Abstract

Mysticism is about faith and about knowing. Practical mysticism is about these conjoined in doing. It is a mystical knowing, including an intense knowing of self and God, that implies and impels action, practical action for good. It lies at the heart of the mysticism testified to in the sacred stories of history’s most prominent religious figures, including those of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, and so should be seen as the most authentic of those mysticisms judged to be genuinely religious in the Semitic traditions. It can also be demonstrated to be the form of mysticism with the firmest of philosophical and theological...
Curiously, practical mysticism seems often to be the object of some suspicion by religious authorities in their attitudes to those who truly emulate their founders. Within the institutionalized forms of religion that purport to be built in their image, it is the perennial irony that those whose actions would seem most palpably to be in the spirit of their founders often experience difficulty in having their religiousness recognized. At the same time as they have their faith called into question by the institutions that go by their founders' names, invariably others who seem more cast in the mould of their founder's own persecutors are hailed quickly as true believers and even saints. The instance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, World War II martyr and saint, is a case in point.

Perhaps some of the above occurs because we have failed clearly to define and understand the nature of the mysticism promoted within the Semitic traditions by the most eminent of their theological interpreters. The quest to rectify this omission has importance beyond the issue of mysticism itself, for this is merely a lens into a deeper issue about the true nature and purpose of religion and religiousness. In an era which sees religion and religiousness so largely turned over to bureaucrats, ideologues and fanatics, it is vital that an image of religion as common-sense, moderate and supremely practical be promoted as not just an alternative form of religiousness but as being at the heart of it, including of its mystical tradition.

Authentic and Inauthentic Mysticism: The Dichotomy of Plotinus

The notion of 'practical mysticism' is most associated with Plotinus, the Egyptian philosopher of the third century CE. While normally taken to be an elitist expression of religiousness, Armstrong (1996) is adamant that all is not as it appears with Plotinus. Armstrong characterizes him as a wry, almost comical and certainly very practical teacher whose primary interest was in communicating to his students a means of spirituality that could work for them in their real settings, while also guaranteeing the essential constructive relationship with the gods. At the heart of Plotinus' discourses on mysticism, there lies a distinction between what might be termed a public versus private mysticism. Public mysticism is that which is for the world to see and behold; it is constituted by outer expressions of religiousness. On the other hand, private mysticism is that which is reserved for the integrity of what passes between individuals and their god. It is only through this latter mysticism that higher consciousness and the profound relationship with god that purports to lie behind the mystical experience can be achieved. For Armstrong, it is in this sense that Plotinus might be said to be elitist, because he knew that while many might master the displays of public religiousness, only a few would achieve
the deeper religiousness denoted by private mysticism. This deeper religiousness is referred to by Idel and McGinn (1999) as “… Plotinus’s … favoring of love over understanding.” (p. 22)

Plotinus’ dichotomy between public and private mysticism, or mysticism about understanding versus one about love, may well provide the substance of the distinction to be made in this paper between an inauthentic and authentic form of mysticism, especially as it relates to the Semitic traditions. Certainly, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, each of them characters said to have had the most unimaginably profound mystical experiences, were at pains to stress the indispensable nature of the practical effect of mysticism. According to the Book of Exodus, Moses’ frustration with those who saw the outer expressions of religiousness as the goal of religion caused him in protest to smash the sacred stones on which the practical goals of religion, the Ten Commandments, were written (Exodus, 32). Jesus’ uncharacteristically harsh words against those who promoted the form of religion but lacked its force were matched only by his violent protestation at those who turned the Temple into a sellers’ market (Luke, 19). Muhammad’s contribution to endorsing the practical effects of religion was profound. Having seen the great forces of Judaism and Christianity turned into empty forms, his Five Pillars were designed to ensure that none of the essential tenets of Islam were able to be reduced to mere form. For each of them, only an action would suffice, including the practical application of charity by means of the giving of alms to those in need (Qur’an, 107).

