup>18</sup>

“That which you have” is, of course, the Truth, the Light, the Divinity who manifests as you. “That which you do not have” refers to the ego, the false identity of separate individuality, which is simply a lie. It is the wrong understanding of who you are that limits you, and which prevents you from experiencing your eternal Self.

The teaching, common to all true “mystics” who have realized the Highest, is “You *are* the Light of the world! You *are* That! Identify with the Light, the Truth, for That is who you really are!” And yet Jesus did not wish that this should remain a mere matter of faith with his disciples; he wished them to realize this truth for themselves. And he taught them the method by which he had come to know God. Like all great seers, he knew both the means and the end, he knew both the One and the many. Thus, we hear in the message of Jesus an apparent ambiguity, which is necessitated by the paradoxical nature of the Reality.

In the One, the two—soul and God—play their love-game of devotion. At one moment, the soul speaks of God, its “Father”; at another moment, it is identified with God, and speaks of “I.” Likewise, in the words of Jesus to his disciples, we see this same complementarity: At one moment, he speaks of dualistic devotion in the form of prayer (“Our Father, who art in heaven”); and at another moment he asserts his oneness, his identity, with God (“Lift the stone and I am there ...”). But he cautioned his disciples against offending others with this attitude (“If they ask you, ‘Are you It?’ say, ‘We are Its children ...’”).

At times, identifying with the One, he asserts that he has the power to grant the experience of Unity (“I shall give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard and what no hand has touched and what has never occurred to the human mind”).<sup>19</sup> And at other times, identifying with the human soul, he gives all credit to God, the Father (“Why do you call me good? There is no one good but the ONE, that is God.”).<sup>20</sup>

There is an interesting story that appears in both Matthew and Luke which illustrates the knowledge, from the standpoint of the individual soul, that the realization of God comes, not by any deed of one's own, but solely by the grace of God: Jesus had just commented upon how difficult it would be for a young man, otherwise spiritually inclined, who was attached to his worldly wealth and occupations, to realize God ("It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle"); and his disciples, who were gathered around, were somewhat disturbed by this, and asked, "Then, who *can* attain salvation?" And Jesus answered, "For man it is impossible; but for God it is possible."

And Peter, understanding that Jesus is denying that any man, by his own efforts, can bring about that experience, but only God, by His grace, gives this enlightenment, objected: "But we here have left our belongings to become your followers!" And Jesus, wishing to assure them that any effort toward God-realization will bear its fruits in this life and in lives to come, said to them: "I tell you this; there is no one who has given up home, or wife, brothers, parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this time, and in the time to come [will] know eternal Life."<sup>21</sup> He could guarantee to no one that knowledge of God; that was in the hands of God. But Jesus knew that whatever efforts one makes toward God must bear their fruits in this life, and in the lives to come.

And so, throughout the teachings of Jesus, one finds these two, apparently contradictory, attitudes intermingled: the attitude of the knower, or *jnani*: ("I am the Light; I am above all that is manifest"); and the attitude of the devoted soul, or *bhakta*: ("Father, father, why hast Thou forsaken me?"). They are the two voices of the illumined man, for he is both, the transcendent Unity and the imaged soul; he has "seen" this unity in the "mystical experience" of oneness.

Jesus had experienced the ultimate Truth; he had clearly seen and known It beyond any doubt; and he knew that the consciousness that lived as him was the one Consciousness of all. He knew that he was the living Awareness from which this entire universe is born. This was the certain, indubitable, truth; and yet Jesus found but few who could even comprehend it. For the most part, those to whom he spoke were well-meaning religionists who were incapable of accepting the profound meaning of his words. The religious orthodoxy of his time, like all such orthodoxies, fostered a self-serving lip-service to spiritual ideals, and observed all sorts of symbolic rituals, but was entirely ignorant of the fact that the ultimate reality could be directly known by a pure and devout soul, and that this was the real purpose of all religious practice.

Jesus realized, of course, that despite the overwhelming influence of the orthodox religionists, still, in his own Judaic tradition, there had been other seers of God, who had known and taught this truth. “I come,” said Jesus, “not to destroy the law [of the Prophets], but to fulfill it.”<sup>22</sup> He knew also that any person who announced the fact that he had seen and known God would be persecuted and belittled and regarded as an infidel and a liar. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus is reported to have said, “He who knows the Father (the transcendent Absolute) and the Mother (the creative Principle) will be called a son-of-a-bitch!”<sup>23</sup> It seems he was making a pun on the fact that one who does *not* know his father and mother is usually referred to in this fashion; but, in his case, he had known the Father of the universe, and knew the Power (of Mother Nature) behind the entire creation, and still he was called this derisive name.

It is the common experience of all the great seers, from Lao Tze to Socrates and Heraclitus, from Plotinus and al-Hallaj to Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. All were cruelly tortured and persecuted for their goodness and wisdom stemming from the ‘vision’ graciously granted by God. Jesus too found the world of men wanting in understanding; he said:

“I took my place in the midst of the world, and I went among the people. I found all of them intoxicated [with pride and ignorance]; I found none of them thirsty [for Truth]. And my soul became sorrowful for the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts and do not have vision. Empty they came into the world, and empty they wish to leave the world. But, for the moment, they are intoxicated; when they shake off their wine, then they will repent.”<sup>24</sup>

Jesus had taught the mystical path to his disciples; but few of his followers, either during his lifetime or after, could follow him into those rare heights. After he was persecuted and executed for expounding his unitive vision, his followers began to gather together for inspiration, and the small gatherings soon developed into a sizable church organization. And, when the few became many, diverse interests inevitably came into play: some were attracted to contemplation; some to charitable or teaching activities; and some preferred to deify their master, Jesus, as an object of ritual worship.

Jesus never formulated a detailed metaphysics to guide his followers. A metaphysics developed around him nonetheless, fueled not only by his Judaic background, but by the persuasive Greek influence of the times. In particular, the Greek philosophical concept of the *Logos* played an important part in the metaphysics of the early Christian theologians.



