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# KING'S

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# SPIRITUALITY AND THE STATUS QUO

GRACE M JANTZEN

'Academic theology has tended to emerge from the dominant groups of society and be entrenched on the side of the status quo in various situations throughout the world.'<sup>1</sup>

These words of Allan Boesak need to be deeply pondered by all of us engaged in academic theology, and nowhere more than by those of us who have a special interest in the study of spirituality. In this paper I propose to indicate some of the ways in which what is called spirituality is used, both at a popular and at an academic level, on the side of the status quo, and make some suggestions about how this has come about. I will then look at some of the issues in the history of Christian spirituality which show that such domestication of sanctity is at variance with the lives and writings of Christian mystics, even while purporting to derive from them. This can be done in no more than a programmatic way; but I hope that it will be enough to help us hear again something of their subversive and counter-cultural voice.

## 1. Consolation Spirituality

It is an obvious fact that there is resurgence of interest in spirituality and mysticism in academia and outside it, in the churches and in wider society. Devotional books, and volumes containing 'selected readings from the mystics' which can be read for a few minutes at the beginning or end of the day, sell thousands of copies and help keep religious publishers solvent. Retreat centres flourish; institutes of spirituality are set up in various locations around the country; and more of the writings of medieval mystics are available in English translation; theology faculties at universities are offering courses in mysticism or spirituality among their options (or feeling uncomfortable if they don't!).

It is very far from my intention to cast disparagement on all this; there is much that is good in it. Yet I suggest that for a phenomenon as widespread and religiously significant as the current resurgence of attention to spirituality, theologians have paid astonishingly little attention to it. We have not done much to identify or evaluate the need to which this resurgent interest gives evidence, nor have we asked many questions about whether or how spirituality either in its popular manifestations or in its academic study does much to meet those needs. Even less have we enquired whether involvement in spirituality actually suppresses important needs of insight. With regard to its popular manifestations on the whole we have been inclined either to assume an uncritical or paternalistic piety and see the phenomena as evidences of the Spirit of God moving among the masses of our time, or we have been inclined to dismiss it as so much religious sentiment unrelated to serious theological pursuits. Often we shuffle uncomfortably between the two. But I have begun to doubt that either response takes the phenomenon of increasing popular interest in spirituality anything like seriously enough.

It hardly requires expertise in social psychology to see that a large growth of interest in something usually indicates some increase in a felt need or desire. If this is correct, then one question we need to be asking ourselves is this: what is the felt need or desire that underlines the growth of interest in spirituality? How is it hoped that spirituality will meet that need?

It would be pleasant for a Christian theologian to be able to

reply that what is desired is God, and that increased interest in spirituality is an expression of the increasing longing for God. Again, I do not wish to deny that this is partially true. But a closer look at the evidence gives me the uncomfortable feeling that there is also a great deal of wishful thinking about such a reply, and that the motivations surrounding the contemporary pursuit of spirituality are rather more complex.

If for instance we look at some of the most widely sold books on prayer and spirituality we find a huge emphasis on personal psychological well-being. Topics like anxiety, depression, and loneliness are regularly addressed, along with such matters as suffering, bereavement and sexuality, all of which are treated as essentially private psychological issues for the individual to work through. Prayer and spiritual exercises are seen as bringing an increase of peace and tranquillity, and courage for the hard things in life. Thus for example Robert Llewelyn's popular (and very good) book on the use of the rosary. *A Doorway to Silence* says that praying the rosary can 'offer a positive way in which our emotions can be handled. Here is a way of growth and integration which cannot but find its repercussions on those around us'<sup>2</sup>. In another place he speaks of the way in which such prayer can 'bring healing to every part of yourself, that body-soul-spirit complex which makes up each one of us.' He then says, 'Perhaps one half of the hospital beds in the country would be emptied if everyone were to spend fifteen minutes on this each day.'<sup>3</sup>

I agree with Llewelyn about this, and about the relationship between a steady discipline of prayer and psycho-physical well being. But my present point is twofold. First, the immense success of his book (measured in numbers of sales) shows how urgent is the felt need for psycho-physical well being, for inner resources to cope with the stresses of life. Second, while the book is a splendid gentle introduction to disciplined prayer and shows its healing value, it nowhere addresses the question of where the stresses in life originate, or whether there are structures in society which generate oppression and anxiety through injustice. Except insofar as the psycho-spiritual well being of the praying individual has an impact on her society (and this should not be minimized) there is no indication that prayer has anything to do with politics or social justice. Rather it provides a private religious way of coping with life, whatever the external circumstances.

