

## Chapter 2

### Spirituality and Mysticism

#### 2.0 Introduction

This study is devoted to nature spirituality and mysticism in the Early Franciscan Tradition. As indicated in the Introduction this will involve the study of Francis's relationship with the universe. One might ask how someone who lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries could have any relevance for us today. And yet, his loving relationship to all people, and his sense of brotherhood to all creation makes him perhaps even more relevant today than he was in his own time (Delio 1999:305). Through the mystery of the incarnation, Francis had a profound sense of God's presence in the world (:305).

Before investigating Francis's nature spirituality and mysticism it will be necessary to clarify the basic concepts of spirituality and mysticism, and how they will be used in this study. I will begin with spirituality.

#### 2.1 The Nature and Forms of Spirituality

In what may well be the major work in World Spirituality,<sup>1</sup> by a prestigious team of writers, Ewert Cousins suggests the following working hypothesis:

The series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions "the spirit." This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. The series explores the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal. It deals with prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey, and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent. (in McGinn 1989: xiii).

---

<sup>1</sup> This series entitled World Spirituality, is a twenty-five volume series which deals specifically with Christian Spirituality. Cousins describes it as "An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest".

This seems admirable to me, and it is a timely reminder that spirituality has an extensive and far reaching connotation that ranges far beyond the bounds of Christian spirituality. The series in question proposes to include not only the spiritualities of the major religions in the world today; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also the spiritualities of religions that have long ceased to exist, even secular and humanist spiritualities which would not long since been regarded as “anti-spiritualities”, if one may use the term.

My concern here must, of course, be narrower, but it is useful, to say the least, to be aware of the wide extent of the term. It can be very helpful to compare what one finds in early Franciscan spirituality to elements one may discover in very different cultures and contexts. Some philosophers who would have shied away from any claim to give spiritual instruction can nevertheless have quite inspiring and penetrating things to say about spirituality. I have found William James quite helpful in this regard, as will emerge later. However, the concern here is with a spirituality that is definitely Christian, and a particular genus of Christian spirituality. I say genus because I believe that there are several species within this genus, and I would claim that the astonishingly rich stream of Franciscan spirituality flows in many surprisingly diverse channels.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it would be useful to go to McGinn to consult the “working description” of Christian spirituality proposed by the distinguished band of contributors, although the editors did not try to impose any single definition of the term since it resists easy definition or universal agreement. This “working description” reads, in part:

Christian Spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief in both its general and more specialized forms.... It is possible to distinguish spirituality from doctrine in that it concentrates not on faith itself, but on the reaction that faith arouses in religious consciousness and practice. It can likewise be distinguished from Christian ethics in that it treats not all human actions in their relation to God, but those acts in which the relation to God is immediate and explicit (McGinn 1989: xv-xvi).

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Book of Franciscan Saints*, edited by Marion Habig (Habig, 1979. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press) contains a great variety of different spiritualities within the Franciscan tradition.

Very worthy of note in this description is the practical response and the orientation to the God of human life and action. It seems to me that this is at the core of the study of spirituality since it seeks to understand the lived experience of God, theoretically and practically. In her article, *"Spirituality as an Academic Discipline"* (1993: 15) Schneiders states:

I would define the academic field of Christian Spirituality as the inter-disciplinary study of Christian religious experience as Christian, as religious, and as experience for the purpose of understanding it theoretically and allowing that understanding to serve as an intellectual resource for the living of the spiritual life and a basis for productive interchange among the spiritual traditions of the world.

## **2.2 The Study of Spirituality**

Christian spirituality in the sense in which it has been described, namely as the lived experience of Christian belief embodied in thought, religious consciousness and practice, existed long before it became the subject of academic study or formal treatises. It was only gradually that the ways in which Christians tried to consecrate their lives and actions to God became the object of investigation and reflection. It is noticeable, for instance, that in early days such treatises as existed, were mainly devoted to rather specialized forms of life. For example, in the early work of St. Athanasius on the life of Abbot Antony, there is a good deal of incidental information about the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. Similarly in St. John Chrysostom's (1996) books on the priesthood, there is a considerable amount about the way priests should conduct themselves, although this tends to exhort rather than to describe. For obvious reasons, the older treatises of spirituality tend to be directed mainly to people who have "left the world"<sup>3</sup> and devoted themselves entirely to religious life.

It was common for treatises on spirituality to have the words "ascetical" and "mystical" included in their titles for example, *Mystical Theology* (Dionysius the Areopagite, 6<sup>th</sup> century), or

---

<sup>3</sup> By the phrase "left the world" I am referring to the practice of fleeing the cities to live in the desert for the purpose of responding to the call to follow Christ more closely.

*Ascetic Treatises* (Isaac of Ninevah, 7<sup>th</sup> century). In this way, emphasis was placed on two very prominent elements of the search for God. The first element, asceticism, concentrated on the disciplines that were regarded as essential to the quest, and tended to focus on chastising the body and bringing it into subjection (1Cor 6:19-20).

It is well to recognize that this ascetical, and even hyper-ascetical tradition is not just a thing of the past. Even in the lives of fairly recent holy people one finds a good many references to hair shirts, chains and other devices designed to cause unease, discomfort, and even quite a lot of pain. There was also the so-called “discipline”; a little whip made of knotted cords meant to be applied vigorously to the body at regular intervals (Russell 1993b:65).

Another strong element of the ascetical tradition was deprivation of sleep. This was mainly achieved by the hallowed tradition of reciting the Divine Office during hours of the night. It was a practice well adapted to the destruction of a life of ease and comfort.

According to the *New Dictionary of Theology* (Komanchak et al 1987:972), the term spirituality refers to both a lived experience and an academic discipline. This would mean (for Christians) that one’s entire life is understood and regulated in relationship to God in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Spirit.

In *Spirituality in the Academy* (1989: 678), Schneiders observes that the term spirituality is:

unavoidably ambiguous, referring to (1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience.

In the *New Dictionary of Spirituality* (1993:932–33), Downey distinguishes three levels of spirituality. He states that the first and most basic level is that of a person’s lived experience. Although this lived experience must be personal, he notes that it is not lived or received in isolation. Hence it implies a second level of spirituality, that of a group. The study of spirituality, practical and academic marks the third level. A distinction of three levels of

spirituality has also been made by Walter Principe (1983:135-36), the first level being that of the real or existential level; the second the level of the formulation of a teaching about lived reality,<sup>4</sup> and the third the study of the first and second levels. In his article, *Christian Spirituality: Changing Currents, Perspectives and Challenges* (1994:9), Downey states that it is the dynamic and concrete character of the relationship of the human person to God in actual life situations that differentiates spirituality from systematic or moral theology.

Bernard McGinn, in his article, *The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline* (1993:6), which appears in the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, concludes that, with regard to spirituality, there is “no fully adequate definition”.

### **2.2.1 “Spirituality or Spiritualities?”**

In his “Introduction to the Devout Life” Francis de Sales informs us that spirituality takes many forms. It must differ, he says, for the gentleman, and the artisan, for the servant and the prince, for the widow and the young girl or the wife (Part 1, ch.3: 5-6).

I will try to make this more concrete. If, for instance, one talks of Christian monastic spirituality, it will be necessary to take into account the conditions of living and acting envisaged by monastic existence. This way of life would have to be studied in detail to see it as a lifestyle that is wholly directed, in a Christian context, to union with God, with doing God’s will, with the age old prescription of prayer and work, (*ora et labora*) and with centering one’s life wholly on God.

It is clear also that there are many variations of monastic spirituality. The Carthusian way of life, which had such an attraction for Thomas Merton (Casey, 1993:180-182), is quite distinctive, laying great emphasis on the solitary life within a community. The Cistercian way is again distinct from the more usual form of Benedictine life. There are other very different

---

<sup>4</sup> In this regard Principe gives the example of Ignatian Spirituality. Of course, one could just as well apply it to Franciscan Spirituality.

forms of monastic life among the Greek and Russian Orthodox communities. And of course there are also Buddhist monasteries, in which the senior monks might well be married.

