

## Service in the Western Mystical Tradition

by Richard Evanoff

There is a widespread tendency to think of the Western mystical tradition as "other-worldly" — as more concerned with a heavenly world beyond matter than with the sometimes hellish problems of "this world." The Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (205-270 A.D.), however, who influenced much subsequent mystical thinking in the West, attempted to reconcile the otherworldly and the this-worldly by positing that the world of everyday experience is infused with a divine presence. Everything that exists is a spark of one divine soul (*psyché*, or "oversoul" as Emerson later translated it). The divine does not exist apart from nature, but within it. The earth itself is a god, a "single living being," interconnected in all its parts. Moreover, to the extent that humanity is able to experience itself not as an isolated fragment but as part of this organic whole, it too is "divine." Rather than regard the divine as a majestic, omnipotent "God" above and beyond the world, Plotinus believed that the divine is at the center of everything that exists. And if God is at the center of everything that exists, then God is also at the center of each tree, river, and mountain, as well as each individual person. Plotinus believed that humans can come to a realization of this divine presence through silent contemplation. By stripping away the film of our selfish thoughts and desires, the divine light is able to shine forth from inside us. Enlightenment is not something bestowed on us from the outside, but rather the realization of something that is already within us. The way to know God, as later mystics would contend, is to know one's own self (also *psyché*!).

Mainstream Christianity has historically emphasized the transcendence of the divine more than its immanence, and typically substituted creeds, rituals, and ecclesiastical authority for direct inner spiritual experience. By conceiving God as a majestic King it was easy for the feudal Church to reinforce the hierarchical structure of both sacred and secular society, symbolized by Pope and Emperor. Running counter to the religious mainstream, however, was a mystical cross-current which emphasized the immanence of God within the self and within nature. The roots of this mysticism are in fact quite orthodox. It was Athanasius — champion of the Nicene Creed adopted at the first ecumenical council convened in 325 A.D. by the Emperor Constantine — who wrote: "God became human that humans might become God." For Athanasius, the incarnation of

Christ represented the perfect fusion of the divine and the human. Instead of being an object of devotion, Christ is seen as the archetype of what it is possible for all human beings to experience. Rather than put Christ up on a pedestal and worship him as some kind of "hero" (as is frequently the case today), we ourselves are invited to become sons and daughters of God.

Shortly after the Council of Nicea, Christianity was proclaimed the official religion of the Roman Empire. Whereas primitive Christianity had been enormously fluid in doctrine, worship, and ecclesiastical organization, post-Nicene Christianity soon began to harden. The hierarchical structure of the Church became firmly established, creeds were formulated to separate the "orthodox" from "heretics," the canon of the Bible was fixed, and elaborate services and rituals were adopted. Church membership swelled. Many people joined the Church not out of sincere conviction but simply because, as the state religion, Christianity had become an avenue

---

Instead of regarding ourselves as alienated, isolated, me-first, grab-whatever-we-can-get egoists, we come instead to see the interconnectedness of ourselves with others and with nature.

---

for worldly success. Both to maintain the vigorous free spirit of early Christianity and to avoid that compromise between religion and secular culture that came to be known as "Christendom," spiritually minded individuals fled the worldly corruption of the cities for the contemplative solitude of the wilderness. There were ascetic excesses to be sure — St. Simeon remained at the top of a pillar for 36 years — but the essential idea of monasticism was, as Bishop Kallistos Ware has written, "a withdrawal in order to return." The wilderness provides a setting for our deepest encounters with our innermost self, when we either give into the demons we find within us or triumph over them. Only by getting our own act together — by realizing our essential oneness with everything that exists — is it possible for us to turn from a life of self-centered greed to a life truly dedicated to others. The old self is crucified and a new self is resurrected. As monasticism later moved north and encountered colder climates it became more communal. While further developing various forms of meditation it also sought to more actively become the salt of the earth and a leaven in society through service to others.