It might well be protested that Llewelyn is writing a book about prayer, not about politics, and it is churlish to castigate him for failing to do the latter when he did the former with great skill and insight. What I am pointing out, however, is that to the extent that prayer actually does help us to cope with the distresses of life, to that very extent it may act as a sedative which keeps us from dismantling the structures that perpetuate the distresses, or even from recognizing that they need to be challenged. If books and practices of spirituality help us calm our jangled nerves and release our anxieties and give us courage to re-enter the world as it is, then whatever the good intentions of authors and practitioners, what is actually happening is that the status quo is being reinforced. People are learning through prayer to find the tranquillity to live with corrupt political and social structures, instead of channelling their distress and anxiety into energy for constructive change.

In this connection it is worth noticing the way in which the writings of the saints and mystics have been domesticated for a privatized spirituality. Take almost any book of daily readings from the mystics (e.g. the enormously popular *Enfolded in Love* series published by DLT), and it is obvious that the predomi-

nant themes are ones like the love of God, trust in God, submission to God's will, dependence on providence, peace, tranquillity, and the like. It is clear that while a person who uses these readings as a basis for daily meditation may well find herself calmed and encouraged, it is unlikely that they will provoke her to think hard about the social causes of her stress, let alone the way in which the structures of our society threaten the survival and well being of our brothers and sisters in the world, and even of the planet itself. As Margaret Miles has pointed out in *The Image and Practice of Holiness*<sup>4</sup>, it was one thing to meditate trustingly on exhortations to submit to divine providence in a time when the plague might come at any moment and no one knew how to evade it; it is quite another to take those texts as blueprints for inactivity when the very survival of our planet depends on informed and concerted effort.

With some notable exceptions (like Gerard Hughes' *God of Surprises*) books of popular spirituality treat prayer and spiritual exercises as personal and private, having to do with the relationship between the individual and God. By this privatization of spirituality the relation between prayer and social and political activity is not addressed. The net result, whatever the intention of the authors or compilers, is the reinforcement of the status quo, as religious energy is poured into personal holiness rather than social justice. And this in turn has the effect not only of turning the attention of those seeking spiritual growth away from issues of justice, but also of leaving the efforts for justice to those who, in conventional terms, are not particularly concerned about spirituality – to the obvious detriment of both.

When we turn from the resurgence of popular interest in spirituality to its renewal in academic study it seems to me that we fare little better. There has been some excellent work in recent years in textual analysis of mystical writings, which has given us critical editions, translations, and studies of literary sources. Again, this splendid; but like the intensive textual criticism of the Bible such textual analysis of mystical writing has often tried to maintain the fiction of detached neutrality, and without consciously intending to do so has thereby played into the hands of the status quo. In the case of mystical writings, the importance of taking social implications seriously is not encouraged by work like that of Matthew Fox whose political fervour outstrips his scholarly competence. This only reinforces the more conventional scholarly approach of treating mystical writings as timeless wisdom, which must be submitted to careful textual analysis but whose social setting is not deemed particularly important: again there are parallels to some forms of Biblical scholarship, especially of the form-critical method popular before more recent sociological and narrative methodologies were taken very seriously.

