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A Reply to Julia: On Christian Meditation and Mysticism

by Angus R. McGillivray

Dear Julia,

Thank you for your letter on Christian meditation and mysticism which well conveys your enthusiasm to know and learn more about God, and your desire to glorify God by seeking to do his will.

I am pleased for you that God is giving you the assurance that He is at work in and through you. Indeed, your desire to do God's will is evidence that God's law is in your heart and mind as Jeremiah 31:33 and Hebrews 8:10 tell us. Note how Psalm 40:8 also emphasizes this relationship: "I delight to do Thy will, O my God; Thy law is within my heart."

Because such themes are vital to the Christian maturity that you earnestly desire, I thought that it may be helpful for me to relate such themes to the ideas that you raise in your letter. I especially do so in order to warn you about some of the deceptions and snares that are associated with Christian meditation and mysticism so that you may mature along Biblically consistent lines — as the apostle Paul would say, "so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge that you may be filled up to the fulness of God" (Ephesians 3:17-19).

Christian Mysticism and Medieval Theology

It is important to first place Christian mysticism in its Medieval context. Graeme Goldsworthy has well pointed out in his book, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (The Paternoster Press, 1984), that medieval theology de-historicized what God did once and for all

time in Christ and consequently internalized and subjectivized the gospel.

The core of the gospel — the historic events of what God did in Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth — were thus downgraded in favour of a mystical emphasis on the private, inner-subjective experience of the individual saint.

This medieval legacy lives on today. As Graeme Goldsworthy writes: "Whereas faith in the gospel is essentially acceptance of, and commitment to, the declaration that God acted in Christ some two thousand years ago on our behalf, saving faith is often portrayed nowadays more as trust in what God is doing in us now." (p. 19).

Graeme Goldsworthy elaborates by writing that "Biblical ideas such as 'the forgiveness of sins' or 'salvation' are interpreted as primarily describing a Christian's personal experience. But when we allow the whole Bible — Old and New Testaments — to speak to us, we find that those subjective aspects of the Christian life which are undoubtedly important — the new birth, faith and sanctification — are the *fruits* of the gospel. This gospel, while still relating to individual people at their point of need, is rooted and grounded in the history of redemption. It is good news *about* Jesus, before it can become good news *for* sinful men and women. Indeed, it is only as the *objective* (redemptive-historical) facts are grasped that the *subjective* experience of the individual Christian can be understood" (p. 2, emphasis in original).

I would encourage you to read further Graeme Goldsworthy's immensely helpful study and then relate what he says to the way in which the gospel also entails the responsive duty which God requires of all Christians: obedience to His will which He has chosen to reveal in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

John Knox is one of the remarkable figures in the Reformation. Perhaps no conservative religious leader in recent centuries has been so bold in leading a people's revolt against all ungodly authority. Knox helped establish the rule of law — God's law. Even kings and queens must obey this Royal law, declared Knox, as he sought the punishment of Queen Mary for her part in the murder of her husband.

The attitude of Knox and many of the Reformers, however, represents a view of Christianity not so common today. Knox believed there was no room for compromise when it came to God's law. In one of his many debates with Mary, Knox declared, "My travel is, that both princes and subjects may obey God. And think now, madam, that wrong is done you, when you are required to be subject unto God; for it is he who subjects people under princes, and causes obedience to be given unto them. He craves kings, that they be as foster-fathers to his church, and commands queens to be nurses of his people. And this subjection, madam, unto God and his church, is the greatest dignity that flesh can get upon the face of the earth; for it shall raise them to everlasting glory."

"But you are not the church that I will nourish," said the queen: "I will defend the church of Rome; for it is, I think, the true church of God."

"Your will, madam is no reason; neither doth your thought make the Roman harlot to be the true and immaculate spouse of Jesus Christ. Wonder not madam, that I call Rome an harlot, for that church is altogether polluted with all kinds of spiritual fornication, both in doctrine and manners."

"My conscience is not so," said the queen.

"Conscience, madam, requires knowledge; and I fear that right knowledge you have none," replied Knox.

The queen replied that she had both heard and read. To which Knox responded, "So, madam, did the Jews who crucified Christ; they read the law and the prophets, and heard them interpreted after their manner. Have you heard any teach but such as

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Editor: Ian Hodge

Remember that Jesus especially emphasized in His teaching that to love Him is to obey Him and to keep His commandments. See John chapters 14 and 15. How good it is that God has given us the Holy Spirit to enable us to comprehend and obey God's law which verbalizes God's character and His abiding standards of love and righteousness.