The mystical strain of Christianity contin-

ued most predominantly in the Eastern Orthodox Church, which promulgated the doctrine of *theosis*, or "deification" — the idea that, like Christ, individuals are able to become mystically "one" with God. The Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas argued that the divine is known not in its essence, but in its energies. We are unable to fully experience everything that the sun is, but we are nonetheless able to have a genuine experience of its warmth and light. God's essence can only be expressed through negative, or apophatic, theology: we cannot say what God is, only what God is not. (Compare this with the *neti-neti* ["not-this, not-that"] of Hinduism and the *mu* ["void" / "nothingness"] of Buddhism.) The energies of God, however, can be expressed metaphorically — although never literally — through cataphatic, or positive, theology, i.e., through conventional religious symbols, such as love, spirit, and light. The Hesychasts, a group of Orthodox mystics that flourished in the fourteenth century, used the imagery of light to talk about the inner illumination they experienced when practicing contemplative prayer. Contemplation for these mystics involved both body and spirit. The body itself was regarded as an icon of the divine. Redemption, moreover, is not merely a personal affair, but a cosmic event that includes the whole physical universe — which is also an icon of the divine. In the book of *Revelation* John envisions both "a new heaven and a new earth" — a cooperative, ecological whole in which self-centered ambition has been cast into the outer darkness where it belongs.

The distinctive features of Eastern Orthodox mysticism remained (and still remain) largely unknown in the West, where Augustinian theology, with its emphasis on the omnipotence of God and the total depravity of humankind, is dominant. Nonetheless, fertilized by the philosophical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite and John Scotus Erigena, there was a flowering of mysticism in medieval Europe which produced such communal, and sometimes radical, lay movements as the Friends of God, the Brethren of the Free Spirit, and the proto-feminist Beguines, and individual mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and St. John of the Cross. Mysticism was frequently suppressed by the Inquisition, however, because it was — quite correctly — perceived as a threat to traditional religious authority. If the divine is *im-mediate* to the individual (regardless of social rank or gender), it is no longer necessary for the Church to *mediate* between the individual and God. Hierarchy is eliminated in favor of genuine spiritual community.

Medieval mysticism sought to combine both intense contemplation with practical activity. Francis of Assisi is probably the best known, and most loved, of the medieval mystics. His exuberant love of nature is expressed in his hymn "All Creatures of Our King" and

in the canticle he wrote to "Brother Sun and Sister Moon." Francis's combination of deep inner spirituality and compassionate service to his fellow human beings illustrates Christ's command to love God with one's whole heart, mind, and soul, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. In this exhortation we see the mystical uniting of self (in its various faculties, including heart, mind, and soul) with both God and the world. Instead of experiencing alienation from God, self, or world, we experience our deep interconnectedness to — indeed our union with — them. But most of us find it difficult to maintain this sense of unity for long: when mysticism was not openly suppressed by the medieval church, it tended to be co-opted. Within a few years of St. Francis's death his successor, Elias, built an ostentatious church at Assisi to "honor" the monk who had devoted his life to Lady Poverty (the medieval symbol for what we would now call a simplified lifestyle). The original spirit of St. Francis lived on only in a small and persecuted minority who called themselves the Spiritual Franciscans.

The Reformation liberated religious life from ecclesiastical authority but the results were not entirely favorable to mysticism. Rather than eliminate authoritarianism altogether in favor of the direct leading of the spirit, Protestantism tended to simply substitute the authority of the Bible for the authority of the Church. Moreover, Luther and Calvin brought the Augustinian theological tradition with them into Protestantism, emphasizing the transcendence rather than the immanence of God and the total depravity of human beings rather than their potential divinization. Although there were a few prominent Protestant mystics, such as the Lutheran Jakob Boehme and the Quaker George Fox, mysticism was by and large rejected by Protestants as an "unhealthy" vestige of Catholicism.