When I speak of monastic spirituality, I am talking in fairly general terms. However, it must be remembered that monasteries are made up of individuals, each individual is different from the others, and it is important to remember that each person has an individual calling, and has to come to terms with that calling in his or her own way. In this light we are led to acknowledge that each individual person within a monastery has an individual spirituality, and may very well have an individual calling to a way of life that makes them very exceptional in the monastic way. For example, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux seems to have spent an enormous amount of time traveling and engaged in the missions entrusted to him by the Pope. He could not himself have been the strict observant of the monastic rule that he held up as an ideal for his monks (Williams 1953:397-398).

In general, then, I am defining spirituality as an approach to God, a way of living that is orientated toward achieving union with God, with doing the work of God, with making God present in the world. This may be achieved by the solitary witness of a hermit, or in the serried ranks of a Religious Order, in the daily rounds of an ecclesiastical administrator, or in the daily routine and responsibilities of a lay person.

Let me look for a moment at the spirituality of the solitary hermit. This is worth doing, I think, in relation to a study of Saint Francis, since he spent so much of his time in solitude. It is important to recognize that there was a deep yearning for solitude in him, so much so that he seriously considered spending his life as a solitary, and at a certain time in his reflections he sought the counsel of two people who were very significant in his life, Saint Clare and Brother Sylvester, to discern whether he should spend his time in prayer or travel about preaching (LMj 12:2).

So what is the spirituality of a solitary or a hermit? Like any other spirituality, the hermit faces the problem of arranging his/her life, of trying to pray always according to the Gospel injunction, and the usual difficulties of coping with the environment and attending to those who visit. And of course there is the problem of eating and drinking, and dealing with cold and heat, and maintaining some reasonable level of health. It is interesting to note that Francis had occasion to reproach himself in his last years for the harshness with which he had treated his body, and very characteristically he apologized to *Brother Ass* (2C 211).

The hermit who undertakes an eremitical life, usually finds a place in the wilderness, wherever that may be. This is not to deny that there are people who can find their solitude in the city, or for some heroic souls, in prison or other forms of confinement.

However, the traditional lifestyle of the solitary has been to abandon the cities and go to the wilds (Hale 1993:353). It would seem clear that to undertake such a lifestyle requires in the first place a feeling for nature and the wilderness, a certain affinity for such places. And again it seems clear that Francis had such an affinity. I shall be looking later on at some of the places he chose for his solitude and try to see if I can gather anything about his spirit from this. Is there some significance in his love for high mountainous places, for caves and for islands? A deep love of nature in its wilder aspects seems to be part of his psyche, and of course it has a great deal to do with his appeal to the followers of the Romantic movement like Jorgensen.

Saint Francis is well known as the founder of Religious Orders, and indeed without them he would probably be completely unknown to all but a few specialists in medieval history. A "reader over my shoulder" challenged me about this assertion, and suggested that it was perhaps his love of nature that made him so well known. It seems clear to me that in the first place, nearly all the important information we have about Francis comes from the writings of his followers, e.g. Leo, Angelo and Rufino, L3C, 1&2 MP, the lives by Celano, Bonaventure and later followers. If he had remained a hermit solitary, would such an outcome be likely or

even possible? There may have been hermits in his time who felt the same kinship with creation as Francis did, and even composed poems about it, but there is no trace of such works, if they even existed. It has to be acknowledged that the Orders founded by Francis cherished and passed on his writings.

I am reminded of an incident told me about Pope Paul VI receiving some children brought to Rome by a group of Franciscans. He spoke to them about St. Francis, and then surprised them all by declaring that St. Francis is still alive in the fine friars present with them there. I think, then, that it is reasonable to claim that the fame of Francis and its endurance is due mainly to the Orders he founded.

The Orders he founded had to live in conditions that made his own individual lifestyle almost completely impossible for them to follow exactly. One could not manage a Religious Order if its members demanded the freedom of spirit that Francis seems to have needed. Even though Francis saw himself as the model and example (*forma et exemplar*) of the friars who followed him (AC 50; 111), his way of life was far too idiosyncratic for any of them to follow it in every respect.

The Franciscans have indeed cherished the eremitical ideal within the Order, and have allowed and encouraged friars to emulate Saint Francis in his eremitical enterprises. However, this presupposes an Order with established structures and houses that provide a framework and backup system for the hermits. One might say that this is a confirmation of the ancient paradox that we must depend on other people for our independence. Throughout the biographies of Saint Francis the names of hermitages are mentioned, suggesting that the eremitical spirit of the early fraternity was quite strong. The *Rule for Hermitages*<sup>5</sup>(RH) also seems

---

<sup>5</sup> The *Rule for Hermitages* is found in the oldest manuscript collection, the Assisi Codex 338. According to Armstrong (1998:63) this text “contains the basic elements of Francis’s view of life”. In this Rule the pursuit of God in solitude is characterized by fraternal caring for one another, an essential characteristic of Franciscan life.



to suggest this since it begins “Let those who wish”, indicating that there was certainly a desire among the brothers to live in this way.

Since I am still in the process of discussing spirituality, let me turn for a moment to the question of lay spirituality. Surely this is relevant to Francis, since he founded an Order for lay people. What is meant by lay spirituality? It is the approach to God, the consecration of one’s life to the service of God, the making of one’s life a focus for the action of God in the world. It has been present among God’s people from time immemorial, but it is only in more recent times that it has been thematized and conceptualized with any great thoroughness. Most spiritualities were dominated and overshadowed by the lives and examples of the more spectacular stories of the saints and martyrs and other heroic figures of the past. Even the spirituality of the secular clergy was dominated by monastic and religious exemplars. For example, the common life among the secular clergy was introduced by Bishop Eusebius of Vercelli (+307) and St. Augustine (+403). Again, Bishop Chrodegang of Metz (c.755) drew up a rule for his clergy, based on the Rule of St. Benedict (Aumann 1985:114-115).

Lay spirituality has to deal with the usual situations of people living in the world. They are not members of an organization that controls and takes care of them. They do not have the backup and the resources available to those who enter monasteries, convents, Religious Orders and Societies. A recurrent feature in the lives of lay men and women who wanted to give their lives to the service of God, was the pressure put on them to adopt a regular form of religious life, complete with religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and life in a community. Several religious founders, such as Jeanne Françoise de Chantal and Mary McAuley, wanted to found lay groups but found themselves pushed into highly structured forms of life based on more ancient models. It has been suggested that Saint Clare of Assisi had a similar experience.

In modern times, it has become possible for lay people fully immersed in the business of the world to consecrate themselves to God in the various lay institutes that have sprung up

in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, a good many writers have suggested that such a style of life would actually be more in tune with the intentions of Saint Francis. In his first Rule he envisages friars engaged in what is essentially lay work, and earning a recompense for it, not in cash but in kind.

Let the brothers who know how to work do so and exercise that trade they have learned, provided it is not contrary to the good of their souls and can be performed honestly. [...]The apostle says: *Whoever does not wish to work shall not eat.* and *Let everyone remain in that trade and office in which he has been called.* And for their work they can receive whatever is necessary excepting money (ER VII:3).

A lay spirituality would have to take into account the enormous variety of styles of life that are encountered among human beings. It would have to take into account the life of the ordinary parents of a family, and the lives of their children. Lay spirituality would have to deal specifically with a woman's approach to spirituality, and how she deals with such matters as legal rights, right relationships with significant others, with her husband, if she is married, with in-laws and extended family, and the milieu in which she lives and perhaps works. According to Vatican II women have a distinct contribution to make to the life of the Church (Flannery 1982:322-329). There are a great variety of lay spiritualities since there are many circumstances and many types of lay people. There are the problems of careers and studies, of creating and working in an environment that is not always responsive and sympathetic to the life of the Spirit. There are problems for both men and women, especially in these days of gender equality, and they need serious consideration. It is a spirituality of the family and the workplace (Sellner 1993:589-596).

At this stage, I think that the concept of spirituality has been sufficiently clarified for my purposes. Spirituality in general is the way in which human beings seek God on their life's journey. If they choose to enter a monastery, they will have at their disposal a body of knowledge, many precepts and rules and a large number of people who have lived the life and

can instruct and advise them on the way they should go. The same will be the case if they join a Religious Order, congregation or institute. And for secular people there is a tradition of secular orders, congregations, fraternities and sororities which set themselves to guide their members on the journey to God.

