

Thoughts in Defence of the Mystical

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A recent book by Richard Abanes, A New Earth, an Old Deception¹, challenges the ideas put forward in the best selling books by Eckhart Tolle, The Power of Now² and A New Earth³. Dom Sebastian Moore who has found confirmation and inspiration in Eckhart Tolle's insights defends mystical experiences, both past and present.

The whole debate that Eckhart Tolle's books provoke hinges on the experience of a person who came, in terror, into the experience of being really one not two, not caught in the fictional relationship of me with me that we all live in with its ego-speak. Let us go into this more deeply and exactly. At Eckhart Tolle's critical moment of exposing himself to what he calls Presence,

he is terrified. Now the advice that the praying person is given in this situation, described by Urs von Balthasar the great Catholic theologian, is to surrender to God as the unknown, and let the unknown lead you into a more intimate relationship. But Tolle got this 'advice' not from a spiritual director but as an inner word. Now before we go off the deep end and say that that's the

whole problem with Tolle, he's a law unto himself, consider more deeply the difference between taking this advice in a context already reassuringly spiritual and without any such context or belief and instead following an inner phrase: resist nothing. The effect of obeying this inner phrase was that an intense and crippling fear stopped instantly, and Tolle let himself fall into the no-longer threatening void, to wake a few hours later into a world of light, in a state of total transformation by utter bliss.

Here is a thought experiment. Look into yourself, you deep down inside, and you in public, and try saying 'these aren't two, they're me!' If you are a believer, think of God not as a remote personage but as a force, pressing down on you inescapably to face yourself. Since God is real for you, so is this force, this Presence, this pressure that wants all of you as one you. Feel yourself resisting it, trying to stay as you are, in private and in public. Imagine your resistance and the downward force interlocking to form a vortex you are pulled into. It's like water in a basin spiralling inward as it disappears down the plughole. Hopkins uses this metaphor in his great poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland* in stanza four.

I am soft sift
In an hourglass – at the wall
Fast, but mined with a motion,
a drift,
And it crowds and it combs to

the fall;
I steady as a water in a well, to a
poise, to a pane,
But roped with, always, all the way
down from the tall
Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein
Of the gospel proffer, a pressure,
a principle, Christ's gift.

With all this in mind, read again this account by Eckhart Tolle:

'I cannot live with myself any longer'. This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. 'Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: "I" and the "self" that "I" cannot live with.' 'Maybe', I thought, 'only one of them is real.'

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words 'resist nothing' as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no

more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that.

I was awakened by the chirping of a bird outside the window. I had never heard such a sound before. My eyes were still closed, and I saw the image of a precious diamond. Yes, if a diamond could make a sound, this is what it would be like. I opened my eyes. The first light of dawn was filtering through the curtains. Without any thought, I felt, I knew, that there is infinitely more to light than we realize. That soft luminosity filtering through the curtains was love itself. Tears came into my eyes. I got up and walked around the room. I recognized the room, and yet I knew that I had never truly seen it before. Everything was fresh and pristine, as if it had just come into existence. I picked up things, a pencil, an empty bottle, marvelling at the beauty and aliveness of it all.

That is the Tolle experience. When I, an old monk long practised in contemplative prayer, first read him, I then saw myself as two, or as 'two-ing' and my prayer now as Jesus drawing me together. I could walk around our garden, looking inward and seeing Jesus dead and risen bringing me together, as an experience not as the implication of

a dogma. Tolle writes of letting the air out of the inflatable toy of ego, and this resonates with me, the image his, the experience mine. I only give this as my own experience, but I know that confreres of mine who are into contemplative prayer assimilate Tolle in the same way, and prayer-groups that we run are enthusiastic. All of us find prayer invigorated by the Tolle connection. This is not the first time that Christian contemplative prayer has been invigorated from a non-Christian source. There was the immense influence of the Neo-Platonist Dionysius on the monastic tradition. And Thomas Aquinas the great synthesiser of Catholic Christian theology quotes him more often than any other source, apart from Damascene whom he also quotes more than any other. The pagan and the Christian between them account for most of his citations. The human mind and soul thirsts for God 'as a dry weary land without water' and the soul of the mystic responds to water wherever it may be found.