The Spirit's Dynamic for Living

In his study on the rule of God's law in relation to the issue of dominion, Greg L. Bahnsen has well written in his book, *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), that "The Holy Spirit does not replace the law of God in the Christian's life, nor does He oppose the law of God in our behaviour." Indeed, Greg Bahnsen goes on to well argue that "A Biblical view of the work of the Holy Spirit reinforces the validity of God's law for the Christian, showing how the law (as pattern) and the Spirit (as power) are both indispensable to sanctification." (See chapter 8.)

It is so important for us as Christians to regard the work of the Holy Spirit as a ministry carried out in conjunction with the already given Word of God. The Holy Spirit is always faithful to the Word of the Son and witnesses to the Son. See further, John 14:23-26; 15:26; and 16:14.

Hence the Holy Spirit does not oppose nor negate God's law, but rather empowers obedience to it.

As Christians, we are ethically regenerated and have God's law in our hearts and minds, and can, therefore, progressively discipline ourselves, by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, to think, speak, and act in accordance with God's law.

Hence our sanctification — the on-going process of maturity in Christ — is a progressive development and working out in all areas of our life of the comprehensive implications of the completed

work of Christ imputed to us at our justification.

By God's Standard

What all this means for Christians who seek to know more about and experience Christian meditation and mystical contemplation, is that it is imperative for them to be not only certain of what they are meditating, but also to be certain of by what standard they are meditating and contemplating God.

God's Word indicates clearly that our meditations and contemplations must always be in terms of His law. The second verse of the first psalm in the book of Psalms tells us that the godly person delights in the law of the Lord and "in His law he meditates day and night." And Psalm 119, which I encourage you to read, repeatedly exhorts and encourages us to make God's law the subject of our meditation.

When we read New Testament passages such as Ephesians 4:22-24 — "that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, . . . and that you be renewed in the mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" — we can grasp why it is so essential that we focus on God's law which defines His righteousness and holiness and the standards by which we are to love Him and our fellow man.

Christian Zen and Silentium Mysticism

Non Christian forms of mystical contemplation and meditation, including Christianized versions such as "Christian Zen," all ultimately reject the very concepts, images, thoughts, categories, boundaries, and standards on which God instructs us to dwell. They, therefore, reject God's self-revelation of Himself in His revealed Word.

Consequently, non Biblical forms of mysticism leave a person with an experience of being between what mystics call a "cloud of unknowing" above and a "cloud of forgetting" below — a contentless "cloud" or realm of "silentium mysticism."

Mystical Union with Christ

God's Word declares the contrary and instructs us to meditate on God's truth, God's dealings with man, and God's own self-disclosure to man in terms of the categories, concepts, images, and patterns that God has chosen for us. When we do this and are obedient to God, there is no loss of personality. Rather, there is communion with Christ — a Creator-creature relationship, not a monistic oneness.

Our mystical union with Christ involves Christ bringing forth fruit through us with no loss of personality. As Paul puts it in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the

the pope and cardinals have allowed? and you may be assured that such will speak nothing to offend their own estate."

"You interpret the Scriptures in one way," said the queen evasively, "and they in another: whom shall I believe, and who shall be judge?"

"You shall believe God, who plainly speaketh in his word," replied the Reformer, "and farther than the word teacheth you, you shall not believe neither the one nor the other. The word of God is plain in itself; if there is any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, who is never contrary to himself, explains it more clearly in other places, so that there can remain no doubt, but unto such as are obstinately ignorant."

This dialogue between John Knox and Queen Mary, adapted from Thomas M'Crie's *Life of John Knox* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, pp. 174-175), indicates Knox's uncompromising stand for the truthfulness of God's word. It also reveals how he answered objections to Christianity — objections that are with us today. Fortunately, we are left with his own words describing his motivation for such a strong stand against all those who denied the true faith: "What influenced me to utter whatever the Lord put into my mouth so boldly, without respect for persons, was a reverential fear of my God, who called, and of his grace appointed me to be a steward of divine mysteries, and a belief that he will demand an account of my discharge of the trust committed unto me, when I shall stand before the tribunal."

Thus it was said at Knox's funeral, "There lies he, who never feared the face of man."

We could certainly do with some John Knox's in the twentieth century.

Education is one area in which most parents will not cut costs. They want their children to be better educated than they were, and they're willing to pay for it.

As a result, there is a significant shift out of the government school sector into private schools. In 1990, 32% of full-time secondary school students were studying at private schools. This is up from 26% a decade earlier. Results speak for themselves. In 1991, only 49% of school leavers from government schools were on their way to university, while a significant 66% from private schools were on the same path.

Not surprisingly, there has been an increase in the number of non-government schools. There were 805 non-Catholic private schools in 1991, up from 415 twenty years earlier.

Higher productivity in some countries is explainable only from a religious basis. Those nations influenced by Christian faith have become the leaders in economic affairs.

