

On A Christian Mysticism of Action

Dear friends,

I am extremely happy to have been invited to this very interesting conference and grateful to the Centre for the Study of Comparative Religion, Jamia Millia Islamia University, and the Gobind Sadan Institute of Advanced Studies in Comparative Religion for the invitation extended to me. I have been asked to present a paper on “Christian Mysticism.” Rather than a general survey, I decided to take one special stream of mysticism which I know personally and even intimately.

After a few preliminaries I shall focus on the tradition developed from the life and writings of St, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), especially kept alive by the Society of Jesus (the members are popularly known as 'Jesuits'), which he founded. It may be of interest to know that at present India is the country in the world with the largest number of Jesuits, about 4000. The Society was really born from the mystical experiences of Ignatius and continues to promote his approach to mysticism and the spiritual life in general. Without claiming myself to be a mystic, I think I can speak more competently on this than on any other stream of mysticism.

I. Preliminaries

I begin with a preliminary question, always difficult in seminars like this, and it is: What is the meaning of mysticism as understood in the Christian, and more specifically in the Catholic, tradition? For even among Christians there is much confusion about mysticism, and the Protestant tradition in particular, which is the better-known form of Christianity in North India, does not incorporate much of what the Catholic tradition has developed in the line of mysticism. As I look at a non-sectarian source, the *Collins-Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, I find the following explanation: “Mysticism is a religious practice in which people search for truth, knowledge and unity with God through meditation and prayer.” This is a fair description. But in the Catholic tradition, the 'search' of the bhaktas is rather called an ascetic practice: mysticism comes after this, when the seeker's experience is such that now it is no longer he or she who searches, but the Divine has taken over the initiative and seeks to come into union with the seeker. In other words, there is an element of passivity in the mystic. Note however that in the Christian understanding, even asceticism, or the human search for the divine, is a gift of God. Already St. Augustine said this when reporting the Divine message: “You would not seek me if you had not already found me.” However, in asceticism this gift aspect is a matter of belief, rather than of clear experience.

The presupposition of all Christian mysticism is that there is radical distinction between the Divine and the human, including the human spirit. Human beings are 'created' – body and soul – and they do not have a prior existence even as souls. Each one has begun in time, surely through agencies of biology (the parents) but not without the presence of the power of God who wants each new human being to come into existence in this world of ours, and indeed wants him or her to remain forever united with the Divine. The physical substratum of each human being has of course a long material existence, since the beginning of creation, but now it is only a substratum, not the being itself.

A further presupposition of the Christian understanding of mysticism is that although both the human body and the soul are created realities, and of themselves ever infinitely distant from the Divine Reality, yet there remains the possibility of a human entering the essence of the Divine Life, or to become “participants of the divine nature,” to use a much-quoted biblical expression (2 Pet 1:4). The phrase is almost *shirk*--blasphemous to Christian ears, for the Divine Reality is not only eternal, but belongs to another kind of existence, the *svayambhū* existence. Yet in Christian theology such

apparently impossible participation of the creature in the Divine Existence becomes real thanks to Jesus Christ, who is the presence of the Eternal Divine Word within humanity.

In this understanding, when the person experiences herself or himself somehow invaded by the Divine with a sense of being done unto (a sense of 'passivity'), then the mystical experience proper takes place. Other religious experiences may be pre-mystical, leading to mysticism. In so far as the union of the human and the Divine implies a union of two distinct persons, the mystical experience is always an experience of **love**.

II. Ignatius of Loyola

In the Christian tradition there have been many forms of mysticism, from the times of the Fathers of the Desert in the third to the fifth centuries CE, through the mysticism of the Eastern European monks a few centuries later, leading to the so-called 'Jesus Prayer,' to the mediaeval mystics: especially those of the Germanic lands (Eckhart and others), the Spanish mystics at the time of the Renaissance (e.g., St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross), and the 19th and 20th century flourish of mystics, not always easily distinguishable from the ascetics and their writings.

