

Mysticism in the Church: 10 Things to Watch For

(expanded version)

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Intro

Maybe you're unaware that mysticism, Eastern religions, and occult practice are slipping into the church. If so, and assuming that you want to stick close to the Lord and his Word, you will generally first begin merely to sense that some vague, unsettling change is taking place in Christian teaching. Then you'll probably follow the predictable progression we've observed over the last decade. Let's move through this "10 things" progression.

1. That Gritty Feeling

In your Christian reading or from sermons, you get "that gritty feeling" about a phrase here or a teaching there, but you can't quite put your finger on the problem. (When we mention "that gritty feeling" in workshops, heads across the room start nodding.) A phrase or idea sounds "off" in a seemingly solid book. Ex: "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*). Such things sound strange, but you're not familiar enough with mysticism/Eastern religions/the occult to make a direct connection. So you just move on, thinking, *Well, surely he didn't mean THAT! And besides, everybody else thinks this is great stuff, so it's probably OK. Otherwise, it wouldn't be in the Christian bookstore or my church, would it?*

2. Same Vocabulary, Different Dictionary

You begin to sense, by the context of what you're reading/hearing, that new meanings are being applied to established Christian terms. Ex: *Christ* should mean "Jesus Christ." But it may mean that man Jesus who managed to attain ascended-master status (and you can too). It also may mean your own "christ consciousness" (that awareness of your own christhood), or it might mean the coming cosmic christ, Maitreya. Ex: *God* should mean "the almighty creator of the universe," but it might mean the big, fluffy universal energy or a bundle of "love." Ex: *Atonement* should mean that Jesus Christ was the substitute sacrifice for our sins, but it might mean that Jesus was an example of sacrifice (not an actual sacrifice); his death was an act of love that warms our hearts.

And speaking of definitions, don't confuse the concept of mysticism with something that's merely mysterious. Mysticism centers around the idea that mind and thought interfere with "communication with God" (often called "union with the divine"; that is, my realization that I am divine). The Christian mystic (though there can really be no such thing as a Christian mystic, because the Christian worldview is at odds with the mystical worldview) attempts to get beyond the inferior normal senses, the inferior practices of normal prayer and reading the Word; he wants to break through a sort of cosmic barrier (and attempts this by going into an altered state of consciousness through mantra meditation) to have a supposed superior experience.

Now, review the above and realize that with a sentence like the following, the author you're reading might not mean at all what you'd mean if you said the same sentence: "In this mystical state, we adore the Christ whose atonement brings us closer to God."

3. Outright False Teaching on Foundational Doctrines

You find outright heresy in books and/or sermons. You read Rob Bell's words: If "Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists . . . prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in," Bell says, we wouldn't lose any significant part of our faith (*Velvet Elvis*, p. 26). And you think, *Our youth minister used this book. Does he think it wouldn't matter that the Bible writers lied and that Jesus isn't God?*

A Christian magazine recommends Brian McLaren. So you get his book and read: "I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable . . . to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish contexts" (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 260). And you think, *Really? What Scripture teaches that?* Someone told you a good Alan Jones quote. Then you were shocked to read in his book: "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). You find yourself wondering, *What does Jones do with . . . well, with the whole New Testament?* Someone proudly showed you a Renovare study Bible. But in the Isaiah notes, you see that Foster, Willard, Peterson, and Brueggeman reject the messianic passages in Isaiah, calling them mere "poetic imagination." They also say we don't know who wrote Isaiah. And you think, *Hmm. Jesus, the Gospel writers, and Paul knew who wrote Isaiah.* Sue Monk Kidd has multiple books. You stand in the Christian bookstore and read: "The ultimate authority of my life is not the Bible. . . . It is not from a source outside myself. My ultimate authority is the divine voice in my own soul" (*Dance of the Dissident Daughter*). You're wondering, *And just what is the source of that "divine voice"?*

You're quite troubled now as you run into more and more things like this. But no one else seems concerned. During one wild moment, you're afraid you might be in that movie with the pod people.

4. Endnotes

You're zoned in now and looking more closely at the books everyone is reading/referencing. Certain names seem to keep appearing in sermons or in the endnotes of books. Among those who promote mysticism and related theology/practice (though some people are sincerely unaware of what they're promoting) is a pattern in the sources being quoted. A few key names are: Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, Richard Rohr. Research online the spiritual family trees of the names that keep showing up. When you hit Hindu/Buddhist/New Age/occult partnerships and teachings . . . well, it's not a coincidence.

