



Mystique and Theology: from the modern divergence to the pursuit of a contemporary reunion

Mística e Teologia: do desencontro moderno à busca de um reencontro contemporâneo

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Abstract

The contemporary cultural condition challenges the religious experience. We live a moment with a new spiritual demand: nowadays, one seeks a freer relation to dogma and a freer religious experience. However, one takes the risk that this wish, which is, in fact, one of the major values in our culture, ends up satisfying itself with superficial spiritual proposals. Through this concern, and understanding that the mystique, as a process experienced by the subject towards the meeting with the holy mystery, has important contributions to this set of problems, we'll undertake a reflection on the relation between mystique and Theology, the modern divergence, and the reunion signs which can already be visualized nowadays. We'll reflect on the mystique's marginalization, which has occurred in modernity, the suspicions hovering over the mystic ones, the division between spirituality and Theology which arose from the triumph of rationalism and, finally, on the new interest in mystique that has been sketched in contemporary Theology through the declaration of a new conception of revelation within the context of conciliar renewal.

Keywords: Mystique. Spirituality. Theology.

Resumo

A condição cultural contemporânea desafia a vivência religiosa. Vivemos um momento de nova demanda: busca-se, hoje, uma relação com o dogma e uma vivência religiosa mais livre. Corre-se o risco, todavia, de que esse desejo, que é, de fato, um dos grandes valores de nossa cultura, acabe se satisfazendo com propostas espirituais superficiais. A partir dessa preocupação, e entendendo que a mística, enquanto processo vivido pelo sujeito rumo ao encontro com o mistério santo, tem contribuições importantes para essa problemática, empreenderemos uma reflexão sobre a relação entre mística e Teologia, o desencontro moderno e os sinais de reencontro que já podem ser visualizados na atualidade. Refletiremos sobre a marginalização da mística, ocorrida na modernidade, as suspeitas que pairaram sobre os místicos, a divisão entre espiritualidade e Teologia que adveio do triunfo do racionalismo e, finalmente, sobre o novo interesse pela mística que vai se esboçando na Teologia contemporânea a partir da afirmação de uma nova concepção de revelação no contexto de renovação conciliar.

Palavras-chave: Mística. Espiritualidade. Teologia.

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Introduction

We live an interesting time. Nowadays, one speaks of supermodernity, a cultural condition in which one finds out the experience marked by a paradox: overtaking and conservation of modernity, i.e. replacement without annulment. Religious supermodernity might be characterized by a concern with individual salvation and a freer relation, non-dogmatic, to beliefs. Within this context, we've seen it, a new disembodied spirituality has flourished, devoid of commitment and aimed at the deepening of an individualistic subjectivism; and also, on the other hand, a search for stricter religious proposals which can offer safety in this shaky ground of freedom that often tends, going beyond the appreciation of the relative, to relativism.

Having this in mind, the demand for a theological reflection comprising the relation between mystique and dogma has grown, since the attention to the mystique as a process experienced by the subject towards the meeting with the holy mystery, the “where from” and the “where to” of the whole reality, comprises a freer way of relating to the dogma and socially experiencing the religion, without losing the depth sense that the spiritual experience provides our relation to the world with. The contemporary Theology, already aware of its limits, has sought to reflect on the mystique's importance and resume its link with the dogma, in an attempt to respond to the current anxieties of a religious experience which can be, at the same time, free, deep, and committed to the transformation of reality.

In this paper, we'll reflect on the mystique's marginalization occurred in modernity, the suspicions hovering over the mystic ones, the division between mystique and Theology which arose from the triumph of rationalism and, finally, on the new interest in the mystique that has been sketched in contemporary Theology through the declaration of a new conception of revelation within the context of conciliar renewal.

1 The mystic tradition as a criticism to the theological enterprise

By the 12th century, Theology was a unified enterprise implying intellectual reflection, prayer, and living, comprised a synthesis of exegesis, speculative reasoning, and mystic contemplation:

The theology's unity implied that intellectual reflection, prayer, and living were, ideally speaking, an integrated whole. The patristic theology involved a constant reading of the Scripture, which was then shaped on liturgy and critical dialogue with the Greek philosophical culture. This resulted in reflection on key issues, such as prayer, martyrdom, the status or the stages of Christian life, and so on. A variety of genres provided this theology with means: sermons, letters, lives of saints, and monastic rules. Being a theologian meant that a person had contemplated the mystery of incarnation and had a faith experience for reflecting on (SHELDRAKE, 2005, p. 55).

The mystique will indicate that knowledge on God requires an ever deeper penetration and overtaking of the statements and images which constitute themselves in the pursuit of developing knowledge on God (Theology).

This notion of the theological language's failure is present in the Christian tradition and it finds expression in the treatise *Mystic Theology*, by Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite, a writing of crucial importance to the development of Christian thought.

In this treatise, the mystiques are revelations of simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of Theology to which one comes when putting aside the sensations, the intellectual operations, all sensible and intelligible things, everything which doesn't exist and that exist to join the One who is above every being and every knowledge in an unrestricted, absolute, and pure abandonment (PSEUDO-DIONÍSIO, 2005, p. 15-16).

