

# The Contemplative Urge

by: Douglas Lockhart

*The Church cannot exist at all without a measure of mysticism, but as soon as mysticism begins to gain ground, it begins to do away with the need for the Church's ministers and their services. In the extreme case, the mystic may dispense with the Scriptures and even the Incarnate Christ himself, and seek to relate directly with the uncreated, absolute godhead. Mysticism appears to make the Church and institutional religion unnecessary, and thus is a threat to the established Church even when it operates within a totally orthodox theology.*

Harold O.J. Brown *Heresies*<sup>1</sup>

## The River of Truth

The conditions necessary for a contemplative life formed in the 4th century, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria having set the ball rolling in the 1st with his *On the Contemplative Life* (50 CE), a treatise in which he merged Jewish mysticism with the Greek mysticism of Plato. Not so for many of the Christian hermits and monks of the 4th century; their contemplative scheme was centered on affective identification with Jesus' life and crucifixion, an intoxication that transformed him into a being of ever-expanding spiritual potency. Elevating Jesus to a position consubstantial with God, his all-too-human nature was shunted off into some oblique theological tributary by the Council of Nicea in 325.

Then came the fusion of biblical mysticism with Platonic, and later Neoplatonic, mysticism, a fusion that helped create the contemplative platform of Christianity as it developed. The Catholic scholar A.L. Maycock may deride the mystically inclined Sufis for being adulterated by "Neoplatonic metaphysics,"<sup>2</sup> but the Church, West and East, was equally influenced by Neoplatonic ideas, the East in particular taking to Plato's grandiose vision of transcendent realities with alacrity. In the year 200, Clement of Alexandria admitted that "The way of truth [the Christian religion] is one, but different streams from different quarters flow into it as into an ever flowing river."<sup>3</sup>

In the 3rd century both Clement and Origen made Platonism the metaphysical foundation of Christian philosophy, the problem of reconciling Platonic mysticism with Church doctrine leading to a watering down of Plato's grand metaphysics. Continuing in less extreme form into the next century, this metaphysic appeared in the thinking of St Gregory of Nyssa and St Ambrose of Milan, and returned strongly through the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite. This renowned Neoplatonist's influence on Sufi contemplative thought is everywhere evident, and it is admitted that even the thinking of Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart came under his sway. Odd as it may sound, Neoplatonic thinking infiltrated the West through no less a personage than St Augustine; the contemplative metaphors coined by Dionysius becoming the pivotal influence on medieval mystical theology. But it was the Eastern Church Fathers who imbibed the deepest, Gregory of Nyssa developing a comprehensive theory of the mystical contemplation of God.<sup>4</sup>

Like Philo, Dionysius combined biblical faith with mystical experience and expressed the whole in rich metaphors. Describing the sublimity, intangibility and ineffability of God as "inaccessible light," he created a language of transcendence in which "imageless vision" and "nonseeing seeing" helped capture something of the contemplative's perceptual dilemma. When images interrupted the task of the contemplative was to "penetrate the outward sheath to the core of the holy symbol, and so behold the naked and pure divine mysteries in their essence."<sup>5</sup>

In his exhaustive study of contemplation in Christian mysticism, Friedrich Heiler quotes Plotinus (203-270) in an attempt to interpret the Neoplatonic contribution of Dionysius into Christian terms, and in doing so tells us that all concrete conceptions and imaginings are left far behind. The religious and cultic symbols vanish. Even the humanity of the Son of God, the child in the manger and the sufferer on the Cross evaporate. Jesus the man is forgotten; only the God-Logos remains.<sup>6</sup>

Friedrich Heiler's attempt to leave us with a "God-Logos" in relation to the philosophy of Plotinus is an attempt to merge the "One" of Neoplatonic experience and speculation with St. John's notion of Jesus as the Logos, and St. Paul's notion of Jesus as the Mystic Christ. Assuming that when the man Jesus evaporates in deep contemplation what is left must necessarily be God *and* Logos as one expression of ultimate reality, Heiler mixes Neoplatonic contemplative experience with Christian theology and makes a nonsense of both. Plotinus was not a Christian; he was a philosopher of the Neoplatonic school to whom such a notion would have made no sense whatsoever. So when Jesus disappears during high contemplative activity, it is not just the stories of Jesus' physical presence on

Earth that cease to have meaning, it is the whole theological corpus built around this extraordinary figure. *Everything* goes, and that includes *all* theological constructions attached to the living, breathing person that Jesus was. This is to say that when the highest contemplative levels are reached, both religion and philosophy are transcended.

