

"Practical" Mysticism Seeking to Unite Contemplation and Action

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Abstract: Over a number of centuries, many Christians have shown a concern to unite contemplation and action. It has turned out, though, that this quest confronts practical and theological difficulties. It is timely to ascertain whether it is still a matter of concern to Christian spirituality and theology now to hold these two elements together. If so, we need to discern what resources there might be for a fresh approach that addresses some of those difficulties. This involves taking up the wisdom of the ongoing mystical tradition in Christianity (the focus here will be on the tradition found in the Western Church), and bringing to bear fresh insights from contemporary theology.

1. A CONCERN TO UNITE CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION

SPEAKING IN THE 1940S from within Eastern Orthodoxy, Vladimir Lossky argued that the ascent to union with God is achieved simultaneously on two different but closely interrelated levels, that of action (*praxis*) and that of contemplation (*theoria*). The two are inseparable in Christian knowledge, which is the personal experience of spiritual realities. Lossky finds in Maximus the Confessor the view that contemplation without action is like fantasy without real substance, while action not inspired by contemplation is sterile and rigid.¹

Within the Western Church, too, the relating of the contemplative and active lives (at times referred to as the two lives) has regularly been a matter of concern. Augustine of Hippo sets the scene for this.

As for the three kinds of life, the life of leisure, the life of action, and the combination of the two, anyone, to be sure, might spend his life in any of these ways without detriment to his faith, and might thus attain to the everlasting rewards. What does matter is the answers

1. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976) 202-203. Compare what is said by Timothy Ware on deification and its down-to-earth aspect in caring for the poor and sick in *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 241-242.

to those questions: What does a man possess as a result of his love of truth? And what does he pay out in response to the obligations of Christian love? For no one ought to be so leisured as to take no thought in that leisure for the interest of his neighbour, nor so active as to feel no need for the contemplation of God.²

This carries little risk of reducing Christian life to a bland uniformity. It does suggest, though, that in some significant sense contemplation and action are inseparable. To pursue either to the total exclusion of the other may prove problematic. There is a suggestion that, through God's gracious initiative, contemplation of God is possible for many within the church; it is not the preserve of a select few. This is a matter of some consequence, even if in that setting it could be difficult in practice for many Christians to arrive at contemplation.³ There is also an expectation that Christians will have a concern for virtue and, where possible, will respond in love to the needs of people around them.

The view that there is to be some uniting of the two lives, both within the Christian church and as particular Christians set out to live the Gospel, has been taken up in much contemplative theology.⁴ This article will focus on ways this has come to expression within the Western Church.

Just what is meant by the active life (*vita activa*) and the contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) has been expressed in a classic way by Gregory the Great.

The active life is: to give bread to the hungry, to teach the ignorant the word of wisdom, to correct the erring, to recall to the path of humility our neighbour when he waxes proud, to tend the sick, to dispense to all what they need, and to provide those entrusted to us with the means of subsistence.

But the contemplative life is: to retain indeed with all one's mind the love of God and neighbour, but to rest from exterior action, and cleave only to the desire of the Maker, that the mind may now take

2. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIX.19. *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*. Vols. 47-48. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955). E.T. *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 880. In Latin, it reads in part: "Ex tribus uero illis uitae generibus, otioso, actiuo et ex utroque composito.... Nec sic esse quisque debet otiosus, ut in eodem otio utilitatem non cogitet proximi, nec sic actiuus, ut contemplationem non requirat Dei." Augustine's consideration of Marcus Varro's definition of the three kinds of life, which provides the setting for Augustine's own delineation, is found in *ibid.*, XIX.1-3.

3. On the extent to which all Christians might aspire to mysticism, note for instance Bernard McGinn, "The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism", *Church History* 65/2 (1996), 197-219, and note particularly 198.

4. On ways Christians take up, but also modify, Greek philosophical views in this regard, note for instance Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 191-204.

no pleasure in doing anything, but having spurned all cares, may be aglow to see the face of its Creator...⁵

This indicates what is distinctive of each life without radically opposing the two.