It has only been recently that some Christians, noticing the spiritual aridity of much that passes for contemporary "Christianity," have begun to recover their mystical heritage, as witnessed in the writings of such contemporary Christian mystics as Thomas Merton and Matthew Fox. Similarities between Christian mysticism and mystical traditions found in Buddhism, Sufism, and Hinduism have also been explored. The net result of this revived interest in mysticism is a reawakened sense of a "divine presence" within the self and within nature. Instead of regarding ourselves as alienated, isolated, me-first, grab-whatever-we-can-get egoists, we come instead to see the interconnectedness of ourselves with others and with nature. This contemplative awareness exhibits itself directly through the service we give to others and on behalf of the earth. □

(Note: This is the full and uncut version of an article originally published in the JEE Newsletter.)

GLOBE Japan Press Release

## Japanese Legislator to Succeed Al Gore as Leader of GLOBE

March 17, 1993 — Tokyo, Brussels, Washington, Moscow

Kosugi Takashi, a member of the Japanese Diet, was recently nominated to succeed Al Gore as president of GLOBE International. Founded in 1989, GLOBE (Global Legislators Organization for a Balanced Environment) is an international non-governmental organization of parliamentarians working to protect the global environment by legislative means.

United States Vice President Al Gore acted as GLOBE International president for over two years. Gore resigned from GLOBE on January 20, 1993, the same day he assumed his new responsibilities as vice president of the United States.

Kosugi Takashi served as the first GLOBE Japan president for more than two years. He simultaneously served as GLOBE International vice president.



A well-known environmentalist in the governing Liberal Democratic Party, Mr. Kosugi headed the LDP Environment Division from 1989 to 1990. In 1991 Mr. Kosugi became the chairman of the Environment Committee in the House of Representatives. Since January 1993 he has acted as a director of the Budget Committee.

In response to his nomination, Mr. Kosugi stated: "This is a great honor. I will do my utmost to unite GLOBE members in an effort to overcome the global environmental crisis by democratic and constructive means. More than ever we need innovative and efficient international cooperation, building bridges of understanding across national borders and political affiliations. We must all put the environment at the top of our political agenda."

From the White House Vice President Al Gore sent his congratulations, stating: "I am delighted to hear that Takashi Kosugi has

been selected to succeed me in this position of leadership. It has been my pleasure to know and work closely with Takashi for several years now. He is an extraordinarily able and dedicated legislator and a true leader on environmental issues in Japan and internationally. I wish him every success as he assumes his new leadership responsibilities in the GLOBE federation."

All four branches of GLOBE are unanimous in supporting Mr. Kosugi as their new international leader.

GLOBE EC President Hemmo Muntingh, member of the European Parliament, and one of the founders of GLOBE, stated: "In his capacity as President of GLOBE Japan, Takashi Kosugi is already well known to Europeans for his strong commitment to the environment. GLOBE EC is extremely happy to welcome such a distinguished Japanese member to ensure the presidency of GLOBE International. Japan has a particular role to play in finding solutions to our global environmental problems such as global deforestation, particularly in Southeast Asia. GLOBE EC is counting on GLOBE International, under the inspiring leadership of Takashi Kosugi, to become a driving force in mobilizing environmental parliamentarians all over the world to ensure the implementation of Agenda 21 adopted at the UNCED Conference in June 1992."

Newly elected GLOBE USA president Senator John Kerry welcome Mr. Kosugi stating: "The members of GLOBE USA are delighted that Takashi Kosugi will be the next president of the GLOBE International Confederation. I look forward to working closely with him as we seek to address the urgent environmental challenges facing our planet."

Professor Nikolai Vorontsov, president of the recently founded GLOBE Russia, added that "GLOBE Russia is pleased to welcome Takashi Kosugi as the next president of GLOBE International. We look forward to his leadership and to meeting with him and other GLOBE members at the GLOBE General Assembly meeting in Tokyo this August."

GLOBE International hold two general assemblies each year to discuss global environmental issues and negotiate common policies. The 7th General Assembly will be hosted by GLOBE Japan in Tokyo this summer. Kosugi Takashi will be formally appointed at the Tokyo General Assembly. □