Furthermore, as in any branch of study, the questions we bring to the study of spirituality will affect the answers we are likely to receive. If we are not asking questions about justice and the structuring of society, we may well fail to perceive how significant were the views of many of the paradigms of spirituality in Christian history, especially when this lack of questioning is coupled with a concentration on textual analysis which itself is conducted without much reference to social structure. Now since the time of Schleiermacher and Schelling, and much reinforced by the work of William James, one of the dominant sets of questions with which study of the mystics is approached concerns their subjective psychological state: whether their ecstasies and visions and reports of union with God are signs of psychic health or of psychic imbalance,

whether they can be authenticated as experiences of God or whether they are merely human projections, whether from analysis of such experiences we could develop a doctrine of a mystical core of religions, and the like. The Romantic view of religion as based on private and ineffable feeling or emotion, in some direct apprehension of the divine that bypasses Kantian strictures of evidence or rationality, has been decisive particularly in the study of mysticism, where one scholar after another simply repeats William James' characterization of mystical experience and concentrates on the inwardness and subjectivity of the alleged occurrences. This concentration on the mystics' psychological states effectively distracts attention from the social implications of their lives and writings for their time or our own.

Thus for example there is endless discussion of what John of the Cross meant by the dark night of the soul: how it is the same as psychological depression and how it is different, how it should be recognized and how it should be dealt with, whether there is linear progression through the stages of the dark night or whether the experiences can be cyclic or recurrent, and so on. What is hardly discussed are the glaringly obvious implications of speaking of the growth of faith and love as darkness and obscurity in *sixteenth century Spain*, when the Inquisition was in full swing with triumphalist light and certainty, and the major religious counterweight to it was the sect of the Alhumbrados, the Illuminists, who as their name suggests also thought of spiritual growth in terms of increasing light and illumination. In such a context John of the Cross' emphasis on the *dark night* of the senses, the intellect, and the spirit is outrageously subversive of the certainties of ecclesiastical and socio-political structures. Yet scholars have been slow to investigate this while arguing finer points of the psychology implicit in his writing.

Along with the concentration on the psychology of mystical states has been a continuing concern about the doctrinal orthodoxy of the mystics. This is nowhere more clear than in Eckhartian studies, where article after book after article is written to show that he did (or did not) slide into pantheistic heresy. In this particular case, however, it is almost impossible to avoid some discussion of the heresy itself, which quickly reveals that whatever one's view of the orthodoxy of Eckhart's doctrine, the procedure of the trial left a good deal to be desired. What this ought to do is to lead scholars to ask why it was that emotions ran so high; and to look seriously at the social conditions in which Eckhart was preaching. Even if Matthew Fox's theories stand in need of more careful scholarship, it is at least worth considering his suggestion that Eckhart's preaching in the vernacular about the nobility of the soul was directly and influentially subversive of the collusion of the ecclesiastical and social hierarchy that was keeping the peasants firmly in their place. Yet apart from the work of Matthew Fox, it is rare to find discussions of Eckhart which take issues of social justice seriously: most concentrate on his ideas about God as the Abyss, and about the point or apex of the soul, and his use of language and paradox. As in the case of John of the Cross, Eckhart's views are implicitly presented as a privatized and psychologized spirituality that does not challenge the structures of society.

One of the glaring gaps in conventional theological study is the lack of interaction between the study of spirituality and the study of Christian doctrine, either in the sense that theologians have paid much attention to the ways in which their presentations of Christian doctrine foster (or fail to foster) holiness of life and society, or in the sense that those who study

spirituality have had much to say about how theology should be done. Again, there are important exceptions: one need only think of the integrating work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. But quite often spirituality is treated by 'serious' theologians as the soft and trendy side of the curriculum, while specialists in the study of spirituality in their turn suspect theologians of constructing (or deconstructing) ever more complex doctrinal edifices without really thinking through how anyone could actually live in them.

Surely it is not accidental that one of the major areas where this gap between the study of spirituality and the study of theology is bridged is in the various forms of liberation theology. Leonardo Boff, in his efforts to develop an ecclesiology that does justice to the Latin American context, has drawn strongly on the life and writings of Francis of Assisi, allowing his theological considerations to be informed by Franciscan spirituality. Feminist theologians like Rosemary Reuther have been reclaiming the spirituality of women in the early and medieval church in an effort to rethink concepts of power and patriarchy. In Germany ecotheologians have studied the life and work of Hildegard of Bingen to great profit.