Hardly surprisingly, over time there have been shifts in the meanings that attach to these terms. In some instances they have come to represent states of life. The contemplative life, then, can signify the life of religious orders which aim at facilitating contemplation. As such it is distinct not only from active life outside the order, but also from the apostolate in more active religious communities, though it certainly does not exclude activity as such.⁶

John Cassian refers to a practical or actual life as a preparation for contemplation. This involves driving out sin and acquiring virtue. It can be directed in particular towards purity of heart, or teaching, or welcoming strangers, or caring for those who are sick and oppressed.⁷ Clearly there are similarities here with what Gregory says about action. And yet the concentration has moved towards the person acquiring virtue, and somewhat away from the neighbour in need.⁸

Active and contemplative have been taken also as referring to aspects of the life of prayer. Meditation can join asceticism and the practice of virtue in being spoken of as spiritual activity.⁹ In addition, they have been understood as involvement of the human faculties in different, but possibly complementary, ways. For instance Teresa of Avila holds that sometimes in the prayer of quiet the will is united with its God and leaves the other faculties free to be occupied in what is for God's service. In this way, active and contemplative lives join.¹⁰

5. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam*, II.ii.8. *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*, vol. 142. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971). The translation is from Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: the Teaching of SS. Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life. Neglected Chapters in the History of Religion*. (2nd ed.; London: Arrow, 1960) 222-223. Butler holds that Gregory's is the first formal definition of the two lives, which has ever since been "the classical and standard definition" (222). Thomas Aquinas works with Gregory's view in *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 180,5. Vol. 46. Action and Contemplation (2a2ae. 179-182) (London: Blackfriars, 1966) 30-35.

6. See for instance Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 270; Thomas Merton, *Reflections on My Work* (London: Collins, 1989) 30.

7. John Cassian, *Conferences*, 14.1-4, 9. Trans. by Colm Luibheid. *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 155-7, 162.

8. G. R. Evans also identifies a "subtly different emphasis" in Cassian, but notes rightly that the difference is not absolute. *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 109-110.

9. Note Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 17-18 on Eastern monasticism. Compare also what Thomas Merton says on Thomas Aquinas' view of good works and works of devotion as activity in *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, Vol. 2: 1941-1952* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997) 345-6. Merton refers to Thomas' commentary on John, Chapter I (Lectio XIV).

10. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 31.4-5, in *Collected Works*. Transl. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (3 vols; Washington: ICS Publications, 1972, 1980, 1985) 2: 154-155. Andrew Louth has brought this meaning to my attention in correspondence.

It is important to take account of this variety of meanings. Cassian's view, for instance, has clearly affected what many western writers say about the active life. Nevertheless Gregory's influential exposition has provided, and continues to provide, a valuable guide to an exploration of how contemplation of God relates to action in Christianity.

Recent theological and practical concerns with oppression in particular societies, and with possibilities of social as well as personal transformation, bring new insights into the value and scope of Christian praxis, but in doing so engage with traditional views of the active life.

What is meant now by contemplation of God shows no less continuity with Gregory's view. It is held to be a perception or conviction of God's presence, an encounter and contact between God and human persons made possible by God's initiative, above all in the person of Jesus Christ. It is spoken of in terms of vision of God, union with God, participation in God, transformation into Christ-likeness. The older term contemplation can be used synonymously with the more recent term "mysticism". Bernard McGinn speaks of the mystical element in Christianity as centring on "a form of immediate encounter with God whose essential purpose is to convey a loving knowledge (even a negative one) that transforms the mystic's mind and whole way of life".¹¹ The sense of immediacy is central to what mystical writers say about contemplation and union with God. That does not mean, though, that the sense of God's presence/absence is wholly unmediated. The notion of a "mediated immediacy", put forward by a number of theologians, is helpful in speaking of contemplation or mysticism in Christianity.¹²

Writers of mystical theology over many centuries have identified different ways contemplation and action might connect. Some consider action the necessary preliminary to contemplation. Others hold it to be the fruits of union with God.¹³ Still others (Hadewijch, Jan van Ruusbroec and Teresa of Avila, to name just a few) look to interaction between the two lives at various stages in the Christian journey.

