

Characteristics of Voluntaristic Mysticism

by

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The essay later appeared with the new title, and some changes, in Schuon's book

The Transfiguration of Man (World Wisdom, 1995). It is this more recent version of the essay that appears below, in a new translation approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.

Voluntaristic mysticism is a path of love which—in contrast with Hindu *bhakti*—is characterized by the fact that no intellectual element intervenes in an active fashion in its method; thus the qualifications it demands are almost exclusively moral: at most it demands a general predisposition which, together with moral factors and on contact with grace, becomes a “vocation.” It is true that this mysticism thrives on dogmatic symbols and theological concepts, but not on intellections: it is entirely centered on love—on the will with its emotive concomitances—and not on gnosis. In a certain sense, passional mysticism is “negative,” since its method—apart from sacramental graces—consists above all in the negation of the natural appetites, whence the cult of suffering, and the importance of trials and consolations; the activity is purely moral and ascetic, as the following opinion of Saint John of the Cross shows well: “By its nature, this [our mind] is limited to natural science; but God has nevertheless endowed it with an obediencial power in regard to the supernatural, so that it can obey whenever it pleases Our Lord to make it act supernaturally. Strictly speaking, no knowledge is accessible to the mind except by natural means; therefore all knowledge must pass through the senses” (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I, 2). This is the negation of the intellect, the reduction of the intelligence to reason alone. In such a perspective, there is no place for the intellectual man; there is no path for him. The consequence is that he is condemned to occupy himself with philosophy; given his need for logic and the nature of his aspiration, he cannot follow the path of love—the only one offered to him—except on the margin; his particular vocation falls so to speak into the void.

A particularly striking characteristic of voluntaristic mysticism is sentimental humility, which appears as an end in itself and which excludes all help from the intelligence. Humility as such is certainly everywhere a condition of spirituality; but it is only in “passional” mysticism that it is situated on the plane of sentimentality, which proves that the human groups to which it is addressed have a fundamental tendency to the sort of obsession with the “ego” that is

individualism; this obsession or this “pride” has an influence on the intelligence, whence the propensity to Promethean thought, to rationalism, to philosophical adventures, to the divinization of passional art, to egocentricity in all its forms. In human groups whose mentality is not centered on the individual and on the individual point of view, asceticism could not put the emphasis on a systematic and blind humiliation that is contrary to the nature of things and also to the intelligence. If we divide men into two groups, contemplatives and those whose natural vocation lies in action, we could say that the first are much less obsessed with the ego than the second, and even that the passional element in them has something quasi-impersonal about it, in the sense that their passion is much more passion as such than that of a particular ego; it hardly encroaches on their intelligence, especially since the latter determines passion and not conversely. What perhaps most distinguishes the born metaphysician from the ordinary man is that in the former, passion stops where intelligence begins, whereas in the latter, the intelligence does not by itself oppose the passional element, of which, all too readily, it even becomes the vehicle. Moreover, it is important to know that anti-intellectual mysticism is not an exclusively Christian phenomenon; it is also to be found in the two other monotheistic religions and even, incidentally, in Hindu bhaktism.

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Sentimental humility seeks out pride because it has need of it, and is fundamentally fearful of any perspective that transcends the moral alternative on which it lives, and this explains the sacrifice of the intelligence in the name of virtue. Saint Theresa of Avila, whose intelligence was keen, had no difficulty in recognizing the dangers of this position, but she did not bring any decisive remedy for it, given the empirical character of her own point of view. She did not wish us to remain “sunk in the consideration of our own misery,” and she believed that “never will the stream of our works come out clean and pure from the mire of fear, weakness, cowardice, and a thousand troublesome thoughts, such as these: are not people looking at me? In taking this road, am I not going to be led astray? Is it not presumption to dare undertake this good work? Is it not pride, is it not worse still, that a creature like me should occupy herself with a matter as lofty as prayer? Will people not have too good an opinion of me if I abandon the common and ordinary way? Must one not avoid all excess, even in virtue? Sinner that I am, will the wish to raise myself not simply expose myself to the risk of falling from higher up? Perhaps I shall stop short on the way; perhaps I shall be for some good souls a cause of scandal? Finally, being what I am, is it right for me to aspire to anything at all? O my daughters, what a lot of souls there must be to whom the demon brings great losses by thoughts of this kind! They take for humility what I have just said, and many other similar things.... This is why I say, my daughters, that, if we wish to learn true humility we must fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, the sovereign good of our souls, and on his saints” (*The Interior Castle*, I, 2). Now, if scruples like these—which are actually pieces of foolishness—are current coin, it is because the very conception of humility has become superficial; only individualistic sentimentalism can give rise to finicalness of this sort on the