A correction to the dictionary description of mysticism mentioned above becomes necessary when we come to Ignatius of Loyola in the mid-16th century. He finds the mystical experience not exclusively "through meditation and prayer," as the Dictionary says, but also, and especially, through *action*. He called his followers to be "contemplatives in action" or "contemplatives even in action," so that they "find God in all things and all things in God." We will explain this expression later.

Who then was Ignatius of Loyola and how is his legacy of the booklet called *Spiritual Exercises* alive today? The youngest of many children of a noble family in north Spain, Iñigo as he was called (later latinized into 'Ignatius') became after childhood a page in the homes of the nobility of the time and eventually a soldier in the army of the king of Spain, developing the rather worldly outlook characteristic of soldiers. In a petty war with the French, so common at the time, he led the defence of a small town in Navarre called Pamplona. A French canon ball passed through his leg and left him badly wounded. The battle was lost, and the victorious French army chivalrously took the sick soldier to his home a few kilometres away, in Loyola, in the Basque country. Convalescent after very painful operations, he passed his time reading the only books available in the ancient castle: a Spanish version of a Latin 'Life of Christ' by the Carthusian Ludolf of Saxony, in four volumes, and a recently published Spanish translation of 'Lives of Saints' by the Italian Dominican Archbishop of Genova, Blessed Iácopo de Varazze. (It might be of some interest to know that this version of 'Lives of Saints' included a much modified and westernised version of the life of the Buddha, appearing under the name of 'Josaphat,' a western corruption of 'Bodhisat.')

Perhaps as a result of a long absence from his family in his early life, Iñigo was quite an introspective young man, and much given to reading books of chivalry. Now he began to notice different moods in his readings. Some readings were entertaining, but left him empty inside, and somewhat restless. Other readings seemed dry, but eventually they left him with deep inner peace and a sense of joy and universal love. When he realised this, he noted it down in a personal copybook. Months later the content of several copybooks would become the core of the booklet called the *Spiritual Exercises*.

He also began to have at this time what we call nowadays mystical experiences: visions of Christ, His mother Mary, and some saints. These '*siddhis*,' if you want to call them thus, are described by Herbert Thurston as "The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism," in a book with this title published in 1952. They are not the essence of mysticism.

After his convalescence, Ignatius decided to abandon his position and his career as a soldier and to seek God more eagerly, like the saints he had read about. He became a homeless pilgrim. He retired in a cave near Barcelona to pray and seek God, and began sharing his experiences with others. It is here that he enlarged his early writings and composed the basic text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, now a classic manual to guide people into deeper prayer and more committed action. It has been widely used and is still used by all sort of groups, not only in the Catholic Church but also in other churches and beyond. Ignatius then undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land but was forced to return. He now decided to take to studies in order to serve God better. His studies took him to the then famous University of Paris where he met a group of like-minded students from Spain, Portugal and France, with whom he came into deep friendship.

The University made this group of young students aware of the issues and problems of their church in Europe: the discoveries of new worlds were less than 50 years old, and the Protestant reformation had just exploded, so that both theology and society were in great turmoil. The group decided to strengthen their bonds and form a new religious order, which they called the “Company of Jesus,” later mistranslated into English as “Society of Jesus.” Though new orders were not allowed at the time, this one was eventually approved by the Church.

Among many other mystical graces he received, two stand out as very significant. The first was at the beginning of his new life, in Manresa, when he suddenly saw the universe and all human history as related to the Divine Essence and Love, from which they descended, and going to a definitive goal, inviting him to be in it. It was a kind of illumination which may have contained the seed of the idea of the Society of Jesus. The second, years later, was when he entered Rome with his companions: he said that he saw God the Father inviting him to be with Jesus carrying the cross. Ignatius understood: the call was to an authentic life of love capable of facing opposition and suffering with unbroken hope.