There are indications that such concerns are ongoing. Some Christians express a view that contemplative stillness and practical activity are not strict alternatives; each appears to require, and enhance, the other. Steve Francis, for instance, identifies a model of pastoral ministry where "prayer and contemplation are foundations in shaping

11. Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 26.

12. For instance Denis Edwards, *Human Experience of God* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 65-6, and note the references to Rahner and Schillebeeckx there.

13. Compare the pointed observations on the patristic period and the middle ages by Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Das Betrachtende Gebet* (4th ed.; Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976) 253-4.

our being and doing, our theology and ministry".¹⁴ In a not dissimilar way, Mark Yaconelli has highlighted the pertinence and value of a contemplative approach to youth ministry.¹⁵ This is not to say that it is easy to make time to engage in both prayerful stillness and activity, and to allow for interaction between them. Nevertheless, the sense that this interaction is possible and could be fruitful is worthy of note.

2. DIFFICULTIES IN ACHIEVING THIS UNION

Western mystical tradition gives a prominent place to contemplation of God as an element in Christian life. In doing so it recognises that authentic contemplation is not self-serving, but has to do with true love of God, which goes together with love of neighbour. It is not surprising, then, that this tradition does not isolate contemplation from action. Indeed it provides the basis for a searching critique of any activity which is unexamined and which may verge on self-justification. A number of mystical writers (arguably with Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross prominent among them) raise perceptive questions concerning motivation for action. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of such insights for Christian living.

Still, the conviction that Christians and the church do well to allow the two lives to interrelate is far from being the whole story. That there is a problem in holding the two together is acknowledged in a candid way by the fourteenth century English writer Richard Rolle:

If any man could achieve both lives at once, the contemplative and the active, and sustain and fulfil them, he would be great indeed. He would maintain a ministry with his body, and at the same time experience within himself the song of heaven, absorbed in melody and the joy of everlasting love. I do not know if anybody has ever done this: it seems to me impossible to do both at once.¹⁶

This could be written off as an aberration, if it were not for the fact that Rolle merely accentuates difficulties that beset other writers on the topic.

One difficulty is the practical one, experienced by many, of making time for contemplative quiet and for active ministry. This is in keeping with the lament of Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, who knows at first hand what it is to be "a holy man violently tossed between the fruit of

14. Steve Francis, "The Contemplative Pastor – the Role of Prayer and Contemplation in Parish Ministry", *Australian Ministry Digest* (January-March, 1996) 7-9; the quotation is from p. 7.

15. Mark Yaconelli, "Youth Ministry: a Contemplative Approach", *Australian Ministry Digest* (July-September, 2000) 2-5; reprinted from the April 21-28/ 1999 issue of the *Christian Century*.

16. Richard Rolle, *Incendium Amoris*, chap. 21 (London: Manchester University Press, 1915). E.T. *The Fire of Love*; transl. Clifton Wolters. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 112.

action and the quiet of contemplation".¹⁷ Arguably, busy-ness has increased since Bernard's day, and this places barriers in the way of making time both for prayerful stillness and for ministry. Of course, there are different approaches to meeting such demands. Prolonged active engagement with needs of people can lead to the sense of a loss of intimate communion with God, or it may highlight encounters with Christ in other people as well as in prayer and worship. The desire for contemplation may take one away from active involvement with issues of the day in society, or it may deepen that involvement and help clarify the motivation behind it. Practical problems are real, but do not stand alone.

Another, potentially more serious, difficulty is theological. While western contemplative theology seeks to combine contemplation and action, it also holds to a lack of proportion between the two that makes it hard to envisage them combining in anything like a partnership of equals. One reason for this is the contrast in the eschatological significance it accords to each.¹⁸ Contemplation has its beginnings in life on this earth, and continues on to find its fullness in the resurrection life. It anticipates now the joys to come. Action, on the other hand, has its place only within this world, not in the world to come. The end to human need in the resurrection signals an end to the active life which seeks to meet that need. The only abiding significance in action is its heavenly reward: the vision of God.