The bottom line of the conflict between this book by Abanes and Tolle is a certain Christian mistrust of the mystical. We ran into this at Downside, big time, in 1938 when the *Spiritual Letters* of our Abbot Chapman⁴ were published posthumously and provoked a frenzy of condemnation, one writer finding in them all the condemned propositions of Michel Molinos the eighteenth century Quietist. Go back a couple of centuries, and you run

into the bitter dispute over so-called Quietism, in which the eloquent Bossuet prevailed over the gentle mystic Archbishop Fenelon, thus depriving generations of seminarians of training in contemplative prayer, so you had young men trained to live without pleasure either in marriage or in God, a recipe for the ills of our time in the Catholic Church. We Catholics need to remember that Jesus never promised Peter wise leadership in his successors, only that a pope would never put the barque finally on the rocks. During my twelve years working in Campus Ministry at Marquette University in America, I ran into the same Christian mistrust of the mystical. At that time, a Trappist monk was teaching 'Centering Prayer' and we plugged this on campus. We ran into much opposition from the Campus Crusade for Christ, which seemed so counterproductive. Surely the interest in personal prayer in a worldly environment would bring us together, but this did not happen. What we ran into was the religious mistrust of the mystical.

This book by Abanes, I think, epitomises this Christian mistrust of the mystical, which shows itself in the authors he does not draw on. There is no index of names, which is a pity in a work of this importance, so I had to comb the notes to each chapter. None of my names were there! Urs von Balthasar, Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, the very popular American Franciscan who

has for years led a group devoted to contemplative prayer and social action, and who quotes Tolle with entire approval. What is rather intriguing is that a splendid little book, *Who Told You That You Were Naked?*, by John Jacob Raub⁵, the Trappist, who is described as the new Thomas Merton, has a preface acknowledging a basic indebtedness to *A Course in Miracles*⁶, as does Tolle in his prescript. I know quite a few Catholics who have had the patience to work through this book, including the priest who gave us our community retreat this year. Yet the book is described by our author Abanes as 'a new age channelled document supposedly from Jesus which denigrates Christianity and directs people toward New Age concepts'.

Interestingly a best-kept secret among the Jesuits was the mystical character of their founder's spirituality. This was lost sight of when the Society was reinstated by Rome after the defeat of Napoleon, as part of a policy of 'restoration.' The General of the reconstituted Society was a Spaniard called Rotan, a military type who gave the Society his authoritarian stamp. That was the Jesuit model until the sixties, when the true Ignatius was being discovered as the mystic he was. It was my privilege to be working in the Jesuit University of Marquette, both in Campus Ministry and in the Theology Department. It was Ignatius who discovered the vital role of feeling in the spiritual life. He no-

ticed the difference between how he felt after reading tales of chivalry and after reading the life of a saint. The first feeling was of what we would call ennui, the latter of 'consolation' a big word for him, meaning the experience of coming-alive to God and a vigorous inner life. Using Eckhart Tolle's language, the first effect was of pain-body, the other – in a Christian language-game – of the Holy Spirit.

This leads on to our understanding of salvation through the blood of Christ. Astonishingly, it is the case that from the third century onward, our salvation through the blood of Christ was thought about without the Resurrection! In his magisterial letter to the Romans, which is the key text here, Paul says that the righteousness of God is made manifest with the crucifixion of his Son. Amazingly this has been taken to mean that the justice of God was carried out when Jesus was on the cross and made things right with God for us, Luther seeing all the fury of God against sin unleashed against that bleeding dying body! (God help us, how has Christianity survived?) The truth is wonderfully different. What the crucifixion of the Son of God shows us is the justice of this world in action. What this world thinks of God is shown in the death-sentence passed on him by the powers that be, spiritual and temporal, Israel and Rome. There's justice for you, all our victims of wars, of our insane humanity spoken for by 'a

blood more insistent than Abel's'. The justice of God is shown by this victim risen and calling a bewildered world into the forgiveness and the bliss of God himself. Sound unfamiliar?