The pathway leading to the penetration into mystery, a darkness which illuminates and "overfills with splendors from the spiritual super goods the spiritual intelligences" implies the removal of all things "in the same way by which

those who shape a beautiful statue flatten the impediments which could obnubilate the pure beauty of its arcane vision, being able to fully show it, through removal” (PSEUDO-DIONÍSIO, 2005, p. 21). Theology, or Theosophy, God’s wisdom, as Pseudo-Dionysius indicates, implies an ascending dialectics which involves affirmations and denials that, for the author, should be praised with opposite procedures:

Indeed, we stated, when coming from the most primary principles and going down through the intermediate members up to the utmost things; in the case of denials, however, we remove everything, when we climb from the utmost things to the most primary ones, for knowing the ignorance hidden in all beings through all cognoscible things, and for seeing the supernatural darkness hidden by all lights present in beings (PSEUDO-DIONÍSIO, 2005, p. 21-22).

Pseudo-Dionysius teaches and the Christian tradition embraces (at least until the Middle Ages) that the theological enterprise assumes the mystique. The author shows that the relation to God, absolutely transcendent, implies the ecstasy operated through the denial procedure (removal), with the ultimate goal of the transforming union (divinization) through the love that is God, absolutely transcendent and fully present in all creation. The mystique is, according to the author, a theology’s quality, a kind of God’s wisdom in which penetrate the initiated ones who are willing to be stripped of knowledge itself and those who abandon themselves, in an unrestricted, absolute, and pure manner, letting themselves be led upwards and live in the One who transcends everything, joining the superunknown principle according to the best (of her/his faculties), but which is known beyond intelligence (PSEUDO-DIONÍSIO, 2005, p. 18)¹.

For Theology, the mystique will be, in a certain sense, the criticism implying this divestment intellectual process. In medieval Theology this process will deepen within the subjective experience domain and, later on, it’ll gain a sense of experimental knowledge.

¹ For more details on the concept of mystique, see Mariani (2009, p. 361-375).

In the medieval world, a mystic literature affirms and develops itself as a search for the divine within the soul and as a mystic unity experience with God, *unio mystica*, a subjective experience overflowing all theological concepts and doctrines. This literature is clearly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius, since he discovers and announces that in the foundation of every effort to talk of God there's an unspeakable experience and that, for reaching Him, there's a need to divest of all things and, more than that, divest of oneself, annihilate oneself. The medieval mystique expresses itself in speech a more focused on the movements caused in the soul, experience of ecstasy (exodus from oneself) and transformation through the union with God. Here, perhaps, we can talk of mystique as "experience", understanding this term like Congar (2005, p. 13-14):

Perception of God's reality coming to us, active in us and for us, attracting us to himself in a communion, a friendship, that is, being to the other. All this, of course, below the view, without abolishing the distance in the knowledge order of God himself, but surpassing it in terms of a God's presence in us as the beloved purpose of our life: a presence which becomes sensitive through the signs on peace, joy, assurance, comfort, and illumination effects, and everything that comes along with love.

2 The mystique's marginalization by Theology in modernity

The divorce between Theology and mystique, which was made explicit in the late 17th and in the 18th century, after the Reformation crisis and the Enlightenment challenge, is a process conceived since the High Middle Ages and which has as an important factor the emergency, within scholasticism, of a field distinct from the mystic Theology, consisting of a systematic study, doctrinal, of the soul's contemplative journey towards the union with God through the various stages of spiritual life. A classic expression of this mystic Theology, Sheldrake (2005, p. 61) observes, is the work *De triplice via* by St. Bonaventure describing the three indispensable steps for the human's rise to the perfect happiness for which it was created: that of progressive purification (the purgative path); of illumination

(illuminative path); and of unitive life. Each of these steps, Velasco (2003, p. 80-81) shows,

involves the practice of indispensable and usual exercises with regard to the three paths: meditation, prayer, and contemplation. They're accompanied by the practice of certain virtues, such as humility, and carefully specified exercises, such as conscience examination, mortification, life reformation, contrition for sins, in the purgative path; the imitation of Christ, the practice of evangelical advises, and devotion to the Virgin, in the illuminative way; and the exercise of love, adoration as a peculiar form of prayer, devotion, eucharistic life, and contemplation, under their most perfect forms, in the unitive path.

However, the caution expressed in the work by St. Bonaventure, i.e. not losing sight of the complexity and depth of the relation between mystique and Theology, the growth of a knowledge body associated to asceticism, contemplation, and mysticism, has led to the emergence of systematic meditative techniques.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, the interest in prayer methods which will go towards the needs of devout Christians in response to excessive theorizations on the union with God in the mystic state grows. The new spiritual movement “modern *devotio*”, born in the Netherlands in the late 14th century, will be characterized by a seriousness and a distrust in everything going beyond the extent (and, thus, they'll prefer discretion and moderate austerity), and also by a dedication to internalization exercises, meditation, under their various forms. According to the supporters of this movement, “the methodical meditations are designed to intensely strengthen the convictions of world's vanity, the nullity of what goes on, the belief in divine judgments and the Christ's love taken into account in the Gospel” (DEBONGNIE, 1964, p. 743).