To Christians over many centuries it was evident that something which begins now and will continue for eternity is of greater value than anything that has its place only within the life of this world (though it may be necessary here and now). Hence in much mystical theology contemplation is esteemed much more highly than action. Many writers have taken up the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10: 38-42 (and sometimes Rachel and Leah in Latin translations of Gen 29:16-35) as providing a scriptural warrant for this assessment. There is an ongoing theological struggle to hold together realities which are so patently incommensurable.

It is hardly surprising that the relationship between the two lives in much western mystical theology is addressed as a problem. It may not be going too far to identify an impasse confronting attempts in that tradition, highly creative as they often are, to resolve the problem

17. "Vides virum sanctum inter fructum operis et somnum contemplationis graviter aestuare..." (Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticatorum*, 57.9. *Opera*, Vols. 1 and 2. [Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957, 1958]. E.T. *On the Song of Songs*; transl. K. Walsh and I. M. Edmonds [4 vols.; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971-1980] 3: 104).

18. Eschatology involves expectancy and hope. It looks to a qualitatively new situation brought about by God, and ultimately to the consummation of all things. It commonly looks to fulfilment in the future and combines this with an awareness of realisation already in the present.

theologically (even if some mystics present a practical, lived-out resolution). There is a degree of pathos in Thomas Merton's plaintive cry in his journal in 1949: "I wish Saint Dominic would finally give me an understanding of this problem of contemplation vs. action – clear as the line of the landscapes of Southern France!"¹⁹

A theological reconciliation of the claims of contemplation and action, which has implications for practical reconciliation of those claims, calls for a critical examination of the commonly-assumed incommensurability between them – something which, as noted above, has an eschatological dimension to it.

3. SUGGESTIONS TO GIVE UP THE QUEST

An even more robust approach may be in order. If it proves problematic to hold together contemplation and action in some form of unity, despite the concern of many western mystics to do so, that may indicate that the quest itself is futile, perhaps even wrong-headed. It may be timely to take a step backwards and ask seriously whether contemplation and action both have a place in Christian living. Only if this is so is there any need to consider the value in uniting them.

There is sometimes a suggestion that mysticism itself points away from any active involvement with other people. In the first half of the twentieth century Ernst Troeltsch sought to delineate a mystical "type" that involves a resignation and quietism which results in "a complete indifference, or impotence" towards all social problems lying outside the directly religious sphere.²⁰ World denial is one accusation often levelled at mysticism, within Christianity and in other religions.²¹

It is true that quietism has been in evidence in the Western Church over time. Even some who might be considered notable mystics (Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart among them) can sound very much as if they decry or devalue action, whether or not this proves to be the case on closer inspection. Nevertheless, quietism does not prove to play a significant part in the writings of most of those who are commonly acknowledged as major western mystics. Church authorities, and even some mystical writers (such as Ruusbroec) have shown little tolerance towards it. How love is put into practice and relates to the contemplative life has been a recurring theme. Hence some commentators find that combining contemplation of God with active love of

19. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 344; published also in Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Sheldon, 1976) 212.

20. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (2 vols.; London: Allen and Unwin, 1953) 2: 800-801, 816. Compare the types in Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (4th ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1964) 166-170.

21. See for instance Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: a Christian Interpretation* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1964) 2: 11-14.

neighbour is a critical issue in Christian mysticism.²² It would fly in the face of western mystical tradition to remove the tension between prayer and praxis by the simple expedient of eliminating the active life from Christianity. And there is little or no sign that an excising or even downplaying of praxis is a compelling option for Christians now.

That still leaves the option of ignoring or eliminating the contemplative life. And this requires closer attention.

Writing early in the twentieth century, Dom John Chapman identified a "reversal of tradition" in Roman Catholic theology from the seventeenth century that made it possible for contemplation to be considered something "extraordinary", so that it would cease to be a vital part of Christian life for all but the very few.²³ Edward Schillebeeckx has also observed that from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "mysticism" became a kind of term of abuse to describe alien and mysterious, occult and irrational phenomena. He indicates, though, that in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth, mysticism (which he considers an intense form of the experience of God in faith) was again approached positively.²⁴

From early last century, moves to reject contemplation might be expected more from certain groups within Protestantism. Thus Louis Bouyer has commented that for a number of schools of Protestant theology, "where true Protestantism is concerned, mysticism is the most unacceptable reality of all".²⁵ Emil Brunner, for instance, has found it decidedly unacceptable.²⁶

It remains true nonetheless that there is no general dismissal of mysticism by Protestant theologians. Karl Barth, for instance, clearly challenges mysticism and criticises it stringently, but finally draws back from excising it completely from Christianity. Intriguingly, he observes, with reference to Paul in Gal 2:20 and to Calvin (and going on to

22. For example Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1961) 172, 429; Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (2 vols.; London: Dent, 1908) 2: 129-143.