The Spiritual Exercises

More than a book, the *Spiritual Exercises* are a bundle of notes, more or less organized. The booklet is not meant for continuous reading. It is rather a manual on “how” to do it. “It” means a *sādhana* meant to last for about one month, although some people are known to have spent many months on it and also shorter versions of one or two weeks, and even three days, have been practised in the Christian world for centuries.

This is *not* a *do-it-yourself* manual: in fact, from the earliest tradition, the *Exercises* are not 'done' nor are they 'preached:' they are 'given.' They require a guide, a guru, a master to whom one gives an account of how the inner process goes on. The 'guru' proposes themes for meditation or contemplation and shows how to go about it, and the 'exercitant,' to give him or her a name, meditates in private and eventually gives an account to the guru of what she or he has felt. With this, the guru will lead him or her to further areas, till she or he obtains what they seek.

What do they seek? This question leads us to the essence of the *Exercises*. Their purpose has been clearly spelt out in the title of the book itself (that comes after several pages of introductory matter!). It reads: “**Spiritual exercises to overcome oneself and to order one's life without reaching decisions through inordinate affections.**” (21) [In modern times the text is divided in consecutive paras or sections, as cited here.]

The key word is “to *order* one's life.” Of what does this 'ordering' consist? It consists of obtaining the inner freedom to make decisions about one's future and also about daily choices that are always in harmony with the Divine Will (or in harmony with the cosmic order, if you prefer!). Such total inner

freedom requires us to pass through a mystical experience, prepared and made possible in the course of the *sādhana*. The goal is not the experience itself, but the experience is in order to 'decide:' the goal is in the reality of *action*. Free actions, or mature and correct decisions, are the characteristic of the human existence. We are in this world not just to know and contemplate, but to act in an evolving universe, to bring our own creativity and cooperation to it, because the world is evolving and this evolution calls for human participation. Was it Marx or Feuerbach who said that philosophers have tried to understand the world, but what matters is to *change* it? The affirmation is valid, provided however we realise that we cannot change it if we do not understand it! There is the famous sentence said to sum up the mysticism of Ignatius, and it is that he himself was a "*contemplative in action*." The definition of mysticism taken from the Collins-Cobuild dictionary given above is too narrow. Mysticism is not obtained only in 'prayer and contemplation.' There is also a mysticism of *action*. This was the characteristic trait of Ignatius. What does mysticism in action--or contemplation in action--mean?

In his writings, Ignatius uses often the expression "finding God in all things," with an alternative version, "finding all things in God." This does not mean merely to see the Divine Reality in every creature, nor to see everything as "God" – for things are not God, but creatures of the Divine Love. It means really to seek to cooperate in the direction of the Divine Will in every decision we make. We all feel many pulls and pushes in life that come from selfish drives. Our decisions are often determined by what Ignatius calls "inordinate affections"--the drives that too often control our lives. The Indian traditions of spiritual purification say the same. The *Exercises* aim at creating a person so inwardly free and so clearly focused as to be able to contribute to the march of history in a positive way. Such mysticism must be called a mysticism of *love* guided by a wisdom experience.

The philosophical premise of this project is that we personally, as well as the whole world, are not a perfect or complete reality, but rather that there is an evolution towards a goal, not so much in the biological sense, but as a human reality. We are still being made, individually and collectively. That making is not automatic, but calls for right human decisions. The mystical power must guide these decisions.

What then is the programme of the *Spiritual Exercises*? On principle it is rather simple. Ignatius proposes a *sādhana* of about a month, which roughly divides itself into four weeks, though some weeks may be longer and others shorter. The *first week* focuses on the exercitant: Who am I; what has been the course of my life? The exercitant is called to be ruthlessly truthful and totally authentic, examining his or her whole adult life and the turns and decisions so far taken. The good and the evil must be examined and named courageously. The background of these reflections is taken from various passages of the Bible, but the focus is always one's life. It generally calls for repentance and turns into a desire to change the negative aspects.