The common Greek word, *logos*, was originally understood in several different ways; one of which was as “intention, hypothesis, or thought”. Heraclitus, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., the first to use the word in a metaphysical sense, intended by it the Divine Intelligence by which all the world is pervaded. Much later, a contemporary of Jesus, Philo Judaeus, who was an influential Alexandrian Jew with strong ties to the Greek, and specifically the Platonic, philosophical tradition, used the word to denote the Thought in the Mind of God, from whence the Idea of the world took form. Here is how he expressed it:

“God who, having determined to found a mighty state, first of all conceived its form in his mind, according to which form he made a world perceptible only by the intellect, and then completed one visible to the external senses, using the first one as a model. ...It is manifest also, that the archetypal seal, which we call that world which is perceptible only to the intellect, must itself be the archetypal model, the idea of ideas, the *Logos* of God.”<sup>25</sup>

“...The incorporeal [spiritual] world then was already completed, having its seat in the Divine *Logos*; and the world, perceptible by the external senses, was made on the model of it.”<sup>26</sup>

For Philo, the *Logos* was not only the Idea in the mind of God but was that very Ideational Power of God that Plotinus would later call *Nous*, or “The Divine Mind”. Philo, acknowledging that the *Logos* was the creative Power of the One, referred to it as “the first-born of God,” because 'It was conceived in God’s mind before all things, and is that which manifests as all things.'<sup>27</sup>

One of the four Gospel authors, living in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., and known to us only as ‘John’, was apparently familiar with the writings of Philo, and taking his theological cue from him, began his Gospel with these words:

“In the beginning was the Logos, the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. ...All things were made by the Logos; without him, nothing was made. It was by him that all things came into existence.”<sup>28</sup>

This was, of course, quite in keeping with the Philonian concept; but then John added these words:

“And the Logos became flesh and lived among us...as the only-begotten son of his father.”<sup>29</sup>

In the words that followed, John made clear he was referring to Jesus of Nazareth whom John the Baptist had declared was the Messiah at the time he baptized Jesus in the river Jordan.

Some of the most influential Christian theologians and apologists, such as Justin Martyr (100-165 C.E.), Irenaeus (130-200 C.E.), Tertullian (150-225 C.E.), and others, jumped on this bandwagon, campaigning strongly for the recognition of Jesus as synonymous with the *Logos*, or Creative Power, of God; though there were others, called *alogi*, who were against this idea. And so, there was much argument and discussion among these early Christians. It was a time when theological and metaphysical ideas were very much ‘in the air’; and it is clear that many of the learned Christian theologians and Apologists of the time were influenced not only by the Judaic tradition, but by the Platonist vision, as well as by the writings of Philo Judaeus, and possibly the Gnostics, Hermetics and Stoics as well. Borrowing the terminology of Philo, as echoed by the Gospel writer, John, they regarded the *Logos* much the way Plotinus regarded *Nous*, the Divine Mind: as the active Creative power of the transcendent Godhead, or “the One”. For the Christians, the Godhead was referred to as “the Spirit” or “the Father”, and His Creative power was referred to as “the Logos” or “the Son”. According to Tertullian (150-225):

“The Spirit is the substance of the Logos, and the Logos is the activity of the Spirit; the two are a unity (*unum*).”<sup>30</sup>

The Christian Apologist, Athenagoras (133-190) wrote:

“If you ask what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that he is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal Mind has the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos); but inasmuch as the Logos came forth to be the Idea and energizing power of all material things.”<sup>31</sup>

Later, Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria (293-372), using the very analogy of the Sun’s radiation often used later by Plotinus, says:

“Was God, who IS, ever without the Logos? Was He, who is light, ever without radiance? ...God is, eternally; then, since the Father always is, His radiance also exists eternally; and that is His Logos.<sup>32</sup>  
...The Logos of God *is* creator and maker; he *is* the Father’s will.”<sup>33</sup>

From these many theological interchanges a consensus arose; and the historical Jesus became permanently associated with the *Logos* and was thereafter regarded by Christians as an incarnation of God; or, in popular circles, ‘the Son of God’.

Then, to the duality of the Father and Son was added the “Spirit” or “Holy Ghost”—thus constituting a holy Trinity, comparable to Plotinus’ trinity of The One, the Divine Mind, and Soul. This doctrine of the ‘Holy Trinity’ became firmly established as a metaphysical tenet of the Church with the formulation of the Nicene Creed following the first ecumenical council assembled by emperor Constantine in 325 C.E., and the Athenasian Creed, penned around the same time—though in later years Christendom would become bitterly divided in its acceptance of this tenet.

All the great teachers of Spirituality have offered a description of and commentary on the nature of Reality as directly experienced in “the mystical vision.” Only those who have actually experienced the Truth directly are able to speak authoritatively about it. And, the fact is, there have been many wise and pure-hearted men and women of every nationality and every religious affiliation who have experienced the Truth. There are Christians who have experienced It, and Jews, and Muslims, and Hindus, and Buddhists, and so on. And so, we must include as part of our Spiritual heritage the teachings and writings of all those of various traditions who have directly realized the Truth and spoken of It.

Let us consider, for example, some of those Christians who taught Spiritual Truth under the name of Christianity. They are the seers, the mystics of the Church, who taught the path to God-realization, and who proclaimed the identity of the soul and God, and the indivisibility of the one absolute Reality. First among these, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth, called “the anointed one,” or *Christos*, in the language of the Greeks. It is of his own mystical experience that Jesus spoke, a mystical experience that transcends all doctrines and all traditions, and that is identical for Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Vedantists alike. It is an experience of absolute Unity—a Unity in which the individual consciousness of the soul merges into its Divine Source, and knows, “I and the Father are one.”

Ironically, however, this knowledge is unacceptable in all conventional religious traditions; and so, those, like Jesus, al Hallaj, Meister Eckhart, Spinoza, and many others who have experienced the Truth, are inevitably rejected by the religious traditions to which they belong. The religious tradition, which arose around the teachings of Jesus, commonly rejects and persecutes its mystics as well.

Nonetheless, down through the centuries, a few of the followers of Jesus also experienced the spiritual unity, by the grace of God, and spoke of It for posterity. Here, for example, is what the famous Christian mystic of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Meister Eckhart, had to say about his own experience:

“As the soul becomes more pure and bare and poor, and possesses less of created things, and is emptied of all things that are not God, it receives God more purely, and is more completely in Him; and it truly becomes one with God, and it looks into God and God into it, face to face as it were; two images transformed into one. “... Some simple people think that they will see God as if He were standing there and they here. It is not so. God and I, we are one.”<sup>34</sup>

“... I am converted into Him in such a way that He makes me one Being with Himself—not (simply) a similar being. By the living God, it is true that there is no distinction!”<sup>35</sup>

Or this, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Christian Bishop, Nicholas of Cusa:

“Thou dost ravish me above myself that I may foresee the glorious place whereunto Thou callest me. Thou grantest me to behold the treasure of riches, of life, of joy, of beauty. Thou keepest nothing secret.”<sup>36</sup>

“I behold Thee, O Lord my God, in a kind of mental trance,<sup>37</sup> ... and when I behold Thee, nothing is seen other than Thyself; for Thou art Thyself the object of Thyself, for Thou seest, and art That which is seen, and art the sight as well.”<sup>38</sup>

“Hence, in Thee, who are love, the lover is not one thing and the beloved another, and the bond between them a third, but they are one and the same: Thou, Thyself, my God. For there is nothing in Thee that is not Thy very essence.”<sup>39</sup> Nothing exists outside Thee, and all things in Thee are not other than Thee.”<sup>40</sup>

Or listen to this, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian monk, St. John of the Cross:

“What God communicates to the soul in this intimate union is totally beyond words. In this transformation, the two become one.”<sup>41</sup>

“... The soul thereby becomes Divine, becomes God, through participation, insofar as is possible in this life.