23. Chapman comments, "The dogmatic theologians were rising up against mystical theology" in "Mysticism (Christian, Roman Catholic)", in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1917) IX: 90-101 (and note 100-101). Compare Auguste Saudreau, *The Life of Union with God and the Means of Attaining It, According to the Great Masters of Spirituality* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1927) 301-313.

24. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 68-69.

25. Louis Bouyer, *Orthodox Spirituality and Protestant and Anglican Spirituality. A History of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 3 (New York: Seabury, 1969) 57. Bouyer refers in particular to Barth, Ebeling, Nygren and Brunner.

26. For example in Emil Brunner, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947) 109-121. John Burnaby comments on the uncompromising nature of Brunner's anti-mysticism in *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938) 13.

mention the christological mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux): "If this is mysticism, then mysticism is an indispensable part of the Christian faith."²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, too, has been critical of aspects of mysticism.²⁸ However he has also shown a measure of appreciation of it within Christianity, when it is centred on Christ. He finds that it need not mean estrangement from action, but can be a preparation for public discipleship.²⁹

There is no Protestant consensus, then, on the elimination of contemplation from Christianity. It is even worth investigating the extent to which the target of much theological polemic has been a perceived universal mysticism, with Christian mysticism being identified as but one manifestation of that phenomenon. This suggests that it is important to examine Christian mystical writings within their actual settings in Christianity, and not simply to assume they represent a universal mysticism. Grace Jantzen is critical of the lack of attention to primary sources among many philosophers of religion, finding "respect for the lives and writings of the mystics themselves...conspicuously absent".³⁰ Some theologians may have done well to heed such criticism. Bernard McGinn is right to emphasise the interdependence of the two tasks of a more complete and critical knowledge of Christian mysticism and more adequate appraisals of the phenomenon.³¹

For much of Christian history, mystical theology has been a significant element in Christian and church life. There is evidence to support a claim for letting it continue in that role. A rejection of contemplation could lead to an impoverishing and even a misconstruing of Christianity, just as surely as a rejection of the active life could. If so, it would be a mistake to cut the connection and resolve the "problem" of the two lives by excising or even downplaying one or the other. Both examining tradition and listening to contemporary Christians confirms the importance of the quest to unite the two lives.

27. "Ist Mystik das, dann ist Mystik eine unentbehrliche Bestimmung des christlichen Glaubens" (*Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 12 vols. [Vol. 1, 2nd ed.; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1935]; Vols. 2-12, [Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938-1967]) III, 4, pp. 63-4; E.T. *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1936-1962), III,4, pp. 58-9. Note also for example *ibid.*, I, 1, p. 233 (E.T. pp. 253-4.), p. 253 (E.T. p. 275); IV, 3, p. 620 (E.T. pp. 539-40).

28. For instance, Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer Christlichen Eschatologie*. (11th ed.; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1980) 23-27.

29. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 208-211. It is possible to demonstrate in Moltmann's writings since the 1960s a growing, though never uncritical, appreciation of mysticism in Christianity.

30. Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 342.

31. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) xii.

4. REASSESSING THE VALUE OF PRAXIS

If there is a continuing conviction that contemplative and active elements both have a place in Christianity, and that some combination of them is to be desired, more is required in working towards such a union than an adjusting of timetables on the part of those who engage in ministry. It necessitates an addressing of theological issues, and particularly a rethinking of the relative value of the two lives. Recent developments in eschatological thought in Christian theology make this possible.