So from where comes the other, horrific understanding of God's ways with man? You got it: the pain-body, our addiction to unhappiness insisting that religion be sad, based on a hideous caricature of the greatest act of love that there has ever been. Tolle's principal contribution to our self-understanding as human beings, the lack of which, St. Teresa says, leads to untold miseries, is the pain-body and he defines it as an inherited addiction to unhappiness. Now this concept acquires exceptional authority from the fact that it follows directly and inescapably from Tolle's transforming experience of bliss. I mean, that his notion of 'resistance to bliss' is formidable. I must confess that I find compelling the conclusion that the critical book by Abanes is influenced by this addiction to unhappiness. Here it takes the form of saying that religion is supposed to be tough, and Richard Rohr is very emphatic on the harm done to religion by making it 'appropriately sad.' To diagnose in humanity an addiction to unhappiness is to account for a huge amount of pain and history. This goes without saying. To anyone tempted to ignore this human insanity, may I recommend the recent *The End of Wars* by Adam Hochschild⁷. But does this

diagnosis of man have the last word? No, for that man who came up with it knew an inundation of bliss, and far more importantly the last word is with the cross of Jesus issuing in the Resurrection and Mission of the Holy Spirit. Think on these things, as Paul our bringer of the Good News tells us we must always do.

All religion mistrusts the mystical, and Christianity is no exception and has persecuted its mystics. We need to open some spiritual windows on the confused world of our time. An easy Christian dismissal of an experience that a growing number of Christians are recognizing as holding up a mirror to their own life of prayer is problematic. I write as one of their number, and I was put onto Tolle by a fellow-monk whose spiritual life, anguished and joyous, has been known to me for fifty years. Both of us are amazed that our lifelong monastic prayer experience finds itself mirrored in the experience of an outsider to Christian faith and an insider to pain. This evidence of the secularity of the Spirit is devastating. Its confident dismissal as a fashionable cult by those who share our Christian faith is, as I say – to use a word now over-used – problematic. In short, it's not doing any good. Supernatural faith and the need for absolute certainty tend to go together. But the former is the cure for the latter rather than its triumphal confirmation, for it roots the mind in the deep mystery of God and not in

guaranteed certainties. There's a saying of Carl Rogers: the only security to grow in is the stability of change.

And now I feel that I have hardly begun, with these observations, so much more is to be said. Thomas Merton writes lovingly of what is called a 'point vierge', literally the virginal point in us that is free of the brutalities of the will as Merton puts it. Abbot Chapman calls it the fine point – or base – of the soul, innocent of all our involvement in the world, a radical purity of heart, before the pain-body begins its sad history. It is here that the desire for God takes its rise, as the immediate expression of the still point, so that the still point is the seat of desire, whose attraction is for God, the longing for union. Now as God is ultimate infinite mystery, conventional theology held that the soul, being finite, could not reach out *even in desire* to do so, hence conventional theology disagreed with the view of Aquinas, recovered by de Lubac, that we have a natural desire for the vision of God. This natural desire must reside at the still point of the soul.

Now Abbot Chapman held the unusual view that the natural desire for God was to be found in a nature poet such as Wordsworth. This view was sternly opposed by the Catholic orthodoxy of the time, which didn't like an affair with God not under its auspices. And an evangelical theology is similarly disinclined. Now Chapman had no

truck with equating the longing of Wordsworth with the love-poetry of John of the Cross, but he saw the difference to consist in the presence, in the Catholic mystic, of faith which *obeyed* the divinely inspired movement to give all to God in a new and wonderful world. In Tolle's crisis it was *an obedience* that was required to a command, to 'resist nothing', obedience to which brought immediate peace. This looks *far more* like the story of the conversion of a believer than the aspiration of the poet.

Tolle writes:

So discover the depths within yourself. A sense of awe, of wonder, will arise within you. It can only awaken those who are ready. Are you ready? Find the goodness already within you. The past has no power to stop you from being present now...Only through awakening can you know the true meaning of that word. To love is to recognize yourself in another. In order to attract success, you need to welcome it wherever you see it...The source of all energy is within you. You will come to life. A new year ... A new you ... A new earth.

Abanes comments: 'These sentiments may sound wonderfully poetic and inspiring. But what do they actually mean? What is 'the depth' within yourself? What does it mean to be awakened? What does it mean

to be 'present now'? What does it mean to be 'aware'? Aware of what? And what is the 'truth' about who I am?' Now anyone who, like me, has been long-practised in what de Caussade SJ calls the Sacrament of the Present Moment will answer all those rhetorical questions, finding them meaningful. One knows what he's talking about. Off-and-on, one is there. This is the language of the mystical. But the give-away comes as Abanes concludes his commentary on that paragraph, 'we must also ask: How might Tolle's teaching contradict or complement scripture? What does he say about religion in general, and about Christianity specifically? Where does he stand on God, Jesus, and salvation?'

