

SANTA TERESA DE JESUS: AN ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE

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The word mysticism has its origin in the Greek mysteries, and connotes something silent, secret, exclusive. Because of this, it has been associated with astrology, superstition, witchcraft, the occult, spiritism, satanism and other practices of this nature. "There are many who shrink with horror from the thought of consulting spirit mediums, but who are attracted by more pleasing form of spiritism. Others are led astray by the teaching of Christian Science, and by the mysticism of Theosophy and other Oriental religions." (1)

Henry Delacroix, one of the best-known French authorities on this subject, says that "the most significant mark of mysticism could be considered the suppression of any egotistic self-hood in man." Goethe called mysticism "the scholastic of the heart, the dialectic of the feelings", while others have used phrases as "intellectual intuition" and "formless speculation". Another philosopher defined this term as "The assertion of an intuition which transcends the temporal categories of the understanding, relying on speculative reason". (2)

On the other hand, mysticism relates to the perfect and conscious harmony that should exist between a subject and the knowledge of the object. The Real Academia Española

dictionary defines this word in this manner: "Estado extraordinario de perfeccion religiosa, que consiste esencialmente en cierta union infalible del alma con Dios por el amor, y que va acompañado accidentalmente de extasis y revelaciones." (Extraordinary state of religious perfection essentially consisting of an ineffable union of the soul with God due to love and which is accompanied by ecstasy and revelations.)

Thus, mysticism is "the experimental knowledge of the divine presence in the soul of that person who possesses a great reality and maintains a sentiment of holiness in the presence of his Creator. Mysticism is like passive contemplation." (3).

Mysticism has continued throughout history and has left its imprint on various aspect of social, religious and literary life. Mystics have written the most beautiful and sublime pages full of visions and spirituality, pervaded by feelings of ecstasy.

#### Mysticism in Spanish Literature

One of the richest areas of Spanish literature and philosophy is found in mystic prose and poetry. This is true because mysticism, in its intrinsic language, studies the relation between God and the soul. Mysticism attempts to reveal man's soul and his external nature, in relation to his Creator. A respect for science and the exercise of reason, characteristics of Spanish mystics, are summarized by the

beautiful words of San Juan de la Cruz, when he said: "Oh, flame of the Holy Spirit, that so intimately and tenderly does pierce the substance of my soul and cauterize it with your heat! Since you are now so loving as to show that you have the desire of giving yourself to me in perfect and eternal life, I love you with the fullness and satisfaction which my soul desires, without end, for ever". (4)

Some critics assert that mysticism is the most valuable and genuine literary expression of Spanish thought from the Renaissance to the Baroque period. In his study, Menendez Pidal emphasizes that a distinctive feature of the period, which he considered as belonging to "the great mystics," was the creation of a refined, literary and cultured language emerged before Cervantes and Lope de Vega.

There are hundreds of mystic writers during this period who left beautiful sentiments for posterity: feelings made sublime by their longing for the absolute, by their perception of communication with the divine, and by their desire for God, Creator of the universe and of beauty itself. The ecstasy of the Divine is made human through a strong feeling of reality. This ecstasy is accompanied by a yearning for the divine and sublime, along with a disdain for mundane and trivial things.

According to Menendez y Pelayo, more than three thousand books were written on the topic of religion during the "Golden Age" in Spain. All of them were inspired by its

spirit, but only a few demonstrate the characteristics of true mysticism. He believes that true expositors of this literary genre number no more than one hundred. True mysticism is based on a fundamental knowledge of the Divine presence, which the soul, when in communion with its creator, experiences as a wonderful reality. According to this critic, the mystic experiences the following fundamental states:

1. Conversion. Acceptance of the soul when it perceives God's presence.

2. Purification. Alienation from mundane things: a discipline which obtained through penance and self-control.

3. Contemplation. Illuminative passage by the way of meditation and concentration of the soul, dedicating the will, intellect and feelings to the divine cause.

4. Union. Spiritual union with God.

It can be said that the four greatest expositors of mystic Spanish literature with these characteristics were Fray Luis de Leon, Fray Luis de Granada, San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa de Jesus. (5)

#### Santa Teresa de Jesus

The life of Santa Teresa de Jesus, filled by intimate passions and spirituality symbolized the true spirit of this literary genre, and it can be summarized by the following verses which she wrote herself:

"Vivo sin vivir en mí,  
y tan alta vida espero,  
que muero porque no muero".