In various contexts there has developed an awareness of the need for a Christian praxis within the society concerned that will attempt to address situations of oppression or conflict and move towards personal and social transformation. Theological reflection on hopes for and anticipations of God's reign has commonly provided a critical accompaniment to this development. Together they set the stage for a new appraisal of Christian praxis which points beyond a subordination of action to contemplation. This in turn may open up new possibilities in seeking to relate union with God to action in the world.

Of course a reverse subordination could result, which might produce its own baneful effects. Still, some theologians of late have displayed a conviction that a focus on praxis is no reason for devaluing spirituality, and indeed contemplative spirituality.³² So evidently there is some prospect of finding more worth in the active life than has often been allowed for, without diminishing the worth ascribed to contemplation.

Warrant may be found in scripture for coming to a high valuation of praxis. The affirmation in the Old Testament of Yahweh's sovereignty, in the present and as future expectation, gives rise to a demanding personal and social ethic. In the New Testament, too, the proclamation of the coming reign of God which enters the life of this world in Jesus' person and ministry, and which continues to be effective in the presence of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, brings the possibility of and the demand for a way of life that accords with God's reign.

This being the case, some liberation theologians have demanded that the relationship between the historical action of Christians and the kingdom be spoken of in terms of causality, if in a limited way. Thus Juan Luis Segundo writes about the relationship between a liberative event in history and the definitive kingdom of God:

By virtue of the power of God who lies behind it every such happening, however ambiguous and provisional it may be, stands in a causal relationship to the definitive kingdom. The causality is

32. For instance, Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theology: an Ecclesial Function" in his *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999) 182-5.

partial, fragile, often distorted and in need of reworking; but it is a far cry from being nothing more than an anticipation, outline, or analogy of the kingdom.³³

José Miguez Bonino has also claimed that “the strong language of growth, realization, creation” is not only justified but required in relating human action to the kingdom.³⁴ Such views assert that authentic praxis has eschatological significance within Christianity.

Nevertheless a view that human action is to be spoken of as causative in terms of the reign of God is not unproblematic. For instance, Barth has asserted emphatically that the kingdom is

God himself, who in the act and revelation of his own divine righteousness certainly frees man and calls him to a being in human righteousness but who still remains free over against all the inner and outer works of human righteousness..., who can thus free all people for such works, and call them to them, precisely in his indestructible sovereignty.³⁵

Certainly in scripture the reign of God is brought about not by human effort but by God’s own action. William Temple was quite right, then, to maintain: “If the Kingdom of God is to come on earth, it must be because God first comes on earth Himself.”³⁶ God’s reign is precisely the action of God in reigning; it is not a human achievement. To be fair, some liberation theologians have shown themselves to be quite aware of difficulties in speaking of building the kingdom.³⁷

A closely-related problem concerns the ambiguity of human action. Human beings display a creativity that reflects the creativity of God. This finds many expressions: in art and music and in other fields of human endeavour. It is also in evidence when some people seek for justice and peace in human society, and between humanity and the rest of nature. However human creativity is flawed, and this affects attempts to bring about justice and peace. There are destructive aspects to human actions, even at their best, and these taint any peace which is achieved, even if it turns out to be a significant improvement on what preceded it.

To be Christian means being set right with God through God’s grace encountered in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit leads us in a process of

33. Juan Luis Segundo, “Capitalism Versus Socialism: Crux Theologica”, in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 240-59; quotation from p. 257.

34. José Miguez Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (London: SPCK, 1975) 139 (and note 139-42).

35. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life. Church Dogmatics IV,4. Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 244.

36. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1953) 513.

37. Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology*, 142; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (rev ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) 102-104.

sanctification. However we are *not* immediately freed from all effects and distortions of sin. Christian life is on the way to its goal, but has not yet reached the goal (see Phil 3:8-16). Imperfection, sin and evil are found not only in social conditions, but also in the human beings who set out to improve those conditions.

Observing that the reign of God is God's initiative, and so holding to a realistic view of the possibilities and limitations of praxis, are vital aspects of ongoing theological reflection on action, which in turn affects subsequent action. This priority of God's reign does not reduce the value of praxis, but it *does* mean that not everything depends on human work. Hence Christians are not compelled to do absolutely *anything* to achieve their ends, however important those ends might be. There is a hope that need not surrender to despair when the results of costly efforts are tragically disappointing.