I have pointed out too, that each individual person has an individual, personal journey to make, the conditions of which will be slightly different, at least, from those of others. There is one amusing example in the Franciscan sources of a brother, John the Simple, who tried to model himself exactly on Francis (AC: 61; 2C 190), even to the extent of copying his gestures and his coughs. The folly of that became a byword among the brethren. The ideal was not for Brother John to become like Francis as far as possible but to become what God wanted Brother John to be.

Thus each person has an individual, personal journey to make to the kingdom and the blessed vision of God. This journey is profoundly conditioned by the heredity, temperament and life situation of that person. One receives guidance for the journey from the revelation of God, the long and powerful witness of the Christian community and especially from individuals which one may encounter on the way. Francis of Assisi has had an enormous influence on a great multitude of pilgrims on life's journey and it is still evident today.

### **2.3 Nature Spirituality**

Having looked briefly at the nature of spirituality and some of its forms, and having seen some of the problems that arise within spirituality, I must now turn to the specific topic that concerns me here. And so I raise the question, what is meant by nature spirituality?

In line with what I have said about spirituality as a way to God, nature spirituality is a study of the role of nature and human relationships with nature, in the grand project of consecrating our lives and our world to God. That Saint Francis was capable of thinking this

way is seen, I think, in his remark: “The whole world is our cloister”(ScEx 63). He really was a very prophetic man!

Saint Francis clearly felt that nature was a stepping stone to God. This was something new in his time. It will be seen, in the study of his life, that he quite deliberately called on nature and the whole cosmos to show forth the glory of the Most High, to praise Him and to support and encourage us in our striving upward, our *sursumactio*<sup>6</sup> as Saint Bonaventure was so aptly to call it. In his *Journey of the mind into God* Bonaventure (1993:11) is convinced that:

We may behold God in the mirror of visible creation, not only by considering creatures as vestiges of God, but also by seeing Him in them; for he is present in them by His essence, His power, and His presence.[...]we ought to be led to the contemplation of God in every creature that enters our mind through the bodily senses (2:1).

I will try to point out in a more concrete way, what nature spirituality means in practice. As has been seen, dealing with nature, creation and the environment is part of everyone’s spirituality, whether or not they realize it. However, there are great differences in the way people deal with nature. Looking at the extremes, on the one hand there are those who worship nature and on the other, those who ignore and despise it.

### **2.3.1 Infatuation with Nature**

As an example of one extreme, I could cite the youthful enthusiasm of William Wordsworth (1951:163-165) who, at the time he wrote “*Tintern Abbey*”, was wholly engrossed in nature. In that poem, he affirmed that he was:

Well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being (Wordsworth 1951:165).

---

<sup>6</sup> “*Oratio est mater et origo omnis sursum-actionis*” [Prayer is the mother and origin of all upward striving](Itin.1:1).

I will pause a moment to consider the implications of these lines. Wordsworth seems to have assumed that his overwhelming love of nature was, as it were, a sure guide leading him to the fullness of life. This is also reflected in lines 74-75 of the same poem where he states that nature was to him “all in all”. In later life, Wordsworth became a very conservative upholder of the *status quo*, and seems to have overcome his earlier infatuation with nature. But in his early work, I think it is fair to say that, he idolized nature, i.e., he made nature into an idol to be worshipped, a substitute for God. This is not by any means a new thing in human history. The peoples of ancient times had gods of streams and groves, of valleys and mountains, of fountains and lakes, and it is not at all unlikely that many of them had very deep feelings and sentiments about these natural phenomena. Saint Augustine, in his “*City of God*”, (1959:52-54; 116-121) mocks them because of their credulity as he saw it.

The same can be said about the infatuation with animals that has played so large a part in the religion of various peoples, even to the present day. Among the animals worshipped by different peoples are snakes, crocodiles, cats, dogs, horses and eagles. These also can provoke profound feelings of devotion and worship, and can become the focus of quite elaborate religious rites.<sup>7</sup> Saint Francis is well known, perhaps even best known, for his love of animals. We shall have to interrogate the texts about his attitude to the animal creation. Is there any trace of infatuation or idolatry in his relationships in this area?

Another English poet who was greatly enamored, not to say infatuated with nature, was Francis Thompson. In his great poem, *The Hound of Heaven* (Maline & Mallon 1949:572), he describes how the worship of nature had turned sour for him and how nature itself had, in disappointing him, been true to the God who made it.

I said to dawn: Be sudden – to Eve: Be soon;  
With thy young skiey blossoms heap me over

---

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed study with regard to this see Mircea Eliade. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Sheed and Ward. 1958: 11-37.

From this tremendous Lover –  
 Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see!  
 I tempted all His servitors, but to find  
 My own betrayal in their constancy,  
 In faith to Him their fickleness to me,  
 Their traitorous trueness, and their loyal deceit.

Nature, in which Thompson sought happiness and fulfillment betrayed him because it failed to satisfy his extravagant expectations. Nature was meant to reflect the beauty of the Creator and thus lead him to God. Nature could not satisfy his expectations if he persisted in excluding its Maker, God. Hence the oxymorons, *traitorous trueness* and *loyal deceit*. He cannot accept creation as something beautiful in itself without at the same time accepting its maker – God.

I have considered the one extreme of the infatuation with nature, i.e., the way in which nature can become an idol. Now I would like to consider the other extreme, that is, to ignore and disdain nature. This is a strong tradition in Christianity and one that deserves attention.

### **2.3.2 Disdain for Nature**

Disdain for nature and rejection of any claims it might have on us probably goes back to the earliest times that dualism<sup>8</sup> appears. In historical times, it is likely that the greatest influence was Plato who was himself very strongly influenced by the metaphysics of Parmenides. Parmenides was so infatuated by the one intelligible Being, behind all appearances, that he denied all diversity and change. Such a denial would seem to leave little room for the admiration and appreciation of nature and its phenomena. They belong to the level of “mere appearances”.<sup>9</sup>

Plato was not quite so stark. He was himself a close observer of the natural world, and in one of his most famous passages in the “*Symposium*” he outlines the way in which someone

---

<sup>8</sup> In radical dualism the world is the work of evil powers and the aim of life is to escape from it.

<sup>9</sup> In his poem, which is divided into two parts, the “*Way of Truth*” and “*Way of Seeming*”, objects of sense are, to Parmenides, ‘mere names’ without substantial existence (Kirk & Raven 1973:279).

who admires things in the world could ascend to ever higher levels of appreciation until they finally ended with the pure admiration of intelligible forms.

The passage in question is put in the mouth of Socrates, who himself attributes it to a wise woman called Diotima of Mantinea. It is worthy of note that Plato, rather uncharacteristically, chose a woman to make this passionate presentation of the glory of a love that rises gradually from the world around us to the highest intellectual level (Plato *Symposium* 1959: 79-95).

Ambiguity about the world and nature seems to be hinted at in the origins of Christianity. On the one hand, one finds the Master who invites us to consider the lilies of the field and their splendor, and was not without delight in the world around Him. On the other hand, there is the harsh and extreme approach of the same Master who proclaimed a radical renunciation of the world and all its attractions, who demanded self-denial and renunciation of any attachment to the things of this world.<sup>10</sup>

These extremes have been thematized in terms of love of the world (*amor mundi*) and flight from the world (*fuga mundi*). In theory, they are not irreconcilable. There is no reason why one cannot love the world and all things in it, and yet be detached from it. Paradoxically, perhaps renouncing and “leaving” the world is a condition of fully appreciating it. One can easily become entrapped in an aspect of the world and be unable to appreciate many other beautiful aspects of it. The spirit of this is well summed up in a quatrain of William Blake (1981:158):

He who binds to himself a joy  
Doth the winged life destroy  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in Eternity's sun rise

---

<sup>10</sup> New Testament writings of St. John show the two attitudes to the world. He says “God so loved the world that he gave His only Son” (3:16); but in the prayer of Jesus in Chapter 17:7-9, we read that Jesus does not pray for the world. The attitude of rejection is clearly expanded in 1John 15; “Do not love the world or the things of the world.”

