

# The Erosion of the Mystery

by Irene Marinoff

The process of secularization which began towards the end of the Middle Ages seems to have reached its peak. Not only has a way of life developed which no longer even pays lip-service to religion, so that large sections of the population live completely outside any direct religious influence, secular values have invaded the City of God itself. They have all but succeeded in eliminating an entire dimension of experience which, by the grace of God, is open to man. In other words, man is slowly and systematically robbed of his ideals. His vision is narrowed down to the here and now. If it is true, as George Herbert wrote: 'Who aimeth at the sky shoots higher much than he that means a tree', we are in danger of missing even the tree, unless we stop and take our bearings afresh. It is one thing to say that monogamous marriage, celibacy and the non-use of contraceptives are far beyond the powers of the average man. It is quite another to demand their abolition on these grounds—not only because there have been people—they still exist—who are actually able to live on this level, but chiefly because this would mean ignoring one human possibility. No one would dream of abrogating the law of charity, because most of us sin against charity regularly, often grievously. But the lives of the saints are there to show us that the ideal is patient of realization, even if we ourselves are too weak to approach it more closely. Lower any ideal and a light is extinguished which might have helped us of the average to continue our struggle.

By inviting us to lower our standards, the world has already made an inroad on our religious life and practice. It is making another by forcing its empty activism on the faithful. St Paul writes: 'And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing', and in that same thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians the apostle gives us an idea of what that charity really implies: patience, long-suffering, faith and hope. It is a sad truth that, while real charity of necessity overflows into good works, good works, as St Paul reminds us, do not necessarily presuppose charity. One is tempted to misquote Christ's words: 'If your charity is not greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5, 20). In our anxiety to perform corporal works of mercy we tend to overlook the far more exacting spiritual ones. It is in my opinion a sad sign

when a bishop, especially in our troubled times, deserts his flock in order to work in the mission field, or when a priest asks to be laicized because he believes he can be a better Christian if he does not remain on a plane apart from the rest of the faithful. With the exception of the extremely rare cases of a special vocation, as e.g. St Nicholas of Flüe, who left his wife and large young family in order to become a hermit, our duty normally lies in the circumstances ordained by Providence. Nor is it for us to judge by which kind of apostolate we can best honour God. However, activity is at a premium today, and those who like Mary are reproached by Martha are in a sorry plight. One even hears of priests who can no longer find colleagues with whom to discuss the things of the spirit, quite apart from the laity, members of which in the Church of England as well as in the Catholic Church regret this concentration on external activities. 'To make the New Pentecost a reality'—by putting money in an envelope! This is a case in point.

On all sides there seems to be an almost morbid fear of the Mystery as such. God is no longer conceived of as the *Numinosum*. Anything that approaches mysticism in religion is devaluated as a 'Myth' or 'Magic'. Since the scientist and technologist—the second-rate ones—have become the pundits of the age, men are haunted by the fear of everything that cannot be calculated or measured. They are quite prepared to settle down comfortably in a world where there are neither angels nor devils—in spite of concentration camps and Vietnam—and where the Mystery has gradually been eroded.

There are many signs of this in the Church. One is the replacing of Latin by the vernacular. The centuries-old language of the Church in the West has been exchanged for the language of the people. We are supposed to understand the Mass better if it is offered in our own tongue, for our own convenience. I do not know whether I am alone in feeling the impertinence in the rendering of *Unde et memores* by: 'So now, Lord'. I am always tempted to add: 'Let's get on with it!' The great St Teresa of Avila always spoke of His Majesty. Once the Mystery is brought down to the level of the market place, it soon evaporates. Great action demands great language, as all lovers of Shakespeare know. And here is the greatest action of all.

Secondly, we are losing our holy signs. In my experience few members of the congregation still beat their breasts at the *Confiteor* or make the sign of the cross during Mass. At a time when the importance of the body for mental health has been rediscovered, when remedial therapy is used to restore psychic equilibrium, we, who should know better, neglect the value of these outward signs by which the body is encouraged to take part in the worship of the soul. These outward signs allow the body to share in the mystery that gives life to the soul. Of all these 'signs' the Blessed Sacrament is the greatest. Here again a process of corrosion is going on. The presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is threatened in its unique

character by the argument that Christ is also present in his word, in our neighbour and in the Church. To be sure we can find Christ in the New Testament, where our Protestant brethren have found him in the last 400 years. To be sure he said that what was done unto the least of his brethren was done unto him. To be sure the gates of hell will not prevail against his Church. Nobody denies that. However there are many who despair of finding Christ in his Church, nor is it always easy to find Christ in one's neighbour; as for his presence in the Bible—the history of Protestantism proves that it is by no means an unequivocal Christ who is met in its pages. On the other hand, in the Blessed Sacrament we possess the *totus Christus*, a treasure only available at the hands of a duly consecrated priest.