Of course, the juxtaposition between form and force, inauthentic and authentic religiousness is not a theme exclusive to the great Semitic traditions. Confucius too saved his harshest words for those he saw as having learned the art of convincing the crowd of their noble spirituality through clever rhetoric and trickery, but in fact lacked the integrity of ren, compassion towards and practical love of others. “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others,” (Lunya, 12:2) was the Confucian Golden Rule that guaranteed that the spiritual glue of China would be based on practical benevolence between its people, rather than on the showiness of religion (cf. Brooks & Brooks, 1998). This having been said, it is especially germane to the three Semitic traditions in question that the issue of the authentic versus inauthentic religious response be sorted out because each of these three religions is particularly associated with the ethical mission and practical action as constituting the keystone of faith in their traditions, be it the practical action of the Ten Commandments, Jesus’ Great Commandment to love God and neighbour or the Five Pillars of Islam.

Plotinus’ fine detailing around mysticism is important because he is regarded not only as having captured the best of what went before him in Greek philosophy but was also most instrumental in the development of higher forms of mysticism in the later developments to be found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In terms of what went before, his importance cannot be overstated because he represents the finest of balances in his exposition of Greek thought, being both an exponent of Plato and of Aristotle. Rather than being caught between the streams of thought associated with these two giants of Greek thought, his neo-Platonism seems actually to be a syncretized thought which captures some of the best of Plato and the best of Aristotle. Armstrong (1996) ponders on the extent to which Plotinus’ Plato is really an Aristotelian Plato while some more blatantly suggest that the Plato that Plotinus promoted was really Plato as seen through the eyes of his disciple, Aristotle (cf. Plotinus, 2005).
The idea that Plotinus’ notion of practical mysticism is inspired by Aristotle is of interest to the thesis behind this article, for Aristotle is rightly regarded as a giant in the development of mysticism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, while not himself having any claims on mysticism (cf. Janz, 2005). Furthermore, Aristotle’s perspective on mysticism can be seen as influential on a number of key characters in the interpretation of these traditions, including the likes of al-Ghazzali, Aquinas and Cordovero, as well as modern epistemologists whose theories of knowing can be seen to rely on and in turn take us back to the mysticisms of antiquity. Key among these epistemologists is Jurgen Habermas (cf. Lovat, 2004).

Around the issue of virtue and how we knew and understood it, Aristotle (1985) was caught between the very intellectual approach of Plato (1987) and the extreme pragmatism of Protagoras (Plato, 1989). Plato’s intellectualism about virtue was seen in his postulation that to be virtuous was essentially about ‘knowing’ the Good, the Just and the Right. On the other hand, Protagoras held that there was no such thing as the Good, Just or Right, but only what one experienced as pragmatically good, just or right in the given circumstances. In attempting to moderate between the two positions, Aristotle proposed not only a way of conjoining the two ways of knowing but an entirely new way of knowing altogether. This was a way of knowing that arose partly from the human need to be guided by one’s intellect (after Plato), and partly from the human need to be guided by one’s sense experience (after Protagoras) but, above all, by one’s need to be authentic in what one claimed to know. Eudaemonia was Aristotle’s supreme good, but it was not a good that could be pursued merely by being known or merely by being sensed. It was a good that required living out in practice.

The kind of judgment essential to the pursuit of eudaemonia was what Aristotle finally described as a ‘practical’ judgment, based on intellect and sense experience no doubt but one that would ultimately lead to practical action. At the heart of the concept of eudaemonia lay the notion that it was only in the conjunction of knowing, sensing (or believing) and doing that one could achieve happiness in life. This supreme form of happiness arose from the inherent integrity of having one’s thoughts, intentions and actions in alignment. Implicit in this scheme of thinking was that one could only achieve happiness by knowing one’s self and, hence, when one’s practical actions were aligned with this self. This seems clearly to be an underpinning force in the thought of Habermas (1972; 1974) around the supreme knowing being in the form of the conjunction of self-reflectivity and praxis.