The element of flight from the world may have some connection with ancient dualism which saw matter as evil and spirit as good, and often went on to apply this dichotomy to body and mind. There is something primordial and, one might say, atavistic about dualism. It appeared very early on in the Christian church among the Gnostics and Manichees. The great Augustine (*Confessions*. Book IV) himself was held in thrall for many years by this doctrine.

In Christian spirituality, the dualist contempt and disdain for the world has its chief source in Neo-Platonism, particularly coming from the writings of the very influential Dionysius the Areopagite, usually called Pseudo-Dionysius. Dionysius was very much occupied with achieving union with God, and for him this means developing in both the apophatic and kataphatic way, i.e., the way of denial and renunciation on the one hand and the way of affirmation on the other (Johnston 1995: 26).

There are saints who seem to have imposed on themselves a fiercely harsh regime that looks more like a spiritual marathon race, or a prolonged self-affliction than a gentle, loving ascent to the higher levels of union with God. One admires the zeal and the dedication, but is repelled by the ferocity and the harshness with which the task is accomplished.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Saint Francis himself is not without harshness, but one can also sense a gentleness and compassion underlying it. Both aspects are represented in his apology to “*Brother Body*” for treating him so badly (L3C 14).

Where does Francis stand in relation to nature and its role in the journey to God? In spite of a very enthusiastic temperament that could, and sometimes did, drive him to extremes, it will become clear from the investigation of the sources that, in the first place, he was deeply in love with all of creation. Although he manifested this love in ways that were often extreme

---

<sup>11</sup> An example of such harshness can be found in the life of St. Simeon Stylite who spent 37 years of his life living on top of pillars to remove any causes of distraction in his search for union with God (Butler’s *Lives of the Saints* Vol.1 1956:34-37).



and quixotic he does not ever seem to have been tempted to worship nature instead of its Creator. He seems to have achieved a singular perfection in his combination of love for the world and flight from the world – or perhaps I should say flight to the source and origin of the world. In his *Testament* Francis spoke clearly of having left the world but for him this did not mean to live apart from others but rather to abandon his comfortable lifestyle and to live among the poor and the outcasts of society (ER IX:2).

Thus Francis neither despises nature nor is he an infatuated lover of nature. What then is his spirituality of nature? If he is neither a despiser nor a devotee of nature as such, is one to say that he is indifferent to it? The answer must be a resounding “No”. Nature and the love of the creation are central in his approach to God, his spirituality. Perhaps never before or since has anyone incorporated nature into his/her journey to God as much as Francis did.

For a long time I thought of Francis’s devotion to nature as an amiable eccentricity, as something strange, extraordinary and rather quaint. But eventually it dawned on me that he was availing of nature and its creatures all around him as an inspiration, a support, a resource and even a sacramental medium to help him on his journey to God. As will be clear in the later chapters, Francis drew strength and inspiration from the elements of the world and the heavenly bodies, from the places he lived in, from the fruits and flowers and the bountiful produce of Mother Earth and from all the living creatures on the earth.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> I was fortunate to have several conversations with Eric Doyle OFM, who had written extensively on this aspect of Franciscan spirituality and found his comments insightful because of the depth of his research and reflection.

Anybody on the journey to the kingdom of God learns to avail of the conditions and circumstances of their journey. The path of wisdom is surely to get as much help and encouragement as possible from the environment and surroundings. Francis, with that wonderful openness of his to the world of nature was able to draw on that resource and drink deeply from those wells of inspiration.

Hence, in examining his nature spirituality, I am not investigating an incidental aspect of his character and personality. His devotion to nature is central to his life and his journey. And it is of paramount importance to us today, living as we do in a world threatened by our grasping and rapacious cult of wealth and power. But now it is time to turn to the analysis of the second main concern of this investigation, mysticism.

#### **2.4 The Nature and Forms of Mysticism**

How is mysticism related to spirituality? Spirituality is concerned with the orientation of one's life towards God, its source and center. It is concerned with the ways in which that orientation is lived out in the various forms and conditions of life.

Mysticism, on the other hand, is more concerned with the interior states of mind and consciousness. When one turns to such classics as the writings of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross, one finds there a soul driven by a powerful appetite of will towards union in spirit with God. In mysticism the focus is on the personal journey and the stages and trials of that journey as depicted for instance, in the *Interior Castle* (Teresa of Avila Vol.2.1980:359-452).

The word *mysticism* is derived from the Greek, and it suggests a secret knowledge not available to common people, a secret knowledge surpassing ordinary rational knowledge (Johnston 1978:16). There has been so much superficial information disseminated in the name of mysticism that people are generally suspicious of it and tend to demand communication that is open, verifiable and intelligible to all not only to a select 'elite'. Secrets and mysteries

accessible only to certain people are very suspect. In fact, the words “mysticism and mystical” are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which is regarded as vague and vast and sentimental without a base in either facts or logic (James 1902:370).

However, within the Christian, and some other traditions, mysticism has an enduring appeal, and people who claim a hidden knowledge and special experience have often had huge followings. To exclude such knowledge and experience on the grounds that it is unrepeatable and unverifiable would be to unduly restrict human discourse in an unacceptable way. In spite of this one must, when entering into a discussion of mysticism, keep things in perspective.

The word *mysticism* has a long history and it is far from easy to define it. William Johnston (1978:15), mentions that William Ralph Inge, cited twenty six different definitions of the word in a book written at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that it would be fifty or a hundred if he were writing today. Johnston himself, in an effort to clarify the term, decided to look at the etymology of the word and take his initial understanding from the medieval Western tradition. Starting from there he tries to remain open to modern thought and especially to the Orient on which he has written extensively. He is acutely aware of the enormous cultural gap between the East and West and feels that it is not yet possible for anyone to do justice to the two traditions (Johnston 1978.15-16). According to Kourie (1992:84), because of the ambiguous meanings attributed to the word *mysticism*, any attempt to define it is filled with difficulties.

Where does the word *mysticism* come from? In the Greco-Roman world, mystery religions and mystery cults flourished and were popular especially in the form of Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic mysteries. Plato is said to have been initiated at Eleusis. The initiate was called a *mystes* and was sworn to secrecy. The root word *muein* means to close the mouth or the

eyes. The *mystes* was a holder of secret knowledge and it was for initiates only (Delio 1998:173-174).

The term passed into Neo-Platonism and was used in relation to the practice of closing one's eyes to the outer world in order to assist the journey into the inner and higher world of contemplation where as Plotinus (*Ennead* VI:9) says "the flight of the alone to the alone" might take place. The Neo-Platonist tradition became part of the Christian tradition, especially through the writings of the celebrated Dionysius the Areopagite, a Syrian monk writing in Greek about the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century CE (Flew 1984:96). One of his books was entitled *Mystical Theology* and it became the classic source of apophatic or negative theology in the West, a theology that emphasized the frailty and inadequacy of human reason in approaching the Divine. However, Dionysius was not all darkness, as Johnston notes, (1995:26) and his theology of negation was carefully balanced by a theology of affirmation (:26).

Why was Dionysius so influential? He wrote in the "persona" of a character mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (17:34), as having followed St. Paul. The writings of such a man would obviously carry enormous weight and authority in the Christian Church. He would be speaking with an authority that was almost apostolic and close to being divinely inspired if he were really an intimate of Paul. Although Dionysius presented his writings as the work of someone converted by Saint Paul (Luscombe 1997:24), there is no evidence that he intended to deceive his readers even though he did, in fact, deceive many generations of readers, and was not definitively exposed until the end of the nineteenth century. The influence of Dionysius spread extensively in the Christian West when he was translated, in the ninth century, by the famous Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena (Johnston 1978:15).

How did the teaching of Dionysius affect Western Mysticism? It brought in a very strong awareness of the Neo-Platonist notion of God as the “One” the “Alone”, utterly beyond human reason or comprehension. This was a God utterly beyond the reach of the senses, either exterior or interior, a God totally beyond the reach of the human intellect. Only by leaving behind all things of the senses and the intellect can one be “borne up to the ray of divine darkness that surpasses all being” (Johnston:1978:17-18). Here we have the paradoxes of dazzling darkness, clear obscurity, unintelligible clarity, that is commonly found in mystical writers.