spiritual plane, and the true remedy would be to purify the idea of humility by bringing it back to its profound meaning, which implies above all a sound knowledge of the nature of things. If humility is subject to so many contortions of the mind, and if the demon has at his disposal so many doors to slip through and take on the appearance of virtue, the reason obviously lies in the sentimental and individualistic corruption of humility itself; in a word, the whole chaos of these entirely artificial difficulties and these almost inextricable psychological subtleties, is due to the abolition—which in its fashion also smacks of pride—of the intelligence. Man no longer “knows” that, metaphysically, he is nothing; he must therefore always be reminding himself, with much effort and sighing, that he is base, unworthy, and ungrateful; something that he has difficulty believing in his heart of hearts. It is not sufficiently realized that the devil is not merely in “evil”, properly so called, but also, although indirectly, in the insipid exaggeration with which one surrounds the “good,” as if to make it suffocating and improbable; whence a pendulum-like play between an “evil” considered as being absolute and endowed with arbitrary aspects, and a “good” detached from truth and compromised by the unintelligence of the sentimentalism which accompanies it. Be that as it may, this play of the pendulum between an “evil” made positive and a “good” made improbable and almost inaccessible, cannot be displeasing to the demon, for he has every interest in contributing to a quasi-insoluble alternative which burdens the mind, and to an exaggeration which, basically, does wrong to God.¹

In the same order of ideas, to search after sins denotes a rather outward perspective for, if man is a sinner, it is not in this superficial and quantitative way that he can free himself from his nature. The sound attitude, on this plane, comes down to this: to do what is prescribed, to abstain from what is forbidden, to strive towards the three fundamental virtues from which all others derive, namely humility, charity, and veracity; on this basis, our mind can concentrate on God, who will Himself undertake to transform our purely symbolical virtue into an effective and supernatural virtue; for good can come only from Him. Every other attitude is contradictory and unsound; the exaggeration of sin is not possible without individualism; to everywhere and

¹ An example of a healthy attitude is the following meditation of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in which instead of abasing himself in an unintelligible sentiment of gratitude—or culpability—he relies, with intelligence, on the nature of things: “...I will consider God present in all creatures. He is in the elements, giving them being; in plants, giving them vegetation; in animals, giving them feeling; in men, giving them intelligence; He is in myself in these different manners, giving me at one and the same time being, life, feeling, and intelligence. He has done more: He has made of me his temple; and, to this end, He has created me in the likeness and image of his Divine Majesty.... I will consider God acting and working for me in all created objects, since He is in fact in the heavens, in the elements, in plants, in fruits, in animals, etc. as an agent, giving to them and conserving for them being, vegetation, feeling, etc.... Then, considering seriously my own self, I will ask myself: what do reason and justice oblige me on my part to offer and to give to His Divine Majesty, and that is, all the things that are mine, and myself with them...” (*Spiritual Exercises*).

always look for sin is to cultivate it, whereas the aim of spirituality is to transcend the human, not to magnify it. “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” said Christ; now the perfection of God is a blessed one, which means that the perfection of man must also have an aspect of serenity and peace, which the contemplation of truth confers. It is true that man is free will; but freedom comes from the intelligence, and it is the latter that characterizes man in the first place.

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Saint John’s doctrine is that of emptiness or obscurity according to faith, hope, and charity: emptiness of understanding, memory, and will. This conception of hope and charity is universal, but not that of faith: for here emptiness should be, not the negation of pure intelligence, but the negation of the mental element and of formal thought; in other words, instead of comprehension being extinguished before dogma, it is the mental element that has to be extinguished, not before dogma, but before pure intellection, before direct and supra-formal intellectual vision. This is obvious, for if love is emptiness of the will, and hope emptiness of the memory, then faith must logically be emptiness of a faculty situated on the same level, namely the mind or reason; faith cannot be emptiness of a faculty incomparably more eminent—because transcending the individual—than will and memory, and above all, it cannot sacrifice the greater for the less, otherwise one could also demand the “emptiness of virtue” by emptying virtue of its contents.