These forms of liberation theology are often seen as 'marginal' rather than 'mainstream' within the world of academic theology. Yet when theologians do begin to ask questions about justice and liberation, then it becomes clear that the tradition of Christian spirituality has much to offer. And this, of course, is entirely consistent with what a saint is. As Karl Rahner has put it, saints are women and men who have shown what it is to be followers of Christ — that is, to *live* an incarnational theology — in their own unique places and times, and who thereby liberate our imaginations in an attempt to be followers in our turn, not by rigid imitation, but by living the gospel of liberty and justice in our own contexts.<sup>6</sup> Where the conventions of church and society are at odds with that Gospel it is inevitable that sanctity must be unconventional and countercultural, radical (i.e. from the root) both in the sense that it is rooted in the Gospel of a crucified failure, and in the sense that it challenges the roots of current assumptions and values.

My argument, therefore, is not only that the privatization of spirituality and the domestication of the saints is a failure of justice and a betrayal of the spiritual giants of Christian history, though both of these are true. My argument is that these failures constitute a theological failure as well. Insofar as our theology does not engage, in method and in content, with issues of justice and liberation, and see these as essential to personal and communal holiness, to that extent we are wittingly or unwittingly reinforcing attitudes and structures of oppression. To suppose that justice and compassion are not central to our theology, our words about God, is to ignore the incarnation and the heart of the Gospel message: arguably, it is to ignore the heart of God.

## 2. The Counter Culturalism of the Saints.

One of the things that can be done to begin to redress the balance is to reclaim the lives and writings of the giants of Christian spirituality, paying particular attention to the social contexts in which they lived in a way that shows how their spirituality challenged the conventions and stereotypes of their societies and ours. It is obviously impossible to do more in this paper than to indicate a few particularly striking instances in a sketchy and programmatic fashion, but even this will be enough to show that the privatization and domestication of

sanctity is very far from justifiable historically or theologically.

One of the most pervasive challenges of the tradition of Christian spirituality to the changing society in which it finds itself is in what constitutes security and success. This challenge was instantiated early in Christian history in the women and men of the Roman Empire who left the cities to live in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, and who were regularly the inspiration for subsequent movements of reform and renewal. It would be foolish to pretend that there was only one motivation for going to the desert: clearly there was a rich variety of both intention and lifestyle. Yet it seems clear that part of what was happening was an effort to keep hold of the ideals of martyrdom, an identification with Christ who gave his life for his people. If it was no longer likely, as persecution of Christians diminished, that they would be called upon to endure red martyrdom — the actual shedding of blood — they could still offer themselves for green martyrdom, the life of identification with Christ given for others. Thus women and men left the relative comfort and security of the cities to pray and do battle with demons on behalf of the church. This was not, I think, fundamentally a bid for a private holiness while the rest of the world could go to hell. Rather it was the recognition that holiness is self-giving, not in the sense of self-disparagement but in the sense that following the marginalized and crucified Christ entails living in the margins from which the 'demons' which had society in their grip could be discerned and fought.

Such recognition is far less possible from the centre, where concerns for material security and assumptions about what constitutes success and progress too easily blinker vision. Accordingly the women and men who left their society and went to the desert are renowned for their ascetical practices; and taken out of context many of the stories about them sound like body hatred gone wild. That there was some body hatred born of an overzealous and under Christianized Platonism can hardly be denied, but surely Benedicta Ward is right in her claim that asceticism was only a means. The end was God; and this end was to be reached by learning how to deal with the passions and learning how to practice ordinary Christian charity.<sup>7</sup> Now it is very easy to suppose that we already know what the passions are which must be dealt with, and on the other hand that we know what the Christian charity is that must be practiced: if this were the case, then asceticism could be seen as a means for helping us learn to do what we already *know*. I suggest however that part of the point of moving to the margins and practicing asceticism, both for the desert mothers and fathers and for the subsequent Christians in monasteries, anchorholds, and modern inner cities, is the realization that in large measure we do not know, and we need to be in a place where we can learn discernment. The values — even (or especially?) the ostensibly Christian values — of society need to be deconstructed and reevaluated, and there is no place like the desert, literal or metaphorical, for such a programme, and no substitute for ascetical discipline as a pedagogical method. Particularly when the society in question was overtly sympathetic to Christianity, as it was in the Roman Empire after the conversion of Constantine, it was necessary that there should be those who would move to the margins to discern and challenge societal values that had increasingly little to do with crucifixion.