“... The union wrought between the two natures, and the communication of the Divine to the human in this state is such that even though neither changes their being, both appear to be God.”<sup>42</sup>

“... Having been made one with God, the soul is somehow God through participation.”<sup>43</sup>

This is the truth revealed in “the mystical vision,” the truth that Vedanta speaks of as “Nonduality.” While some Christians interpret St. John’s words to indicate that “the mystical experience” of Unity is an aberration, a gracious unification of the soul with God, rather than a revelation of the eternal unity of the soul and God, Vedantists take the position that the soul is always identical with God but is concealed from the awareness of this unity by the (veil of) ignorance inherent in phenomenal manifestation. The central teaching of Vedanta, and of all genuine religious teachers, is that the inner Self (*Atman*) and God (*Brahman*) are one. This is expressed in the Upanishadic dictum: *tat twam asi*, “That thou art.” It is this very knowledge, experienced in a moment of clarity in contemplation or prayer, which prompted Jesus of Nazareth to explain to his disciples who he was, and who they were, eternally:

“If you knew who *I* am, you would also know the Father. Knowing me, you know Him; seeing me, you see Him. ...

“Do you not understand that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? ... It is the Father who dwells in me doing His own work. Understand me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”<sup>44</sup>

There are many other nondual mystical teachings, which one can find in the utterances of Jesus, and his followers. For example, it follows from the teaching of Nonduality—that is to say, the teaching that all beings are manifestations of the one Divinity—that we should therefore treat all beings as our own Self, as they most truly are. We find this teaching very prominent among the teachings of Jesus. In his Sermon on The Mount, he says:

“Ye have heard that it has been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy; but I say unto you, love your enemies [also]; bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on the just and on the unjust. Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”<sup>45</sup>

This is the message of equality-consciousness, of seeing God (one’s eternal Self) in all beings, and of thinking and acting for the benefit of all. It is this kind of reformation of our minds and hearts that is called for if we are to assume our true identity and experience the perfection of our eternal Self. It is, of course, our own minds, which must be transformed so that we are capable of ridding ourselves of the false notion of a separate and distinct identity apart from the one eternal

Identity. It is the mind, which must be made single, one-pointed, and eventually identified with the eternal Self.

To this end, Jesus spoke to his disciples of the necessity of releasing their minds from concerns for the welfare of their separate personalities and worldly holdings in order to lift them up to God through meditation and prayer. “How,” he asked them, “can you have your mind on God and at the same time have it occupied with the things of this world?” He pointed out to them that their hearts would be with that which they valued most. One’s attention could not be focused on God and on one’s worldly concerns at the same time, for, as he said, a city divided against itself must fall. He advised them frequently to let God be the sole focus of their attention, and to let God be the sole master whom they served. “No man can serve two masters,” he said,

“for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve both God and Mammon [the flesh]. Therefore, I say unto you: take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”<sup>46</sup>

Naturally, this is a hard saying to those who harbor many hopes and dreams of individual worldly wealth and attainments. You’ll recall what Jesus said to the sincerely spiritual man who, nonetheless, was yet attached to his worldly wealth; “It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” he said, “than for such a man to experience the kingdom of God.” The necessity for renouncing the preoccupation of the mind with worldly things if one is to occupy the mind with thoughts of God, is a teaching that is found, not only in Vedanta and Christianity, but in all true religion. It is certainly a consistently recognized fact within the long tradition of Christian mysticism. Listen, in this regard, to the words of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic who wrote under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite:

“While God possesses all the positive attributes of the universe, yet, in a more strict sense, he does not possess them, since He transcends them all. <sup>47</sup> ... The all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all, (and) is free from every limitation and beyond them all.<sup>48</sup>

“Therefore, do thou, in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the

intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things, thou mayest be born on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential radiance of the Divine.”<sup>49</sup>

We are accustomed, perhaps, to associating the word, “renunciation” with the Vedantic tradition of India, and most especially as it is used in the *Bhagavad Gita*; but renunciation of the false individual self is a prerequisite to God-consciousness, regardless of one’s nationality or religious affiliation. It is a word, which occurs frequently among the writings of the great Christian mystics of the past. Listen, for example, to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish monk, St. John of the Cross:

“The road and ascent to God necessarily demands a habitual effort to renounce and mortify the appetites; and the sooner this mortification is achieved, the sooner the soul reaches the summit. But until the appetites are eliminated, a person will not arrive, no matter how much virtue he practices. For he will fail to acquire perfect virtue, which lies in keeping the soul empty, naked, and purified of every appetite.”<sup>50</sup>

“Until slumber comes to the appetites through the mortification of sensuality, and until this very sensuality is stilled in such a way that the appetites do not war against the Spirit, the soul will not walk out to genuine freedom, to the enjoyment of union with its Beloved.”<sup>51</sup>

Now, I would like for you to hear one more Christian seer on this same theme: Thomas á Kempis was a German monk of the 15<sup>th</sup> century who, above all other mystics, Christian or Vedantic, had a great influence upon me and many others for the beauty of his expression and the pure sincerity of his longing for God. Here is just a little of what he had to say:

“You may in no manner be satisfied with temporal goods, for you are not created to rest yourself in them. For if you alone might have all the goods that ever were created and made, you might not therefore be happy and blessed; but your blessedness and your full felicity stands only in God who has made all things. And that is not such felicity as is commended by the foolish lovers of the world, but such as good men and women hope to have in the bliss of God, and as some spiritual persons, clean and pure in heart, sometimes do taste here in this present life, whose conversation is in heaven. All worldly solace

and all man's comfort is vain and short, but that comfort is blessed and reliable that is perceived by the soul inwardly in the heart.

Await, my soul, await the promise of God, and you shall have abundance of all goodness in Him. If you inordinately covet goods present, you shall lose the Goodness eternal. Have therefore goods present in use and Goodness eternal in desire.”<sup>52</sup>

Here, again, from the same author:

“Many desire to have the gift of contemplation, but they will not use such things as are required for contemplation. And one great hindrance of contemplation is that we stand so long in outward signs and in material things and take no heed of the perfect mortifying of our body to the Spirit. I know not how it is, nor with what spirit we are led, nor what we pretend, we who are called spiritual persons, that we take greater labor and study for transitory things than we do know the inward state of our own soul. But, alas for sorrow, as soon as we have made a little recollection to God, we run forth to outward things and do not search our own conscience with due examination, as we should, nor heed where our affection rests, nor sorrow that our deeds are so evil and so unclean as they are.”<sup>53</sup>

“... You shall much profit in grace if you keep yourself free from all temporal cares, and it shall hinder you greatly if you set value on any temporal thing. Therefore, let nothing be in your sight high, nothing great, nothing pleasing nor acceptable to you, unless it be purely God, or of God. Think all comforts vain that come to you by any creature. He who loves God, and his own soul for God, despises all other love; for he sees well that God alone, who is eternal and incomprehensible, and fulfills all things with His goodness, is the whole solace and comfort of the soul; and that He is the very true gladness of heart, and none other but only He.”<sup>54</sup>