Aristotle was the major influence on the thought of the great Muslim scholar, Abu al-Ghazzali, born in 1058 CE in a thoroughly Islamic Persia towards the end of the so-called Golden Age of Islam, with Islam under challenge from the wider world and especially from the Christian Crusades. While he
saw some of the worst excesses of the Christianity of the day, al-Ghazzali had become a devotee early on of Jesus, having done a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to visit Jesus’ birth place at Bethlehem, along with the more regular Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. In many ways, this typifies his bridging of the two traditions. His intellectual inspiration was Aristotle, while his first prophetic hero was, appropriately, Muhammad. Coming close behind, however, was his devotion to Jesus. Al-Ghazzali therefore saw through the ugly spectre of Christians marauding and killing in the Crusades to understand that this was as far from the essence of Christianity as it was from Islam. Among other things, al-Ghazzali is responsible for much of what is referred to broadly as the ‘Muslim Gospel’ (cf. Khalidi, 2001), texts about Jesus from Islamic sacred writings that would seem to have been taken largely from early Christian texts that fell outside the Christian canon as it formed throughout the first four centuries of Christianity. They are important for Christians who seek to know more about the origins of their own tradition, and especially about some of those earliest expressions of Jesus that may not have survived the ecclesial politics of the first few centuries.

Al-Ghazzali, himself a mystic, speaks much about knowing and the importance of acquiring knowledge yet of not using it to subjugate others. Knowledge is a gift from God that religious leaders, in particular, must use to foster the knowledge of those in their care, rather than to subordinate them. In this, he found many of Jesus’ statements about the ways the priests and Pharisees of his own day had misused their knowledge to be instructive. Some of these statements he found in the Christian canon though many of the more illuminating ones had curiously been removed from the canon and so they were only to be found among the texts of the Muslim Gospel. Above all, for al-Ghazzali, knowledge was given only so that its necessary concomitant, action, could be informed and well-directed. Knowing on its own was useless; its only usefulness was in impelling benevolent action. So, in his Book of Religious Learnings, we read:

The learned are the heirs of the prophets …the best of people is a believing learned man who does good. (al-Ghazzali, 1991:15)

Similarly, in a text of the Muslim Gospel attributed to al-Ghazzali, we read:

Jesus said: It is of no use to you to come to know what you did not know, so long as you do not act in accordance with what you already know. Too much knowledge only increases pride if you do not act in accordance with it. (Khalidi, 2001: 178)

Al-Ghazzali would seem to provide as good a formula as we will find, not to mention being a model, for the notion of practical mysticism. This is the kind of mysticism that conjoints the scholarly (after Plato) and the experiential (after Protagoras) but in a way that issues necessarily in practical action (after Aristotle). It is not the path of the showy mystic, the pietistic or the sanctimonious. It is the path of the
one who aligns knowledge, beliefs and practical action with the understanding of self that allows this conjunction to issue in a personal integrity which, in turn, provides the foundation for happiness, or virtue. The life’s work of this great Muslim scholar was about salvaging Islam from a spirituality based on exclusivism and pietism in favour of one based on inclusivity and engagement. Inspired by Aristotle, al-Ghazzali’s virtuous Muslim was, above all, one in whom one could place trust that what was said was what would be done. Al-Ghazzali’s was a particularly important influence in reforming Islam’s own expression of the Semitic mystical tradition, Sufism, away from pietistic mysticism in favour of practical mysticism.

As al-Ghazzali did within Islam, so Aquinas’s influence within Christianity was to free it from earlier conceptions that the holy life was essentially about withdrawal into isolationist and highly cognitive spirituality divorced from the practicalities of action for good.

Like his mentor Aristotle, Aquinas was caught between a highly intellectual tradition, in this case that of Augustine (1972), and a range of earlier traditions of Christianity and pre-Christianity that continued to fascinate him, especially after the work of the Islamic scholars came under his gaze. Rather reminiscent of Plato, Augustine’s ‘good conscience’ was in having one’s mind conformed perfectly to the mind of the church. In contrast were those earlier Pre-Nicene traditions of Christianity and much of the Aristotelianism that came to him, principally through al-Ghazzali, which emphasized the deeply personal relationship of the individual with their God as the basis of any morality. Like Aristotle before him, Aquinas not only conjoined these two stances but he elicited a new form of moral knowing in the concept of synderesis, described in the Summa (cf. Aquinas, 1936) as an inborn facility that urged us not only to seek truth but to put it into practice. For Aquinas, knowing truth was knowing on the inside what it meant for oneself and then possessing the commitment to act accordingly. If one did not act accordingly, in the best tradition of the New Testament (cf. I Cor, 13; James, 2; I John, 4), one could not claim to know or understand at all. Again, this is particularly reminiscent of the Habermasian thesis about authentic knowing issuing in praxis.

In Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, born in 1522 CE of apparent Spanish Jewish ancestry, we find one of the firmest expressions of the practical mysticism held to be authentic by al-Ghazzali and Aquinas and, before them, by Aristotle by implication. Cordovero (1974) would go on to be a seminal figure in the later medieval revival of Jewish mysticism. Like those who had clearly influenced his thought, Cordovero does not resile from postulation about mystical experience but is painstaking in his preparing candidates for it that they understand that there can ultimately be no true mystical experience without emulating God in his sephiroth, in a word, in his immanence. As God was immanent, that is, totally immersed in the practical matters of life, so the true mystic must engage in practical action which conforms to godly practice. Cordovero teased this practice out in the form of thirteen attributes which captured the essence of God’s sephiroth. These attributes included
complete identification with one’s neighbour, mercy beyond the letter of the law, forgiveness to the point of eradicating the evil done and eliminating all traces of vengefulness. These attributes were clearly beyond normal human virtue and that was the point. They could only be achieved through mystical experience but, in turn, the mystical experience was identifiable and confirmed only by their having been achieved (cf. Epstein, 1988).

In similar vein, Moshe Idel, one of contemporary Judaism’s major scholars of mysticism, is at pains to correct common misapprehensions that the brand of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah is essentially an austere and secretive entity divorced from the practicalities of life. He suggests that the literature that has led to such a conclusion needs to be re-appraised as offering an entirely opposite mystical path. He says that the essence of Kabbalist literature is not in its speculative use but in its providing a kind of ‘map’ for practical action:

*Maps, as we know, are intended to enable a person to fulfil a journey; for the Kabbalists, the mystical experience was such a journey.* (Idel, 1988: 29)

Idel makes use of the writings of the thirteenth century mystic, Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, in emphasizing the circularity of the genuine mystical experience, that is, that the most noble forms of human behaviour play a role both as cause and effect of authentic mystical experience:

… *in the profundities of human thought there is no one more profound and more excellent than it (= the product of mystical union) and it alone unites human thought with the divine (thought) to the extent of the human capability and according to human nature. And it is known that human thought is the cause of his wisdom, and his wisdom is the cause of his understanding, and his understanding is the cause of his mercy, and his mercy is the cause of his reverence of his Creator.* (Idel, 1988:147)

As suggested above, much of the Aristotelian underpinnings of practical mysticism are to be found in what might seem at first to be an unusual place, namely with the contemporary epistemological scholarship of Jurgen Habermas. When one recognizes that Habermas is merely defining for a secularized generation thought that has, in a sense, been in the tradition for millennia, then the sense of it being unusual tends to fade. Habermas’ work is useful in this context because of its radical re-defining of the nature of knowing, a concept that lies at the heart of mysticism of all kinds but that has particular ramifications for practical mysticism. It is also useful in that it makes some of the thought of mysticism, and especially practical mysticism, available to an era that is not naturally disposed to such things. While Habermas has spent his career known chiefly as a neo-Marxist and probably atheist, in his later years his work has turned in obvious fashion to issues related more explicitly to
theology, spirituality and the mystical thought that I would maintain was actually never far from his grasp (cf. Martin, 2005).

Habermas (1972; 1974) touches on recognizably mystical notions in challenging us to consider the different ways in which we claim to ‘know’. Knowing facts and figures is important, he says, as is the knowing of communication and meaning-making, but the knowing that most truly marks out human intellectual endeavour and has the capacity to transform self and community is critical or self-reflective knowing. Ultimately, this is a critique of all knowing that renders in a profound knowing of self and issues in praxis, practical action for change. In a word, one cannot come to know in this profound sense, including knowing of self, without being changed. It is through the process of coming to know self, invariably entailing an agonizing struggle, that one gradually strips away the inherited knowledge, the familial and cultural baggage, and the ignorance that is so often the source of relational misunderstanding, bigotry, hatred and violence. For Habermas, this latter was the supreme knowledge that marked a point of having arrived as a human being. One might caricature him as saying “There is no knowing without knowing the knower’, and the knower is oneself. In a sense, the ultimate point of knowing is to be found in knowing oneself.

