

# MYSTICISM AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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*'The sole meaning of human life lies in serving the world by promoting the establishment of the Kingdom of God.'* —Tolstoy.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HIS PAPER SHOWS how mysticism can contribute to the Kingdom of God, and that it has already done so. The examples are from contemporary economics and politics.

The kingdom of God has had a more robust innings in Russia than in the Christian West. Dostoyevskv has Fr.Zossima say in *The Brothers Karamazov* that the brotherhood of man would come to pass when the period of extreme individuality was over. Tolstoy went to much greater lengths on the subject. Tolstoy wrote an entire book about it: *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*. Though the kingdom may begin within you, the whole point of the book is to make it a social reality. Writing in 1893, Tolstoy asserted that 'a time is already coming when the Christian principles of equality [the brotherhood of man, the community of property, and non resistance to evil by violence] will appear just as natural and simple as the principles of ... national life do now.'<sup>2</sup>

Well, he was partly right, though the form the first two of these took in the Soviet Union would have appalled him. One can imagine the theologians, 'those masters of circuitous evasion' as Tolstoy called them, saying 'I told you so.' In the West, aspirations like 'thy kingdom come' in the Lord's prayer and injunctions such as 'seek ye first the kingdom of God', were construed to be about the next life. After all, Jesus said at his trial 'my kingdom is not of this world.'

However, it is not that simple. St. Paul wrote 'it is not eating and drinking that made the Kingdom of God, but the saving justice, the peace and joy brought by the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17) which seems to be about life here. As a result, there is a difference of opinion among theolo-

gians. After a survey of the literature, Professor Michael P. Hornsby Smith, a sociologist, comes down on the 'already' but 'not yet' position. That is, the kingdom of God is partially, but not completely, present. 'So a purpose of [his] book is to seek a kingdom of truth, life, justice, love and peace.' He asks 'How can the emergence of these 'kingdom values' be encouraged?'<sup>3</sup>

In Hornsby Smith's book, the kingdom of God is put at the centre of a Church's social teaching. It is not a criticism of his account that he omits any mention of mysticism as a source of some of his 'kingdom values'. Mysticism does not feature in the social teaching of most churches, as it does not feature in social thought generally. Indeed, Max Weber roundly declared that 'mystical experiences lead away from everyday life and all expedient conduct.'<sup>4</sup> Pace Weber, mysticism has the merit of supporting the kingdom of God.

We may find some encouragement for this in the father of all social thought, Plato. In *The Republic*, the forthcoming rulers are led to an awareness of Goodness Itself, which has the effect of making them love goodness, and motivates them to give it appropriate expression in the governance of the state. Sir Desmond Lee, in his translator's introduction to *The Republic*, writes 'the vision of the good is not entirely dissimilar to what others have called the vision of God.'<sup>5</sup>

Then why not take something that straightforwardly is a theistic mystical experience and see what social ramifications there are? That is the procedure here. The experience selected is from St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) the reason being that his experience is typical of Christian mystics. There is, to be sure, within Christianity, a neo-Platonic tradition whose ex-

perience may well derive from meditation, like Buddhism, but here we are dealing with the prayerful tradition. Here, then, is the experience

His whole being somehow changed into a movement of divine love...He is filled with God. But God is love, and the deeper one's union with God, the more one is filled with God.<sup>6</sup>

St Bernard goes on to point out the social consequence:

It will not now be hard to fulfill the commandment in regard to loving his neighbor. For he truly loves God and in this way also loves the things which are God's.<sup>7</sup>

The experiencer was filled with God's love, and turns that love onto other human beings. The result is what Hornsby Smith calls solidarity, or what Dostoyevsky calls brotherhood. The intent is towards community. The mystic pursues community and opposes whatever is destructive of it. That is mysticism's social and political agenda.

St Bernard puts the point succinctly: 'This heart is filled with a love that embraces everybody.<sup>8</sup> So it wishes them peace, which is essential to the preservation of the community. St Bernard makes a strong statement about the implication to peace:

Instead of shutting off your affections from your enemies, you will do good to those who hate you, you will pray for those who persecute and slander you, you will strive to be peaceful even with those who hate peace.<sup>9</sup>

Community and peace are the orientations provided by the experience. There will be other sources of a person's social and political agenda, and they may be good, such as experience and reason. And one of the great lessons of experience is that society benefits from freedom as well as community, so it is desirable to have both. A mystic is capable of learning from experience like everyone else, so will pursue community in ways compatible with freedom. Thus one of the great mystics of the twentieth century, Toyohiko Kagawa (1888-1960) an economic reformer in the 1930's, writing in the shadow of the Great Depression when capitalism seemed to be finished, sought unity in co-



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operatives rather than communism.

However, the greatest doubt about the mystic's social vision comes from its utopian character. Utopian visions and social reality don't mix, it will be said. When has the brotherhood of man ever come to pass? It may not have come to pass everywhere at all times. but in some places at some times it has done well. In what follows, I shall cite two instances in the twentieth century in which the social orientation provided by mystical experience has made a social difference.