5. Dismissive Leaders in the Local Church

Finally, you can't stand it. Something's wrong! You voice concern to your minister. Even though you have evidence, you're shocked to find him dismissive: "Now, now, we can't all agree on everything." (As if you're upset with the paint colors in the multipurpose room, rather than concerned about key teachings.) Or he might say: "Well, I haven't heard about this. You must be mistaken" or "That's a brilliant scholar you're criticizing!" Your minister doesn't appear willing to investigate further, and you leave this meeting stunned.

I'm sorry, dear ministers and teachers, but let's consider the need to be teachable and humble when we've been wrong or acted in ignorance. I still remember feeling humiliated more than a decade ago when I first learned that this mystical shift was happening. See, I've studied all things bizarre since I was 17. Not everyone has that background, but I should have picked up on this new deception since I at least sorta speak the lingo. How embarrassing! But ego isn't the main issue here. When we learn something of vital spiritual

importance, we can't just pretend everything's OK and continue sending our friends to iffy sources for spiritual guidance.

6. Eastern Wellness Techniques

Having gotten no satisfaction from your experience in #5, you're a bit depressed but more on alert than ever. Now you recognize, because of your research, that even some practices accepted in the secular community are definitely religious, while billed as neutral.

The argument has been that yoga (which means “union with the divine”) has had the Hinduism removed; it's not religious, just exercise. But now that yoga has gained wide acceptance, more ads openly admit that it has spiritual implications. Even kundalini yoga (designed to awaken “serpent power”) is now advertised in medical centers. Catholic writer Philip St. Romain unfathomably equates this kundalini serpent power with the power of the Holy Spirit! Reiki (a Japanese term meaning “spirit energy”) is also used in medical centers or hospice care and may be performed on the patient without his knowledge. (I know of multiple cases.) Mindfulness (an aspect of Buddhist detachment) and occult visualization are part of counseling courses—taught even in Christian colleges, but with no warnings given by the profs.

You think, *It's bad enough that my neighbors who are “not religious” are unknowingly participating in religious practices; but now in the church there's so-called Christian yoga, Christian reiki, Christian Zen . . .* You have many “yikes!” moments as you read up on what happened in the Old Testament when the Israelites mixed in forbidden practice with what the Lord had ordained.

7. Contemplative Prayer

In researching all these matters, you keep running into talk of contemplative prayer (also called centering prayer and a number of other things); it appears to be a key for bringing mysticism into the church. Neither “contemplative” nor “prayer,” this is mantra meditation—repeating a phrase for 10–20 minutes until going into an altered state of consciousness. It is described by the expert Christian promoters as wordless (no content), not for the novice (so, it's exclusive; and yet everyone should try it, they say), unmediated (?), and even dangerous (you might dial a wrong number). There seems to be some thought that if people of all religions set aside their religious teachings and just “meditated,” the world could have a happy, one-size-fits-all spirituality. *Hmm, something clicks, maybe that's why the Christian books that are high on contemplative prayer don't seem very interested in Scripture.*

I've thoroughly covered contemplative prayer in my two articles: [“Can Christians Practice “Good” Contemplative Prayer?”](#) and [“Big Noisy God.”](#)

8. Interspirituality/Interfaith Dialogue

When you first heard the terms *interfaith dialogue* and *interspirituality*, you thought they were talking about the Baptists chumming up with the Presbyterians. Then you decided, no, this must indicate that Christians and Hindus and atheists should work together amicably on the job or when helping disaster victims. But . . . um, we're already doing that. So you've come to see that the underlying agenda is actually about blending the world religions—each person building a spirituality by choosing “spiritual side orders,” as if in a buffet line. You're reading about Chrislam, Buddhist Catholics, Christians who also follow Swami so-and-so. There are even demon-invoking ceremonies held in churches. Also adopted from paganism/occultism and moving into Christian life are labyrinths, consulting the dead, channeling, magick circles, and goddess worship. The idea is that we should cling to any common ground we have and throw out anything divisive (which is sort of the idea discussed in #7—if we all just did mantra meditation and downplayed tedious doctrine). But “common ground” talk is misleading. Ex: Christian

compassion and Buddhist compassion aren't the same thing at all. Ex: *Peace* in some religions really means “Do what we say or we'll kill you.” The “divisive,” uncommon ground in Christianity that Christians would have to throw out is the Bible. And of course, Jesus. Yeah, he's a problem. OK. Well, at least things seem pretty clear to you now. And yet . . .