The reign of the triune God brings the promise of community with God, with other people, and with the created world. And in the presence of the crucified and risen Christ and the activity of the Spirit, what is expected and hoped for is anticipated now. God's initiative calls for human response. Christian praxis follows on from participation in God's reign. It is to be in keeping with that reign (or kingdom or commonwealth), and is of significance in relation to it. As Gutiérrez wisely puts it: "The building of a just society has worth in terms of the Kingdom."³⁸

For Christians, God's reign is the horizon of promise and expectation. This enables involvement with persons and with society to be loving and purposeful rather than desperate and self-assertive. And that horizon is not just wish fulfilment. Its reality and nature are revealed in God's creative love for the world, in the incarnation, ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the presence of Christ and the working of the Spirit.

Giving allegiance to God's reign militates against absolutising any particular social system or movement for social change. Miroslav Volf argues that, while we can learn from the postmodern critique of emancipation that we must engage in the struggle against oppression, we must renounce attempts at final reconciliation; otherwise we will end up perpetuating oppression. The struggle against oppression must be guided by a vision of reconciliation between oppressed and oppressors, or it will end in "injustice-with-role-reversal".³⁹ Volf rejects, though, giving up the *hope* for final reconciliation. Drawing on the resource found in Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God, in his death on the cross, and in the character of the triune God, he advocates the struggle

38. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 46.

39. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 109.

for a nonfinal reconciliation based on a vision of reconciliation that cannot be undone.⁴⁰

Christian praxis is a response to God's gracious presence and promise, and in a limited and potentially costly way, a sharing in God's working. In restricting the claims it makes for itself and what it can achieve, it shows its true value. This also leaves the way open for fruitful partnership between praxis and contemplative life. According to many Christian writers on spirituality, the latter can aid the former in remaining true to its calling.

As contemplative theology has recognised consistently, the active life is of great importance for Christians. Contemporary systematic theology makes possible the recognition that the active life is concerned with particular persons, and also with the social reality in which people live, and indeed with this earth and the life it supports. The church, the people of God's reign, can take up an incarnational and prophetic involvement in existing societies, testing social realities and movements for change to determine the extent to which they are in keeping with the kingdom. Christians are to be "open – in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of people, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society – to the gift of the Kingdom of God".⁴¹ This openness may draw the Christian community into common action and suffering with movements for change, but not into a submerging of its identity into theirs.

Here the scope of Christian action is widened. In 1942 William Temple could assert that the claim of the church to be heard in relation to political and economic problems is no new usurpation, but a re-assertion of a right once universally admitted and widely regarded. He added, though, that the right may be compromised by injudicious exercise.⁴² This claim looks to a foundation in the scriptures and in Christian tradition.

Many Christians would agree that a concern for social and political realities is vital, but it is not to overshadow a concern for persons. The active life based on the promise and presence of God's reign can be expected to combine a practical love for persons with a critical engagement with social structures and a concern for this earth.

5. WAYS OF RELATING CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION NOW

These developments open the way for a profound change in relating contemplation to action. It becomes possible to acknowledge a much greater mutuality, and so a closer union, between them. Praxis is much

40. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110.

41. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 12.

42. William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: SPCK, 1976) 31.

more than a supplement of debatable importance to a Christian existence consisting fundamentally of prayer, contemplation and worship. Schillebeeckx is right in observing that not to be active, to allow things to run their course, would be in contradiction to the active significance of theological hope for our fellow human beings.⁴³ And Gutiérrez can claim support in scripture and tradition for his assertion: "Every attempt to evade the struggle against alienation and the violence of the powerful and for a more just and more human world is the greatest infidelity to God. To know God is to work for justice."⁴⁴

There is a need to move beyond views that find no eschatological value in the active life. Christian praxis responds to God's gracious initiative. Its task is to take up and develop new possibilities opened up by the triune God within history, possibilities for the transformation of individuals, societies and the earth. The action of love is of worth in relation to the coming reign of God. Christians may be spoken of rightly as "co-workers for the kingdom of God" (Col 4:11; see 1 Cor 3:9 and 2 Cor 6:1). Action and contemplation are commensurable and can come together in a true partnership.