### **The Logos**

Philo the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher uses the word Logos 1,300 times throughout his voluminous works; but not always in the same sense. There is no single, consistent doctrine of the Logos, such as in Christianity. The Logos is certainly divine, but it is not God; and that in spite of the fact that Philo sometimes uses the expression “first-born son” to describe the Logos. This is not a personification; it is merely a poetic rendering of a difficult idea. In the Gospel of John, the word “Logos” is translated from the Greek as “Word”, this conception having its roots in the Old Testament notion of God *speaking* through the prophets. This is rendered in the prophetic books as “The word of the Lord came to”, and was conceived of as having a quasi-independent existence; but only in the sense of an activity or power that inspires. And so the prophets uttered blessings or cursings, and their behavior signalled the presence of God among the people.

Judaism avoided anthropomorphism, stressed the transcendence of God and interpreted his contact with the world as being through divine agents such as Wisdom, Word and Torah. And so the rabbis developed a doctrine of Wisdom that was feminine in gender, identified Wisdom with Torah and came to see the Word (the Law) as divine and pre-existent with God. She (Wisdom) was also *the presence of God*, had existed before the creation of light, and was involved in the creation of the world. So it is possible to exactly parallel statements about the Logos (Jesus) in St John’s Gospel with identical statements from Jewish Wisdom literature, and rabbinic writings about the nature of Torah complete the correspondences. However personified these three agencies may on occasions be, they cannot legitimately be conceived of as independent metaphysical entities. Jewish thought would not tolerate such an idea, and this fact squarely places St John’s notion of the Logos as an independent entity outside of Jewish mystical tradition. And as even Philo’s Greek-influenced exposition on the Logos cannot be bent to such a view, the question of why St John evolved such an idea being a bit of a puzzle. But not for long, for among the Nag Hammadi scrolls the *Gospel of Truth* carries elaborate speculations on just such an idea.<sup>7</sup>

The Gnostic scholar Elaine Pagels refers to a tradition that makes the great orator Valentinus the author of the *Gospel of Truth*; she speaks of the book as “poetic”, and reminds us that Valentinus was revered as a poet and spiritual master. Paying

lip-service to the Christian tradition while believing something quite different, Valentinus claimed to have been initiated into a secret doctrine of God at the hands of Theudas, a disciple of St Paul. This initiation is interpreted by Pagels as “theological justification for refusing to obey” the Christian hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> As it is Paul who presents an alternative Jesus to that of the Jerusalem Church, and this Apostle’s Jesus is not necessarily that of the later Roman Church, then it may well be that Valentinus is telling the truth when speaking of a “secret doctrine” being passed on from one of Paul’s advanced pupils. The Jesus of the Jerusalem Church continued to teeter on the edge of theological disaster after the fall of Jerusalem, but unlike the Roman Church’s later interpretation of Paul’s mystic Christ, they did not allow their Jesus to be directly identified with the God of Israel.