The foregoing paragraphs stress the very important influence of Plotinus and the Neo Platonist movement on Christian mysticism. However, as Johnston points out in his magisterial study of mysticism (1995: 25-6), there is a very strong element of mysticism native to Christianity and the Christian scriptures with roots in Judaism, an element that owes nothing to Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism, after all, is a rather late arrival on the scene, and the Christian Church was well established before Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism, was born. There is even a suggestion that Plotinus was possibly a lapsed Christian.

These historical notes on the development of mysticism in the Christian West led Johnston to his first sketches of a definition of mysticism. Of particular interest to this study is the inclusion of St. Bonaventure in the sources he uses for the definition. According to Bonaventure, “Mystical Theology is the raising of the mind to God through the desire of love”, *Est animi extensio in Deum per amoris desiderium* (1978:19). Johnston does not give the source of the definition, nor can I accept that it is a very happy definition. In the first place, the translation should be that mystical theology is an extension of the soul rather than a raising (*elevatio*). In the second place, I believe that theology is better understood as a reflection on

revelation or revealed truths rather than as an experience (Deist 1987:172). Theology should not be identified with experience.

Bonaventure's affirmation of the desire of love as an element of what he calls mystical theology is important, I think, and also very characteristic of his teaching. There is remarkable agreement among writers on mysticism that love is the driving force of the mystical impulse. Johnston (1995:51) gathers a few other definitions in the same vein from Gerson and St. John of the Cross and draws attention to a few salient points in the various definitions. First, mysticism is wisdom or knowledge that is found through love. In other words it is loving knowledge. Second, it is "experimental", not in the sense that it is obtained by making experiments, but rather is felt or experienced, not by the senses, or by mere abstract knowledge, but in some mysterious way by love. Thirdly, he notes that the definitions he refers to make no distinction between mystical theology and mystical experience. However, I believe that distinction is very important.

Johnston has written several books on mysticism. In his wide ranging study (1995:74) he writes of his own work as a "modest attempt to rewrite mystical theology for the new era." His own definition of mystical theology is that it is "theological reflection on the secret wisdom that comes from love". This definition has indeed its roots in the Christian tradition, but I think it is open to question whether mysticism is really secret. Could mysticism be open to all, or is it reserved to only a few initiates? Kourie (1992:89) points out that the idea of mysticism being reserved for the spiritual elite needs to be countered by the "democratisation of mysticism" (89). I would propose, as a working definition of mysticism, that it is a felt or experienced awareness and knowledge of the presence of God.

Johnston also believes very strongly in the universal call to mysticism. He quotes, with approval, the belief of a number of theologians in the "universal vocation to mysticism"

(1995:189). He argues the same point quite trenchantly in an earlier book *The Wounded Stag* (1984:40), originally published as *Christian Mysticism Today*. “I myself have come to believe in the universal vocation to mysticism.” He gives his reasons for this: 1) he believes it is included in the universal call to holiness proclaimed by Vatican II, which involves a sharp rejection of the notion of an “elite” called to perfection and the rest called to salvation; 2) he adduces the authority of Karl Rahner, and 3) he draws on his experience of simple poor people, praying for hours in the great centers in the Philippines (:40).

What is one to think of these three reasons? On my own part, I find myself strongly in sympathy with them. I have often been surprised at the depth of insight shown from time to time by people who seemed to be very ordinary people doing very ordinary things. Perhaps it is going too far to say that everyone is a potential mystic. It is certainly not a common view but it attracts me. And it evidently held some attraction for the great American philosopher, William James.

#### **2.4.1 Mysticism and the Everyday World**

I was struck recently, reading a lecture by William James (1943), given to students on some of life’s problems. The title he chose was *A Certain Blindness in Human Beings*, and his theme was, that most human beings go about, as it were, with their eyes closed missing the joy and splendour of life. At the beginning of the lecture he compares this blindness to what must be the frustration of a dog taken for a walk by its master who sits down, pulls out a book and reads for an hour or so while the dog is ignored (:2). He has an amusing African story of an American explorer who finds an old newspaper, sits down to read it, totally absorbed in its pages while the African natives looked on. When he had finished, they offered a high price for the paper in order to use it as an “eye medicine” (:2).

James' point is that the world around us is a wonderful and splendid place, full of delights and joys to which we, for the most part, are oblivious. He gives a long extract from R.L. Stevenson about some lanterns that he and his friends had found delight in when they were young. The lanterns themselves, called "bulls-eye lanterns", were trivial and tawdry but the joy and delight they brought to the youngsters was immense (:4-5). "To miss the joy is to miss all" (:8). James goes on to speak of the joy and delight found in everyday life, more specifically in nature by the romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. His talk reaches its highest point, I think, when he speaks of Walt Whitman whom he describes as a modern prophet. The theme that James adumbrated in this talk was clearly of great importance to him. In the preface to the book he expressed some unease that he had failed to do justice to a very important topic, and indeed a reader could not fail to notice that about half of his lecture consists of quotations, including a long one, of over three pages, from R.L. Stevenson at the beginning, and others from Wordsworth, Tolstoy, Whitman and W.H. Hudson. Nevertheless, the theme was obviously near to his heart and represents the sympathy he had with seekers after the transcendent. What James was expressing in this lecture, the mysticism latent in the everyday, has been adverted to and expressed by many writers, most in accounts of striking moments of illumination. I found a remarkable collection of such illuminations compiled and edited by Michael Paffard (1976) under the title *The Unattended Moment*. Paffard has sifted through a great deal of material to find his insights, and arranged them in a series of chapters that make a satisfying pattern. The book cries out for quotation but this is, I think, a temptation that must be resisted here.

However, there is one account that I think is well worth delaying over. It was written by an American writer, near the beginning of the twentieth century. She was called, Margaret Prescott Montague and the title of her book was *Twenty Minutes of Reality*. The main experience



she described happened during a period she spent in hospital recovering from a serious operation. Best to let her speak for herself:

It was an ordinary cloudy March day, I am glad to think that it was. I am glad to remember that there was nothing extraordinary about the weather, nor any unusual setting – no flush of spring or beauty of scenery – to induce what I saw. It was, on the contrary, almost a dingy day. The branches were bare and colorless, and the occasional half-melted piles of snow were a forlorn gray rather than white. Colorless little city sparrows flew and chirped in the trees, while human beings, in no way remarkable, passed along the porch.

There was, however, a wind blowing, and if any outside thing intensified the experience, it was the blowing of that wind. In every other respect it was an ordinary commonplace day. Yet here, in this everyday setting, and entirely unexpectedly (for I had never dreamed of such a thing), my eyes were opened, and for the first time in all my life I caught a glimpse of ecstatic beauty of reality.

I cannot now recall whether the revelation came suddenly or gradually; I only remember finding myself in the very midst of those wonderful moments, beholding life for the first time in all its young intoxication of loveliness, in its unspeakable joy, beauty and importance. I cannot say exactly what the mysterious change was. I saw no new thing, but I saw all the usual things in a miraculous new light – in what I believe is their true light. I saw for the first time how wildly beautiful and joyous, beyond any words of mine to describe, is the whole of life. Every human being moving across that porch, every sparrow that flew, every branch tossing in the wind, was caught in and was a part of the whole mad ecstasy of loveliness, of joy, of importance, of intoxication of life.....

For those glorified moments I was in love with every living thing before me – the trees in the wind, the little birds flying, the nurses, the interns, and the people who came and went. There was nothing that was alive that was not a miracle. Just to be alive was itself a miracle. My very soul flowed out of me in a great joy.

[...] In what I saw there was nothing seemingly of an ethical nature. There were no new rules of conduct revealed by those twenty minutes. Indeed, it seemed as though beauty and joy were more at the heart of Reality than an over-anxious morality (1917:6-25).