Praxis is the necessary concomitant action that results only from knowing self in this radical (and quite mystical) way. This is a practical action that makes a difference to whatever it is directed towards. Like Cordovero’s mystical attributes, Habermas’ practical action is beyond the action that is characteristic of knowing prior to the knowing of self. It is the action of radical, unselfish commitment to a cause, a community or an individual that brings a new force into being. In another place, Habermas (1984; 1987) develops his thoughts on praxis in eliciting the notion of ‘communicative action’. On the surface, the notion is of global communicative competence, however at a deeper level there lies a thesis about effective practical action being the result of the most profound knowing, especially the knowing of self. In a word, the most effective artefacts of communicative action can only come from the wellspring enshrined in the notion of self-reflectivity, from one who knows who they are, values the integrity of being authentic and commits to the benevolent actions and positive relationships that bear the best fruits of human interactivity.

Habermas has provided an updated and highly credible justification and elaboration of the practical mysticism that denotes authentic religiousness in the Semitic traditions. It fits well with the most updated work available on the mystical intersections to be found between the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. Idel and McGinn (1999), for instance, state:

(Semitic) mystics constantly break through existing theological theories in order to stress the unity of love and cognition … Gregory the Great’s ‘amor ipse notitia (’love itself is knowledge’) provided Western contemplatives with a basis for affirming again and again that the highest love includes supreme knowledge … We detect a similar favoring of love among Muslim mystics. (p. 22)
Idel and McGinn go on to make the same claims around Judaic mysticism, confirming the thesis and point of their work that, in terms of the nature of mysticism, there is more in common within the three great Semitic traditions than separates them and that the common core is to be found around Plotinus’ favouring of love over understanding, or what I am calling practical mysticism, the most authentic religious expression for the Semitic traditions, replete as they are with the sense of ethical mission:

*The division of the mind postulated here enables the mystic to combine a contemplative life with one of active service. Yet by describing the two attitudes as juxtaposed, one risks missing their real nature. For one is not superimposed to the other: the two intimately collaborate and reinforce each other … the mystical state, far from diminishing this unique ability to integrate, enhances the powers from a single dynamic source of concentration.*

*Generally speaking, for each of the three religions, the mystical union enhances a person’s capacity to fulfil his or her given or assumed task … All genuine mysticism results in spiritual fecundity … Having come to partake in God’s life, the contemplative also feels called to share in God’s life-giving love.* (Idel & McGinn, 1999:13-14)

**The Dangers of Practical Mysticism: The Bonhoeffer Case Study**

There are countless instances that illustrate the thesis put at the beginning of this article that practical mysticism is that which most closely conforms with authentic religiousness as exemplified by history’s most significant religious figures and furthermore by key philosophical and theological justifications as found in the likes of al-Ghazzali, Aquinas and Cordovero. At the same time, there are many instances that underline the point also made that practical mysticism does not come without its dangers for its proponents, so little are its effects apparently recognized by the traditions which have spawned it. A particularly powerful case study is offered by the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, far too late recognized as an archetypal mystic and virtual saint by a range of religious traditions, including finally his own Lutheran Christian tradition which effectively excommunicated him in his own day even as he was engaged in the practical action that necessarily accompanied his mysticism. For many years after his death, he was still kept at some distance from full communion with his church and even many of its purported scholars, before being reluctantly hailed as one of its truest and most authentic offspring. His is an appropriate case study in the context of this article because his theology and interrelationships moved freely across the Semitic traditions, and indeed beyond, and it was largely through pressure from across the various faiths that his own Christian tradition finally provided the recognition and acceptance of sainthood that justice would suggest should have been there all along.