The “common life brothers”, as they were called, longed to reform the Church's life from the inside out. Their spiritual renewal program can be known even today through the book *The imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis (2001, p. 13), who advises in the very first book:

Those who wish, then, understand and enjoy the fullness of Christ's words should strive to conform with Him all her/his own life. What does matter for you deeply talking of the Trinity, if you aren't humble and, thus, will displease the Trinity itself? In fact, it isn't by using sublime words that a man becomes holy and fair; it's the virtuous life which makes him pleasing to God. I'd rather feel compunction than know its definition. If you knew by heart the whole Bible and the sentences by all philosophers, what would you do with all this without God's love and grace? "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (Ecl 1,2), except loving God and serving Him only. The supreme wisdom consists in the tendency by the kingdom of heaven to disdain of the world.

This movement, Pierre Debonnie (1964, p. 744) observes,

is included in the general movement which, since the end of the 14th century, abandoning the unity between Theology and spirituality of the Fathers and thomism, results, with the triumph of nominalists tendencies, in the divorce between Theology and spirituality, of asceticism and mystique.

According to Sheldrake (2005), one operates within Theology in the West, a division between the affective side of faith (or participation) and conceptual knowledge, and, within what has been defined as spirituality, another separation with regard to the public liturgy and ethics. Spirituality, focused on interiority, has passed to the margins of Theology and culture as a whole.

Around the 16th century, the relationship between mystic theology and theology in general was ambiguous, at best, and antagonistic, at worst. The divisions in Western Christianity in the wake of the Reformation encouraged theology to concentrate on dogmatism, in order to become guardian of the prevailing Catholic or Protestant orthodoxies. The Roman Catholic dogmatic theology was opposed not only to the alleged unbalanced subjectivity of the Protestant reformers, but also to the mystic and spiritual reformers in their own ranks (SHELDRAKE, 2005, p. 63).

Here, we should remember that one outlines, in this medieval transition to modernity, a transformation in the understanding of mystique which gains a more subjective accent and the introduction of a distinction into the relation to God, between mystique and spirituality. The mystique starts referring to the direct

experience of God and spirituality, to the whole growth and deepening process which involves a relation to God. Spirituality, which is a recent concept, according to Urs von Balthasar (1965, p. 5), would be:

The practical or existential radical attitude, which is something like the result or expression of man's self-understanding, as a religious being, or, in a more generalized way, the result and expression of his self-accomplishment as an ethically committed being. In this sense, it would be a current and usual life information by the ultimate value judgments and the crucial ultimate decisions.

Anyway, we should take into account that there's a relation between mystique and spirituality and that the great inspirers of modern spiritualities were deeply mystic and, thus, faced distrust and suspicion, because they dared to take theoretical and practical consequences out of this spiritual experience that, for them, would always imply divestment in the relation to the world, a direct meeting with the God's mystery, transformation of oneself and a reunion with the world.

2.1 The mystique under suspicion

The mystics will be, within this new context, target of suspicions, because they dare to advise people and explain the scriptures, through the transformations that God exerts on them. St. Ignatius of Loyola became suspected of unorthodoxy because of the emphasis on inner freedom and personal inspiration. The *Spiritual exercises* that he proposes as "method" are, in fact, the result of his own spiritual itinerary. The deepest thing he knows about God is a result of what he saw himself, of his own process of meeting with God, a process which also involves divestment of worldly attachments and conquer of inner freedom (indifference, in his way of expressing himself)²:

² In the visions of Manresa, reported in the *Autobiography* of Ignatius of Loyola, there're moments of deep anguish caused by the torment which represented for Ignatius an awareness of sin. He describes, there, moments of great "varieties in his soul", moments when he was "so unbridled that he felt nothing for praying, neither for listening to the mass, nor in any other prayer". Disturbed by the scruple that doesn't let him free from guilt, he often feels temptations "like a big urge to launch into a big hole which existed in that room, close to the place where he was prayed" (LOYOLA, 1978, p. 33-37).

One day, praying the Hours of our Lady, on the steps of the same monastery, understanding started ascending, as if he saw the Holy Trinity in a three-key figure, and that with many tears and sobs that he couldn't refrain. That morning, going in a procession which departed from there, he couldn't hold back the tears until the eating time, nor after eating could he stop talking of the Holy Trinity. And that with many and varied comparisons, and with much joy and consolation. Thus, throughout his whole life he got this impression of feeling a great devotion for praying to the Holy Trinity. [...] One day, in the elevation of the Lord's Body, he saw with the inner eyes something which looked like white rays coming from above. However, this, although he can't explain, after so long, he clearly saw through understanding the status of Jesus Christ, our Lord, in the Blessed Sacrament. [...] Going this way in his devotions, he sat up for a while with his face turned to the river, which was just below. Being seated there, the eyes of understanding started opening up. There was no vision at all, but he understood and penetrated into many truths, both in a matter of spirit and a matter of faith and letters. This with such a great illustration that looked like new things [...] (LOYOLA, 1978, p. 40-42).