The whole business of Jesus being made into God resulted from the early apologists’ attempts to construct Trinitarian belief out of pagan philosophy. Wishing to make Paul’s “Christ” intelligible to others, and superior to all that was best in pagan philosophy, the Church developed a language based on pagan philosophy itself. But there was a problem, for no matter how hard the Fathers tried, they could not avoid giving the impression that Jesus was no more than an “attribute” or “function” of God, and as such subordinate to God. And so Justin was forced to describe the Logos as flame derived from fire, and Origen driven to express the notion of the Logos as a creature eternally generated by the Father. To combat the Arian heresy, Athanasius later picked up on Origen’s idea of “eternal generation”, expressed it as the Son “eternally begotten”, and so sidestepped the problem of explaining a pre-existent Logos independent of God. But the problem of Jesus’ nature and status would not go away, and in every subsequent generation Christians challenged the Church’s claim to theological uniqueness. For what could one do with a Christian explanation of Jewish-sectarian mystical ideas expressed in Greek philosophical terms? Everything seemed to make sense, but when the ideas and insights and revelations of Christianity were seriously examined, the inherent discrepancies in their construction were immediately obvious. There was certainly more to Jesus than met the eye, but to conceive of him as God incarnated in human flesh was, for many Christians, to push that “more” beyond the pale of spiritual decency.

### **The Contemplative Mix**

Prayers directed to this constructed figure did, however, prove spiritually potent for the monks and hermits who escaped to the deserts of Palestine, Egypt and Syria – emotional identification with Jesus’ sufferings could be very rewarding. But it could also be problematical, for how could one control someone to whom being out of emotional control had become a way of life? Recommending that the impulse towards contemplative fervour be checked, St Benedict instructed his

monks in unspoken contemplative prayer (*pura oratio*), and made silence the hallmark of serious contemplative activity. Having added what Heiler terms Roman balance and restraint, Benedict's influence led Pope Gregory the Great (604) to further develop the more moderate approach, the ecstasies, visions, auditions and general boilings over of the Eastern Church being abandoned for Augustinian coolness.

But not completely; identification with Jesus through his sufferings was a pattern too well ingrained to be eradicated overnight, and anyway, what else was there for the common folk? This resulted in two contemplative approaches, the monks developing a route to God different from that of the common people and the ecclesiastics who had to instruct them in the literalisms of biblical truth. Then a third approach developed, for St Benedict's contemplative scheme, like that of St Augustine's, was predominantly intellectual (the monks' attention was taken up with "godly thoughts" during contemplation), and this completed the break from Christianised Neoplatonic contemplation where the whole point of the exercise was the *penetration of all holy symbols to their core*.

It was Bernard de Clairvaux in the 12th Century who helped correct the direction taken by the Western Church's contemplative movement, for it is with this unusual man that reflection on contemplative experience begins. Developing a psychology as well as a theology of contemplation, Bernard systematically analysed and classified contemplative experience, and in doing so resuscitated what appeared to be the old ecstatic route in preference to the intellectual. But this is incorrect. What he actually did was get rid of the Augustinian underpinnings of St Benedict's coolly intellectual approach. Replacing "godly thoughts" with a dynamic contemplative process based on Jesus' crucifixion as a preliminary stage, he developed a contemplative technique, or bridge, that helped carry the minds of his monks towards an imageless contemplation of the Logos. Going beyond the physical Jesus, the babe in a manger, the man who was crucified, Bernard's monks moved away from the literal life of Jesus towards that dangerous sphere of contemplative realization where Jesus was capable of evaporating altogether. As Saskia Murk-Jansen states in an essay on the Beguine mystic Hadewijch, "The demand to withdraw from sense perceptions and the activity of the intellect as a preparation for drawing close to God is referred to in numerous texts by Bernard de Clairvaux."<sup>9</sup>

And yet this is the man who could say: "To know Jesus, Jesus crucified, that is the kernel of my philosophy." Are we then to conclude that Bernard's imageless contemplation of the Logos was merely another step in orthodox contemplation? Or was this spiritual and political maverick simply teasing his peers? Could his statement about knowing Jesus crucified mean knowing the *real* Jesus of history,

not merely the Jesus of the Church's imagination? An astute politician wielding immense power within the Church (no one since Athanasius in the 4th century had determined the policies of the Church to such an extent), Bernard is also described as having learned more about God from nature than from books, his use of natural objects for purposes of meditation being rarely found in Christian mysticism.<sup>10</sup> Natural objects? Such a statement forces one to conclude that this man was highly unusual, and that his move away from established religious symbolism signified a serious break with orthodoxy. Known to have been involved in many an intrigue, Bernard was a man of parts, a man with the capacity to cloak his beliefs when it suited him.

