

Mysticism in the Church: 10 Things to Watch For

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As unsettling changes take place in your Christian environment, you might find yourself in this scenario:

1. In my Christian reading I get a gritty feeling about a phrase here or a teaching there. Then...
2. I sense that new meanings are being applied to established Christian terms. Then...
3. I find outright heresy in books and/or sermons.
4. I notice certain names repeated in those sermons or in the endnotes of books.
5. I voice concern to my minister, but he's dismissive: "Now, now, we can't all agree on everything."
6. I see acceptance of practices that I've discovered are misleading: Eastern wellness techniques...
7. and contemplative prayer...
8. and interspirituality.
9. But I also wonder if I'm missing out, if I'm not as spiritual as others who are having "experiences."
10. I come to realize that I can't blindly follow authorities; they may be losing their grasp of the Scriptures.
I'll get into the Word for myself, stay connected to the church and to the real Jesus.

1. That gritty feeling

A phrase or idea sounds "off" in a seemingly solid book: "the Christ-thing which has no name." (John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*) "Our souls are those sacred centers where all is one." (Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*) "There is nothing wrong...with eroticism in worship." (Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*)

2. Same vocabulary, different dictionary

Terms that have traditionally been associated with the church have been infused with new meaning, like: Christ, God, atonement, kingdom, silence, spirituality, meditation, incarnational...

3. Outright false teaching on foundational doctrines

Rob Bell on the virgin birth, Jesus' deity, truth of Scripture: If "Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time," Bell says, we wouldn't lose any significant part of our faith, since it's more about how we live. (*Velvet Elvis*, p. 26)

Brian McLaren on salvation: "I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish contexts." (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 260)

Alan Jones on the atonement: "The Church's fixation on the death of Jesus as the universal saving act must end...[because of]...the vindictive God behind it." (*Reimagining Christianity*, p. 68.)

Foster, Willard, Peterson, Brueggeman reject the messianic passages in Isaiah, calling them "poetic imagination." (Renovare Study Bible notes)

Sue Monk Kidd, on goddess worship: "My soul is my own. It is all right for women to follow the wisdom in their souls, to name their truth, to embrace the Sacred Feminine....She is in us." (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=45557)

4. Endnotes

Among those who promote mysticism (some inadvertently) is a pattern in the sources being quoted. Learn to check the endnotes in popular books. Some key names: Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, Madame Guyon...

5. Dismissive leaders in the local church

The response to your concerns/research: "Well, I haven't heard about this, so you must be wrong." Or "That's a brilliant scholar you're criticizing!"

6. Eastern wellness techniques

Yoga (union with the divine), *reiki* (spirit energy), and *mindfulness* are brought into our culture from paganism, often somewhat sanitized and/or billed as non-religious. Compare manifestations of *kundalini* (coiled) yoga and the Toronto Blessing/IHOP movement. Catholic writer Philip St. Romain equates kundalini serpent power to the power of the Holy Spirit.

7. Contemplative prayer

An integral part of “spiritual formation” disciplines, contemplative prayer (aka centering prayer, abiding prayer, breath prayer, Jesus prayer) is described by Richard Foster as: wordless (no content), not for the novice (exclusive), unmediated, and dangerous. Thomas Merton gives the dangers: you could lose your faith, contact a demon, be led into false belief by your own imagination, feel a dread sense that God has abandoned you, or have a mental breakdown. No Scripture prescribes the following ritual to achieve union with the divine: sit quietly, use measured breathing, repeat a phrase over and over for 20 minutes until your mind is empty. Is this altered mental state *really* the one way to achieve union with God, as mystics claim? ...Aren't Christians already covered with the blood of Jesus and indwelt with the Holy Spirit? Aren't we already united with him through his body, the church?

One Christian blogger expressed what thousands are coming to believe about meditation: “The ridiculous theological squabbles between adherents of different faiths disappear when the thoughts that produce all that dissension are stilled. Call it centering prayer; call it mantra meditation. The practice is the same, and it brings mystics together under the sheltering tent of wordless reality.”

8. Interspirituality/Interfaith dialogue

Do these terms mean “doing benevolent work with people of other faiths” or “blending religions”? We're hearing about Chrislam, Christian Zen, Buddhist Catholics, and demon-invoking ceremonies in churches. Also adopted from paganism and moving into the church are labyrinths, rosaries, monks and monasteries, enforced celibacy, extreme asceticism, visualization, consulting the dead, channeling, and goddess worship.

9. Missing out on something?

You may begin to question your own faith. Others are having spiritual experiences—seeing lights or spiritual beings, visualizing Jesus for a personal message, feeling an ecstatic unity with all mankind and the universe—all of which can subtly begin to take precedence over the authority of God's Word and the Lord Jesus.

10. Naïve acceptance

Perhaps you haven't felt the need to question Christian study materials until recently. But how *are* destructive heresies secretly introduced? Why are doctrines of demons (1 Timothy 4:1-3) associated with asceticism, and how is the church exposed to them? How could demonic doctrines be so clever that the elect could be deceived? Who *is* “the Christ-thing which has no name”? Would God refer to his Son in that way? What *are* the implications of “eroticism in worship”? When confronted with several wrongly translated texts in *The Message* Bible, someone from the publisher dismissed the problem by asking, “Does anyone really know what any of the Bible really means anyway?”

Conclusion

Ironically, a couple of insightful Western Buddhists seem to see the problem better than we do, probably because they understand pagan doctrine. From a Buddhist's review (2008) of Rob Bell's popular book: “*Velvet Elvis* contains enough inconsistencies of logic and violations of orthodox Christian theology to raise the hairs on the back of any well-read and deep-thinking Christian's neck.” And from a Buddhist blogger to his student on how to convert Christians to Buddhism: “If this information [Merton's teachings, for example] could be taught in the Seminaries it might start to impact the various preachers 10 or 20 years down the road. This is the angle I'm working. If the preachers are inwardly ‘Buddhists’ in their hearts, then you don't need to beat your head against the wall dealing with ignorant congregants.”

Watch out that no one deceives you.