In the Nazi prison for his actions against Hitler, Bonhoeffer (1998) struggled to answer the question ‘Who is Christ for us today?’ Who is
Christ for a church that had surrendered its integrity in the face of such vile opposition? How could this church ever hold its head high again? What did it mean to be Christian anymore? Apart from the experiences of war and prison that clearly shook the foundations of his earlier thinking, Bonhoeffer also brought forward his interfaith engagement as being central to the struggle for these answers, and so to his mystical growth. For one brought up in the safe and secure environment of Protestant orthodoxy, these engagements would be crucial to his developing understanding of religiousness.

First, there was Bonhoeffer’s intensive dialogue with Judaism, brought on partly by the horrors of the ‘final solution’ as it was becoming evident to him, and partly by his growing understanding of the need for any Christian to know Judaism if one was to know Christianity. The Jewish question was at sufficiently close quarters, including in his own family, for him to know of the suffering, the bravery and the faith of many Jews and, at the same time, the faithlessness of many pious Christians, including in Christian leadership, who knew about the travesties being inflicted on their fellow human beings but, in spite of their claims to be acting in Christ’s name, in fact enacted nothing. These experiences became the focus of much soul-searching in prison as he strived to ponder on the meaning of faith and religiousness in the context of church-state complicity over the goals of the Third Reich.

Second, were his engagements with the religions of India, as understood largely through his active dialogue with Gandhi and his pacifist movement. Through this, Bonhoeffer came to have intense understanding of Hinduism and Jainism as well as Islam. Bethge (1970) offers testimony that his interest in India and its spiritualities was an abiding and tantalizing passion for Bonhoeffer, and that he had a keen sense that Christianity had originally come from the East and that it was only through the East that it could ultimately be understood. Bethge quotes him as saying of Indian spiritualities: “Sometimes, it even seems to me that there’s more Christianity in their ‘paganism’ than in the whole of the Reich church.” (1970:330) In Gandhi and the mysticism he saw implicitly in him, Bonhoeffer came to understand further that there could be no authentic religiousness without commitment to action. Gandhi’s greatness was in his challenge not only to the British oppressors but to the pious among the religions of India that one could not do God’s work merely by having the right sentiments; the person of faith had to enact those sentiments, including putting right the wrongs that one confronted. The fact that Gandhi was prepared to shock both Hindus and Muslims with his explicit embodying of the religion of the Jains further inspired Bonhoeffer that practical mysticism would always put benevolent action before denominational attachment.

Third, and perhaps most dramatically, was Bonhoeffer’s fraternity with the ‘unfaithed’, with those with whom he found himself sharing commitment and the conditions of prison but who, unlike him, were not at all motivated by a faith position. Their sole motivation was an earthy integrity and a profound commitment to their fellow human beings. Bonhoeffer could not help but contrast these latter self-professed ‘atheists’ and ‘agnostics’ with so many of his erstwhile ‘enfaithed’ colleagues whom he saw cowering behind the protective walls of the church. In this
context, his earlier inspirational thoughts, be they from Barth’s reliance on the revelation to be found in the Bible or from Von Harnack’s search for the historical Jesus, became starkly narrow and incapable of addressing adequately the far larger world that Bonhoeffer was now inhabiting. Bonhoeffer had been changed by his wider experience of religion (and non-religion) and, true to the terms of Habermasian self-reflective knowing, he could never go back to where he was. He had to find a way of capturing intellectually this bigger world, and there was no time or room for an intellectualism that was not indispensably about action, about making a difference.

In the end, Bonhoeffer posited the notion of ‘religionless Christianity’ as the only form that could credibly survive the times in which he was living, that could find meaningful dialogue between Christianity in its institutional form and that much bigger world that he now saw as the true church of God. The knowing that would underpin this ‘religionless’ form for individual Christians was what he described as ‘the arcane discipline’. Again, this was a deeply personal knowing that would emanate from complete conformity between one’s understanding, one’s dispositions and one’s actions. It was arcane in the Plotinian sense that it would remain a secret between the Christian and God who, unlike those who saw only the face, saw also the heart. The sign of its authenticity would not be in the ‘cheap grace’ of enfaithment but in the costly grace of conforming one’s life and actions to the essential charter of Christianity to ‘make a difference’ (cf. Bonhoeffer, 1959).