### **Union with God**

Detachment from the things of this world was the monk's aim, union with God, his hope. Burdened by St Augustine's conception of original sin, and by a similar inability to escape the tendency towards sin in everyday life, monks and nuns sought to purify themselves by the ascetic route. The *via purgativa* of asceticism would lead, so they believed, to the *via illuminativa* of contemplation. Closing the gates of the senses, the contemplative entered what Bernard called the *vitalis vigilque sopor*, a sleep alive and watchful.<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Heiler is quick to point out that Bernard's sleep alive and watchful was not just a matter of inner concentration and heightened awareness; it was a state of mind set up for the purpose of silent contemplation on nature and the recitation of Scripture. He is adamant, "The inner void is, on the contrary, filled again with concrete content."<sup>12</sup> Fixating on some ritual object or sacred image, on some verse of Scripture or even on a religious fantasy, the contemplative nudged ever closer to union with God – the God of the Catholic Church, the God who had conceived of that Church's existence and behavior even before the creation of the world.

One can only be blunt in the face of such a suggestion; Heiler is quite wrong in thinking this. The words "a sleep alive and watchful" speak volumes about Bernard's contemplative competency; he knew a great deal about meditation and contemplation. A "sleep alive and watchful" is not a preliminary stage; it is a consequence with profound implications. It is not an initial approach; it is an established condition that allows the contemplator to scan the "still point" spoken of by the Carmelite mystic Bernadette Roberts. Conscious ideas, Scriptural recitations, images or objects have no place in it; it is totally and utterly self-sufficient. Heightened attention and awareness become not the means to an end (a filling up again of the mind with "concrete content"), but the penultimate point in a process within which all content melts clean away. Meditations on objects, pictures, icons, saints, altars, crucifixes or Stations of the Cross can certainly help

concentrate the mind, but once the mind is fully concentrated such crutches fall away like the booster rockets on a space shuttle. Heiler seems to agree; he says: “All these objects and pictures are outward aids and stimuli to the contemplation of God’s presence, His mercy, His condescension and sacrificial death; while the pictures of the saints encourage contemplation of heroic *caritas* and love of God.” There is something peculiar about this argument; it ends by subtly denying its own premise. For is not our idea of God’s sacrificial death *as* Jesus no more than a cloud of impenetrable religious reasoning? And is this perhaps why Bernard was in the habit of choosing “natural objects” on which to meditate? This wily old Christian had woken up to the Neoplatonic fact that any old object of attention could afford the same result.

Aware that only the divine could reveal the divine, Plotinus said that the contemplator does nothing and should strive to do nothing. Only an “eternal seeing” could see God; subtlety of mind via the intellect was not nearly subtle enough. And yet out of this empty seeing, unimaginable visions, sounds and intimations of Ultimate Reality could flourish; there was no telling what might happen. In the Christian contemplative tradition women – ever suspect in the eyes of churchmen – seemed to be particularly susceptible to such intimations, their sensory expressions of spiritual experience having to be handled with great theological care. But whether male or female, priest, nun, monk or lay person, if unable to cut loose from mental distractions, then doomed to remain forever untouched by contemplative insight. Mental distraction, as St John of the Cross would reveal, was the problem we all had to face, a problem that followed us right into the center of being where “self” became the final obstacle. For how could we unite the person we were with a transcendent God when preservation of the limited self was the strongest instinct we possessed? Indeed, how could we create the conditions by which such an unimaginable thing might be accomplished? And if accomplished, how might we explain to a church bound by the limitations of that self that its religious explanations of Ultimate Reality were fundamentally inadequate?