Thus, while Australia has only 0.3% of the world's population, her inhabitants will produce an estimated 33% of the world's

life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me."

We are thus to be conscious that the power in which we live and have our being is the power of the crucified, risen, ascended, and glorified Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit by faith.

So Julia, if you do decide to go ahead to study the works of Christian mystics, please be on guard and pray that God will protect your heart and mind in Christ Jesus and enable you to discern His truth.

This is especially important if you study William Johnston's edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of Privy Counselling* originally written by an unknown mystic of the fourteenth-century; for the opening of this latter book tells the reader to "Reject all thoughts, be they good or evil." Here warning bells should ring clearly, for God's Word tells us to do otherwise.

Consider Philippians 4:8 which instructs us to contemplate and meditate as follows: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things."

Consider also again Psalm 119 which highlights over and again our need to contemplate and meditate on God's law. Read, for instance, verses 15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, and 148. Note also verse 20 which says, "My soul is crushed with longing after Thine ordinances at all times;" and verse 105 which says, "Thy Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path."

Love and Holiness

Sadly, Christian mystics and Christians influenced by medieval theology tend to stress the primacy of God's love to the almost exclusion of God's holiness and righteousness. The Biblical position is the simultaneous expression of God's love and holiness.

Notice how God links His redemptive love with His holiness and righteousness in verse three of your favourite Psalm 23: "He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness."

If we emphasize or stress love in the flesh, we tend to accommodate and compromise God's revealed standards of righteousness and holiness. If we emphasize or stress holiness in the flesh, we tend to be legalistic, harsh, and unloving. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives that we can express God's love and holiness simultaneously.

As Christians, this should be our delight, for not only is God's law within our minds and hearts, as we have already mentioned, God's love has also "been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5). We should thus be mindful

that it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to love God by faithfully obeying God's will which He has revealed to us in the whole Bible.

Grace and Law

You will, therefore Julia, need to be on guard against those who say that the Holy Spirit will freely guide and empower you to love God and your fellow-man in any way that seems loving and good and appropriate to you in the moment. Your desires and feelings, and the dictates of your conscience must be tested against the Word of God. The Holy Spirit will not oppose God's Word.

The debate amongst Christians concerning the basic principles of stewarding finances, and in particular, the issue of the tithe - to give ten percent of our increase to God - is a case in point. To tithe is our first financial obligation. Proverbs 3:9-10, for example, says to "Honor the Lord from your wealth, and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine." Yet you will encounter Christians who argue that to tithe is legalistic and contrary to the "spontaneous giving" they claim should be a mark of those who serve God in "newness of spirit."

Rousas John Rushdoony in the second volume of the *Institutes of Biblical Law*, which is entitled, *Law and Society*, has well argued that "To favour 'spontaneous giving' over the tithe is not to stress the Holy Spirit; the Spirit cannot be divorced from the word or law of God. Spontaneous giving is autonomous giving, not Biblical or Spirit-governed giving. Autonomy means self-law literally (*auto*, self; *nomos*, law), and it is the enemy of God and His law. The branches of a tree live the life of a tree; the believers in Christ live the life of Christ and His total Word." (p. 686).

You will also, therefore, need to be careful not to be misled by those who theologially argue that because you are saved by grace that you are free from the law.

Romans 6:14 certainly tells us that we are not under the law, but under grace. But to be under grace does not, however, Biblically imply lawlessness or sin. Because we are not under the law as our means of justification does not imply that our progressive sanctification is free from God's revealed standards of holiness and righteousness.

The apostle Paul's epistle to the Galatians clearly tells us that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law" (3:13). We have been delivered from the curse or the condemnation of the law, not the obligations nor the objective standards of the law.

As creatures, we have our being and live under the covenantal terms of our Creator's sovereign rule. As creatures, we choose to be either covenant-keepers or covenant-breakers. We do not have an autonomous choice to ignore

wool production in 1992-93. Percentage estimates for other commodities include: sugar, 3.6%; meat 1.9%; skim milk 4.9%; cotton 1.8%; wheat 2.6%; and butter 1.8%.

In spite of the fact that Australia is so productive in primary produce, farm debt has risen a staggering 48% above levels of five years ago. The previous year's increase - in the middle of a recession! - was 5.5%.

Meanwhile, the lower Aussie dollar means higher commodity prices for Australians who can sell abroad. Although prices have fallen for a number of goods in terms of a fixed currency (U.S. dollar), the decline of the Australian dollar against the U.S. currency has brought many Australians a benefit.

Even gold, still misunderstood by the majority of the investment industry in Australia, has produced a 3.4% return over the past year in terms of Australian dollars. This is because the gold price is quoted in U.S. dollars, and in spite of an approximately 6% fall in the U.S. dollar price of gold, the Aussie dollar has fallen over 9% during the same period. Therefore, an Australian who bought a year ago and sold now would have made a profit.