One of her critics considers Santa Teresa as the greatest woman in Spanish history, and one of the greatest in the history of the world. "First and foremost, she was a saint, and her sanctity, so attractive as well as so sublime, was recognized by her contemporaries during her own lifetime. She was also outstanding as a contemplative: the accounts of the Mystic Way which she has left us are based, not, like those many other writers, upon reading, but upon her own experience. Yet, saint and mystic though she was, she never ceased to be human. There was nothing forbidding in their personality: if princes and prelates respected her, muleteers and peasants adored her". (6)

Santa Teresa de Jesus was born in Avila de los Caballeros on March 28, 1515, and died in Alba de Torme on October 4, 1582, at 67 years of age. Only 23 years before she was born, the voice of a sailor was heard, far away in the dark ocean, announcing the arrival in a new land, which signified the discovery of a New World.

Little is known about her infancy, childhood and adolescence, except from what she wrote in the autobiography, where she exaggerates her shortcomings and imperfections. However, in the first few chapters she confesses that from a young age she had an insatiable thirst

for reading and that her favorite works were novels of chivalry, then popular. She was also passionately fond of reading biographies of martyrs and saints, books which were never lacking in her home.

When she was seven years old, she and Rodrigo, an older brother, their tender hearts burning with flaming passion, according to their childish concept of geography, would lead them to the land of the Moors, where they were determined to be decapitated in the name of Christ. Another brother noticed their disappearance, however, and, after some searching, found them and brought them home.

Contemporaneously, an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, was excommunicated by the Pope because of his theological ideas, which were classified as heretical and which in time would become the basis of Protestant religions.

Recognizing his daughter's religious inclinations, Teresa's father enrolled her in Santa Maria de Gracia's Convent, but after three months she became ill and had to withdraw from the cloister. Later, as a young woman, she voluntarily decide to re-enter the convent, but her father was opposed; nonetheless her pleas prevailed, and she entered the novitiate of the nuns of Carmelitas de la Encarnacion. Three years later, afflicted by an illness that threatened her life, she had to leave again. These were years of great suffering that tested the strength of her soul. One day, during this period, she lapsed into a coma. Her family,

assuming her imminent death, prepared a place for her in the cemetery. She survived, however, and when her recuperation was completed, returned to the convent, more vigorous than before.

Teresa's major concern was to help her fellow men. For this reason, desiring to return the Orden del Carmelo to its original status, in 1562 she founded her first convent for discalced nuns of Carmelita.

The indifference of other nuns brought criticisms, affronts and revilement, but Teresa did not despair. In time she met a mystic poet, a young monk, who shared her concerns, and together they founded convents and monasteries for youth who would leave the world and take refuge in these places. From 1562 until the year of her death in 1582, she founded sixteen convents in addition to other accomplishments. These experiences are documented in her book *Foundations*, in which she combines anecdotes, practical advice and some devotional material.

Santa Teresa also wrote a spiritual guide entitled *Way of Perfection*, where she emphasized the benefits of poverty, the fruits of prayer, the necessity for love and the virtues of humility, which she calls the "queen of all virtues." The work ends with an excellent exposition of the Lord's Prayer.

The last book written by this mystic was *Interior Castle*, in which she compares the soul to a crystal-clear, multi-chambered diamond castle. In the middle of these



dwelling is located a main room filled with splendor of divine grace. The symbolism of this work is related to the seven states of prayer, in which we enter the "small heaven where the soul finds its Creator," until we find perfect union in the seventh dwelling. (7)

All of her works were written at the suggestion of her confessor. In addition to the above-mentioned books, she left behind various short writings, some poetry and copious amounts of epistolary correspondence, which are among the best jewels in universal literature, unrivaled in its genre in Spanish literature. It is asserted that Santa Teresa wrote 440 letters, undeniably authentic, which represent a rich treasure of sincerity and simplicity. Into these letters this illustrious woman poured her finest and keenest thoughts and the most noble sentiments of her heart. (8)

Undoubtedly, Santa Teresa de Jesus is pre-eminent in Spanish literature and the history of mankind as one of the most outstanding mystics of all times. She stands out not only because of her magnificent writings, but also for her practical teachings. She gave her life to the order of Carmelite nuns by stressing both a discipline of the body and a need for constant communication with God. Her response to the Protestant Reformation, that was taking place in Europe during her time, consisted in attempting to reform her church by reforming the religious spirit within it. To accomplish this purpose, she engaged in almost superhuman labors,

founding convents for Carmelite nuns and writing remarkable pieces of literature. According to her account, she often had visions, locutions, raptures, and ecstasies throughout her life. She reports that on one occasion she had a vision of an angel who pierced her heart with a long, golden dart tipped with fire, and when it was withdrawn she was left imbued with a great love that moved her soul. She also confesses that on more than one occasion she had devilish visions that perturbed her. Those visions, whether holy or diabolic, were manifested in her life and included many profound insights, which were incorporated into her remarkable writings (9).