Christian monks and hermits of the early centuries are thought to have retreated to the desert to get away from the restrictions of ecclesiastical Catholicism. Prone to orthodox fanaticism on the one hand, they were, on the other, anarchic, their theology tinged with dualism, their abhorrence of the world often reminiscent of the Manichee heretics at their most intense. Without doubt influenced by the monastic practices of the Quietist Jews who had fled into the hills during the Maccabean wars, by the Covenanters of Qumran, and by the Egyptian Therapeutae,<sup>13</sup> they went about their contemplative business with a seriousness that sometimes verged on the manic. Looking back to Elijah, Elisha and John the

Baptist as prototypes, they also (inadvertently) imbibed elements of Pythagorean, Neoplatonist and Stoic philosophy, their aim being to pursue solitude and soar above the contents of their minds.<sup>14</sup>

By the year 200, Clement of Alexandria was talking of Christians advancing by progressive elevation of the soul towards the divine, a move towards asceticism that came to replace martyrdom as an accepted ambition. The contemplative could rise towards God using free will to subdue the body and its passions, so avoiding a martyr's death. In this sense, contemplation was martyrdom spiritualized; it was "death" elevated to a new level of comprehension – the *death of the ego*. Here then, in embryo, is the soul's mystic union with God, an attempt to so saturate the self in heavenly things that only God, and not the self, remained.

Unlike the ecclesiastics who thought orthodox belief and behavior paramount, the monks and hermits accepted adherence to orthodox teaching as a necessary discipline, but in the seclusion of their cells or caves behaved in accordance with conscience and relied not on theology, but on their own understanding of the Bible. Thinking in non-ecclesiastical terms, St Anthony is known to have told his monks that the Scriptures were enough for instruction, a statement in defiance of ecclesiastical control. And that in spite of his close friendship with Athanasius, champion of the Nicene formula. Although critical of both the Arian and Manichaeian heresies, this seeker after God nevertheless removed himself from the organized Church, and is thought not to have received the Eucharist for most of his life. This fact alone speaks volumes, for it was the firmly held belief of the establishment that without the Eucharist a soul was damned for all eternity.<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

At first a loose association of groups of hermits with little discipline, the monasteries later became highly organized communities where intellectual pursuits dominated, and extremes of asceticism were discouraged. But not at first; asceticism was all the rage at first. At Mount Nitria, southwest of the Delta for instance, upwards of 5,000 monks settled down to the business of collective solitude, each monk having a separate cell in this vast settlement. Seeking out and attaching themselves to a recognized spiritual "master," newcomers found themselves engaged in "fantastic competitions in spiritual perfection."<sup>15</sup> In northern Syria, the desert is said to have been crowded with monks, some of them behaving more like Indian fakirs than Christians.<sup>16</sup> On visiting one such community in 373, Jerome was taken aback by the ferocity with which they rejected the world at large, their view of physical life being little different from that of the Manichee heretics. In Palestine, an Anchorite community was established near Gaza by Hilarion, a disciple of St Anthony's, and in Upper Egypt 490 settlements mushroomed into existence. Free as birds, the many thousands of

monks inhabiting these settlements sought their own salvation by way of unregulated ascetic and contemplative practices. But not for long. The efforts of St Pachomius and St Basil eventually brought regulation and a new purpose to these disparate communities.

With nine monasteries and two nunneries set up, St Pachomius introduced uniformity of behavior on many levels, and with a soldier's reasoning established an "Order" of monks recognisable by their similarity of dress. Later, full control was established through the organising of the monasteries in alignment with the Longer and Shorter Rule of St Basil. Having studied monasticism in Mesopotamia, Palestine, Lower Egypt and Syria, St Basil drew up a way of life recognising "full episcopal control over the affairs of the cloister,"<sup>17</sup> so changing forever what had been a deeply personal search for spiritual freedom into a highly controlled system. Ascetic self-sufficiency was replaced with "brotherliness", monasticism attached to, rather than separated from, town and village. Monasteries were reduced to thirty or forty members, schools and hospitals created to serve the community, the old ascetic communities transformed into places of learning.<sup>18</sup> Over the first three centuries of the Christian era, however, communities quite beyond ecclesiastical control flourished in both the East and the West, their spirituality directed, not by theological concerns, but by a Christianity as yet unhardened by dogma.