Christian truth is reduced to pliable human material. There is no mystery left. Everything takes place on a familiar plane. Christ is in his word—so anyone can begin to interpret this according to his liking. Christ is in our neighbour, and we know enough about psychology now to be quite at ease with him. Christ is in the Church, but he is also in me. So I am in a position to oppose the Church as an institution in his name. No supernatural norm is left, the Divine-human Mystery has vanished. We have all become existentialists. What former centuries have taught about the *essence* of things is discarded, and the scholastic principle of *actio sequitur esse* completely ignored.

It does not make for human happiness nor does it make supernatural truth more easy to apprehend when the Mystery is robbed of its trappings of solemnity and decorum. It is, to say the least, disedifying for the penitent who enters the confessional to find a young priest reading the newspaper. Another example recently witnessed by the present writer in a Convent Chapel, no doubt with permission of the Ordinary of the diocese, is the introduction of self-service into the liturgy. During the Communion the priest gave the host to the communicants who came up in pairs, then parted and turned aside to 'help themselves' to the chalice. Maybe only an experiment. But the spirit behind this sort of thing is alarming. The 'message' of Christ, to use the terminology of our separated brethren, comes from above and should be met with reverence, not 'grasped' at.

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There seems, then, to be a progressive erosion of Mystery in the Church. But if we try to follow through the implications of what is happening today, then we realize that what may here seem a mortal blow to the world view of one generation is only the *conditio sine qua non* of a fuller appreciation of reality. Again and again in the course of history the change in outlook brought about by Copernicus repeats itself, the earth losing its central position in the universe to make room for a conception which can contain the vast galaxies of

modern astronomy. Change is of the very essence of life, and it is worth while to mention, though not to consider more fully, some of the discoveries that have fundamentally altered our way of looking at the world. The first of these is the discovery that the same laws obtain in the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the atom. Another is embodied in the work of Teilhard de Chardin, the significance of which lies in the fact that he freed modern thought held spellbound by Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* from its pessimism and revealed a positive view of the world in which science and religion are no longer, or rather seem no longer, irreconcilable, and optimism is again a human possibility. In this connexion it is not uninteresting to note that one of Teilhard's religious books, *Le Milieu Divin*, seems to strike men as more of a novelty than women. These find in it nothing new, only a confirmation of what, in their heart of hearts, they have always thought and practised.

What is the significance of the rejection of the Mystery in this context? In all primitive civilizations we meet with the attempt to conciliate superhuman powers by certain rites and sacrifices. These powers are envisaged as being external to man—they belong to the sphere of Adam, the male of the species. The relationship with the deity or deities, *religio*, is effected by external actions. A man is 'pious' if he performs these correctly—*rite*. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition more is demanded. Hence the difficulty we experience when trying to find a modern equivalent for 'pious' in the recurring phrase of Virgil's *pious Aeneas*. In our eyes this Aeneas is anything but *pious*. It is true, he obeys the commands of the gods, he offers the right kind of sacrifices. But he is not a religious man in our sense of the word.

When we compare the world of the Old Testament with classical mythology, we realize that here it is God who speaks and establishes the ways along which he is to be approached. Leviticus and Deuteronomy are full of these directives. But Yahveh does more. He demands, beyond the formal practice of *religio*, a real *relatio*, a spiritual relationship of the whole people with himself as between bride and bridegroom. With the exception of the prophets, the individual in the Old Testament is still in the background. The Jewish people are the bearers of the relationship. Yet even here there are indications that God demands the whole of man, demands the worship of the heart.

Christ is emphatic in his insistence on *relatio* instead of formal practice. His condemnation of those among the Pharisees who were hypocrites shows that clearly, as does his answer to the question of the First Commandment. Here the religious centre of gravity is transferred from external practices to the heart, the seat of love. The *relatio* of the Chosen People with God is henceforth to be realized in the heart of each believer.