St. Ignatius describes, in the visions of Manresa, something which we can interpret in modern terms as the consciousness moment when one has the experience of penetrating into God's mystery, the perception of completeness. We can see that it's the light moment when answers are found to life's crucial questions: where do I come from, where do I go to, what can I expect? (BOFF, 2008, p. 186). This experience, which was organized under the form of spiritual exercises over time, Ignatius starts sharing.

This itinerary, welcomed by many people who had "a taste for spiritual things", raised the inquisitors' suspicion:

As stated above, there was a loud noise, throughout that land, about Alcalá's works and those who spoke in a way or the other. It reached Toledo, the inquisitors. They came to Alcalá, the pilgrim was warned by their host, telling them that they were called "the sackcloth-clothed ones" and I believe that "enlightened ones", who would make a carnage on them. They soon began to turn their lives into research and process. Finally, they returned to Toledo without calling them, just for this purpose. They left the case to the vicar Figueroa, and now it's with the emperor (LOYOLA, 1978, p. 67-68).

The inclusion of the “Rules for thinking with the Church” as an appendix to the *Spiritual exercises*, translation of the Spanish text into an official version in Latin, and the general direction taken by the Ignatian spirituality after Ignatius’ death reflected the antagonism between Theology and mystique. The effort consisted of control and institutional framing of the theological knowledge which is based on experience.

Like St. Ignatius, St. Teresa of Avila was also monitored by the Inquisition, as reported by Elisabeth Reynaud (2001, p. 145-150). She was afraid of threats which reflect on their experiences and on their way of praying. She was advised to seek guidance from doctors, men of letters, the wise theologians from Salamanca or Valladolid who diagnose there the devil’s presence. Knocked down, Tereza searched for other theologians. She was heard by Francis Borgia, a Jesuit with a great reputation who recognized God’s action in her. Although she was defended by such a distinguished personality, there’re still suspicions about her mystic experiences on the part of Jesuits who were willing to care for her spiritual progress. “The Company’s priests very often prohibited her to commune, thinking that the Eucharist is a reason for her exaltation; they also prohibited her to dedicate herself to solitary contemplation exercises, since the forbidden delights revive on them” (REYNAUD, 2001, p. 151).

Teresa of Avila describes the transformations that God, the Holy Spirit, operates on her. It’s her own spiritual experience, analyzed with remarkable introspection lucidity, that she generalizes as teaching. On this experience, described in *The interior castle or the mansions*, her knowledge of God is based:

Let’s consider, therefore, that this castle has, as I said, many mansions, some of them on top, other ones underneath, and more on the sides. And, in the center, in the middle of all it will be the primary one, where extremely secret things occur between God and the soul. In this ultimate mansion, things are different. Our good God wants to take out of soul the eyes’ scales, as well as that one sees and understands something from the grace which is granted to someone – although this is undertaken in a somewhat strange manner. Once the soul is introduced into this mansion,

through intellectual view, the Holy Trinity – God in three Persons – is shown to it through some kind of truth’s representation. First, an inflammation which resembles a huge cloud of light comes to the spirit. Then, it clearly sees the distinction between the divine Persons. Through admirable news which are infused on it, believes with absolute certainty, that all three Persons are an only substance, power, knowledge, an only God. Thus, what we believe to be faith is here understood by the soul, by sight, so to speak, although it isn’t seen by the body or soul’s eyes, because this isn’t an imaginary view. In the seventh mansion, the three Persons communicate to it and talk to it. They provide it with an understanding of the Lord’s words which are included in the Gospel: that He would come, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, to dwell in the soul which loves Him and follows His commandments (TEREZA DE JESUS, 1982, p. 230-231).

Teresa speaks of God through the experience and she should, thus, explain herself before the holy Roman Catholic Church. She had to write an autobiography to be evaluated by the Inquisition and, in the prologue to *The interior castle or the mansions*, justifies:

If something isn’t in accordance with the holy Roman Catholic Church doctrine, it’s due to ignorance, rather than malice. Through God’s goodness, I am always, I was in the past, and I’ll be in the future subject to the holy Church. Be Him forever blessed and glorified! Amen (TEREZA DE JESUS, 1982, p. 15).

2.2 The controversial theme of annihilation

As the 16th century Spanish mystique arouses suspicion, the 17th century France also experienced its crisis. The controversial theme permeating the French spiritual literature is “annihilation”.

Christian perfection, according to this literature, Mino Bergamo (1992, p. 16) states, relies on annihilating oneself to conform to Jesus Christ, who, being a God, annihilated himself. Annihilation is, therefore, adherence to the sacrifice of the God-Man which is reached through the continued practice of shaming. Annihilation is also contemplative stillness, soul’s perfect passivity, and oneself’s loss.