### **Alternative Gospels**

Some of the early monastic settlement had in their possession gospels of an unorthodox nature. In 367 Athanasius was forced to purge the monasteries of these heretical books, and that suggests there were a lot of them around. The Nag Hammadi collection, found in 1945, was probably hidden by monks belonging to the monastery of St Pachomius in Upper Egypt around this time. With the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John hailed as canonical – that is, as conforming to an agreed interpretation of historical and spiritual events – texts previously considered wholesome were rejected and outlawed. As some of these texts described the virgin birth and the resurrection as "misunderstandings", the Nag Hammadi texts were singled out as subversive documents that had to be destroyed. The fact that they were buried and not destroyed speaks volumes.

Among the fifty-two Nag Hammadi texts discovered was a Gospel of Thomas, a Gospel of Mary (Magdalene), a Gospel of Philip and a Gospel of the Egyptians. There was also a Gospel of Truth presenting a very different rendition of the Genesis narrative, and a strange document called *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, which spoke of a feminine divine power. This text carried the words: "I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one. [SEP] I am the wife and the

virgin".

According to the Gnostic scholar Elaine Pagels, the main point about these texts is that the writers did not consider themselves to be heretics; they used Christian terminology, related to Jewish teaching, and claimed knowledge of a separate tradition regarding Jesus and his teachings. Pagels also points out that the term "Christianity" has come to cover an astonishing range of groups since the Reformation, and that it was much the same during the first three centuries of the Christian era. Early Christianity was much more diverse than the Church cares to admit, gospels utterly at odds with those of the New Testament being in wide circulation. Although categorised as apocryphal by the end of the 2nd century, these alternative gospels containing secret teachings, myths and poems attributed to Jesus or his disciples are known to have been doing their rounds.<sup>19</sup> Christian scholars mostly dismiss these texts as useless flights of the imagination, but the tendency of secular scholarship is to take them a little more seriously. Some of them are, after all, thought to contain material older than that found in the canonical Gospels, and as such are viewed as of vital importance to our understanding of Christianity's early growth and development.

But what of the men and women who regarded these rejected texts as valid, those who believed that their alternative message better served the community than the stories made standard through the legislation of a council? What happened to them? Where did they go? How did they manage to survive as Athanasius's purge took effect? By subterfuge, of course. Remaining in the settlements or monasteries to which they belonged, they became a circle within a circle, a group within a group willing to pay lip-service to the dominant cult for the sake of privacy and safety.

Question is, what was the quality of the spirituality engaged in by these monks, nuns and hermits during this period of fluctuation and change? What level of contemplative experience did they attain in their desert retreats before St Pachomius and St Basil rearranged their personal search for God into community service and intellectual asceticism? The monks of St Pachomius in Egypt did not pass from community life back to that of the contemplative, but in other parts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria contemplative-based groups flourished, St Euthymius (376-473) and St. Saba (439-532) successfully founding Eastern Orthodox monasticism in these same areas.

Elaine Pagels' description of orthodox Christianity's success over other forms of Christian belief is quite straightforward; it was a matter of winners over losers. The winners wrote the history books; the losers were denied all credibility. After accepting the model of Roman organisation, the Church became theologically

stable, turned imperial, and dismissed other points of view as heretical. In Pagels' opinion this caused the impoverishment of the Christian tradition – alternatives were forced outside, triumph was interpreted as historically inevitable and experience overshadowed by theology.<sup>20</sup> Referring directly to this other type of Christianity, the historian Karen Armstrong sums up the situation thus:

Eventually this type of Christianity would be suppressed but we shall see that centuries later Jews, Christians and Muslims would return to this type of mythology, finding that it expressed their experience of God more accurately than orthodox theology.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the heretics seem to have had a better grasp of spiritual reality than orthodoxy could muster, and not a few of those heretics were living quite undetected in the mainstream monasteries. Well, not quite undetected; Athanasius knew what was going on. Issuing an order for them to destroy all of their heretical texts, he reveals the extent of the monks' interest in these texts, and in doing so opens up for us a world not quite as theologically tidy as some would have us believe. So too does Elaine Pagels in her seminal study of these Christian radicals, for on having shown that these alternative Christians did not accept Church organisation or episcopal authority, that they rejected the exclusion of women from the priesthood and considered the cult of martyrdom downright silly, she goes on to show that the Church's notion of itself as the only road to salvation was not acceptable to everyone.

