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The Final Person: *Mysticism, Christianity, and the Southern Movement*

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The importance of Christianity to the Southern movement can not be understated. The southern states of America were birthed in Christianity and continue to this day as a beacon of Christianity in a post-Christian American Empire. The South is not called "the Bible Belt" for no good reason. To many approaching the Southern movement, however, the strong emphasis on "Biblical Christianity", "fundamentalist Christianity", and "evangelical Christianity" (all doctrines, by the way) can stand as a barrier. One often gets the feeling, if not the outright commandment, that it is necessary to believe in the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, for example, to be a Card-Carrying Member of the Southern movement. The idea that some Christians might hold other views (or experiences, more importantly) seems hardly talked about.

But, as seen in the history of Christianity, doctrinal orthodoxy (or heterodoxy) is, however important, simply not the last word on the subject of Christianity. Jesus the Christ is. And in the Person of Jesus the Christ is the Final Person, the experience of the Christ which is the only knowledge one can ever have of Him, since there is nothing known outside of experience.

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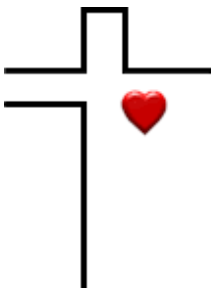
There are at least two basic "types" of religious experience: the phenomenal and the noumenal, or doctrinally based religiosity and mystically based religiosity. By doctrinally based religiosity, I refer, however inadequately, to the type of person who finds his truth and solace in the great doctrines of religion. Most of those doctrines are found in the written Scriptures of Christianity. I hasten to point out that I am not anti-doctrine. The doctrines of the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and others, are not ideas with which I necessarily disagree. (I can hear sighs of relief out there: "Whew, he's going to hang himself soon!") I do, however, wish to point out that there are some who do not find doctrinal issues the most important part of the Christian experience.



Throughout the twenty centuries of historical Christianity, there has been another stream flowing down the mountain of faith. It is generally called mysticism, though that word seems to have taken on negative connotations, especially since the 17th and 18th centuries, dominated as they were by the Enlightenment thinkers. ("Obscurity of doctrine"!) The Gospel of John is a paean to mystical theology, and the first Christian mystic, Paul, began his life as a Christian with the famous mystical experience on the road to Damascus. Paul's epistles shine with mystical thought. It was Paul's use of "the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:15-16, for one) that led to the now-familiar doctrine of the mystical body of Christ, the mystical union

of Christians into a spiritual body with the Christ as their head. St. Augustine continued the metaphor as did Pope Pius XII whose 1943 encyclical, Mystici Corporis Christi ("the Mystical Body of the Christ"), reflected upon the church as the body of the Christ.

But though the doctrines of the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the Resurrection are generally well known to many, the theology of mysticism is not. Mystics tend to be, historically, a minority among Christians. (Though the mystical experience itself, oddly enough, belongs to all Christians, especially to those to whom the blinding truth of the Christ comes of a sudden.) One could do worse, in plumbing the depths of the subject, than to turn to William James and his "The Varieties of Religious Experience", for in that work James proclaims his attempt to defend "...'experience' against 'philosophy' as being the real backbone of the world's religious life..." This statement is just another way of saying that the personal mystical experience is the real substance of religion, for James locates religion itself "not as it appeared in the object (God or the universe or revelation) but as it appeared in the subject (the believing, doubting, praying, and experiencing person)." This is to say that no matter how much the various doctrines may be debated, and no matter how many sects, denominations, and churches take issue with each other, ultimately the encounter with Jesus the Christ is an interior encounter.

One could also quote the logocentric Prologue to John as well in this sense: "In the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God." I can hardly think of a more personal and mystical formulation than John's words (and you who are theologians know the complexity of the Greek word Logos).

One also thinks of the more noted mystics: St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, the Pseudo-Areopagite, and the simple but profound Juliana of Norwich. And the equally profound words of Hildegard of Bingen: "God has gifted creation with everything that is necessary. Limitless love, from the depths to the stars: flooding all, loving all. It is the royal kiss of peace."

G. K. Chesterton, seeking to explain mysticism, wrote:

> "The whole secret of Mysticism is this, that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The Morbid Logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The Mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid."

Perhaps Chesterton has hit upon the confluence of the doctrinal and the mystic understandings of Christianity, for is it not the mystery of the Resurrection, to take one example, that makes all things lucid to a Christian?

What unites all mystical theology, from Paul to Chesterton, however, is the insistence upon the Person of the divine. Thus does Christianity part ways with other religious traditions. Without Jesus the Christ, the Christian's mystical experience is nothing. The Person whom Christian mystics meet is always a Person experienced (as opposed to abstracted). Experience, then, is the ground of all Christian mysticism, and that experience is always experience of a Person. The uppercase letters signify the experience of that Person as the Final Person, the immediate experience of the Christ beyond which one can not go. Beyond that experience also, Christian mystics would say, doctrine can not go.

And this is my point. To a mystic, the Resurrection is not "wrong" or "right". It does not matter to the mystic whether that doctrine specifically points to a corporeal flight into clouds or a non-corporeal resurrection of the inward-dwelling Spirit. What matters to the mystic is that the Christ is risen and by His resurrection all things are made lucid.

Seen from the mystical perspective (and not the mysterious perspective I should add) there is no "right" or "wrong" interpretation of doctrine; there is simply the truth of Jesus the Christ. I am not saying that there is no "wrong" or "right", for there is. But the

Resurrection, the Virgin Birth, and all other doctrines are not so much doctrines as illumination; a way of grasping with one's heart the simple truth that without the Person, the very God, of Jesus the Christ, there is no way home. And considering where our home lies, that insight is of no little consequence, but the very essence of Christianity itself, which is, after all, the only religion that proclaims a saving Love. Imagine that! It is to this saving Love of our Father through His Son, Jesus, that ultimately all doctrines must turn.

Whatever "type" of Christian you may be, whatever doctrines you espouse, whatever your denomination, in the end your eyes must look into the eyes of that Final Person and either accept or reject what you see there.

It is to the Christian mystics that we owe this insight. To those uncomfortable with biblical inerrancy, fundamentalism, evangelicalism, or other doctrinally specific orthodoxies, the personal experience of Jesus the Christ remains not only possible, but necessary. So rejoice, you who fit into no category, you are not alone, nor are you an outcast in the Southern movement. You are simply looking directly into the eyes of that Final Person.