The origin of the annihilation theme in 17th century France, according to Mino Bergamo (1992), is associated to two doctrines. The first is a fruit from the so-called Abstract School³, whose reference is Benoît de Canfeld, and the second refers to the mystic spirituality chain of Pierre Bérulle, manifested, above all, through the work by Charles de Condren.

The first doctrine refers us to the Rhenish-Flemish tradition which is expressed as a deeply speculative mystique, that is, as a spiritual itinerary which, to arrive at its ultimate phase, the union phase, total fusion to God or soul's deification, it's preceded by annihilation, experienced there as an epiphany of truth: discovery of the truth that I, without God, am nothing. The soul realizes that, without God, it lacks ontological substance. The union, then, takes place preceded by perception of the large distance between God and the mystique, which is also, at the same time, perception of the great divine mercy that removes it from the deep and mysterious abyss where it was. In this dynamics, the mystique knows that the creature's nobility has its foundation in God, who comes to it and is deeply born from its soul.

Canfeld's mystique, woven through these references, was also entirely focused on knowledge. Canfeld puts the truth in the foreground. It's a truth that destroys the subject, at the same time that deifies her/him. Through the truth man dies, not with regard to death, but in terms of ascending to a new life, a supereminent life (BERGAMO, 1992, p. 23).

To evoke this strange implication of life and death, Canfeld, however, resorts to love's symbolism, because in the bridal metaphor it finds elements for expressing the strange coincidence between death and life, annihilation and deification.

³ The Abstract School was responsible for the surprising spread of Pseudo-Dionysius' work in the early years of the 17th century in France (DEBONGNIE, 1964, p. 1922).

The second doctrine referred to by Mino Bergamo (1992, p. 25) leads us to Pierre Bérulle. This doctrine has as novelty displacement of the axis from God's devotion to Jesus Christ. Bérulle elevates the Incarnation's mystery to the highest piety position in the Christian religion. On the ground of this new Christocentrism, Charles de Condren could, then, connect an annihilation doctrine which is, in fact, original, now associated to a sacrificial perspective.

According to Charles de Condren, Bergamo explains, the incommensurability between God and the world is absolute. The creature's being is taken away from nothing, it's shaped from nothing and inhabited by the nothingness which eats it. However, this nothingness may honor God, annihilating itself before Him, offering Him its own sacrifice.

However, the human being, corrupted by sin, becomes unworthy to sacrifice her/himself before God. Jesus Christ then, with the Incarnation, allows man, through adherence to his sacrifice, to sacrifice before God.

Sacrificing himself instead of men, Christ doesn't release them from sacrifice, but he prepares the place of sacrifice for them. Well, this place isn't only that of the creature's "worship duty", but it's that of its union with the creator's being (BERGAMO, 1992, p. 27).

The cross, here, isn't only worship, but also union with the creator. And Condren, Bergamo (1992, p. 27) comments, "has no more than a prayer: respond to this call, let Christ being whole in you, and that he is in his 'status' of annihilated victim in his divine being".

Benoît de Canfeld and Charles de Condren materialize, therefore, according to this author, two major steps of the pathway of the notion of annihilation in the first half of the 17th century in France. The theme of annihilation also emerges in the same century, connected to two other crucial concepts for the Christian tradition: the concept of poverty and the concept of indifference. For making this

thesis evident, Mino Bergamo (1992) resorts to the work by Jean-Joseph Surin, one of the great mystics from the Jesus Society, and to St. Francis de Sales.

According to Surin, oneself's loss allows the release of wishing (the will). The saint lives beyond all concern because he lost everything and because this loss constitutes all his joy. It's in the emptiness dug into the being that God may descend and dwell. Emptiness, however, is a poverty which must be wished for, because poverty prepares the union with God; "absolute poverty must be wished for while it leads to agreement with wish's release, but, in turn, this wish's release must be wished for because it implies a release of the (human) being that prepares the union with God" (BERGAMO, 1992, p. 32-33).

According to Surin, the mystic union can only be materialized to the extent of abandoning earthly goods which coincides with loss of the subject's being, i.e. to the extent that the loss tends to a limit which annihilation is.

In Surin's text, according to Mino Bergamo's interpretation, the Christian is free because he untied the knot which, by connecting it to himself, made him an existing slave, occupied with himself. Released from himself, the Christian shall not take care of himself anymore. What separates man from God is, here, the trapping of him manifested in the inevitability of someone's self-care. What makes God closer to man is the radical confidence in providence up to the limit of oneself's loss.

From this perspective, the abandonment to providence opposes itself to care, as the adventure spirit opposing to prudence. God will be an abyss where reason is lost, a space where the laws and human values mysteriously emerge in a reverse manner. Therefore, the danger posed by the mystic one is announced, and he's like a hero of an absolute counterorder.