What has to be emphasised is that the settlements and monasteries were at first populated by monks, not priests, that these monks were unordained individuals led by unordained abbots, and that apart from a blatant rejection of ecclesiastical hobby-horses by some, "non-conformity" was in fact a way of life for most. Adherence to monastic discipline would have been expected, but within that discipline there flourished a variety of approaches to Jesus' nature and status stimulated by writings and traditions not yet declared heretical. That St Anthony is reported not to have received the sacraments for most of his life confirms a quite different approach from that of the ecclesiastical establishment in Rome, and the mystery of his lasting friendship with Athanasius confirms, not that the Nicene formula was already up and running, but that that formula had not yet taken hold. A mighty debate raged around the issue of Jesus' nature and status prior to the Nicene solution in 325, and that solution was swapped for an Arian one in 337 before becoming standard belief throughout the Church West and East in 381. The Nicene formula would eventually harden into dogma, and during this hardening Athanasius would be banished no fewer than six times as the theological stew bubbled and heaved.

This of course throws a completely different light on the beliefs of the so-called heretics, for during this period of upheaval these heretics were not heretics at all, they were just ordinary Christians adhering to views of Jesus later considered to be subversive. It is worth recapping on the diversity of approaches at this point, for it will help clarify how uncertain the Christian formula was even as late as the first half of the 4th century. The widespread notion that Christianity has, since the 1st century, carried the same simple message about Jesus is a mistake. At Antioch the tendency was Adoptionist (Jesus had been possessed by the Spirit of God at his baptism), in Asia Minor Sabellian (Jesus was to be directly identified with the Father), and in Alexandria Platonic (Jesus was the divine logos or link between God and creation). In Rome, Paul's Christology had been beefed up to make Jesus into a divine being; the only question remaining to be solved being the extent of that divinity. By 325 he would be consubstantial with the Father; by 335 he would be back to being subordinate to the Father.

In Paul's scheme of things, contemplation of God became interwoven with contemplation on Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, the sacraments taking on a mystical charge capable of carrying the soul into ecstatic states. So intense did such states become that contemplation on Jesus edged over into unconscious worship of Jesus, the Jesus of history being transmuted, slowly and imperceptibly, from Jewish messiah into a kind of divine being in whom faith could be invested. This is to say that Christianity, from its inception, was deeply concerned with contemplative piety in the sense of emotional identification with Jesus' sufferings, and that it was this tradition of identification that eventually caused a rupture in its historical overview of Jesus the man. With their spiritual vision towards God redirected through Jesus as the Christ, Christian perception underwent a change of focus; the intermediary, like a penny held before the sun, blocking out the larger mystery. Affectively rewarded through this refocusing of the contemplative lens, the next quite natural step was a spin-off re-evaluation of Jesus' day-to-day existence, his every move or statement being seen as indicative of his newly acquired divine status.

What has to be realised is that Jewish prophetism, the Jerusalem Temple cult, the Hellenistic mysteries and the Platonic and Neoplatonic schools constitute the roots of Christian contemplative practice as it developed. For a start, Judaism was strongly mystical, Jacob's ladder with its angels descending and ascending was a metaphor for contemplative activity,<sup>22</sup> his wrestling match with God at the ford Jabbok indicative of great contemplative effort.<sup>23</sup> Given tangible form, the Eternal is interacted with by Moses in the form of a burning bush,<sup>24</sup> by Elijah as a still small voice,<sup>25</sup> by Isaiah on a throne high and lifted up within the Temple itself,<sup>26</sup> and by Ezekiel as a radiant cloud surmounted by a throne.<sup>27</sup> This is the language