“This grace is a light from heaven and a spiritual gift of God. It is the proper mark and token of elect people and a guarantee of the everlasting life. It lifts a man from love of earthly things to the love of heavenly things and makes a carnal man to be a man of God. And the more that nature is oppressed and overcome, the more grace is given, and the soul through new gracious visitations is daily shaped anew and formed more and more to the image of God.”<sup>55</sup>



Thus, as we have seen, the true religion, the true understanding, is always the same. The teachings of the saints who have known their true nature as Divine have always declared the same path of one-pointed devotion as the means to experience and become united with the Divine Self. And so, we find, in the words of the mystics of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and of the mystics of every true religious tradition, the authentic Spiritual teachings.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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3. *Ibid.*, 17:25.
4. *Ibid.*, 8:54.
5. *Thomas, Gospel Of*, 114; Robinson (trans. by Thomas O. Lambdin), 1977, p. 138.
6. *Ibid.*, 51, p. 132.
7. Luke, Gospel Of, 17:20.
8. *Thomas, Gospel Of*, 3; Robinson, 1977, p. 126.
9. *Ibid.*, 83, p. 135.
10. *Ibid.*, 24, p. 129.
11. John, Gospel Of, 1:1.
12. *Thomas, Gospel Of*, 50, p. 132.
13. *Ibid.*, 77, p. 135.
14. Matthew, Gospel Of, 5:14-16.
15. Mark, Gospel Of, 9:1.
16. *Thomas Gospel Of*, 111; Robinson, 1977, p. 138.
17. *Ibid.*, 59, p. 132.
18. *Ibid.*, 70, p. 134.
19. *Ibid.*, 17, p. 128.
20. Luke, Gospel Of, 18:18.
21. *Ibid.*, 18:18-30; Matthew, Gospel Of, 19:16.
22. Matthew, Gospel Of, 5:17.
23. *Thomas, Gospel Of*, 105, p. 137.
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26. Philo Judaeus, *Ibid.*, X.36.
27. Philo Judaeus, *Allegorical Interpretation*, 2.86; *On The Confusion of Tongues*, 63; *On The Confusion of Tongues*, 136-137.
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37. *Ibid.*, XVI; p. 78.
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41. Juan de la Cruz, *Spiritual Canticle*, 26:4; Kavanaugh & Rodriguez (trans.), 1973, p. 512.
42. *Ibid.*, 22:3-4; p. 497.
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44. John, Gospel Of, 13:40.
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46. *Ibid.*, 6:24-25, 31-33.
47. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, I; Editors Of The Shrine Of Wisdom, 1965, p. 10.
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49. *Ibid.*, I; p. 10.
50. Juan de la Cruz, *The Ascent Of Mount Carmel*, I:5:6; Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, 1973, p.83.
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52. Thomas á Kempis, *De Imitatio Christi*, III:9; Abhayananda, *Thomas á Kempis: On The Love of God*, Atma Books, 1992, p. 109-110.
53. *Ibid.*, III:3; p. 90.
54. *Ibid.*, II:5; p. 70.
55. *Ibid.*, III:4; pp. 95-96.

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## The Early Christians

During the first few centuries following the death of Jesus, the entire Mediterranean world, from Rome to Tunis, from Athens to Alexandria, experienced a widespread outbreak of popular religious sects; Christians, Gnostics, Manichaens, Hermetics, Stoics and a host of other religious sects competed with one another for the ear of the populace. And since this period of religious fervor derived so much of its fundamental ideology from the Greek heritage of mysticism, it is worthwhile to trace, briefly, the influence of mystical thought during these formative years on the theology of two of these religious sects: the Christians and the Gnostics.

What we know today as the religion of Christianity began with a handful of Apostles, some of whom had actually been disciples of Jesus, and some who, like Paul of Tarsus (d. ca. 60 C.E.), had learned about Jesus and his teachings only after his martyrdom. During that first century after Jesus' death, the Apostles traveled far and wide, extolling Jesus as the greatest of teachers, a Savior who had taught the message of the soul's salvation through devotion to God. The growing legend of Jesus' rising from his burial place after death did much to increase the widening influence of the fledgling religious organization. Despite prolonged persecutions and martyrdoms, the little band of Christians grew, thanks in great measure to the zealous leadership of Paul, a convert from orthodox Judaism, who was convinced that Jesus was, literally, the Son of God.

By the second century of the Christian era, hundreds of Christian communities were flourishing throughout the Mediterranean world, and the talents of the learned among them were put to the task of formulating a coherent religious philosophy, an authoritative Christian theology, which would convincingly establish the divine origin of Jesus, the Christ (*Christos*, the anointed one). It was necessarily a time for the building up of a bulwark of dogma by which the theological position of Christianity would be clearly enunciated, so as both to unite all elements within the Christian community and to weed out those opinions deemed inconsistent with, and therefore heretical to, the "official" interpretation of the life and teachings of Jesus.

The Christian community had, among its more vocal proponents, a number of learned philosophers and theologians during this time, including Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165 C.E.), Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215 C.E.), and Origen (182-251 C.E.), all genuinely devout and earnest men. They seem not to have been mystics, however; they had not, themselves experienced God directly, but were interested primarily in rationalizing the Christian tenet of the divine authority of Jesus. Being well learned also in the philosophical tradition of the Greeks, they were at pains as

well to explain their theology in terms recognizable to the “pagan” world. As a means of accomplishing this, they adopted the Greek concept of the Logos, and asserted that Jesus was none other than the divine Logos of God.

Let us look for a moment at the progression of ideas and events, which led to the wholehearted adoption of this conception by the Christian Church. The idea first appears in the opening paragraph of the Fourth Gospel written about sixty years after the death of Jesus by the evangelist known only as John. John undoubtedly had some familiarity with the concept of the Logos, probably from Philo, and perhaps from Stoic sources as well. He began his Gospel with these words:

In the beginning was the Logos; the Logos was with God, and the Logos *was* God. ...All things were made by the Logos; without him nothing was made. It was by him that all things came into existence.

... What came about in him [the Logos] was life, and the life was the light [of God] in man. The life shines in the darkness [of world-manifestation], but the darkness did not understand it. <sup>1</sup>

All this is in keeping with the mystical perception of duality-in-Unity enunciated by mystics of every time and place. John then goes on to assert that the Logos became Jesus of Nazareth:

“And the Logos became flesh and lived among us ...as the only-begotten son of his father.” <sup>2</sup>

This statement, that the Logos became flesh in the person of Jesus, is also inarguable, as it is the Logos, the creative Intelligence of God, which has become flesh in the person of every creature on earth; and the phrase, “only-begotten son” is a designation for the Logos which goes back to Philo. But John seems to imply that Jesus was more than simply another manifestation of the Logos, that he was, indeed, the creative Intelligence itself. It was this very suggestion, which gave immediate rise to a widespread movement among 2nd century Christians to regard Jesus as a special and unique manifestation of God, through whom the very Godhead lived and acted upon earth for the upliftment of humanity. But let us take a moment to recall the meaning of the term “Logos,” as it had been traditionally used up to that time.