'Abba, give us a word.' This was the regular plea of the ones who came out from the cities to learn from the wisdom of the desert dwellers. From the stories of the 'words' that were given in response to this request two things are clear. The first is that the ascetical life of the desert did indeed bring discernment.

Time after time, insight was offered, and all too often it was much nearer the bone than the inquirer expected: the stories of the sayings of the desert fathers are often tinged with the wry humour of very prosaic advice being offered to someone desirous of spiritual heroics. Secondly, the discernment was there for the benefit of those who came in need of it; it was not for the sole benefit of the desert dwellers, or for a singular pursuit of private holiness. For all the emphasis on solitude, there was also an emphasis on appropriate availability. In this way genuine alternatives to the norms of society were offered, by precept and example, to those who were willing to go to the desert and learn from the women and men who lived there how their society might be revised.

Central to such revisioning was a different perspective on wealth and possessions than was normal in society: it is no accident that poverty has been part of the monastic vow for most of the history of Christian monasticism. The irony was that although individual women and men renounced personal possessions, the structures of the monastic system from time to time became very wealthy indeed, with abbeys owning vast estates and having enormous political and economic control. Yet these structures were frequently called into question and brought to reform from within: sometimes, as with the Cistercian reform, the new movement to the margins quickly became wealthy and powerful in its turn. This is not the place to recount the ups and downs of the ideal of poverty: the point is that however sadly it often failed in practice, it was an ideal, which directly challenged the norms of acquisitiveness. It was taken as given through many centuries that the pursuit of holiness required renunciation not necessarily of wealth but certainly of greed: and in practice that frequently meant renunciation of wealth as well. Far from being a purely private matter, this was again of direct social concern. The renunciation of wealth was intended to free people from the preoccupations of possessions, to enable them to give to the poor and to challenge the structures of society based on greed which engendered that poverty. Again, it requires only modest acquaintance with Christian history to know how far short of these ideals the reality frequently fell. Yet those who are honoured as saints are those whose attitudes to possessions were patterned after the poor man from Galilee rather than after the personal and institutional greed around them.

How outrageous this could be in the eyes of society is vividly illustrated in the life of Francis of Assisi. Where other young men composed lyrics to their loves, Francis became a troubadour singing to his Lady Poverty, Everyone knows the story of the fury of his father at Francis' identification with the poor, even to the point of himself going round the town with a begging bowl: what is not so often registered is that what so infuriated Pietro Bernardone was the implied criticism of his wealthy lifestyle: was he not a good Christian? The insistence by the early Franciscans on total poverty, institutional as well as personal, and their theological understanding of this as identification with Christ and his poor, was strongly subversive of the institutionalized and often rapacious wealth of the church, including the monastic orders of his time. Again, at its best this voluntary poverty was not merely a private bid for holiness, as though it were a bankrupting payment on earth for the sake of enormous heavenly treasure. Rather it was a deconstruction of the whole myth of wealth and success, not least in its theological implications. It was not the wealthy Pope but the little poor man that the masses honoured as so Christlike that they believed he shared even the wounds of his crucified God.

Again with respect to power, those whose theology forced

them to measure omnipotence against the arms of the cross, seeing in Christ crucified the wisdom and power of God, were forced to deconstruct prevailing ideas of power with its built in recourse to violence. Elaine Pagels has recently argued that the stand of the early Christian martyrs against the demand to offer a religious sacrifice to the empire has for too long been seen as simply standing by their private religious convictions, rather than as the political challenge that it was. She points out that in their questioning of who these emperors and these gods were in whose name atrocities were being carried out, Christians like Justin were implicitly challenging the whole basis and structure of Roman imperial power, and offering the beginnings of a radically different structuring of society.<sup>8</sup>