The church would eventually find itself only by losing itself in the world. The church itself needed saving; its only future was in coming to the same kind of honest self-knowing that would eventually see it grasp its own destiny, leave behind its own blindness and bigotry, and become finally a force for ‘making the difference’, a church engaged in Habermasian *praxis*. In the end, Bonhoeffer doubted that the institutional church would ever be capable of this, but this did not matter so long as individual Christians lived by their own ‘arcane discipline’. As illustrated, there is more than a hint of Plotinus and Habermas, stretching across the ages, in this thinking; there is also much of the Aristotelian imperative around practical virtue as the test of true knowledge, of al-Ghazzali’s and Aquinas’ conforming of action with intention and, finally and perhaps most starkly, of Cordovero’s notion that actions beyond normal human virtue could only emanate from authentic mystical experience. Bonhoeffer’s is a classic case of both the theological enunciation and personal witness of practical mysticism.

Through his practical mysticism in all its forms, Bonhoeffer demonstrated the authentic religiousness exemplified by the inspirational foundation stories of the broader Semitic traditions, the stories of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, and justified by key apologetic figures in the likes of al-Ghazzali, Aquinas and Cordovero. The actions that followed on from his beliefs took the forms of bold resistance to Hitler, including collaboration with those striving to unseat him, exposing the pious complicity of the official church for what it was by professing his commitment to the oppositional Confessing Church, and exulting and emulating the actions of non-Christians and even non-believers whom he saw as more authentically religious than the institutionally religious. For this practical mysticism, Bonhoeffer was shunned and disowned by his own establishment church. Only very slowly and under great pressure from an international community of non-believers and believers of all persuasions did his own church come to admit its errors and acknowledge Bonhoeffer as a near perfect emissary of its
Bonhoeffer suffered moments when he felt a long way from his church and, because of his taught belief that the church was the face of God in the world, from his God as well. Yet it was in this abandonment that ironically he found his greatest freedom. It was in profound knowing of self that he came to know his God and that that God would never abandon him, even if his church did. It was also in this profound knowing of self that he was impelled towards that practical action that surpassed all normal human virtue. For him, the mystical understanding implied by his personal anguish and theological reflections in prison led inevitably to a commitment to action that, if necessary, would lead to his death. For his practical mysticism, love was the necessary companion to understanding.

Conclusion

This article has argued that practical mysticism possesses unprecedented claims to be the authentic mysticism for the Semitic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This form of mysticism is characterized by love rather than mere understanding, being the ultimate expression and proof that the supreme form of knowing God and self that is most associated with the concept of mysticism has in fact been achieved. Practical mysticism has credentials that stretch from the earliest foundational stories of these traditions, through the works of the most respected of ancient and medieval interpreters of the traditions’ mystical heritage, and down to the most updated literature on epistemology generally and mystical knowledge in particular, as they function in the worlds inhabited by the Semitic traditions.

Furthermore, the article has offered a particularly poignant case study as an instance of practical mysticism not being recognized or accepted as a genuine expression of knowing self and knowing God, with the result that the mystic in question, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was excommunicated from his faith community while others with far less credentials for having emulated the sephiroth of God were embraced and promoted within this same community.

The article may serve two purposes by clarifying, with appropriate theological and historical justification, that practical mysticism is the form of religious expression with the strongest claims in the Semitic traditions. First, it might serve to stem the predictable tide which acts too often to discriminate against those whose mystical path is that of love and who most clearly emulate the radical love which characterizes the sephiroth of God, while seeming to endorse those who prefer the path of understanding and whose religiousness is about the public display of piety. If this were to result, it would spark in all those of Semitic heritage a more radical commitment to that practical action best designed to enhance and unite the human community. Second, the article might serve to remind a world which receives the dominant message that the Semitic world is divided and that the major religious traditions are forces that tear apart rather than divide that, at the heart of these traditions,
lies a common mystical heritage that emphasizes that the ultimate product of each of these traditions is practical benevolent action that is beyond normal human virtue and can only be achieved through mystical union with God and the knowing of self that results from this union. In other words, the religious traditions are not the problem that causes disunity. The problem lies with the authorities and interpreters who fail to understand the essence of their own traditions and therefore misjudge regularly those whose lives are the most perfect testament to it.

References


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