#### Abnormal states

There is no doubt that most of the great mystics, including St. Teresa de Jesus, St. Catherine of Siene, St. Francis, Joan of Arc (if she could be included in this category), Juan Diego (who, according to Catholic tradition, was the fist one to see the Guadalupe virgin) and many others, who claimed to have visions, hear voices, experience ecstasies and reel raptures, were people who practiced, in many cases, an ascetic life, and some of those abnormal experiences were produced by their physical condition in that specific moment. Nevertheless, some critics do not agree with this point of view. One of them said: "There is no denying ecstasies, visions, raptures, or abnormal states, and that it is difficult to distinguish the abnormal and the

morbid. And such indeed has been the opinion of the great mystics themselves. Many of them have been the first to warn their disciples against visions which were quite likely to be pure hallucinations...The truth is that these abnormal states, resembling morbid states, are easily comprehensible, if we only stop to think that a shock to the soul is the passing from the static to the dynamic, from the closed to the open, from every day life to mystic life" (10).

We have to take in consideration that many of the mystical writers of the Medieval period were monks, nuns or member of the clergy; all of them separated from their ordinary occupations, because, according to their beliefs, they were closer to God than those who were involved in family life and trivial activities. This sentiment prevailed through the years.

#### Christian Mysticism

Mysticism has been a subject that has seriously concerned many thinkers through the ages. William Ralph Inge, after spending many years studying this matter, published a book under the title, Christian Mysticism, which appeared in 1899. But in 1947, nearly a half-century later, he summed up his lifetime of study on this subject in these words: "Mysticism means communion with God, that is to say with a Being conceived as the supreme and ultimate reality. If what the mystics say of their experience is true, if they have really been in communion with the Holy Spirit of God,

that is a fact of overwhelming importance, which must be taken into account when we attempt to understand God, the world, and ourselves" (12).

#### Communion with God

The religious experience of the true Christian is manifested through "communion" with God. The apostle Paul, in a letter to the Corinthians, give us this advice: "The communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (13).

It could be said that "communion" is not the same as "union," but those terms are not basically different. "Communion" means "union with," and in religious usage the difference between communion and union can be claimed as a matter of degree. Hence the religious experience of the ordinary believer is in the same class as that of the mystic; the difference is one of degree but not of kind. The mystic simply carries to the point of genius that which is the ordinary and indispensable side of religious experience, while the true believer, guided by the Holy Spirit, achieves that communion through Jesus Christ, who said: "Abide in me and I in you" (13).

The apostle Paul, referring to the mystery of salvation, says, "To whom God would make known what is the mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory," and then he advises us: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him" (14).

Although many believe that mysticism is a wonderful way

to obtain communion with God, through the ecstasy of the infinite, this theory does not concur with the teaching of the Bible and the foundations of our church. The Bible manifests that we can only achieve this union through Jesus, "for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (15). The Spirit of Prophecy states the same principle in the following way: "If God is an essence pervading all nature, then He dwells in all men; and in order to attain holiness, man has only to develop the power within him. there is but one power that can break the hold of evil from the hearts of men, and that is the power of God in Jesus Christ" (16).

#### Literature in a Christian College

Teaching literature in a Christian college represents a great challenge to the professor and to the student. This discipline, that reflects the aesthetic values of mankind, should be always part of the academic curriculum. It is true that literature in many cases is filled with fiction, but fiction sometimes forms part of our lives. In literature there are many aesthetic values, beautiful figures and outstanding plots that would help the student to appreciate beauty and understand culture.

It is also true that many writings contain obscene vocabulary, sexual insinuations, pagan tendencies, and even

mystical theories, but in spite of any shortcomings, the beauty and the moral lessons should always be taught. It is the responsibility of the literature professor to make the student understand and appreciate beauty while he honors and glorifies God. The most outstanding norm for teaching literature in a Christian college is found in the Bible, and says: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (17).

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