Relationship and all it implies is especially entrusted to women. It is a woman, Eve, who was first tempted and fell. It is a woman,

Mary, whose *fiat* heralded the redemption, the restoration of the *relatio* with God. The religious attitude is essentially the attitude of the woman—her acceptance, her docility, her patience and her long-suffering are the patterns of 'spiritual behaviour', for in an encounter with God the soul is always the passive recipient, however much 'co-operation with grace' may ensue. Christianity was first preached in and to a patriarchal society. The Church owes to men the painstaking elaboration of her dogmas, an attempt to net the Mystery in words. She is indebted to men for her external structure, the 'administration'. Here men have achieved great things, working in a field especially entrusted to them. However, their touch is less sure when they approach the innermost shrine, the heart-centre of the Mystery, the *relatio* with God. Here they are no longer secure in their own world. Men find it far harder than women to 'abandon' themselves to Divine inspiration, even only to listen. When God calls, there are objections every time. Moses and Jeremias are two examples. Nothing like it is reported of Deborah or Jael, Mary Magdalene or any other woman in the Bible. In the New Testament St Peter is perhaps the only man to listen and obey immediately. Yet it is Peter who denies the Lord three times. It required a special Divine intervention to convince St Paul. On the way to Damascus Christ said to Saul: 'It is hard for thee to kick against the goad' (Acts 9, 5). Even if this verse is not authentic, it points to an incontestable psychological fact. The male of the species is intolerant of restraint.

It would seem as though he must exert a rigid control over his appetites in order to enter into the Mystery. There is a straight line from the penitential exercises of the Desert Fathers to the *nada* of St John of the Cross and the *agere contra* of the Jesuits, which is alien so the soul of a woman, and, it should be added, of an artist. It would seem as though the rebellious nature of men requires this painful activist form of inner purification before they are able to pronounce their *fiat*. For centuries spiritual asceticism has followed this masculine pattern, which is not quite suitable for the feminine psyche whose no lesser problems lie in a different field. The lives of the saints such as St Elisabeth of Hungary and St Teresa of Avila prove how much a woman may have to suffer at the hands of incompetent confessors. In the case of St Elisabeth one is tempted to ask whether the battle of the sexes was not transferred by Konrad von Marburg to the spiritual field. It was surely providential that St Teresa met St John of the Cross at a time when he was spiritually mature. Again and again women have been forced to seek union with God along inappropriate paths. As the Eastern Church shows, there is not only one way to union with God. Referring to her sufferings on her sick-bed Theresa of Lisieux writes that she either tries to rise above them or creep beneath them. Her 'Little Way' is the way of the woman, the way of humility, of abandon, that embraces the details

of day-to-day existence, responding with the whole of her being to the call of each moment, in a creative passivity that is complementary to the activity of the man. In his biography of Mère Berchmans, a Trappist nun who went to Japan as a missionary, Thomas Merton remarks that this Frenchwoman was astonished how easy her Japanese novices found it to love God and live a strict convent life. They had, as she puts it, not been spoiled by Jansenism.

A Mystery that is approached in so one-sided and at times even psychologically unsound a way gradually becomes suspect. Neither the artist nor the woman, I would venture to say, really feels at home in the traditional ascetic teaching and practice. A Mystery that has to be found in such tortuous and tortured ways loses its appeal. Add to this the temptation to secularize and rationalize every department of life, and we have our present situation. However, one thing is certain: There can be no human life, no living Church without the 'Mystery'. The preoccupation with Eastern forms of mysticism is only another proof of this. Your existentialist may endeavour to de-mythologize the world, that Mystery which he is unable to discover in the world outside, in the macrocosm, is equally at work in the microcosm of his own heart. The Eastern Church with its Jesus prayer, which establishes the connection between the outside world of the head—in this context even rational thought is 'outside'—and the inner world of the heart has always known this. The discovery of the heart and its *mystique* is only in its early stages. Attempts are being made both in France and in Switzerland to develop a form of religious instruction for girls which is more suited to the needs of those whose characteristic it is to possess '*Un coeur qui pense et un esprit qui aime*'.

It may well be that the erosion of the Mystery as it has hitherto been approached and apprehended in the West is the condition ensuring a development of a second form of spiritual askesis, which together with the traditional form will do justice to the human psyche in its totality as partaking of both male and female traits. Meanwhile it is imperative to emphasize the fact that there *is* a Mystery and that it can be discovered. 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.'