Indifference is another concept assumed in the 17th century France in by the great spirituals, from Francis de Sales to Fénelon. These spirituals universalize and internalize the indifference (brought to modern spirituality by Ignatius of Loyola) which will be designed as an inner and passive acquiescence state with regard to God's direction. Indifference tends to get confused with conformity to God's will, total abandonment in God's hands, and with pure love, which is the highest reason of spiritual life.

Indifference, in the Salesian doctrine, Mino Bergamo (1992, p. 50) states, is the noblest, purest, holiest answer that man can give to the divine will of good pleasure. It's the highest degree of love, reached by the one who allows to be led, as a small child in her/his mother's arms, by an admirable consent which may be called union, or the largest unit of our will with God's will. Indifference refers to annihilation, to a passive subject, lost, expropriated, separated from her/his own being, and united with the divine being⁴.

According to Fénelon, the mystique is the sanctifying grace manifestation proper to every Christian faithful to her/his vocation. According to the author, as well as for Francis de Sales, love to God, at its highest degree, can and must be pure love, deprived of any interest, including interest for the salvation of her/his own soul. Pure love presupposes indifference in its more radical sense. An indifference unfolded in self-forgetfulness, complete dispossession, and annihilation.

What aroused suspicion, in the case of these positions, Marco Vannini (2005, p. 79-80) comments, was the reference to the soul's bottom, which isn't available to control both of the institution and the subject her/himself.

⁴ This inspiration of Francis de Sales will be condemned by Pope Innocent XII, in 1699, materially through the condemnation of certain propositions by bishop Fénelon.

What aroused suspicion was, sometimes, a reference to that soul's "bottom" which, as such, is ineffable and unknowable, denies all determined content, and escapes the control of "powers", that is, faculties of the soul itself. Regarding this bottomless bottom, abyssal, it's no wonder that the ecclesiastical hierarchy has preferred the safer psychological ground, that of "powers", on which it was possible to exercise spiritual direction.

With Fénelon's condemnation⁵ and that of all authors connected to him, the mystique gave way to spirituality, which starts being understood at this moment as a description of soul's states and driven to the domain of psychology. According to Vannini (2005, p. 80):

The mystique was expelled from the common ground of the religious experience and confined to a kind of "supernaturalistic" reserve, where, perhaps, for many, it still remains. In parallel, the soul's science has lost all contact to the "bottom", always becoming another psychology – a term unknown in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but, on the contrary, it was stated in the 17th century – first, religious psychology and, then, gradually, pure and simple psychology.

2.3 The triumph of rationalism

The Enlightenment period, in the late 17th century and the early 18th century, marked by rationalism and concentrated on the growth of scientific research as a pathway to truth and certainty, expelled the mystique from the religious experience land (as seen above) and worsened, as Sheldrake (2005) observes, the division between spirituality and Theology. If, on one hand, Theology well understand itself as bearing finished truths to be proposed, on the other hand, spirituality, heiress of the suspicion hovering over the mystique, will be associated to dubious devotions or speculations about mental states.

⁵ It's worth remembering here that, before Fénelon, Miguel de Molinos, a Spanish priest, had already been convicted, under accusations of quietism. His work, the *Spiritual handbook*, very successful, supported "that know nothing, be nothing, and wish nothing which eliminates the whole dogmatic apparatus, the whole content, including the religious one" (VANNINI, 2005, p. 84-85).

Roman Catholicism in particular espoused the defensive positivism, which means that faith was increasingly expressed in terms of propositional “truths”. For theologians, spirituality has become an object of suspicion. It wasn’t realistic, because it was associated to a theologically dubious devotion and it had an optional interest because it seemed to relate only to a certain mindset. The value of abstract intelligence was overrated. As a consequence, the spiritual dimension of human life should be continuously challenged by an entire analytic journey towards what could be proved. The notion that theology was a science became linked to the belief that science could generate value-free knowledge. This directed theology to an isolated position with regard to the context or personal feeling (SHELDRAKE, 2005, p. 65).

In the late 19th and the early 20th century, according to the same author, within a new scholasticism, an effort to re-commitment was born between the themes of spirituality and Theology. However, this return showed severe limits, to the extent that the starting point, now, will no longer be experience, but the principles which rule the dogmatic Theology. Here, we see an inversion: the experience which was theology’s foundation turned into an unfolding. This way, a global approach will comprise accurate categories and definitions and, despite the experiential theme, the “spiritual Theology” will be static, because it was developed according to the deductive method.

In recent decades, however, Theology undergoes a significant change. From a deductive reflection it turns into a reflection attentive to the experience of God and open to the reality which poses itself as a plural reality. In this context, the separations observed in late medieval times and reinforced by the Enlightenment started being undone. Nowadays, one may say that we’re seeking a better understanding of the relationship between Theology and spirituality, and that it’s already possible to observe, also, a re-appreciation of mystique by Theology.

3 Mystique and Theology: the contemporary reunion

Surely, for the Theology which took the inspirations of the Second Vatican Council, the conception of revelation proposed by *Dei Verbum*, that God, as a reality, exceeds all our efforts to think and reflect and, also, the limits of language. It's also clear that the mystic tradition, between silence and the speech on God, has, according to this understanding, a fundamental contribution towards meeting the demand of contemporary freedom with regard to the dogma and social experience of religion, without falling into the temptation of superficiality.