The *second "week"* focuses on the *goal* of our history within the goal of all human history. What is the purpose why God allows this created world to continue? Where does God want it to evolve? Towards what? Again, much of the reflection draws from the sources of the Christian faith, the Bible and the Christian spiritual tradition. But what is important is one's commitment to the Divine Plan: Am I ready to embrace it in my life, whatever the cost? The figure of Jesus Christ is naturally the main inspiration in this rather long part of the *sādhana*. The goal is to work out a plan of life for immediate and/or later decision, guided by the divine Light.

It is here that the mystical element is found: the process of making a decisive choice or formulating a plan of personal reform is not merely intellectual, but must be constantly checked by a Divine Approval

in the form of what Ignatius calls “consolations” and “desolations”--moments of awareness of the Divine Touch and moments of its absence. They are experiences of a deeper love, joy, peace, clarity, light, strong faith and unwavering hope. For Ignatius there are different ways for programming one's life in the right direction through such consolations. The first is when a very strong and irresistible mystical experience is experienced as coming from God. The exercitant cannot doubt the authenticity of his own experience that leads him to an authentic decision. This way is rather rare. St. Paul had it. In his own setting, the Buddha seems to have had a similar experience in his Enlightenment. The first way being so rare, one may want to choose the third way, when, after achieving an inner sense of *nirvāṇa* or *kūṣasthātva* ('indifference' in the language of Ignatius), I am open to all positive options and then *reason out* the pros and cons of each option for me here and now, and choose the best. But even here I must seek divine approval through an experience of 'consolations'. Otherwise, it would remain a mere ascetic decision.

Between the first and the third, the second way of deciding is perhaps more characteristic of Ignatius. In it, one follows the guidance of consolations and desolations. Here we find the mystical element. Consolation is the experience of the divine love in our hearts, an experience that does not come from us but gives us an increase in love, faith and hope, strengthens our good will, and fills us with *joy*. The experience of this inner joy, the *ānanda* of the Indian tradition, is a guide towards deciding the orientation of my decisions. This joy is not a superficial satisfaction or an anticipated experience of pleasure at the advantages my choice may bring to me or to others: it is rather a deep sense of peace, of being in the right focus, of a sense of strength, that: “yes I can,” with the divine help. The teaching of Ignatius here seems to come quite close to that of the Nārada Bhakti Sūtras, written about 500 years earlier, when its author offers peace and joy as the *pramāṇas* of authentic bhakti: *śāntirūpatvāt paramānandarūpatvāc ca* (60). A prolonged series of exercises lasting for several days enable the programming of one's life through such experiences. The use of reasoning is not excluded, but the main support of the discernment is the spiritual experience. For Ignatius, that is the more normal way of arriving at right decisions for action, and therefore of “finding God in all things.”

“Finding God in all things” or “Finding all things in God” is a common theme of mystic writing. It is found in the Gita (e.g., 6,30: *yo mām paśyati sarvatra sarvam ca mayi paśyati...*). For Ignatius, the expressions did not mean only being aware of the presence of God in all things we see and people we meet and in all events of our life; nor did it mean merely praying to God at all important moments. It meant mostly that in all our decisions to act, we decide that our actions should be inspired by and fall within the line of the Divine Purpose for all creation and history, which ultimately means that our actions should be motivated not by selfish desires but by authentic love. It was a very personal way of living the ideal of the *niṣkāma karma* of the Bhagavad Gītā, but one where the goal is clear in the mind and consciously sought, the goal being that which the gospels call “the Kingdom of God.” History has a purpose that involves the unity of all humanity under the Divine Umbrella. The mysticism Ignatius seeks and experiences is a mysticism of action. We have parts of a diary of his, a very difficult document, where we see how the deep experiences of the Divine he had almost every day were the inspiration for his decisions when he wrote the “Constitutions of the Society of Jesus,” a society that had been approved on principle, on the basis of an outline of the project, in 1540, well before Ignatius wrote the Constitutions.