This also indicates the necessity for an investor today to have some understanding of currency markets. No longer can an investor ignore world events in an effort to keep his assets intact. Truly, the marketplace is now worldwide.

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Nothing is better suited to make some people look foolish than the predictions they make about the economy. Very few of us are exempt from making mistakes in judgement about the economy. The largest mistakes, however, seem to come from either the politicians and the bureaucrats, on the one hand, or ministers of religion on the other. When you consider the size of the current Australian deficit, and how it was going to be a lot lower - as duly predicted by the world's former greatest treasurer. Or how the recession was supposed to be over by now.

Perhaps one of the boldest predictions on the recession, however, was made on May 17, 1991, at a conference held by a major investment advisory firm. In an entertaining speech on the topic of change ("change is in the air," it was claimed), the Rev. Gordon Moyes, claimed that the recession was over. The recession, he stated, had ended yesterday (i.e. May 16, 1991). Today (the day of the speech) was supposed to be the beginning of a new era. When you get \$2,600 or more for an hour's speech, I guess it doesn't hurt to make some "positive" statements for the audience. No one likes to hear bad (negative) news.

Faith, it was also claimed by Rev. Moyes, was confidence. It was having a sound business sense. Thus, those present were urged to a five point plan for the future: 1) a new attitude to those who work beside you; 2) a new belief in yourself; 3) a new confidence in industry; 4) a new determination to succeed as a person; and 5) enthusiasm for selling.

our Creator's rule or law-word for how we are to live our lives. Since we are required to live our lives for, and to do all to the glory of our Creator God (I Corinthians 10:31), we should heed the rule that He has given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him forever, which is the Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

New Covenant and Law

This involves our responsibility as creatures to diligently work out the application of God's rule or law-word to all areas of our lives in the historic circumstances in which God has providentially placed us. As Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

Now that Christ is seated at the right hand of God's heavenly throne as our high priest, we must understand how the New Covenant affects the *application* of the Old Covenant; "For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also." (Hebrews 7:12).

This does not mean that the revealed law of God is no longer binding in principle. On the contrary, it continues to serve as God's absolute, authoritative legal wisdom for us. What we must understand are the new *applications* of God's law under the New Covenant.

We no longer need, for instance, to sacrifice bulls and goats and other

animals because of Christ's perfect and historic sacrifice of Himself at Calvary. But the principle of a blood covering for sin or lawlessness is always binding. We cannot be reconciled to God without Christ's righteousness and blood sacrifice being imputed and applied to us by the Holy Spirit; and both the New and the Old Covenants were inaugurated in shed blood.

Since there is, "therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1), we can rejoice and be exceedingly glad that as Christians we have the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit to understand and to obey the objective standard of God's revealed law "in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:4).

So I do hope, Julia, that what I have written in this open letter is helpful, and that you plan to set aside time to examine everything carefully and to hold fast to that which is good (I Thessalonians 5:21) so that you might diligently present yourself "approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." (II Timothy 2:15).

Sincerely,

Angus.

In contrast, however, the Biblical view of faith is trusting in God. It is believing in God and what He says in His Word, rather than trusting in ourselves. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding," declares Proverbs 3:5. What was missing from Rev. Moyes's speech was another side of the human condition: sin.

The "positive thinkers" have attempted to portray a better image of man. If we place some qualifications on what they say, then we can agree with them. Unfortunately, some Christians have been so intent on making certain that we don't have a high view of ourselves *ethically*, they have inadvertently given us a poor image of ourselves *metaphysically*. Man is created in God's image. This is not something which we should look down upon, hide, or try to escape. But man, while made in God's image, is also in *ethical* revolt. This means that as a person, it is possible to have a "positive mental attitude" about ourselves, our work, our work habits, and our future success. But we may not portray ourselves ethically as anything but sinner's in need of God's saving grace.

This does not mean we can operate metaphysically without an ethical dimension, for life is a unity. We can't brush aside one aspect of our nature when it suits us, even though in our revolt against God we would do it if we could.

Unfortunately, by not clarifying the issues properly for us, the promoters of "positive image" do us more harm than good. It is true, that in our dealings with others we need to know that the world is not one that is essentially evil. The world is essentially good and governed moment by moment by a benevolent, and not a malevolent, God. This should give us confidence in our businesses, in our relationships with others. Of course, this relationship would be enhanced greatly if we also knew that God was working in us, making us a new creature, conforming us *ethically* more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ to be perfect in holiness and righteousness, and in love of our neighbour and ourselves.

It's a pity Rev. Moyes didn't take the opportunity to tell his audience the whole story.