The freedom to which one comes through the mystic itinerary, recognizes that Theology which was able to overcome the illuminist prejudice and resume tradition, it's the result of a dive into the deep. It implies a great job of the subject with regard her/himself and to her/his relation to the world. It supposes overcoming a formal relation to God based on adherence to the dogma.

Try God, testify mystic ones, presupposes receiving the doctrine proposed from the outside which intends to offer support to the experience of faith, but, at the same time, cross and overcome this entire mediation; welcome, but go beyond the symbols, the rites, the doctrines. In the expression of Pseudo-Dionysius, overcoming all the "transferable names of objects sensitive to the divine things, divine forms, as well as divine figures, parts, instruments, places, ornaments, angers, grief, pain, rages, inebriations, excesses, oaths, curses, sleeps, wakes, and all sacred figurations of God's representation" (PSEUDO-DIONÍSIO, 2005, p. 26). Every positive concept about God, all the gestures proposed, all laws, all rites, all images must be regarded according to their supporting function in the pathway towards God, but, at the same time, all this ends up being relativized to the extent of getting close to the living God, absolutely transcendent. What derives from this process is, in fact, true freedom, a freedom which has its ballast in a deep relation to God.

Regarding the relation between the particular and the universal, the mystic ones, experiences an interesting synthesis: she/he celebrates her/his own experience, she/he speaks in the first person of her/his intimacy with God, teaches that every building built, the whole religious tradition, determined by the limited time and space conditions, has its foundation in an intimacy moment with God that manifests itself as a universal experience, possible for everyone, but which isn't owned by anyone.

The mystique teaches a great respect for the comprehensive truth of God which is always more than what someone recognizes and perceives, an always *absconditus* mystery and never fully revealed, because it's always greater than someone can think of and even than everything that someone can wish for. On the other hand, it also appreciates the experience of the subject who, in its process towards the meeting with God, goes on divesting her/himself and conquering lightness and freedom.

Taking into account the importance of mystique and its current contribution, the Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx includes in his major theological work, *Human history: God's revelation*, a reflection on the deep or theological mystic dimension of human existence which will imply a new concept of revelation, a relation to God which must take into account human freedom and, also, the absolute freedom of God that breaks down our projective images, revealing the precariousness of our conceptual constructions:

Due to the fact that there's absolute freedom with God, he reveals us that all our divine images (not its own reality) are, in fact, products and human projections which, as such, are unable to describe the divine reality. This most precarious point of all our images of God, isn't an absolute human construction or projection, but it's, instead (so we may and must also interpret, and so it's interpreted by believers), a projection from God towards us, through historical and worldly mediations. From its very reality, all our projective images of God are denied and undermined. In this effect on our images of God, in the continued disintegration of the whole image of God produced on us, it's revealed as someone or something in and in a relation to our projections (SCHILLEBEECKX, 1994, p. 105).

When we pray to a living God, as the mystic one does, the author goes on, we use our images (as a mediation) which are, at the same time, smashed to pieces in the prayer itself.

When we pray to the real and living God, we have before our eyes only “images of God” which are smashed to pieces in the prayer itself by the “real” to which we pray. [...] The “real” referent of the name of God must not, therefore, be confused with our objects of experience, nor with our constructions and projections, which nevertheless, play some role in the whole faith in God (SCHILLEBEECKX, 1994, p. 105).

The experience of immediate meeting with God causes the vision of a new possibility, radically different from what was and what is. The old images of the world and of her/himself fall down. The old words are no longer useful to express the new experience, in short, there’s a break and experience of something unusual, “something transcendent and, at the same time, comprising everything; origin both of all objectivity and all subjectivity. An unconditional saving experience, it’s also a wholeness and reconciliation experience... despite one finds out suffering and non-reconciliation” (SCHILLEBEECKX, 1994, p. 101).

The great theologian Karl Rahner also contributes to the renewal of fundamental Theology taking, as a starting point for theological reflection, the human experience of transcendence. For this theologian, being a hearer of the Word, embracing God’s revelation, supposes, before, becoming aware of oneself as subject and person, trying oneself as a being like before the mystery.

In its universal character, Rahner states, the Revelation is the emergence of the mystery that enables the human freedom to decide being subject and person, being open to transcendence. The revelation is self-manifestation of the absolute which is pre-apprehended in an athetic manner by the human in its relation to reality. The absolute which manifests itself and allows the human to be a subject and a person is what is meant by God’s word. God is the “where from” and “where

to” of our transcendence, the infinite horizon which opens to the human limitless possibilities. God is the completely other which finds itself, at the same time, intimately united with the world.

