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MYSTICISM

BY

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## **Mysticism** **by Annie Besant**

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In the early centuries of Christianity, as we know from the writings of many of the Fathers, and more surely by the Occult Records, there existed in the bosom of the Christian Church the venerable institution of the Mysteries, in which the purified met superhuman Instructors, and learned from the lips of the Holy Ones the secrets of the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. After the Christ had thrown off His physical body, He taught His disciples for many years, coming to them in His glorified subtle body, until those who knew Him in the flesh had passed away. So long as the Christian Mysteries endured, Jesus appeared at them from time to time, and His chief disciples were constantly present at them. So long as this state of things continued, the exoteric and the esoteric teachings of Christianity ran side by side in perfect accord, and the mysteries supplied to the high places in the Church men who were true teachers for the mass of believers, being themselves deeply instructed in the "hidden things of God", and able to speak with the authority which comes from direct knowledge. They, like their Master, "taught as having authority and not as the scribes".

But after the disappearance of the Mysteries, the state of affairs slowly altered for the worse, and a divergence between the exoteric and esoteric teachings showed itself ever increasingly until a wide gulf yawned between them, and the mass of the faithful, standing on the exoteric side, lost sight of the esoteric wisdom. More and more did the letter take the place of the spirit, the form of the life, and there began the strife between the Priest and the Mystic that has ever since been waged in the Christian Church.

The Priest is ever the guardian of the exoteric, the recipient of the faith once delivered to the saints, the officiant of the sacraments, the custodian of the outer order, the transmitter of the traditions, becoming more authoritative from age to age. His to repeat accurately the sacred formulæ; his to watch over a changeless orthodoxy; his to be the articulate voice of the Church; his to hand on the unaltered record. Great and noble is his task, and invaluable his services to the evolving masses of the populace. It is he who consecrates their birth, sanctions their marriage, hallows their death; he consoles them in their sorrows and purifies their joys; he stands by the bedside of the sick and the dying, and gilds the clouds of mortality with the sun of an immortal hope. He brings into sordid lives the one gleam of poetry and of colour that they know; he enlarges their narrow horizon with the vistas of a radiant future; he gladdens the mother with the vision of the Immortal Babe; he saves the desperate youth with the tenderness of the celestial Mother; he raises before the eyes of the sorrowful the crucifix that tells of a sorrow that embraces and consoles their grief; he breathes into the ear of the dying the pledge of the Easter resurrection. How could Humanity tread the earlier stages of its journey without the Priesthood that directs, rebukes, and comforts; the universality of the office tells of the universality of the need.

Far other is the Mystic, the lonely dweller on the mountain-side, climbing in advance of his race, without help from the outer world, listening ever for the faint whisper of the God within. Humblest of men as he faces the depths of Divinity around him and the unsounded abysses of the Divinity within, he seems

arrogant as he withstands the edicts of external authority, and rebel as he bows not his neck to the yoke of ecclesiastical order. With his visions and his dreams and his ecstasies, with his gropings in the dark and his flashes from a light supernal that dazzles more than it illuminates, with his sudden irrational exaltations and his equally sudden and unreasoning depressions, what has he to oppose to the clear-cut doctrines and the imperial authority of the exoteric creed? Only an unalterable conviction which he can neither justify nor explain; a certainty which leaves him stuttering when he seeks to expound it, but remains unfaltering in face of all rebuke and all reprobation. What can the Priest do with this rebel, who places his visions above all scriptures, and asserts an inalienable liberty in the face of the demand for obedience? He has no use for him, no place for him; he disturbs with his curbless fantasies the settled order of the household of faith. Hence a continued struggle, in which the Priest for a while seems to conquer, but from which the Mystic emerges victor in the end.

The combat seems an unequal one, since the Priest has behind him the strength of a splendid tradition, of a centuries history, of a changeless authority, and the Mystic stands alone, unfriended. But it is not so unequal as it seems; for the Mystic draws his strength from That which gives birth to all religions, and he bathes in the waters that regenerate, in the flood of Eternity. So in the ever-recurring conflict, the Priest conquers in the world material, and is defeated in the world spiritual; and the Mystic, rebuked, persecuted, crushed, while dwelling in the body, becomes the Saint after the body has dropped from him, and becomes a voice of the Church that silenced him, a stone in the walls that imprisoned.