Some of them, at least, looked for a restructuring that would give equality to women and slaves, but that was not to be. Though there was a sense in which society was Christianized in the centuries after the conversion of Constantine, the hierarchies of power remained firmly in place, with women on the whole excluded. Although a few women came to hold positions of authority as heads of religious houses, for the most part they were excluded through the middle ages from education and from the places of power in ecclesiastical and secular institutions. Perhaps it is hardly surprising that those women who did become able to express their spirituality in writing displayed an understanding of power strongly at variance with the status quo. We find this in individual cases: when for instance we read Julian of Norwich's comments on the courtesy and generosity of the God, who serves us in our humblest physical needs, against the background of the haughty and pompous powermongering of the Bishop of Norwich, Henry Despenser, we are invited to a theology of power very different indeed from conventional ideas of power as force. Again, the personal moral authority of Catherine of Siena, born of refusal to submit to conventional patterns of womanly behaviour and giving herself instead to solitary prayer and service to the sick and outcast, in the end effectively challenged the power structures of church and society and the collusion between them.

But beyond these individual examples and others like them, we find that the spiritual writings of women overall are differently structured from those of their male counterparts, in a way which seems to me to be directly antithetical to norms of power and authority. In the writings of male mystics we find as a regular feature metaphors of climbing. We have *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection*, *The Twelve Steps of Humility and Pride*, *The Ladder of Monks*, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (this one has thirty steps!) and so on: the image was enormously popular. Yet I know of no instance in which it is employed by a woman mystic. Their works are more likely to be entitled *Dialogues or Revelations* or *Book of the Divine Works*. Perhaps the nearest we come to the metaphor of steps in the case of a woman writer is with Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*; yet even here although there are stages the image is of concentric circles requiring ever deeper exploration and integration of layers of the self, not one of climbing up successive steps like spiritual upwardly mobile professionals. I doubt whether this difference between women and men in choice of metaphor is accidental. It seems to me that women, who were barred from climbing the ladder of the ecclesiastical or educational hierarchies, had a quite different understanding also of wherein *spiritual* advance consists. Nor was this private sour grapes pioussity. As we have seen in the cases of Julian and Catherine, when we consider their lives and writings against their varying societal contexts with the question of their view of power in mind, we find on offer important alternatives to the prevailing ideas.

Again, it is at least arguable that there was a strong and deliberate social comment discernable in the choices women and men made about the expression of their sexuality. Our culture has such a romanticized and privatized view of sexuality that (unless we have taken feminist writings very seriously) we can hardly bring ourselves to think about sexual choices as political or social or indeed anything but deeply private. But Peter Brown has argued that at least in the era of the early church, the termination of virginity was seen as a *social* act, and marriage implied solidarity with a whole interwoven fabric of social convention. If one chose not to marry and procreate, this was perceived as abnormal and asocial, as disavowal of participation in the normal structure of society, and sometimes as deeply threatening to it. When Christians asserted their right to remain virgins, and to live together in freely chosen communities rather than in the procreative relationships prescribed and often arranged by society, this was far more than a private choice about sexuality, it was a declaration of independence that resonated with subversive overtones.

Brown argues that we have read the exaltations of virginity in early Christian writers too much in terms of a Platonic suspicion of the body and too little with an eye to the social implications of sexual choices. He does not deny that Platonic anthropology played an important part, both at the time and in the later asceticism that sometimes amounted to hatred of the body and especially of sexuality. But along with the psychology it is important to recognize that sexual choices were choices about the sort of society that was being chosen: in that sense they were not merely personal choices about virtue, where what counts as virtuous is already fixed, but about how new patterns of sexual choices provide an alternative understanding of liberation and justice and integrity.<sup>9</sup>

Brown develops his theory that the choice of virginity was a choice for freedom and for an alternative structure of social life only with reference to the early centuries of Christianity; sexual choices might have very different social implications in medieval and modern times. But though the implications might be *different*, it does not follow that they would not exist or that sexual choices are merely private. When we look at the lives of some of the medieval saints we easily see how their spirituality and their sexual choices interconnected to challenge social conventions. For instance, there are plenty of examples in which stereotypes of what was considered proper for the sexes were dispensed with. Catherine of Siena refused both marriage and convent — the respectable choices open to women — and gave herself to service to the sick and outcast, which in her time was considered utterly disreputable for a woman of 'good birth'. Hildegard of Bingen became an influential preacher, and Julian of Norwich a writer of theology of great subtlety and depth: neither of those were 'normal' roles for women.