It’s in the personal meeting with the absolute that, according to Rahner, the possibility of being is grounded. The human experiences itself as a creature, radically dependent on God and, at the same time, genuinely autonomous:

“Being created”, “creation” don’t point, in the first instance, at a first moment of the time when the creation of the reality concerned, but they mean a process which is in progress and is current, that for every existing thing is happening now in the same way as it occurred at an earlier time in its existence, even if this continued creation is that of a being existing in time (RAHNER, 1989, p. 98).

It’s only under the condition of creature radically open to the mystery, that the human can experience genuine autonomy:

Only when the person is perceived as free subject and accountable before God and she/he takes this responsibility is that she/he understands what is autonomy and that this doesn’t decrease, but increases in the same proportion that the dependence with regard to God. [...] The condition of creature comprises, thus, both the grace and the mandate to preserve and assume that tension of analogy which is the finite subject, thinking of, understanding, and taking itself as something very real and left to itself and, precisely, as what is simply proceeding and dependent, and it refers to the absolute mystery as to its future (RAHNER, 1989, p. 101).

According to this theologian, however, from the transcendental perspective, one finds out a tension between the transcendental experience, i.e. the immediate meeting of the subject with the holy mystery and the historical religion which seems to be unable to do without a God’s categorization.

Religion, as it's practiced, seems neither want nor be able to deny a God's categorization. [...] Our starting point and basic perspective seems to tell us the opposite: God is everywhere, since he's the one who grounds everything and who is nowhere, as the whole reality based on him is creature, and everything emerging this way within our experience's world is different from God, separated by an absolute abyss between God and the non-divine reality (RAHNER, 1989, p. 104).

To work this tension out, there's a need for taking into account that the immediate contact with God is always mediated. If one considers that the experience of God takes place when, in the meeting with reality, we pre-apprehend the reality which is the foundation and meaning of everything, then, we may state that the transcendental experience of God can be mediated by any particular categorial entity, once this experience is done referring to openness to the mystery which, always offering itself to us, makes being possible. This way, mediation and immediacy aren't contradictory concepts. The immediate closeness to God is always mediated by the relation to the world and to others.

From this perspective, religion as announcement of this presence must consider tension, it must assume that every representation of this presence (in the human word, in sacrament, in a church, in a revelation in a scripture etc.) is a categorial indication of the transcendental presence of God which self-communicates to the world and enables the human to be subject and person, free and responsible.

In the context of revelation as an experience of radical openness to the holy mystery, God's action in the world, i.e. the special God's "intervention" must be conceived as a historical embodiment of God's transcendental self-communication already intrinsic to the concrete world. The "intervention" makes sense of presence which offers itself to the human (self-communication), requesting embracement to holy mystery that allows being, i.e. the free and responsible acting.

When and to the extent that something, not only in theory, but in the concrete realization of freedom, is positively included in the free relation to God as its objectification and mediation, it becomes, in fact, inspiration, act, regardless of how small it is, of God's providence, as we usually say in religious language, this is God's special intervention (RAHNER, 1989, p. 112).

We can observe, therefore, in these authors, who are among the pillars of the 20th century theological renewal, the resumption of important elements of the mystic tradition, namely, God's unavailability, i.e. the affirmation of God as absolute mystery and, thus, inaccessible in its entirety and uncontrollable by our human resources and, also, at the same time, the appreciation of experience, the possibility of an intimate meeting with this reality that is offered to us and lets itself being known as the foundation and meaning of our existence.

Final remarks

In the end of this reflection, taking into account the set of problems we want to address, i.e. the current demand for freedom to experience religion which ends up draining into a superficial religious experience style, we may affirm the importance of resuming the mystic tradition and the contribution that this tradition can offer at this time.

We've seen that the mystique, when it states the greatness and infinite freedom of God, proposes a critical distrust of the whole positive pathway to meet God, puts the need for recognizing the limits of all human construction that supports this path (the mediations which are ours and can't be absolutized), and affirms the value of the personal experience of God "conquered" in an itinerary of divestment, offers a good way for a freedom experience. The mystique leads the modern sensibility, which became excited by the value of individual liberty, see that the true freedom presupposes a dive into the deep.

The contemporary Theology, as we've seen, will be able to see this potential. Theologians as E. Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner will not only be able to overcome the dichotomy established within Theology between mystique and dogma, between Theology and spirituality, but through a renewed reflection of the fundamental concepts, bring the mystique to the core of Theology. By deepening a reflection on faith and revelation based on the experience of God, these authors offered to Theology and the faith experience pathways of freedom. One can't deny that this new perception of the Theology's fundamentals will enable a Theology more open to dialogue, as we can observe in the work of the Spanish theologian Andrés Torres Queiruga.

To us, therefore, on the threshold of the 21st century, in times of supermodernity or hypermodernity, there's still the option to embrace the well-known warning by Karl Rahner, "The Christian of the future will be mystic or won't be Christian", and seek to better work out the concept of mystique, resume the plural wealth, the multiplicity of texts which, regarded as mystic texts, spiritual, are no longer part of the "basic bibliography for studying Theology" and deepen this fundamental Theology which takes into account the centrality of the experience of God.

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