The *Logos*, as we have stated before, is the Absolute in Its immanent aspect, the Divine Intelligence or Consciousness that pervades the material world of form. These two, the transcendent One and Its immanent presence are one and inseparable, just as a mind and its thoughts are one and inseparable. Thus, Nature is formed and ruled by God's Thought, or Logos, and is replete with Divinity, is nothing but Divinity; and is as much one and synonymous with God as the radiance of the Sun is with the Sun itself. The term, "Logos," had long been understood in this way, and it was in this way that it was understood and explained by Christians as well, such as Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria (293-372 C.E.):

Was God, who IS, ever without the Logos? Was He, who is light, ever without radiance? ...God is, eternally; then, since the Father always is, His radiance also exists eternally; and that is His Logos.<sup>3</sup>

... For, as the light [of the Sun] illumines all things within its radiance, and without that radiance nothing would be illumined, so the Father wrought all things through the Logos, as by a hand. And He did not speak in order that some subordinate might hear, understand what the speaker wanted, and [then] go perform the task. This is what happens in human affairs. But the Logos of God *is* creator and maker; he *is* the Father's will.<sup>4</sup>

Athenagoras (2nd century C.E.), who wrote an Apology of Christianity to the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, also asserted the eternal coexistence and oneness of God, the Father, and His Power of world-emanation (the Logos), which he calls "the Son":

If ... you ask what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that he is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal Mind has the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos); but inasmuch as the Logos came forth to be the Idea and energizing power of all material things.<sup>5</sup>

Tertullian (150-225 C.E.), another of the early Church Fathers, expressed the same idea in more simplified terms:

The Spirit is the substance of the Logos, and the Logos is the activity of the Spirit; the two are a Unity (*unum*).<sup>6</sup>

These remarks by the early Church Fathers are identical with the declarations of all the mystics who have, over the centuries, described their experience of the two complementary aspects of Reality. But they went on from this conventional observation, to formulate a rather startling tenet of faith: that the Logos, the very stream of God's Intelligence pervading the universe, took on a personality of its own, and lived on planet earth as the man known as Jesus of Nazareth. Here is how this idea was expressed by one of the most influential of the early Church Fathers, Ireneus, the bishop of Lyons (ca. 130-200 C.E.):

The Logos existed in the beginning with God, and through him all things were made. He was always present with the human race, and in the last times, according to the time appointed by the Father, he has been united with his own handiwork and become man, capable of suffering. ... He was incarnate and made man; and then he summed up in himself the long line of the human race, procuring for us a comprehensive salvation, that we might recover in him what in Adam we had lost, the state of being in the image and likeness of God. <sup>7</sup>

At a later date, Athenasius, the Patriarch of Alexandria, added some clarifying remarks to that, in order to explain how the Logos could be working entirely through the person of Jesus while at the same time manifesting the entire universe:

The Logos was not confined solely within [Jesus'] body; nor was he there and nowhere else; he did not activate that body and leave the universe emptied of his activity and guidance. Here is the supreme marvel. He was the Logos. and nothing contained him; rather he himself contained all things. He is the whole creation, yet in his essential being he is distinct from it all, while he is in all things in the activities of his power, ordering all things, extending over all things his universal providence, quickening each and everything at once, containing the universe and not contained by it, but in his Father alone existing wholly and entirely.

So also, when he was in the human body he gave that body life; and at the same time, he was of course giving life to the whole universe, and was present in all things; and yet distinct from and outside the universe. And while being recognized from his body, he was also manifest in his working in the universe. <sup>8</sup> ...Though he was God, he had a body for his own, and using it as an instrument, he became man for our sakes. <sup>9</sup>

Not everyone among the Christian priests and intellectuals agreed with this idea, however; some found all this a bit fanciful and illogical, and resisted the movement to declare that Jesus was God incarnate. A hot debate ensued among the clergy, and eventually the Emperor, Constantine, himself a zealous Christian partisan of the ‘incarnation’ theory, called a universal Council of the Church, which took place in 325 C.E. in the town of Nicaea. It was attended by 318 bishops, who, after all the arguments were presented, decided overwhelmingly (with Constantine’s happy approval) to regard Jesus as identical with the Logos, and to adopt the following Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible or invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten ... not made, being of one essence (*homoousion*) with the Father ...who, for us men and our salvation, came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and comes to judge the quick and the dead. <sup>10</sup>

Thus, a formalized Christian theology was born, declaring Jesus to be identical with the Logos, the creative Intelligence of God. Nor was this the first time, or the last, that a great mystic and teacher was deified by his followers. Many times throughout history, others besides Jesus have been declared by their followers to have been similarly divine “incarnations” of the Godhead; among them, Krishna, Zoroaster, Mahavira Jina, Gautama Buddha, Mani, Jnaneshvar, Meher Baba, and Ramakrishna. Each of these great religious teachers hoped with all their hearts to convince mankind that the realization of God, which they had experienced, was possible to all men, and that such realization would open to them a new life of freedom and joy.

Whether we believe or disbelieve in the special status of these illustrious teachers, whether we do or do not attribute divine authority to their utterances, the truth they taught remains eternally valid and relevant to all mankind. For the message of Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, and all other seers of God is the same: ‘Strive to realize God in yourself! Then you will know the joyful truth that you and the Source of the universe are one.

#### NOTES:

1. New Testament, John:1:1
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5. Athenagorus, Wilson, 1959; pp. 385-386.
6. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxaen*, 26; Betenson, 1956; p. 179.
7. Ireneus, *Adversus Haereses*, III.8.1; *Ibid.*; p. 113
8. Athenasius, *De Incarnatione*, 17; *Ibid.*, p. 397
9. Athenasius, *Contra Arianos*, III.31; *Ibid.*, p. 398
10. The Nicene Creed.

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## The Wisdom of Jesus

A group of Pharisees gathered around Jesus, and a lawyer among them, who wanted to test Jesus, asked him:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

Jesus [quoting Moses] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment (*Deuteronomy*. 6:5). “And the second is like it: [and Jesus quoted from the words of Moses again] ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (*Leviticus*. 19:18) “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (*Matthew*. 22: 36-40; *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, New York, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006; p. 1140).

These two directives which Jesus gave the lawyer are universal and are not just for the followers of Judaism or of Jesus, but for all people: The first directive is paramount, and is theocentric— that is, one’s love is to be focused on God within; the second is derivative of the first and is anthropocentric— stating that one’s love is to be freely shared with others. They are opposing directives, insofar as the direction of the first is interior and the direction of the second is exterior; yet they are complementary. The interior focus and the outer focus are of equal importance to a man’s soul, as is the subtle and delicate balance between the two.