The first is Toyohiko Kagawa. He felt that God... 'was inside me ...I felt great ecstasy and joy.'<sup>10</sup> Thinking about it later, he wrote

The purpose of our having mystical experience is not that we may achieve our own personal satisfaction, but that we may succor the poor, help those in trouble, and educate the masses.<sup>11</sup>

And educate them, he did. He threw himself into labour unions, women's rights, farm organisations, and health clinics.

The great problem of his time was unemployment. Kagawa had no doubt about what should have been happening: the workers should have had increased ownership and control of the means of production, but through a co-operatized form of ownership which allowed a form of community control. Kagawa viewed capitalism as a form of industrial autocracy. He had no objection to small shops, farms, lawyers', doctors' and dentists' practices being owned by individuals, since the work was performed primarily by one person with a few assistants. But when the firm began to grow, and the wealth which brought about the expansion

was co-operatively raised, the resulting firm should be co-operatively owned. The resulting co-operatives should then federate and buy out other businesses and co-operatize them.

Co-operatives did economic justice: they returned the wealth to the people who had generated it. In Kagawa's world there would be no armed revolution, but no Rupert Murdochs either. In his book *Brotherhood Economics*, whose title exhibits the tendency to social solidarity typical of love mystics, Kagawa attempted to assimilate economics into love consciousness, culminating in his description of the co-operative state.

Kagawa's work was noticed in Australia. In 1936, an Australian clothing manufacturer, Fletcher Jones, went to Japan to see how Kagawa's ideas were working out. As a result, he turned his business, which was to have 3,000 employees, into a staff co-operative. The title of Jones' autobiography, *Not By Myself*,<sup>12</sup> explains why.

Kagawa, was not afraid to borrow. In 1921 he founded something like a religious order, The Friends of Jesus Group, which became the centre of his religious and charitable work. As his biographer Schildgen observes, it combined the discipline of the Jesuits, the methodism of John Wesley's spiritual circle, and the hands on activism of the Salvation Army.

My second witness is Anwar El-Sadat, formerly President of Egypt. During an eight month

stay in prison in the last days of the colonial period in Egypt Sadat, a military officer, underwent a religious conversion. He felt that he established 'communion with the Lord of all Being...the mystics I read in prison appealed to me tremendously...'<sup>13</sup> He continues 'I came to experience friendship with God,' and he was fully conscious of the political consequences: 'My friendship with God changed me a great deal. Only in defence of a just cause would I take up arms...'<sup>14</sup> It made that much difference to him: war would have to be shown to be just.

Sadat's political orientation brought about by his communion with God existed alongside others deriving from his military background. In view of these, Sadat launched a war against Israel. It took another man of similar mind to bring the political effects of his conversion to the fore. That man was President Jimmy Carter. It was a case of Sufi recognising Sufi. Sadat described Carter as a man 'impelled by the power of religious faith and lofty values'<sup>15</sup> Carter brokered the Camp David Accords which took Egypt out of the firing line against Israel. In his historic speech to the Knesset in 1977, Sadat quoted from Proverbs '...to the counsellors of peace is joy.'<sup>16</sup> He was shot dead by extremists soon after.

I conclude that mystical experience can support the The Kingdom of God, notably in the areas of solidarity and peace, since it has already done so.

## NOTES

1. Leo Tolstoy. *The Kingdom Of God and Peace Essays*. Oxford University Press. London. 1974. P.444

2. *Ibid*. P.135.

3. Michael P. Hornsby-Smith. *An Introduction To Catholic Social Thought*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 2006. P.44.

4. Max Weber. 'The Social Psychology Of The World's Religions.' in From Max Weber: *Essays In Sociology*. trans H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London. 1974. P. 289.

5. Sir Desmond Lee. Introduction to Plato *The Republic*. The Penguin Classics. Second Edition. 1974. P.41

6. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26.5 *On The Song of Songs*, vol 3 trans Killian Walsh OCSO. Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 1976. P.63.

7. Bernard of Clairvaux, 'Treatises on Loving God', *The*

*Works of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, vol. 5, trans. Robert Walton OSB, Cistercian Publications, Consortium Press, Washington, DC, 1974. P.118

8. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 27:11, *On the Song of Songs*, *op. cit.* P.84.

9. *Ibid*.

10. Robert Schildgen. *Toyohiko Kagawa. Apostle of Love and Social Justice*. Centenary Books. Berkeley. California. 1998. P.36.

11. *Ibid*. P.86.

12. Fletcher Jones. *Not By Myself*. The Wentworth Press. Sydney. 1976.

13. Anwar EL- Sadat. *In Search Of Identity. An Autobiography*. Fontana/Collins. Great Britain. 1978. P.108.

14. *Ibid*

15. *Ibid*. P.359. 16. *Ibid*. P. 401.