9. Missing Out on Something?

You've learned a lot and are quite concerned, but at the same time you're tempted to wonder whether you're missing out on a more exotic spirituality. Your friends are going into the “cloud of unknowing” and carrying “sacred objects” and sitting under a tree until “Jesus” speaks to them. They seem to be having really cool spiritual experiences. And you can tell they're looking down on you in a “the poor thing just isn't enlightened” sort of way. You may begin to question your own faith. Other friends claim that they're seeing lights or spiritual beings, visualizing Jesus or the apostle Paul to deliver a personal message on demand, feeling an ecstatic unity with all mankind and the universe. These heady experiences surely make a person feel special/superior. So . . . But no, wait! You've seen your friends allow these experiences to take precedence over the authority of the real Word of God and the real Jesus, with a downplaying of foundational truths. With a chill, you recall a line from the classic poem “The Spider and the Fly,” in which the spider tempts the poor fly: “The way into my parlor is up a winding stair / and I have many curious things to show you when you're there.” In Deuteronomy 12:30 the Lord specifically told the Israelites not to be curious about the other religions. You remind yourself that feelings aren't the best judge of truth.

10. Naïve Acceptance

You're at a crossroads. You can blindly follow human authorities who may be losing their grasp of the Scriptures. Or you can remain watchful. Perhaps you hadn't felt the need to question Christian study materials until recently. But how *are* destructive heresies secretly introduced (2 Peter 2:1)? How is the church exposed to doctrines of demons (1 Timothy 4:1-3)? How could false teaching be clever enough to deceive long-time believers (Matthew 24:24)? Recalling #1, you've learned that you must challenge teachings that give you that gritty feeling: 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”?

Ironically, people outside the church often understand what's happening better than we do. Reports in the secular news (like *USA Today*) several years ago pointed out surprising theologies and practices that Christians were adopting. A couple of insightful Western Buddhists also seem savvy. One Buddhist's 2008 review of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis* said that the book should “raise the hairs on the back of any well-read and deep-thinking Christian's neck.” And a Buddhist blogger told his student how to convert Christians to Buddhism: “If this information [Thomas 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.”

Maybe the accusation of being ignorant is justified. The publisher of *The Message* Bible was confronted about several wrongly translated passages. The rep dismissed the problem with: “Does anyone really know what any of the Bible really means anyway?” Good heavens! The Scripture was written so that we could know God, know his truth, and know how he wants us to live.

We just need to be like the Bereans, who “examined the Scriptures” (Acts 17:11) to make sure that teachings being presented were true. And it's a good idea to put on the armor of God to “take your stand” against schemes from the dark side (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Conclusion

Mysticism—though at first glance exotic—is complicated, legalistic, ritualistic, shallow, dangerous, and fosters pride in our own efforts. Mysticism is not scriptural. The Lord doesn't distance himself from those who seek him; he doesn't obscure the way until "ancient wisdom" can be unlocked/"reimagined" by some "ascended master." The Lord simply speaks to us in his Word; we speak to him in prayer. And then in that relationship with the Lord, we aim to live confidently under his loving command. Themes of "obey my commands" and "do not be afraid" run throughout Scripture (ex: Joshua 1:8, 9; Psalm 119:32, 93; Romans 8:31, 37-39; 1 John 5:3).

It always comes down to truth. Jesus is the truth (John 14:6); his "word is truth" (John 17:17); "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). The familiar list in Philippians 4:8 puts truth as the first item: "Whatever is true . . . think about such things." But false teaching has always been hot on the trail of what's true. And it sometimes appears in places we wouldn't expect. "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth" (Acts 20:30).

"Watch out that no one deceives you" (Matthew 24:4).

One suggestion about helping others: A friend of mine complained to his elders about a book the church was sort of endorsing. But the elders were already fans of this writer. They couldn't believe they'd been misled, didn't want to hear it; and so were unable to be objective. My friend waited a couple of months. Then he made a list of that writer's quotes, leaving out the writer's name. He showed those quotes to his elders, asking, "What do you think of *these* teachings?" The elders said that the teachings did not match Scripture. Then my friend revealed that this was the same writer they had defended earlier.

So be patient with people who need time to absorb new information. And don't just blurt out that so-and-so is "a heretic" or "wacky." Be specific about the teaching, rather than trying to assess the person's motives/character. Kindly let the person's own words (or quotes of other people he's using in a favorable way) state his theology. We still can't guarantee how people will respond, but at least we've presented clear evidence that can be verified.

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