In the early (Catholic) tradition of Christianity, there was a tendency to emphasize the theocentric directive, which gave rise to the Desert fathers, and the founding of the contemplative Orders; whereas the later Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who became known as Protestants, preferred to emphasize the anthropocentric focus. Therefore, the early emphasis on the contemplative life of prayer and meditation on God gave way to a greater emphasis on the concern for benefiting mankind through good works. The balance, once heavily favoring the inward pursuit of God-knowledge, swung to the active outer pursuit of social justice and human



charity. It is this anthropocentric focus that remains the predominant focus of Christianity today.

But, as Jesus pointed out, it is the theocentric focus that is primary and fundamental; the anthropocentric directive is secondary and follows from the wisdom and love acquired in the primary focus on God. And yet, today, despite the directive from Jesus and the many reminders from Eastern yogis and sages regarding the need for a contemplative life, we in the West have almost completely forgotten the necessity of the interior focus on God. In many segments of Western society, God has become an unnecessary hypothesis in the current formulation of reality. We have so filled our heads with purely material values and our world with so many glittering technological marvels that we as a people are blinded to the larger existential picture, and have clearly lost appreciation for our divine roots, and for the One in whom we continue to live and move and have our being.

It's true that we have greatly advanced as a society in our ability to carry out the second of Jesus' directives, but if we forget the first of Jesus' directives, and lose sight of our own divine Self—the God who lives in our hearts, who is the sole source of our wisdom, our power, and our joy—with what shall we benefit others? If we can no longer soar into the rare atmosphere of His infinite wisdom, if we can no longer drink from the deep wellspring of His all-embracing love, what wisdom and what love shall we have to share with others? And, without our inner focus on God, the Source of all bliss, what will be the quality of our own inner lives?

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## **The Gnostics**

Contemporary with the growth of the Christian movement, during the first few centuries of the Current Era, there existed throughout the Mediterranean world a number of religious sects referred to as *Gnostics*. Up until recent times, the bulk of our knowledge about the Gnostics was derived from the anti-Gnostic writings of the early Church Fathers, especially Ireneus and Hippolytus (d. ca. 235). But since the find of fifty-two Gnostic books at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, and their belated publication thirty years later, we possess numerous first-hand accounts of the Gnostic views during the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

The Gnostics claimed to represent the esoteric tradition of mystical knowledge (*gnosis*), and while many of them embraced and infiltrated the Christian community, they stood opposed to the authority of the orthodox (Catholic) Church, regarding themselves as representative of the “true” interpretation of Jesus and his teachings. It must be understood that, during those first few centuries of the Christian Era, Christianity was not yet a coherent body, but rather consisted of a wide variety of disparate groups, each dedicated to their own opinions regarding Jesus, the Christ. Their opinions were embodied in the works they wrote in order to promote their own particular view.

Many of these works, written and distributed by various authors shortly after the death of Jesus, took the form of “Gospels” (*good news*), purporting to be the authentic reminiscences of the life and teachings of Jesus. The ones that were eventually adopted by the Church authorities as Christian scripture in 367 C.E. are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, known thereafter as “the canonical Gospels.” There were other books of this type, however, that circulated during those first few centuries; one of them, *The Gospel According to Thomas*, was purported to be the work of Didymos Judas Thomas, i.e., Thomas, “the twin brother of Jesus” [which may be either a literal or a figurative designation]. It told nothing of the activities of Jesus and mentioned nothing of Jesus’ status as ‘Son of God’, or his resurrection, but restricted itself to a collection of 114 mystical sayings attributed to him. It began, “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke, and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.”

One group of Christians, the so-called “Thomas Christians”, who adopted *The Gospel of Thomas* as representative of their views, believed that “salvation” lay not merely in accepting that Jesus had direct knowledge of God, but, by following his directions, in obtaining that direct knowledge of God for themselves. Others, who adopted the “canonical” Gospels, and who later became known as the “orthodox” (*straight-thinking*) Church, believed that such knowledge was beyond the reach of mere mortals; they believed in the Divinity of Jesus as a unique and special manifestation of God, and held that it was this very faith in his unique Divinity that by itself constituted “salvation”.

In the first century after Jesus’ death, *The Gospel According To Thomas* was widely circulated in its original Greek edition among some groups of early Christians; then it was translated into Sahidic Coptic (ancient Egyptian) in the third or fourth century C.E. A copy of this Coptic version found its way to the Christian monastery of St. Pachomius in Upper Egypt at the foot of Jabal al Tarif mountain

near a village called Nag Hammadi. When, in the late fourth century, the order went out from the Christian authorities to burn all non-canonical books that might be suspect in doctrine, some monks from the monastery loaded a number of such books, including *The Gospel of Thomas*, into a large earthen jar and hid them away in a nearby cave for safekeeping.

For some reason, the books stored in that cave remained undiscovered for fifteen hundred years, when in 1945, a Bedouin peasant, searching for fertilizer, uncovered the jar and discovered its contents. Prior to his dawning awareness of the value of his find, a portion of the books were burned as fuel, leaving intact only thirteen of the long-lost leather-bound manuscripts, containing fifty-two tractates of early Gnostic writings, among them *The Gospel of Thomas*. It would be another eleven years before this document was translated and published in English. Due to the bickering of the scholars in charge of the lost Gnostic books, many of them would wait even longer to see the light of day. When, in 1956, *The Gospel According To Thomas* made its appearance upon the world stage once more, it was hailed as one of the most important scholarly finds to appear in centuries, one that would greatly influence the study of the teachings of Jesus for all time.

Many of the mystical sayings contained in *The Gospel Of Thomas* may appear to us to be merely rewordings of the sayings in the canonical Gospels, but scholars agree that this text is at least as old as those more familiar Gospels; some even assert that it is a precursor or source of the sayings found in the canonical Gospels. The sayings in *Thomas*, however, are declared “secret”, and appear to be addressed exclusively to Jesus’ sincere disciples rather than to an uninitiated public.

Jesus said, “It is to those [who are worthy of my] mysteries that I tell my mysteries.<sup>1</sup>”

His “mysteries” consisted of the knowledge obtained during his “vision” of God. Jesus had experienced the ultimate Truth; he had known the Eternal in himself, had clearly seen and known It beyond any doubt; he knew that the Self of all beings was one, that the one Consciousness that lived as him was the one undying Consciousness of all. For the most part, however, those to whom he spoke were well-meaning religionists who were incapable of accepting the profound meaning of his words. The religious orthodoxy of his time, like all such orthodoxies, fostered a self-serving lip-service to spiritual ideals, and observed all sorts of symbolic rituals, but was entirely ignorant of the fact that the ultimate Reality could be directly known by a pure and devout soul, and that this was the real purpose of all religious practice.