There are several things worth mentioning in this account. One is the author's conviction that this was not merely a heightened and freakish sense of awareness, such as might be induced by drugs. It was, she believed, a sort of clearing of her vision so that she saw what was really there; what IS really there always, although we are mostly blind to it, if I may borrow a phrase from William James. Montague suggests that something like this wonder at reality is

often felt by small children before their attention is dulled by the myriad tasks of learning to cope with a demanding and overwhelming world. Another point in her account is that she did not see it as explicitly religious. It was not connected to religious rites or formulas of faith, nor did it occur in a special, sacred place or time. It was ordinary and everyday, yet the experience somehow transformed the situation while it lasted.

An additional point to note is that there was nothing moral about the experience. There were no prescriptions, no dire warnings of the kind that we often associate with morality, but there was a very strong awareness of the beauty, value and importance of things. There was an awareness that things must be appreciated and respected and this lies very close to the heart and core of morality.

It is worth noting that Montague says the experience took away completely her fear of death. It did not leave her longing for death or obsessed by it, but it did deliver her from fear of dying. Somehow the acquaintance with what seemed to be a deeper and wholly other life persuaded her it was not something to be dreaded, and that is surely something important.

This passage has been selected as a particularly clear and powerful expression of an experience similar to others collected by Michael Paffard. What they have in common is a deep awareness, a heightened consciousness that occurs in relation to nature, usually for quite brief periods. It seems quite natural to speak of such experiences as mystical in the sense that they seem to transport us to a higher level of awareness and a greater clarity of vision than is normally available to us. It is important to stress that the examples I have mentioned, and the collection of them made by Paffard, are but a very small representation of such experiences encountered among human beings.

In this regard it is important to draw attention to a very common feature of secular societies in the West: a certain fear of talk about religious experience and religious phenomena.

The fear seems to come from the danger that such talk would lead to one being treated as abnormal, as unbalanced or freakish. The pressure of an aggressively secular world intimidates a good many people from any admission of such experiences (Hay 1982:158). A friend of mine, who taught philosophy of religion for many years, discovered that quite a few students who were invited to write an essay on Religious Experience – a Personal View – were able to recount quite remarkable and striking experiences. A common feature in these experiences was that they had never spoken about them previously. They felt the world to be unsympathetic to such stories. One has the feeling that in some other milieus such stories would be heard and even encouraged. There are cultures in the Christian world where religious and mystical experience is allowed to be heard and shared. But I think that there is plenty of room for development in this regard.

The studies of David Hay (1982) in the area of religious experience are important particularly in relation to the frequency of religious experience. In Britain and the United States he discovered that roughly one third of the population, regardless of religious affiliation, reported such experiences (115-19). Something of great interest in regard to this is that the frequency increased considerably in direct proportion to the level of education of the people investigated. He reports being amazed at the link between this type of experience and those with postgraduate education (:122 – 23).

The experiences I have been talking about so far in relation to the everyday world can be loosely described as mystical. It is time now to examine this word a bit more closely because it is one of the most misused words in the language. Anything weird, abnormal or vague tends to attract the epithet “mystical” so that the region of mysticism easily gets designated and denigrated as an area for cranks and freaks. I would, of course, reject this designation. But it is important to get a clearer idea of what is in question.

### 2.4.2 Mysticism and the Natural World

Mysticism, in relation to nature can be loosely described as natural or nature mysticism. But what exactly does this term mean? How can it be accounted for? In considering this question, in relation to the examples given, it is necessary to recognize both a subjective and objective pole. The objective pole is that the scenes contemplated are, for the most part, present to our ordinary senses of sight, and touch, of sound and hearing. What is different about them is that they are in some way transformed, touched by a kind of light that somehow gives the impression of a transcendent quality.

At this point one might be inclined to say “Ah! Yes!, a purely subjective experience”. But it is important to be clear that these experiences I am talking about are not purely subjective. Montague points this out when she says: “It was not that I saw anything new, but rather that I saw everything in a new light” (in Paffard 1976:48). This brings me to the consideration of the subjective pole of this experience. What is it within us that allows the world around us to appear to us in this extraordinary way?

One answer that might be given, especially by the skeptical, is that people who have these experiences are high on drugs of some kind whether they know it or not. They would, for instance, point to the context of Montague’s experience, convalescing in hospital and probably on drugs of some kind.

It is known, of course, that people on drugs do experience extraordinary changes in perception and that certain kinds of drugs can produce dramatic changes in states of consciousness.<sup>13</sup> William James has a few interesting pages on the connection between drugs and mystical states (1902:377ff). However, the suggestion that the experiences I am talking

---

<sup>13</sup> I have knowledge of this fact from my own experience, having spent many years in charge of a hospital Intensive Care Unit. However, drug induced states of consciousness do not exhibit the same features as the experiences to which I am now referring.

about are drug induced does not seem at all plausible. For one thing there is usually no mention of drugs in these accounts in Paffard and others. Secondly, the experiences themselves are usually devoid of any dramatic, overwhelming features of drug induced states of consciousness. The experiences I am referring to in the above passages tend towards a heightened awareness of what is really there rather than a dramatic transformation introducing extraordinary colors, shapes and sounds which are common in accounts of drug induced states. Thirdly, there is a factor that the experiences I am discussing arise out of, take place in, and often affect, the lives of those to whom they happen in ways that are quite different to what happens when people are experimenting with drugs (Zaehner 1972:82-88). I am not claiming that there is no overlapping of genuine mystical states and those induced by drugs. My view is that they are quite distinct in that mystical experiences have consequences for practical life (Hay 1982:96).

If any identification of the states of consciousness I'm discussing with drug induced states, is ruled out, the task of trying to determine the nature of these states in which we reach a kind of identification, a kind of sympathetic union with nature remains. What is it within us that allows this to happen?

Returning to the work of one of the foremost authorities on mysticism, of our time, William Johnston, (1984:12–14) one finds that he sees faith as a key element. This leaves us with the problem that even though religious mystics do quite often show a strong awareness of the transcendent in nature and, as St. John of the Cross (1973:462) expressed it, “My beloved is in the mountains, the solitary wooded valleys, strange islands, ..... silent music,” nevertheless, most of the testimonies I considered so far do not suppose a definite religious faith in the sense of having a body of doctrine which is accepted, and a body of religious beliefs. Montague (cf Section 2.4), for instance, writes that there was nothing explicitly religious about her experience although it was akin to what religious people have sometimes witnessed to.

If people recounting mystical experiences are hostile to religion and faith, is it possible to say that faith in any sense is an element of their experience? If they have rejected a determinate religious faith, must we then eliminate faith entirely from these mystical experiences to which they give testimony (Paffard 1976:61)? In dealing with this question I think we should ask, in the first place, about the concept of faith. One standard definition of faith says that it is believing, or accepting a doctrine or teaching because God has revealed it (CCC 1994:63). This is an explicit and formal religious view of faith and it usually implies adherence to a teaching church.

However, the notion of faith has a much wider application. It is not uncommon, for instance, for some philosophers, for example Jaspers and Schelling, (Jaspers 1967:xxv-xxvi; 61; 272), to speak of philosophical faith. By this they do not, by any means, imply acceptance of a body of doctrine. What they have in mind usually is a sort of confidence in reason and the power of human understanding to grasp, in some way, the nature of human experience and the world. Einstein had a strong conviction of the rationality of the universe. He was not an enthusiastic believer in religion but he did see that the discoveries he was making rested on a sort of faith in the intelligibility of the universe (Johnston 1995:86). Without such faith it is difficult to envisage anyone devoting his life to the study of the mysteries of the universe. It is a basic presupposition of all such study.

Another version of non-religious faith may be found in a philosopher I have already mentioned. William James wrote an essay on *The Will to Believe* (1943:99–124), and in it he was concerned to show how a certain kind of faith, not explicitly religious in nature, is a basic and necessary ingredient in life. He is attempting to combat a philosophy of life that would try to seek absolute and indubitable evidence of any position before accepting it. He points out that such an attitude would have a disastrous effect in the life of a person and their community.

It is clear that in these cases we are far from religious faith as determined by various churches and religious bodies that require the acceptance of a body of doctrine. Nevertheless, I do not think we can refuse to use the term faith in relation to these cases. It is a question of natural or philosophical faith, and it is indispensable to human life.