In the Roman Catholic Church this combat has been waged century after century, with the same result continually repeated. Teresa, rebuked and humbled by her confessor, arises as S. Teresa for unborn generations. Many a man and many a woman, regarded askance, treated with scorn by their contemporaries, become the cynosures of countless millions of eyes, eyes of the faithful, descendants of the faithful who decried. And on the whole it is as well that it should be so, until the stern training of old is re-established; else would every dreamer be taken as a Mystic, and every hysteric as a Revealer. Only the true Mystic can walk unblenching through the fire of rebuke, "even in hell can whisper, 'I have known'". Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church alone has preserved a systematic training within the 'religious life', a real preparation for the occult life, ever recognised in theory even if challenged and suspected in practice. Hence has she so many Saints, and such grace and tenderness of spiritual beauty, that one is fain to pardon her the cruelties of her Priesthood for the sake of the rich streams of spiritual life poured by her Mystics over the arid deserts of the outer world. And one can understand, while reprobating, the fierceness with which she guarded the ground that made such growths of saintliness possible, and made her deem the superstition and bigotry of the masses but a small price to pay for the keeping sacred from profane touch the inner seeds which flowered out into the world as the Saints

In Protestantism there has been no systematic training, and hence no soil in which the rare flower might readily root itself and grow. Few and far between are the Mystics in the Protestant community, though Jacob Boehme rises, splendid, gigantic, as though to show that even the absence of all training cannot stifle the Divinity of the Spirit which is Man. More than any other phase of christianity does Protestantism need the presence of Mystics in its midst, the touch of the living Spirit to save it from the arid letter. But this is a subject that needs separate treatment, which elsewhere I hope to give.

Theosophy is the reassertion of Mysticism within the bosom of very living religion, the affirmation of the reality of the mystic state of consciousness and of the value of its products. In the midst of a scholarly

and critical generation, it reproclaims the superiority of the knowledge which is drawn from the direct experience of the spiritual world, and, facing undaunted the splendour of the accumulated results of research, historical and scientific, facing undaunted the new and menacing Priesthood of Science and of Criticism, it affirms the greater splendour of the open vision, and the royalty of the Kingdom into which may pass 'the little child' alone. The primary experience of Mysticism is direct communion with the unseen, the recognition of the Gods without by the God within, the touching of invisible realities, the passing with opened eyes into the worlds beyond the veil. It substitutes experience for authority, knowledge for faith, and it finds its guarantee in the 'common-sense' of all Mystics, the identity of the experiences of all who traverse the grounds untrodden by the profane.

The results of mystic experiences show themselves in a method of interpretation applied to all doctrines and to all scriptures, a method which justifies itself by the light it throws on obscurities rather than by reasoned arguments. It is, in all ages, the method of the Illuminati.

An example will show the method better than efforts at explanation. Let us take the doctrine of the Atonement. The Mystic sees in this Christian doctrine one of the ways in which is told the ancient but ever new story of the unfolding of the human Spirit into self-conscious union with God. He sees the Atonement wrought by the unfolding of the Christ in man as the reflection in the human consciousness of the second Aspect in the Divine Consciousness, gradually shining out into clearness and beauty. As the Christ in man matures so is the atonement wrought, and it is completed when the Son, rising above separation, knows himself as one with Humanity and one with God, and in that knowledge becomes a veritable Saviour, a true Mediator between God and Man, uniting both in His own person, and thus making them one. The Mystic cares not to argue about the dead-letter meaning of any dogma; he sees the heart of it by the light of his own experience, and to him its true value lies in its inner content, not in its outer history.

So also with Scripture. It may, or may not, have an outer accuracy as history; its value lies in its exposition of the facts of the spiritual world. Whether a physical Israel did or did not wander through a physical desert seems to him to be of infinitesimal importance; many nations have wandered through many deserts. But the spiritual Israel wanders ever through spiritual deserts in its search for the promised land, and this is ever fresh, ever true, and he reads the story in the spiritual light and finds in it much that consoles, much that illuminates. He sees a Moses in every Prophet of humanity, pillars of fire and of cloud in every guidance of a nation. Nor is the Mystic without justification in thus reading the Scriptures; for S. Paul in *Galatians iv.*, has thus dealt with the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael; and all the early Fathers of the Church sought the inner meanings and care little for the outer words.

For the educated Christian of today, who would not cut himself wholly off from the old moorings, this method of interpretation is vital, and only by the direct knowledge gained in the mystic state of consciousness can he preserve his religion amid the changes brought about by modern research. The Higher Criticism is undermining all his authorities; subtly, but in deadly fashion, its burrowing's have taken the ground away beneath their feet; and only a thin crust remains, which at any moment may give way, and let the whole structure crash down into irretrievable ruin. The Church can no longer be built on historical authority; it must build itself on the rock of experience, if it would survive the tempest which roars around it. Mysticism can give it the surest certainty in all the world, the certainty of mystic experience continually renewed. The Christ within is the only guarantee of the Christ without - but no further guarantee is needed. Because the Christ lives undeveloped in every human Spirit, the Christ

developed is a historical fact; and those in whom the mystic Christ is developing can look across the gulf of centuries and recognise the historical Christ; nay, can transcend the limitations of the physical, and know Him in His living reality as surely, and more fully, than His disciples knew Him when He walked by the lake of Gennesaret.