There were many other Gnostic documents in the collection found at Nag Hamadi, but while they are all of great historical interest, none possesses the intrinsic value of *the Gospel of Thomas*. Some of these Gnostic documents originated, apparently, among dissident Jews, and were grounded in Jewish mythology. Others seem to have been drawn from a number of widely diverse mystical traditions, including Indian, Persian, Greek and Egyptian. And, while some of their peculiar ideas were vehemently attacked and declared heretical by representatives of the established Christian Church, the Gnostics served nonetheless to stimulate the early Church Fathers to a formulation and clarification of early Christian theology.

It is impossible to briefly and categorically assess Gnosticism as a whole, for in the period between the 1st and 4th centuries, such a wide variety of beliefs and creeds were subsumed under the name, "Gnostic," that they cannot all be treated collectively or summarily. Suffice it to say that among the Gnostics, as among any religious group, there were perhaps some genuine mystics, or *knowers*, and undoubtedly a great many unenlightened who superimposed upon the declarations of the true mystics their own fantasies and misconceptions. We find, therefore, in the literature of Gnosticism, as in nearly all bodies of religious literature, an occasional instance of true mystical knowledge, and a preponderant body of pretentious and uninspired mythology.

That it was not only possible but incumbent upon men to attain direct knowledge of God was a basic tenet of all who professed Gnosticism, as their name implies; however, the literature produced by the Gnostics reveals, not surprisingly, that there were many more who sought this knowledge than had actually attained it. If one is to comprehend the vast literature of the Gnostics, therefore, one must be prepared to find but a few gems of genuine mysticism here and there amidst the inevitable and overwhelming excrudescence of superimposed speculations by those who were mere theologians and mythologizers.

Among the Gnostic hymns, prayers, and expository declarations by the anonymous mystics who claim to have attained the vision of God, is this, from the Mandaean tradition (ca. 2nd century):

From the place of light have I gone forth; from thee, bright habitation ...; an *Uthra* (angel or spiritual guide) from the House of light accompanied me ... and he turned upward the eyes in my head so that I beheld my Father and knew Him. <sup>2</sup>

From the day when we beheld Thee, from the day when we heard Thy word, our hearts were filled with peace. We believed in Thee, Good One; we beheld Thy light and shall not forget Thee. <sup>3</sup>

And this Hermetic prayer (2nd century C.E.):

Saved by Thy light, we rejoice that Thou hast shown Thyself to us whole; we rejoice that Thou hast made us gods while still in our bodies through the vision of Thee.

Man's only thank-offering to Thee is to know Thy greatness. We came to know Thee, O Light of human life; we came to know Thee, O Womb impregnated by the seed of the Father ... In adoration of Thy grace, we ask no other grace but that Thou shouldst preserve us in Thy knowledge (*gnosis*) and that we shall not stumble from the life so gained. <sup>4</sup>

It was common, at that time, to speak of the experience of the absolute Godhead as “the Light,” and to refer to the state of normal awareness within the manifested world as “darkness.” We see this same terminology used by the Gospel author, John, as well. Here, as illustration, is a prayer from the Gnostic book, *Pistis Sophia* (3rd century C.E.), by one who had “seen” the Light of God, and now once again finds himself returned to the “lower” world of obscurity and darkness:

O Light of lights, in which I have had faith from the beginning, hearken now to my repentance. Deliver me, O Light, for evil thoughts have entered into me. ... I went, and found myself in the darkness, which is in the chaos beneath, and I was powerless to hasten away and to return to my place, for I was afflicted. ... And I cried for help, but my voice did not carry out of the darkness; and I looked upwards so that the Light in which I had faith might come to my rescue. ... And I was mourning and seeking the Light that I had seen on high.

... Now, O Light of lights, I am afflicted in the darkness of chaos... Deliver me out of the matter of this darkness, so that I shall not be submerged in it. My strength looked up from the midst of the chaos and from the midst of the darkness, and I waited for my Spouse, that He might come and fight for me, and He came not. <sup>5</sup>

Such a sense of alienation, upon descending from the vision of God, is certainly understandable. The mystic feels that he has fallen from his true home, his eternal identity, and now must dwell in exile in a world ignorant of its true Source. Compared to the state of awareness in which he knew himself to be the eternal Light of pure Being, the state of existence in the manifested world is a place of exile, a place dimmed by the darkness of ignorance; and he longs to return to that absolute state of Godhood which he has known to be his true Self. Yet never does he imagine that he is, even for a moment, actually separated from that eternal Selfhood; for he has seen, with a clarity and certainty far surpassing all worldly clarity or certainty, that all this world is God's, and that there is no other but He.

Unfortunately, however, the words of the mystics are often misinterpreted by the ignorant, who imagine that the "Light" and the "darkness" are two separate and irreconcilable realms, each governed by its own deity, one good, one evil. It is just this foolish sort of Dualist view, which the unilluminated theorists among the Gnostic community created, and which pervades much of the later Gnostic literature, consisting of endless cosmological mythologies and quasi-Biblical allegories.

These have, for the most part, only tended to confirm the harsh judgments made against them during those centuries by the Church Fathers and others, including the (pagan) mystic, Plotinus. It is now clear that the greater portion of that discovered Gnostic literature represents a tradition counter to the true "gnosis," or revelatory knowledge, and is a corruption of the authentic teachings of the mystics, as perennial perhaps as the mystical view itself.

How this corruption, or degeneration, took place can be illustrated by taking as a starting point an example of the clear expression of authentic mystical philosophy, such as this, attributed to Simon Magus (1st century C.E.), and preserved by Hippolytus:

### **The Great Exposition**

There are two aspects of the One. The first of these is the Higher, the Divine Mind of the universe, which governs all things, and is masculine. The other is the lower, the Thought (*epinoia*) which produces all things, and is feminine. As a pair united, they comprise all that exists.

The Divine Mind is the Father who sustains all things and nourishes all that begins and ends. He is the One who eternally stands, without beginning or end. He exists entirely alone; for, while the Thought arising from Unity, and coming forth from the divine Mind, creates [the appearance of] duality, the Father remains a Unity. The Thought is in Himself, and so He is alone. Made manifest to Himself from Himself, He appears to be two. He becomes “Father” by virtue of being called so by His own Thought.

Since He, Himself, brought forward Himself, by means of Himself, manifesting to Himself His own Thought, it is not correct to attribute creation to the Thought alone. For She (the Thought) conceals the Father within Herself; the Divine Mind and the Thought are intertwined. Thus, though [they appear] to be a pair, one opposite the other, the Divine Mind is in no way different from the Thought, inasmuch as they are one.

Though there appears to be a Higher, the Mind, and a lower, the Thought, truly, It is a Unity, just as what is manifested from these two [the world] is a unity, while appearing to be a duality. The Divine Mind and the Thought are discernible, one from the other, but they are one, though they appear to be two.

