

Excerpts

Excerpt from the Introduction

Why, when God's world is so big,
did you fall asleep in a prison
of all places?
— Rumi

For many years I have been drawn to and borne by mystical experience and mystical consciousness. Within the complex phenomenon of religion, they appeared to be central. All living religion represents a unity of three elements that, in the language of the great Catholic lay theologian Friedrich von Huelgel (1852–1925), we may call the institutional, the intellectual, and the mystical (see chapter three). The historical-institutional element addresses itself to mind and memory; in Christianity it is the "Petrine" dimension. The analytical-speculative element is aligned with reason and the apostle Paul. The third element, the intuitive-emotional one, directs itself to the will and the action of love. It represents the Johannine dimension. The representatives of all three elements tend to declare themselves to be absolute and to denigrate the others as marginal; however, without reciprocal relationships among the three elements, religion does not stay alive. Reciprocity between institutional, intellectual, and mystical elements of religion may take the form of polarization, or the exchange may be dialectical.

What enticed me to the lifelong attempt to *think* God was neither the church, which I experienced more as a stepmother, nor the intellectual adventure of post-Enlightenment theology? I am neither professionally anchored nor personally at home in the two institutions of religion—the church and academic theology. It is the mystical element that will not let go of me. In a preliminary way, I can simply say that what I want to live, understand, and make known is the love *for* God. And that seems to be in little demand in those two institutions. At best, what Protestant theology and preaching articulate in what they designate as "gospel" can be summed up as follows: God loves, protects, renews, and saves *us*. One rarely hears that this process can be truly experienced only when such love, like every genuine love, is mutual. That humans love, protect, renew, and save *God* sounds to most people like megalomania or even madness. But the madness of this love is

exactly what mystics live on.

What drew me to mysticism was the dream of finding a form of spirituality that I was missing in German Protestantism. What I was seeking had to be less dogmatic, less cerebral and encased in words, and less centered on men. It had to be related to experience in a two-fold sense of the word: how love for God came about and what consequences it has for life. I was not looking for what Thomas Müntzer refers to as "made-up, fictitious faith," that is, something that is fine for the head and keeps the institution functioning. Instead, I searched for the mystical element of faith; in the Bible and other sacred writings, in the history of the church, but also in the everyday experience of lived union with God or the divinity. The distinction between the ground of being perceived in personal terms, or, in transpersonal terms, need not concern us here. For are "mindfulness" or "pure attentiveness" of Buddhist tradition not other words for what the Abrahamic traditions call "love for God"?

Often an expression like "longing for God"—which could be a different rendering of "mysticism"—evokes embarrassment; yet, tradition declares that our greatest perfection is to need God. But it is precisely that longing that is taken to be a kind of misguided indulgence, an emotional excess. In recent years, when two of my friends converted to Roman Catholicism, I could not approve. In the first place, the denominational divisions of the sixteenth century are no longer substantive for me. Second, in the Roman institution—with its unrelenting "nyet" to women, to a humane sexuality, and to intellectual freedom—I only find in double measure the coldness from which both my friends were fleeing. But what these two women were seeking they found, above all, in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. The experience of mysticism made them feel at home. That is what I am looking for, too, and that is what this book is about.

The history of mysticism is a history of the love for God. I cannot conceive of this without political and praxis-oriented actualization that is directed toward the world. At the beginning of the seventies, I wrote *Death by Bread Alone (Die Hinreise)*, a book with autobiographical undertones. Many of my friends on the political and Christian left became worried. "Dorothee is leaving," I heard them say in Holland, "will she ever return?" But that was not my worry; what I was particularly trying to do was to hold together what Roger Schütz, the founder of the Protestant monastic community in Taizé, calls "*lutte et contemplation*" (struggle and contemplation). I did not want to travel on two distinct pathways. What in the late sixties we named "politicization of conscience," at the time of the political evensong of Cologne, has in the

meantime become widely generalized. More and more Christians and post-Christians understand the connection between setting out and then coming back again (*Hinreise and Rückreise*). They need both.

There has been very little examination of the relationship between mystical experience and social and political behavior. Social-historical enquiry always recedes—especially in today's mysticism boom—in favor of a "perennial philosophy" (to borrow the name of Aldous Huxley's famous anthology), a way of thinking that is outside time. It looks at God and the soul alone, without any social analysis. To say the least, such an approach is an abridgment. What interests me is how mystics in different ages related to their society, and how they behaved in it. Was the demeanor of flight from the world, separation, and solitude adequate for mysticism? Were there not also other forms of expressing mystical consciousness to be found in the life of communities as well as individuals? Did mystics not have a different relation, communally and individually, to the "world," to the whole of society, both in practice and in theory? The prison, of all places, in which we have fallen asleep (Rumi)—is this what we are supposed to regard as the world's eternal condition, unaffected by real history?

My questioning is focused on social reality. This means that for the sake of what is within, I seek to erase the distinction between a mystical *internal* and a political *external*. Everything that is within needs to be externalized so it doesn't spoil, like the manna in the desert that was hoarded for future consumption. There is no experience of God that can be so privatized that it becomes and remains the property of one owner, the privilege of a person of leisure, the esoteric domain of the initiated. In my search for concepts that depict the possibilities open to mystics of their relation to the world, I find a series of different options. They lie between withdrawal from the world and the transformation of the world through revolution. But whether it be withdrawal, renunciation, disagreement, divergence, dissent, reform, resistance, rebellion, or revolution, in all of these forms there is a No! to the world as it exists now. The reformer Teresa of Avila; the Beguines of Flanders, who created their own new forms of life; Thomas Müntzer, the revolutionary leader of peasants; and Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit destroyer of weapons of mass destruction; all of them lived their mysticism in the repudiation of the values that ruled in their worlds. For those who want the world to remain as it is have already acceded to its self-destruction and, consequently, betrayed the love of God and its restlessness before the status quo.