of contemplation, the language of transcendence, the language of mystery, and it is completed by the psalmist's beautiful songs where soul and heart are described as panting after God. Even the ordinary Jewish people are allowed to share in such experiences, for the Temple liturgy, complex and lengthy, is said to have afforded them a sense of the presence of God, and Christian liturgy would serve the same purpose.<sup>28</sup> In his important essay on contemplation and Christian mysticism, Friedrich Heiler completes this picture when he describes Jesus as the conclusion of this prophetic series, the most telling moment of his life being that of his transfiguration before his disciples.<sup>29</sup> (see my essay 'The Human Jesus (1)') A contemplative by nature, Jesus eventually became an object of contemplation, a move at first useful, but later problematical.

### **Platonic & Neoplatonic Mysticism**

This presents us with a further problem, for if advanced mystics are, as Neumann attests, and Bernadette Roberts confirms, prone to break out of the conventional religious mold, then how much more anticonventional, anticollective and antidogmatic must what we call "God", or the "Absolute", or "Ultimate Reality" be in his/her/its own right? You can't have one without the other, as the song goes. You can't have advanced mystics breaking the belief-conventions of centuries on the one hand, and on the other have what they are uniting with advocating through traditionally minded theologians a hemmed-in, cramped religious attitude. We may not fully understand what these extraordinary individuals were attempting to say at times, but we should have little problem in following the often explosive nature of their experiences. Neumann confirms this when he says that any mysticism that consists of dogmatically defined contents is either low-level or disguised mysticism.<sup>30</sup>

This reinforces the idea that Jesus' teachings about God, the Sabbath and much else were the result, not of his being God, but of his having united with God (his "father" as *formlessness*) during deep contemplation. His policy of religious and social reform seems to have been born in his own depths, and it is to these depths that he directs the attention of his disciples throughout his ministry. So when he says, "I and the Father are one," he is not claiming to be God in person, he is claiming to have experienced God *in* his person to the point of *unity*. This was fully understood in the early days of Christianity's development, hence the concept of Jesus as God's "adopted" son, a concept eventually jettisoned as Jesus' identity underwent the twist towards inherent divinity.

Theologians argue that Jesus was God, but at the same time keep him fully human. The language utilised is at times astonishing, the arguments presented mind-

bending. And still they keep coming, highly intelligent men and women labouring dutifully to explain how Jesus was actually God, yet fully human, yet not literally God while human, yet not not God because he was human. The brain reels as categories clash and the rules of logic are tested to destruction. And all because a belief system has become circular; that is, an early mistake in information processing has become a factor integral to the integrity of the system as a whole. Discard the mistake and the whole system fails. Discard the idea that Jesus was actually God and the underlying reason for Christianity's continuance as a religion appears to evaporate. But only in appearance, for what one is left with is not a religion shorn of its heart, as many would contend, but a religion capable of functioning as originally intended. Put Jesus back into historical, cultural and spiritual focus and the result is not chaos, or blasphemy; it is an integral honesty that allows us to place this victim of our conditioned minds in a new frame of reference. Jesus was not God come to Earth in any literal sense, but the shock of his extraordinary presence was such that we are still talking about him.

## References and Notes:

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- 5) Ibid, p 196. [SEP]
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- 20) Ibid, p 179. [SEP]
- 21) Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God*, Mandarin, 1984, p 114. [SEP]
- 22) Genesis 28:12. [SEP]
- 23) Ibid, 32-22. [SEP]
- 24) Exodus 3: 2. [SEP]
- 25) 1 Kings 19. [SEP]
- 26) Isaiah 6. [SEP]
- 27) Ezekiel 10. [SEP]
- 28) Heiler, Friedrich, "Contemplation in Christian Mysticism", [SEP]an essay in *Spiritual Disciplines*, collected papers in the [SEP]Eranos Yearbook, Bollingen Series XXX. 4. pp 188-189, 1955. [SEP]
- 29) Ibid, p 190. [SEP]
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