[Thus,] ... there is one Divine Reality, [conceptually] divided as Higher and lower; generating Itself, nourishing Itself, seeking Itself, finding Itself, being mother of Itself, father of Itself, sister of Itself, spouse of Itself, daughter of Itself, son of Itself. It is both Mother and Father, a Unity, being the Root of the entire circle of existence. <sup>6</sup>

This brief explanation of the mystically perceived duality-in-Unity is, without doubt, the clearest and most comprehensible such explanation ever written; yet, crystal clear as it is, there are few, it seems, who are capable of grasping its meaning. It is important to an understanding of this, and other such characterizations of the Absolute and Its Creative Power as Male and Female, to realize that such descriptions are merely poetic representations of what is *experientially perceived* in the mystical vision. Such descriptions are admittedly inadequate to the experience itself, for which no language or metaphor is truly apt; but these remarks of Simon Magus, a true mystic and contemporary of the apostle, Peter, represent the best that language can approximate to that ineffable knowledge revealed in the transcendent vision.

In the vision of God, the mystic experiences, through himself, the absolute Godhead. It is not separate from himself but *is* who he is; he experiences and knows *as* the Godhead. He is the eternal, motionless, Consciousness; utterly alone, without a second. Yet, *from* him, he is aware of the outflow of power, a radiance, which may be likened to that of the Sun's rays, or to that of a heart's love, which is projected as the multitudinous universe of animate and inanimate forms. From the vantage point of eternity, he experiences also the withdrawal of this radiation, much as a breath is indrawn following its expiration. From his absolute vantage point, he watches the cyclic manifestation and de-manifestation of the universe. How is it possible to describe to others such an experience? He knows that the Godhead and Its Creative Power are one, yet he must differentiate between them; for the one is single, formless, and eternally constant, while the other appears as a multiplicity of form and is transitory. The Godhead he calls the "Father"; Its emanating manifestory Energy he calls the "Mother"—yet he knows, with a certainty that is possessed by no other, that they are one Being, one God, one and only one Reality.

When his mind descends from this "vision," he is cut off, as it were, from that pure Awareness; he is returned once more to his worldly existence in time and space; but the knowledge of Oneness, the knowledge of his identity with the Godhead is retained. And the conviction is firmly established in his heart that he can never be separated from That from which nothing can ever be separated. His worldly form and all forms that can be perceived he recognizes as the projection of God. He lives in a world that is imaged forth from God; and he walks in that world as God, the eternal Self of all, and views all creation as his own dream-world, his own play, knowing that he is ever secure, ever alone, ever still, the ever-conscious Fountainhead of his own drama.

It is this state of *gnosis* which the Upanishads refer to as "Liberation" (*moksha*) and which the Gnostics called "Release" or "Salvation" (*apolytroxis*). The Gnostic sect of the Valentinians declared: "The cognition of the ineffable Greatness is itself the perfect salvation... To us suffices the knowledge of universal Being; this is the true salvation." <sup>7</sup> It is a liberation and release from the ignorance of one's true nature, a release from the slavery of fear, passion and error, which those ignorant of their true, eternal Identity must unwittingly endure.

Another marvelous example of the expression of mystical vision among the Gnostics, which Hippolytus has preserved, is this, attributed to Valentinus (ca. 160 C.E.):



The Father existed alone, unbegotten, without place, without time, without counselor, and without any conceivable qualities..., solitary and reposing alone in Himself. But as He possessed a generative Power [the Mother, Logos, Prakrti, etc.], it pleased Him to generate and produce the most beautiful and perfect that He had in Himself, for He did not love solitude. He was all love, but love is not love if there is no object of love. So, the Father, alone as He was, projected and generated [the world].<sup>8</sup>

We find, however, that the Valentinians, like many of the other followers of Gnosticism, soon distorted the concept of duality-in-unity and transformed it into an absolute Duality. Following in the tradition of Persian Zoroasterism (from the 6th century B.C.E.), the Gnostic scriptural authors translated the two complementary aspects of Reality into two independent and irreconcilable principles. Some, like the followers of Marcion (ca. 140 C.E.) or Mani (216-276 C.E.), declared that the two were eternally independent and antagonistic principles, one the power of Good and Light, the other the power of Evil and Darkness; and that the world was solely the product of the Evil and Dark force. Others, like the followers of Simon Magus and Valentinus, rightly viewed the Power of world-manifestation as an “emanation” of the Absolute, but hypostacized that creative Principle, and attributed to it a “will” independent of and rebellious to its original Source. The result is that Gnosticism, in many of its forms, came to assert a philosophy of Dualism, viewing the world, not as an expression or manifestation of God, but as wholly separate from God, and diametrically opposed to Him.

It would seem that, for all their talk of “gnosis,” many of the authors of the Gnostic Gospels were frauds who had not actually experienced the revelation of Truth of which they so glowingly spoke; for it is impossible to behold that vision without apprehending the singularity of Existence, the fundamental unity of God and His Creative Power. Indeed, the Gnosticism of the 2nd and 3rd centuries provides us with a clear example of how the mystical philosophy expounded by the authentic seers is invariably corrupted and distorted by deluded pretenders to mystical knowledge. It is the perennial hallmark of ignorance to see division, conflict, alienation, just as it is the hallmark of the true mystic to have attained the realization of unity, harmony, and integration.

The true mystic could never, even for a moment, declare this world to be separate and divorced from God. If he has truly known God, he knows that

this entire universe is the manifestation of God's will and is replete with Divinity. He could never assert the contrary, though his head were battered and bleeding; and never, ever, could he assert, as do the pseudo- Gnostics, that this world is the creation of a second, and evil, Creator, whose will is antagonistic to its Origin and Source. The true mystic and sage, Plotinus, writing in the 3rd century of these pretenders to gnosis, stated the matter most clearly:

The one Divine Mind, in Its mentation, thinks Itself; the object of Its thought is nothing external; Thinker and Thought are one, unchangeably the same. <sup>9</sup>

How could anyone say that [this world] is not a clear image, beautifully formed, of the Divine? ... Such a one could neither have fathomed this world nor have had any vision of that other [the Divine Mind]. <sup>10</sup>

#### NOTES:

1. The Gospel of Thomas, 62
2. Jonas, Hans, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1958; pp. 89-90
3. *Ibid.*
4. Pseudo-Apuleius, *Asclepius*, 41; *Ibid.*, pp. 267-268.
5. *Pistis Sophia*, ch. 32; *Ibid.*, p. 68
6. Simon Magus, *Apophysis Megale* ("The Great Exposition")  
Quoted by Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutatio Omnium Heresium*, VI.8;  
Adapted from Roberts & Donaldson, 1892, Vol. VI, pp. 208-210.
7. Creed of the Valentinians, according to Ireneus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.21.4.
8. Hippolytus, *Refutatio Omnium Heresium* VI.29.5ff.; Roberts & Donaldson, *op. cit.* 18.
9. Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.1-2, Turnbull, 1934, p. 63.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66

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