

# The Wednesday

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## Editorial

### *When Philosophy Meets Mysticism*

It is a long time since a philosopher addressed the topic of mysticism. William James lectured on the topic in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and Russell took it up in his *Mysticism and Logic*. The latter was only concerned with the concept of intuition as it was used by Bergson. It was not really an attempt to take mysticism seriously. But now we have a philosopher who takes mysticism seriously and tries to understand it from its own sources (texts and experiences) since the thirteenth century. Simon Critchley in his latest book *On Mysticism* shows the relevance of mysticism to philosophy and culture. He points out that 'mysticism is about the possibility of ecstatic life' that has been ignored by philosophy, but re-instated by Nietzsche and Bataille. He also blames the Enlightenment tradition that 'blinds us to what is rich, strange, and provocative about the tradition of thinking and experience that we label as mystical.'

The book deals with mysticism in Christianity, and within Western culture there is a special reference to Julian of Norwich. Critchley does not deal with mysticism in Eastern religion, Judaism and Islam, which have rich resources, but I understand the methodological limitation of the book. Mysticism declined after the reformation that ended the monastic life, but as Critchley shows, the mystical practices had mutated and transformed themselves in later centuries into art, poetry and music. He says the word 'mysticism' did not exist before the seventeenth century and only came to be widely used in the nineteenth century.

Critchley points out that art, poetry and music replaced mysticism in catering for our 'spiritual hunger'. In this respect, the poetry of TS Eliot has a special significance, and he spends a good deal of time analysing it, because of its Christian nature and the way it reflected the spiritual crisis of the century and our present time. Critchley is excellent in explaining mystical language which uses contradictory terms, negations and exaggerations. He extends his analysis to modern writing to show, for example, how this is reflected in Eliot's texts, especial the *Four Quartets*. His philosophical training enables him to come up with a memorable sentence. Explaining *via Negativa*, he says it is 'a language that ceaselessly undoes itself'. Some Kantian principles seem to be reformulated, such as 'Mystical experience without theology is blind. Mystical theology without experience is empty'. One can hear here Kant's

definition of knowledge!

But what interests me here is the encounter between the philosopher and mysticism, which Critchley describes from a personal perspective. He tells us in a chapter called 'Confession' that he went through a conversion experience while visiting Canterbury Cathedral when he was twenty-four. He had an experience that did not last, but it 'began to feel like an ersatz epiphany'. At the time, he felt ashamed of it. He also says that in his earlier works he 'argued persistently for the centrality of religious disappointment'. But his thinking shifted over the years. He realised that his earlier views on religion were 'simply too philosophical, that is, too abstract and metaphysically minded'. Now he considers the connection between religion and aesthetics, and to see how both cater for 'that intense spiritual hunger that we all have'. However, I wonder whether in reducing mysticism to aesthetics he trivialises mystical experience. Mystical experience is not just aesthetic but aims at the beyond and the transformation of the mystic.

My intention here is not writing a book review, but to draw attention to an unusual book. It is readable and enjoyable. It is informative and has great insight into the language of mystical texts and practices, such as what he called, after Anne Carson 'decreate' or emptying of the self in order to contemplate and take up a journey to the Divine.

I will add a final comment to link philosophy and mysticism by referring to their roots in Greek philosophy. It goes even further back to what is known as the Hermetic tradition of old Egypt. These trends have influenced Islamic mysticism since the ninth century and also infiltrated Christian mysticism, mainly in the form of Platonism in all its stages and major figures, especially Plotinus. For example, the writings of Ibn al-Arabi, a contemporary of Averroes and Maimonides, were clothed in figurative and theological language that covers up many of the Neo-Platonic thoughts, and echoes of these could also be found in Meister Eckhard and others. Nearly two decades ago a book came out to highlight the influence of this tradition on modern philosophers (See: Glenn A. Magee's *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*). I hope Critchley's book will generate more philosophical interest in this subject to enrich both philosophy and mysticism.

*The Editor*