Of course the mystery of Christian existence is not to be reduced to a formula requiring that we all combine these two elements, much less that we do so in some stipulated way. Karl Rahner warns against the idea that what is properly Christian (and he specifically mentions contemplation and world transfiguration) has to be realised in the same way in all people.⁴⁵ Mystical writers speak of the perception of God, often in tension with a sense of God's absence, and of union with God in ways that show the breadth of the intimate and life-giving relationship which God makes possible. Ways that faith works through love (see Gal 5:6) also show a rich variety, depending on particular Christians and their communities, their personal and social contexts, and their places in history. Christians respond to the claims of the Gospel authentically in a range of ways, and this seems to be in keeping with the workings of God's Spirit. Both prayer and praxis can take many forms, and it is likely that attempts to combine them will prove to be exuberant in their diversity. The living tradition of the church is most compelling, not in being prescriptive concerning ways to combine contemplation and action, but in demonstrating the worth there is in letting them relate in Christian existence and within the church.⁴⁶

43. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1980) 835.

44. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 156.

45. Karl Rahner, *Opportunities for Faith: Elements of a Modern Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1974) 71.

46. For instance, Philip Shano finds that the mysticism of Ignatius Loyola is an active or apostolic mysticism which is characterised by the ability to find God in all things. Ignatius' own influential apostolic work was the expression and sacramental embodiment of his

The conclusion arrived at here depends on bringing together the living tradition of contemplative theology and theological outlooks which set out to respond to the expectation and presence of God's reign. An impetus towards new (and necessarily provisional) resolutions of difficulties facing any uniting of the two lives will be found not in mysticism or theology in isolation, but in an interaction between them.

Unfortunately in the Western Church there has come to be something of a division between mystical and systematic theology, or between spirituality and theology.⁴⁷ This division was not characteristic of the patristic era, and Eastern Orthodoxy distances itself from it. According to Lossky, for instance, dogmatic work has its basis in mystical experience, and all mystical work is connected to the realm of dogma.⁴⁸ Thomas Merton has demonstrated just how damaging the division has been, and how urgent the need is to overcome it:

Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and "spirituality" are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and in spirituality. But the two belong together, just as body and soul belong together. Unless they are united, there is no fervour, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.⁴⁹

There are signs in the Western Church of a coming-together of contemplative and systematic theology. It may be, in turn, that exploring how contemplation relates to action, a matter of concern for spirituality and theology, is one concrete way of furthering this process of "rapprochement".

In the past, Christian theology and spirituality have often considered contemplation in this life to be the beginnings of the vision of God, which will then continue through eternity. Action, on the other hand, has had its place only within the confines of this world. It has been recognised as necessary to Christian life but has often verged on being viewed as something of a regrettable necessity. If, however, praxis is now taken to have its origins in the coming of God's reign, the scenario

radical mysticism. Shano points to an interest among many practitioners of the Spiritual Exercises in finding a uniquely Ignatian contribution to contemporary questions of ecology; see "Mysticism and Ecology: Ignatian Contemplation and Participation", *Christianity and the Mystical. The Way Supplement* 102 (2001) 107-123 (and note 107, 119-121).

47. On this division see for example Louth, *Origins*, xi-xii; Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers. A History of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 1. (New York: Seabury, 1963) 421.

48. Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974) 49-50; *Mystical Theology*, 8-14.

49. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (2nd ed.; Wheathampstead: Clarke, 1972) 197-8.

changes. Action has its beginnings here; it has implications for God's reign in the present *and* in its expected fulfilment. Like contemplation, it is of continuing and not just temporary importance. Contemplation and action both involve a response to God that combines active and passive elements, and each is of value in terms of the glory and lordship of God. Difficult and demanding though the combination may be in practice, there is no incommensurability between them. And there may prove to be great gain in letting them interact in Christian life and ministry.

Uniting contemplation and action is not a problem to be resolved, but a quest to be undertaken. Engaging with the living Christian mystical tradition and with recent developments in theology makes it possible to take on this quest in a committed and hopeful way.