A further step may be taken when one reflects that in the perspective of the major monotheistic religions, all of nature and the whole universe come from the Creator, God. It could then be possible to see the instances of philosophical and natural faith as existing in the lowest part of a continuum that stretches to the highest levels of supernatural faith and intimacy with the Triune Divinity itself (Hayes 2000:64-66).

What then are we to say of those who witness to nature mysticism and yet reject any religious interpretation of it? I would not find it surprising that someone could feel and apprehend a touch of the transcendent and be unable to recognize or acknowledge it as such. One of the perils of an organized religion is that quite a number of people who are formed in its theory and practice become quite disillusioned and hostile to it. And sometimes they are extremely sensitive and gifted individuals. Thus one may well suspect that such individuals are sometimes touched by the transcendent or the divine but that they cannot recognize it as religious because of their alienation from their religion. It does happen, of course, that if one suggests that their experiences are really religious, without their recognizing them as such, they become offended and indignant.

Indeed, I would not be surprised if part of the strategy of the “Divine Hunter”, the “Hound of Heaven”, is to pursue people by making them aware and open to the Divine, by first infusing the light through the natural scenes and creatures in which they find joy, delight and inspiration.

### 4.3 Mysticism and Contemplation

William Johnston (1978:24) mentions that the term “mystical” entered into the Christian vocabulary only in the sixth century and became widely used in the West only in the ninth century. The older term used was contemplation. This also has a Greek source. It translates the Greek term *theoria* which means gazing at, being aware of. *Theoria* is one of the great words of Greek philosophy and is used by Plato for the exalted contemplation of the Forms or Ideas which he sees as the ultimate archetypes of reality. Aristotle, who was, after all, Plato’s greatest disciple, also used *theoria* for what he believed to be the highest level of human existence where the human person is most Godlike (Aristotle 1953:Nicomachian Ethics Book X:1177a-1179a).

What is the origin of the term contemplation in the Christian tradition? The Latin word is *contemplare* and the element of *templum*, in this word refers to an open space marked out for observation, e.g. of birds and also the stars. Thus it is a sacred or reserved place for observation and often became the site of a sacred building. The term contemplation was adopted, and is widely used in Christianity for observing, looking at, and being aware of sacred and holy realities. The term contemplative life, as distinct from active life, was adopted into Christian religious language and corresponds to Aristotle’s distinction between theoretical, as opposed to practical life. The suitability of applying this distinction to different forms of religious life, as has often been done, is, of course, a highly contentious matter.

Johnston (1978:23) quotes Saint Francis de Sales in defining the term contemplation as a loving, simple and permanent attentiveness of the mind to divine things. He notes that in early Christianity contemplation was very closely associated with monasticism, the life of silence, prayer, meditation on the scriptures, praying the Divine Office, and seeking the wisdom of God. It was very often contrasted with the busy, active life of ordinary people which was not highly esteemed. The contrast between the two was symbolized in the roles of Martha and



Mary in the Gospel. Mary, sitting at the Lord's feet, listening and attending to him, while Martha bustled about getting things ready. Mary was supposed to have "chosen the better part", attending to "the one thing necessary" (Lk10:38-42). Although this story was not meant to exalt the contemplative life above the active (Marshall 1979:451), the application of this Gospel passage to the forms of religious life, active and contemplative, has, in the past done just that. Martha was seen as somewhat of a "second-class citizen". It had a very strong influence on the Christian tradition as can be seen in the famous English mystical text, *"The Cloud of Unknowing"*, which makes an unfortunate distinction between those called to perfection, (contemplatives) and those called to salvation, (actives) (Johnston 1978:25). It may be pertinent to point out here that the great popular religious movement, started by Saint Francis of Assisi did a great deal to break down the division between the secluded contemplative monastics and ordinary people going about the world. Saint Francis's phrase, "the world is our cloister" (ScEx 63) makes this point very succinctly and accurately. Francis's movement, as people like Jacques de Vitry recognized at the time, helped to break down this disastrous division (Armstrong, Hellmann, & Short 1999:582-583). It is worth mentioning that Bonaventure rejected the superiority of contemplatives over actives and held that the mixed life, in which contemplation overflows into action is superior. It is clear that the terms mysticism and contemplation refer to realities and states of consciousness that are very similar. They approach these realities in a rather different way, mystics from the approach that what they experience is secret and must not be revealed except to initiates, contemplatives from the approach that they are absorbed in gazing on the highest and most interior realities. But there is a definite convergence in the two approaches, and they seem to be describing experiences that have a great deal in common.

It would seem then, that the terms mysticism and contemplation can be interchanged, and that there is not much difference between the realities and states of mind to which they

refer. Johnston refers to a group of Catholic theologians writing on mysticism in the early twentieth century, and notes that they prefer the term contemplation but frequently speak of mysticism and call their discipline “Mystical Theology”. Among these he mentions the names of Poulain, Tanquerey, Garrigou-Lagrange and Joseph de Guibert (1978:29).

Nevertheless, the term mysticism has a cachet of its own, and the element of secret and hidden knowledge clings to it and imparts to it a certain ambiance of excitement that is lacking in the term contemplation. For that reason I do not think the two terms can ever be completely interchangeable.

But it is important to realize that both terms deal with the same realities, and to realize also that mystics are not simply people of “odd”, “strange”, and “eccentric” habits and attitudes, somehow freaks and oddities.

Since our concern is with spirituality and mysticism in the early Franciscan movement, we must inquire whether the distinction between those called to perfection and those called to salvation has a place among the early Franciscans. Saint Francis was not at all disposed to condemn other people. Indeed, he specifically warns his followers not to judge or condemn people who lived very differently than they did. Condemnation of those who were not members was an all too common feature of reform movements at that time. Saint Francis seems to have been aware of this danger. In his *Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance* (2LtF 45-51), he urges them to seek and serve the Lord with their whole heart and to remain faithful to the Church. He certainly did not assume that all had to follow his way. But he did, in response to the requests of many, establish a branch of the movement for lay people living in the world. There was no question but that these people were seeking the highest perfection. One incident that shows the attitude of the early friars to the common people is when Brother Giles asked Brother Bonaventure, the great doctor and Minister

General of the Order, whether a poor illiterate old woman could be as perfect in God's eyes as a very learned doctor of theology. Bonaventure answered that of course she could, whereupon Giles leapt for joy and was filled with gladness at the goodness of God who could do such things (Anal Franc 1897:101).

I think I could say, in conclusion, that the early Franciscans, who were recruited from and identified with, the *minores*, the lower classes of their society, were well aware that all are called to holiness and that no one is rejected on account of his or her social position or disabilities.

#### **2.4.4 Nature Mysticism**

What is nature mysticism? The friend of mine, who taught philosophy of religion for many years (cf Section 2.4.2) noticed over those years that the kind of experience most commonly reported in the assignment on "Religious Experience – a Personal View", was in relation to nature. Young people are very likely to have striking religious experiences in woods, beside rivers or fountains, climbing mountains, or by the sea. Typically they described a feeling of bliss and ecstasy coming over them, a feeling of a presence invading them gently but powerfully, a sense of union with a great power and an overwhelming energy. There is a sense of unity with the source of all, a feeling that this is what is really important in life.

Reflecting on my own experience during my first visit to the "Portiuncula",<sup>14</sup> a place of particular significance to St. Francis, I experienced a very powerful presence, a sense of profound joy, which seemed to find its expression in tears. I cannot explain that experience, but of the fact that it occurred I am quite certain. In fact, at that point in time, I did not have much knowledge of what it meant to be Franciscan. What I do know is that it was an

---

<sup>14</sup> This was a poor little Church (now inside the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels) which was intimately connected with the life and activity of St. Francis. He always wished the brothers to remain in this place and to hold it in greatest reverence and devotion (AC 56). Francis himself asked to be taken here when he was dying (AC5).

experience that cannot be objectively tested and that has never been repeated. But it affected and influenced my life in a most definite way.

A famous passage in Wordsworth (Maline & Mallon 1951:420) has expressed a powerful nature experience with great beauty:

And I have felt  
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things (Tintern Abbey 93-102).