Eliot as a literary critic made much of 'sensibility', and he said that sensibility changes from generation to generation, so that whether a writer was in tune with the sensibility of his day was criterial for one's judgment of him or her. A writer out of touch with their time could not be a first-rate writer – unless he was Blake (whose time, according to an old scripture-scholar friend, has come). How do these observations apply here? What of an Evangelical Christian who denies and denounces the mystical *if* the mystical is in the feel of today, more so indeed than the religious? I am sure that Abanes wants to convert people from Tolle, to liberate them as Christians. But how can he hope to do so if his

treatment of Tolle makes it abundantly clear that he doesn't understand him, indeed doesn't want to understand him? His treatment of the big Tolle experience reads like someone doing brain-surgery with a screwdriver.

And this is the point I keep making: the secularity of the Spirit in our time is a most important reality; one might say a revelation for our desperate time. And to this secularity, evangelical theology is resolutely opposed! And to it I am deeply and exceptionally attracted. Rahner famously predicted a future in which to be a Christian a person would have to be a mystic, or touched with the mystical. Here I'm using Merton's implicit definition of the mystical as being intensely alive at the 'point vierge.' Now in the rapidly receding-for-ever past, there have been prominent Christians, and a few popes, who have denounced men and women whom we now recognize as mystics. But that was when you *could* be a convinced and convincing Christian and denounce mystics as would-be schismatics. That was before – long before – the state of things predicted by Rahner. To be a passionately convinced Christian *today* and denounce the mystical is to show oneself to be out of touch with life today and thus to give to one's Christianity an antiquarian ring. It is to deny what Rahner is saying.

Now all the people I know to have a mystical bent – people in my community and in my world – are en-

thusiastic about Tolle, finding in him, as I do, a 'roadmap' of the interior life. I may be an 'advanced case' of this, but ever since I came across Tolle, I have found his dramatically radical exposure of 'two-ness' to be so much my own that I experience the act of prayer as Jesus un-two-ing me. So the Tolle moment is my prayer moment with Jesus as its focus. Now this is *my* experience of praying as a Christian today. This is how Jesus is alive in me as a Christian today. And I speak, I think, for all who share my Christian spiritual stance.

Finally a useful clarification occurs to me, about living in the power of now. How does it follow from me-no-longer-two that all my relationships are love-relationships, as Tolle says? Well, as long as I am me-for-me, I see another as an interruption in my self-affair. I really think I used to be that way, and the American Jesuit I lived in community with, interviewed in a 'program', said 'He seems to be in a love-hate relationship with himself!' Now Girard fills this out, or fills this in: my desires are not my own. They are rivalistic versus the desires of others, mediated by the 'apex' in the triangular structure that Girard picked up in *The Red and the Black* of Stendhal. Now when I, under the pressure of the Presence, become one, my stance to the other is not rivalistic but inviting, invoking the lovely lyric in the rock opera Tommy, 'Come to my house, all the comfort-

able people!' In short, I come to feel Jesus un-two-ing me into invitation of the others.

Into a new inviting of the other
I am led in undoing me-for-me
So that my rivals become sister,
brother
In freedom wherewith you have
made us free.

Notes

1. Richard Abanes, *A New Earth, An Old Deception* (Bethany House Publishers, 2008).
2. Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Create a Better Life* (Penguin, 2009).
3. Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Hodder Paperbacks, 2001).
4. Abbot John Chapman, *The Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman OSB* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935).

5. John Jacob Raub, *Who Told You That You Were Naked?* (Crossroad Publishing, 1992).
6. *A Course in Miracles* (Arkana, 1975).
7. Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2011).

Dom Sebastian Moore OSB is a Benedictine monk of Downside Abbey (of 72 years standing), a moral theologian and author. His books include *The Contagion of Jesus: Doing Theology as if it Mattered* (2007) and *The Body of Christ*, written with Kate Wilson (2011). Sebastian has spoken on Merton at two day conferences run by the Society.