Men, too, refused conventional sex roles. When Francis of Assisi and his followers took it upon themselves to care for lepers, they were effectively accepting to do the work of lower class women: I suspect that this was one of the reasons why they were treated with such suspicion and scorn by much of 'respectable' society. In the erotic poetry of John of the Cross, God is portrayed as the (male) lover: the fact that this either placed John in the role of beloved woman, or saw the relationship between them in metaphors of homosexuality, bothers my students a very great deal more than it seems ever to have bothered John. It is of course true that it was conventional to use female pronouns for the soul: but that only raises the further question of why, in a strongly patriarchal

society, that should have been so. The old answer that it was because the soul was seen as passive before God (as the woman is passive before the man (!)) needs to look again at the mystical literature and see, contra William James, exactly how unpassive the soul is encouraged to be in her longing and her loving. *Whatever* one says here, it is impossible to rescue the conventions.

But above all, the giants of Christian spirituality are subversive of that spirituality itself. More than they challenge conventions of security and wealth and power, more even than that they challenge norms of sexuality they stand as a challenge to what constitutes holiness. Time after time they reject the notion that sanctity has to do with private consolations and religious experiences: John of the Cross exhorts his readers to treat all visions as though they came from the devil; the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says that those who desire consolations behave 'like sheep with a brain disease.' There is much more emphasis on yearning for God, on the expansion of desire, than on its gratification; and gratification when it does come is to be seen *never* as an end in itself but as a 'spiritual sweetmeat' which will lead to ever deeper longing for God, as an interim treat can be used to encourage children to press ahead with a task which they have not yet learned to value for its own sake.

As the longing for God matures, its satisfaction is seen less and less in terms of subjective sensations of peace and joy and ecstasy, and more and more in terms of being united with God in God's own attributes: compassion, justice, righteousness. Modern writers about mystical union often treat it in terms of unusual and intense psychological experiences, like spiritual orgasms leaving the soul and gasping and inarticulate. It would be silly to deny that Christian mystics speak of intense experiences; of course they do. But out of comparison more important is what Teresa of Avila refers to as *habitual* union: that union with God which is not intensity of emotion but a conjoining of wills, so that the will of God for justice and liberty and compassion becomes the whole motivation of the lover. The desire *for* God engenders in the lover the desires *of* God: the development in the soul and the behaviour of the same longings that God has — longing for deliverance of God's people from tyranny and injustice.

This is not a private spirituality, or a spirituality without social and political consequences. It is certainly not an academically neutral spirituality, 'emerging from the dominant groups of society ... and entrenched on the side of the status quo.' It is rather a spirituality which challenges conventions and stereotypes in the name of a God of mercy and anger and justice. It gets its hands dirty with the grime of poverty, and walks among the marginal with the barefoot Galilean. It is a spirituality that takes the Incarnation seriously.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Allan Boesak 'Preface' on Charles Villa-Vicencio, ed. *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988) p. vii.
2. Robert Llewelyn *A Doorway to Silence: The Contemplative Use of the Rosary* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1986) p. 67.
3. p. 36.
4. SCM Press, London, 1988.
5. DLT, London, 1985.
6. 'The Church of the Saints' in *Theological Investigations Vol 3* (DLT, London, 1967).
7. *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*. Fairacres Publications No. 48 (SLG Press, Oxford, 1975) pp. xvi-xvii.
8. Elaine Pagels *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* ch. 2 (Harper and Row, New York, 1988).
9. Peter Brown 'The Notion Of Virginity in the Early Church' in Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, eds., *Christian Spirituality Vol. I* (Crossroads, New York, 1987) pp. 427-443; cf his *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Faber and Faber, London, 1989).