Acquiring the habit of such options on a regular basis is very difficult because our innate selfishness always tends to twist our options. It involves an inner revolution, namely, a change on our scale of values and at the same time a deep inner experience of total love that will ensure that our lives follow the new values. In very important meditations during the second week, Ignatius guides us towards an inversion of values: instead of wealth, popularity and pride being the goals of our action, we need to

acquire the values of authentic love, which involves accepting and even loving poverty, humiliations and humility, as St. Francis Assisi had already taught much earlier.

We cannot automatically make this new scale of values our own. The only way seems to be to develop a strong sense of love and identity with the person of Jesus Christ, who was crucified precisely because of these values, and whom God the Father raised to a new kind of existence and made him the source of an inner Power for us to live by such values. The second, third and fourth weeks of the *Exercises* are precisely lived in a kind of slow-motion meditation on the life, passion and new life of Jesus, as reported in the New Testament. In the second week, the *sādhak* is encouraged to ask God again and again to grant an “inner knowledge” of Jesus, so as to love him intensely and follow him closely. (104) He or she really asks for “a knowledge of the heart.” In *the third and fourth weeks* one enters into a stronger mystical union with God through the person of Jesus, asking mainly, in the third week, for “sorrow with Christ in sorrow, a broken spirit with Christ so broken; and interior suffering because of the great suffering which Christ endured for me.” (203) And in the fourth we ask “for the grace to be glad and to rejoice intensely because of the great glory and joy of Christ our Lord.” (221)

To come out with a good 'reform of life' during the *Exercises* and outside them, Ignatius tells the retreatants that “everyone ought to reflect that in all spiritual matters, the more one divests oneself of self-love, self-will and self-interest, the more progress one will make.” (189)

There remains for me only to indicate the structure of the day during the *sādhana*. Ignatius suggests that the exercitants should separate themselves for a month from their ordinary involvement in life. They must find a place free from chances of distraction, they should keep an ambience of temperature, light and food in harmony with the mood of their stage of growth in the course of the *sādhana*. Every day during this period they must make at least five one-hour meditations, the first of them being at midnight. They reflect on the outcome of their meditations at least fifteen minutes after each hour. Frequent repetition of the exercises made and a constant reflection not merely on ideas that come to one, but of the moods of one's emotional life, are characteristic of this training period. The emotional life plays a pivotal role in the Ignatian tradition. The exercitant goes on examining his or her life and attitudes: keeping a diary is recommended, as is some reading of spiritual books. Above all, they must frequently meet the Guide who will reflect with each of them the experiences of the moment and propose new areas for meditation and prayer.

Each hour of prayer starts with an inner preparation, a search for inner silence (nowadays many exercitants do some *prāṇāyāma*), a bodily expression of *praṇām* with an act of *ātmasamarpan*. There follow periods of reflection on the themes proposed, always searching the *inner taste* (the *rasa*!): when one feels it, one should stay with it as long as the mind and heart allow, without proceeding further. Normally the prayer ends either in a *samvāda* with the Divine Reality or in a deep *samādhi*. There will be a follow-up of a reflection on the experiences during the hour, and a continuation through various forms of prayer during the day. Silence is a requirement for the whole period, except during the dialogue with the guide.

For Ignatius, the ability to make our own the choices of Jesus, expressed in the beatitudes (Mt 5:3-11), is the litmus test on whether we have or have not entered into an authentic mysticism of action. Only by a commitment to follow the crucified and risen Lord can we live in this path. Ignatius gives many criteria to enable us to discern where the authentic values are, in contrast with the pseudo-values that the world culture offers. He also offers encouragement to make us live by those values. The last contemplation of the book is perhaps the most clearly mystical, where we come not only to understand but also interiorly perceive everything around us as a Gift from God, everything as a Presence of God,

everything as the Action of God in this world, and the whole universe as “charged with the grandeur of God,” to use the expression of Gerard Manly Hopkins. The exercitant is then invited to express her or his surrender in words similar to the last prayer Ignatius offers:

“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my mind and all my will, all that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all that to me. I now give it back to You, O Lord. All of it is Yours. Give me Your grace and the gift of loving You, for that is enough for me” (234).

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