When Saint John of the Cross says that “the soul is not united to God, here below, either through understanding, or through enjoying, or through imagining,” one should be entitled, in the case of the first of these three faculties, to read: “through thinking”; and when it is said that “Faith despoils understanding and by its night prevents it from comprehending,” one would like to read: “it prevents it from reasoning.” One cannot put pure intelligence—which is “something of God”—on the same plane as the strictly individual faculties.

If Saint Paul says that “Faith is the substance of the things which one hopes, a conviction about those things which one does not see,” this does not of itself mean—though it may do so inclusively and accidentally—what the Spanish Doctor means: “Although the reason adheres absolutely to these things with firmness, they do not disclose themselves to the intelligence, for if they did so, Faith would no longer exist.” The most perfect theoretical knowledge cannot abolish existential ignorance; the proof of this is that it does not suffice to have this knowledge in order to behave as if one saw God; on the other hand, metaphysical knowledge is the unquestionable key for the realization of Truth; intellection, by itself, already has the power to purify the heart, so that many of the more or less hazardous complications of individualistic asceticism become superfluous. The difference between faith as belief and faith as gnosis consists in this: that the obscurity of faith, in the ordinary believer, is in the intelligence, whereas in the metaphysician it is in the will, in the participation of his being: the seat of faith is then the heart, not the mind, and the obscurity comes from our state of individuation, not from a congenital unintelligence. The

faith of the sage—or of the “gnostic”—has two veils: the body and the ego; they veil, not the intellect, but ontological consciousness. Wisdom, however, comprises degrees.

It would be entirely illogical and disproportionate to ask oneself how the limitations of mystical individualism can accord with sanctity and the most obvious signs of divine grace, ecstasies, levitations, and other such phenomena, for religious genius and heroicness of virtues furnish a sufficient explanation both for the miracle of sanctity and for the miracles of the saints. The scope of the intelligence is an entirely different question: it is only too clear that one cannot say, from a Catholic point view any more than from any other traditional point of view, that heroicness of virtues and miracles suffice to prove the universal value of a doctrine, otherwise Catholicism for example would have to accept, not only Palamitic theology on account of such saints as Seraphim of Sarow, but even the Asiatic doctrines on account of the unquestionable sanctity of certain of their representatives; one cannot therefore adduce, as a criterion of value or of intellectual perfection of the Johanian and Teresian doctrines, the sanctity of their authors, although this sanctity is a guarantee of intrinsic orthodoxy, and even more than that.

This is to say that all spiritual paths tend towards Union; it is therefore normal that sanctity as such may comprise “states” and “stations” that surpass the possible narrowness of its point of departure or of its initial form; if the aim is Union,² this has to be able to manifest itself on the way. In this regard let us again quote Saint Theresa of Avila: “What distinguishes this abode is, as I have said, the almost continual absence of dryness; in it the soul is free from the inward troubles which it experiences from time to time in all other abodes and it nearly always enjoys the purest calm. Far from fearing that the devil can counterfeit so sublime a grace, it remains perfectly assured that God is the author of it; firstly, as has been said, because the senses and the faculties have no part in it, and also because Our Lord, in revealing himself to the soul, has put it with him in a place, which, to my mind, the devil would not dare to enter, and to which moreover the sovereign Master forbids him access.... There, our Lord favors the soul and enlightens it amidst a peace so profound and of such great silence that it reminds me of the construction of the temple of Solomon, where no sound had to be heard.”

² It is true that Union comprises modes and degrees, but here it is a question of “Union as such” and not of “such and such a Union.”

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

It is a short lesson, that thou ever praise God, and with a true, not false heart say, "I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall be always in my mouth." It is a short lesson; it is, namely, that thou know that he giveth of His mercy, when He giveth; that He taketh away of His mercy, when He taketh away; and that thou must not believe that thou art abandoned by the mercy of Him who either comforteth thee by giving, lest thou fail, or punisheth thee when thou art uplifted, lest thou perish. Praise Him therefore, whether in His gifts or in His scourges. The praise of the scourges is the medicine for the wound.

St. Augustine.