Some writers have called this an “oceanic” experience, the metaphor implying that one is immersed and absorbed in nature, so that one becomes one with it, and the fragile boundaries of the ego and individual personality are somehow swept away (Hay 1982 39; 41).

Michael Paffard (1976:8), speaks of these experiences as being difficult to come to terms with, to think about, or to communicate because they do not seem to fit into our ordinary pattern of experience. He goes on to say that one of the things that makes these experiences important, and a subject of particular wonder is that those who have these “moments” seem to be transformed by them. They will often say that it has given them new inspirations, enhanced their ability to love their fellow human beings, invigorated their feeling for the mystery and the meaningfulness of life, established firmly in their mind an unshakeable intuition of a benevolent purpose at work in the world and of the ultimate unity of the good, the true and the beautiful (Paffard 1976:10). For example, he quotes Richard Hillyer who left elementary school at the age of fourteen with no prospect but that of following his father and brother in a life-sentence to drudgery on the land of a merciless and irascible farmer. Except

for the fact that ‘a sort of gift for seeing the pleasure in things would break through the misery at times, and drown the misery’, the future would have looked inexorably grim.

Sometimes this pleasure rose, unaccountably, into rapture. Once, I remember, as I was coming home over the rise above the village, the houses below, and the familiar fields, suddenly became incredibly beautiful. They were no different to what they had been before, and yet they were different. Joy burned in them. The sun had set and the trees stood out, sketched with swift black strokes on an orange sky. The great dome of air was swept, and clean. Elation rushed up inside me, as if a barrier had suddenly given way before it. Words, half found lines of poetry, blundered about in my mind, striving to shape themselves into some expression of this intense delight; and in the end verses came, poor, broken-backed things, but seeming at that time to be a miracle (Hillyer in Paffard.1976:101).

Although we do not have any passages like that describing such moments in the life of Francis, I think that in the account of Francis’s relation to the elements, the places he loved, the flora and fauna of all the world around him, which I will be examining in the next chapter, there is implied a deep mystical contemplative outlook. It finds its rest in the *Praises of God* (PrsG) and in CtC.

We do know that Francis was very aware of the world about him, and that he liked to call it his cloister. He seems to have regarded the whole world as a kind of sacrament, a sacred sign which had to be read carefully. Properly understood it would reveal “the most High Omnipotent Good Lord” in all his works. Delio (1998:201) expresses this clearly:

Francis’s charism, theologically crystallized by Bonaventure, is an inversion of monasticism: the world is our cloister, contemplative union is a descent into the poverty and humility of the incarnate Word, and the goal of union is to enter into the diffusive love of God which is found at the heart of the world, in the cross of Jesus Christ. The solitary flight to union with God in monasticism becomes the Franciscan embrace of humanity and creation through union with the Crucified Christ. While the journey to God in the Monastic tradition reminds us that ‘here we have no lasting city,’ in the Franciscan tradition the city has come down in the incarnation and the world is the unfolding of its glory.

Francis's view of nature became more usual in the centuries after him. There is, for example, a famous passage in Shakespeare's "As You Like It" when the Duke: "Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything" (Shakespeare 1972:257).

Bonaventure was well aware of this idea that nature is a book full of sacred signs and is a pathway by which creatures can ascend to God. But because human beings are "bent over" by sin they are unable to read the book of nature (*Collations on the Six Days* [Hex] 13:12; JS 1:7).

From a technical theological point of view, one may well wish to inquire if nature mysticism, as I have been using the term, in the sense of a feeling of unity and absorption in the natural world is real mysticism. The question seems quite important because people who are not in sympathy with any particular religion sometimes experience nature mysticism. It is sometimes the expression of a kind of vague yearning towards a higher union and sympathy with something that might be called spiritual or mystical, but renounces involvement in any organized form of religion. An English writer called Richard Jefferies, for example, although he is considered a nature mystic, regarded all organized religion as superstition. In *The Story of My Heart* he describes one of his experiences in this way:

I looked at the hills, the dewy grass, and then up through the elm branches to the sky. In a moment all that was behind me, the house, the people, the sounds, seemed to disappear, and to leave me alone. Involuntarily I drew a long breath, then I breathed slowly. My thought, or inner consciousness, went up through the illumined sky, and I was lost in a moment of exaltation. This only lasted a very short time, perhaps only part of a second, and while it lasted there was no formulated wish. I was absorbed; I drank the beauty of the morning; I was exalted. When it ceased I did wish for some increase or enlargement of my existence to correspond with the largeness of feeling I had momentarily enjoyed (in Paffard 1976:19).

However, if one were to consult, for example, a text such as that of Auguste Poulain (1978), *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, it would be noted that the definition he gives of mysticism would relegate what I have been calling nature mysticism strictly to the natural order. For him, real mystical prayer belongs to the supernatural order, which is completely beyond and above the merits, the abilities, and even the capabilities of the natural order. I do not want to enter here into the difficult problem of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, which is an area of great controversy. I have no doubt that Francis himself was a true mystic, and enjoyed a truly supernatural mystical communion with God (LMj 13:4). But there is, it seems to me, a good deal in him that can be appreciated and arouse sympathy in people who are not at the higher levels of mysticism. Perhaps in this again, Francis is prophetic in that he somehow reconciles in himself the approach of the one who is entranced with nature, the footprints or vestiges of the divine, with the approach of the grace filled mystic who sees nature from its source in the Godhead from whom it draws its being.

Thomas of Celano tells us:

How great do you think was the delight the beauty of the flowers brought to his soul whenever he saw their lovely form and noticed their sweet fragrance? He would immediately turn his gaze to the beauty of that flower, brilliant in springtime, sprouting *from the root of Jesse*. By its *fragrance* it raised up countless thousands of the dead. Whenever he found an abundance of flowers, he used to preach to them and invite them to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason.

Fields and vineyards, rocks and woods, and all the *beauties of the field*, flowing springs and blooming gardens, earth and fire, air and wind: all these he urged to love of God and willing service.

Finally he used to call all creatures by the name of 'brother' and 'sister' and in a wonderful way, unknown to others, he could discern the *secrets of the heart* of creatures like someone who has already passed *into the freedom of the glory of the children of God* (1C 81).

For Francis the Incarnation sanctified all of nature. Every creature is a word of God because it speaks of God. The foundation for the interest, affection and respect Francis shows to all creatures comes from the fact that all creatures, not just human beings, come through the Son. All creatures are “brothers and sisters” to Francis since they are, with him, fellow creatures with the incarnate Son of God (Short 1999:111). From Francis’s deep faith in the crucified Savior, the Christocentric theology of the Franciscan school developed. Franciscan spirituality draws its distinctiveness from Francis’s imitation of Christ and mystical union. According to Nothwehr (2000:127), it was in a mystical experience that Francis was given the revelation of cosmic union and for this reason Franciscan spirituality and Franciscan theology are inextricably bound. For Francis, there was an intimate link between himself and the physical universe. He experienced reverence for the world, knowing that it is sacred as God’s self-expression (127). In Francis we find the integration of the spiritual and the physical with regard to creation.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter on spirituality and mysticism has been quite long. But I think it was necessary to clarify these two concepts in order to construct a framework for my hypothesis, that nature played a very important role in the spirituality and mysticism of Saint Francis of Assisi and in the spirituality of the movement he founded.

I examined the concept of spirituality at some length and decided that it could be characterized as an approach to God orientated towards union with God, doing the work of God and making God present in the world (cf Section 2.2.1). As I pointed out, spirituality takes many forms and has many varieties. Then I turned to nature spirituality, that is, an examination of the role nature can play in a spirituality. This is fundamentally important for my hypothesis.



Mysticism is a distinct but overlapping concept. It focuses more on the individual, the interior states of the individual and the stages of his/her journey. But the goal is the same, union with God. In this section I drew on some writings by William James and a collection assembled by Michael Paffard to show how deeply nature is connected to mysticism and this again is very important for my hypothesis.

It is clear that Francis was deeply influenced by the places in which he lived. I think that a study of some of those places will tell us a good deal about his vision and spirituality. It is to the consideration of those places that were particularly dear to the heart of Francis that I will now turn.