

THE MYSTICISM OF ST PAUL¹

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SUMMARY: I. A Brief Historical Overview of Studies on Pauline Mysticism. II. Was Paul a Mystic? III. The Fundamental Traits of Paul's Mysticism. IV. Common Mysticism and Paul's own Experience. V. Conclusion.

IN this study I shall attempt to offer a description of the mystical experience and theology of St Paul (ca. AD 8-65). After a brief overview of the principal studies already undertaken on the subject, and a presentation of the fundamental traits of Paul's mystical experience, I intend to reflect on three issues not always considered in studies on mysticism. In the first place, the *nature of the Divinity* with whom the mystic experiences a special union. Mystics for the most part speak of the Divinity in general, non-thematic terms. But I will argue that, for Paul, mystical union was a means and not an end, the end being union not with the Divinity in general, but with the God of Jesus Christ. Secondly, I intend to consider the relationship between Paul's mystical experience on the one hand, and his *ethical striving and tireless activity* on the other. It is not uncommon, in the context of mysticism, to consider the human subject in passive terms, completely absorbed by the Divine, inactive. This was certainly not the case in Paul of Tarsus. But how do the two fit together, mystical union and tireless activity? The third issue is the following. On several occasions Paul recounts his experience of the immediate presence of God in his life. We can take his words on face value. However, his account of these events is *not only biographical but preceptive*, in the sense that his description of mystical union with the Godhead is not only applied to himself but is meant for all Christian believers. Daniel Marguerat calls this «the democratisation of mysticism».² Giovanni Helewa said Paul explained his own experience as a «description of Christian condition» in general.³ Besides, Paul's letters were considered from the very beginning of Christianity as inspired, canonical texts. Yet it is more common to consider mysticism as an isolated

¹ I read a shortened version of this paper at the Inter-faith Congress *Mystics in World Religions* jointly organized by K.J. Somaiya University (Mumbai) and the University of Mumbai, 4-7 January 2008. I thank Dr. Kala Acharya and her staff at the Department of Sanskrit Studies at the Somaiya University, especially Dr. Mariano Iturbe, for their interest and assistance in publishing this study.

² Cfr. D.L. MARGUERAT, *La mystique de l'apôtre Paul*, in J. Schlosser (edit), *Paul de Tarse: Congrès de l'ACFEB, Strasbourg 1995*, Cerf, Paris 1996, 307-329, here 324f, 327-329.

³ Cfr. G. HELEWA, *San Paolo mistico e mistica paolina*, in *Vita cristiana ed esperienza mistica*, Teresianum, Roma 1982, 51-122, here 120.

phenomenon, destined for the individual. In this context, is it meaningful to say that Paul was a mystic?

I. A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF STUDIES ON PAULINE MYSTICISM

The mystical experience of Paul of Tarsus became the object of scholarly debate towards the end of the 19th century. Of particular importance was Adolf Deissmann's celebrated study of the Pauline formula "in Christ".¹ In effect, Paul considered that, as a convert to Christianity, he lived in Christ, and Christ lived in him, taking his place as it were. Yet it was principally Richard Reitzenstein, in his 1910 volume on the Greek mystery religions, who most cogently argued that Paul was a full-blown mystic in the Greek-Oriental tradition.² According to Reitzenstein, Paul's Christian conversion modulated his mystical life somewhat, but left it substantially unchanged.³ Wilhelm Bousset argued likewise that Paul hellenized Christianity by incorporating mysticism into it.⁴ Later authors reacted vigorously against Reitzenstein's reading, some reducing mysticism in Paul to a diffuse, subjective "mysticism of faith",⁵ others denying its presence altogether.⁶

In 1930 Albert Schweitzer published his influential work *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*,⁷ arguing that in Paul's life is to be found what he calls "objective mysticism". It must be said of course, that Schweitzer's thesis is controversial in nature. Elsewhere, he claims that Paul was the true founder of Christianity in that he moved away from the apocalyptic, exterior view of man's relationship with God taught by Jesus, towards an interior, mystical understanding.⁸ According to Schweitzer, Paul's experience of the divine is an eschatological one,

¹ Cfr. G.A. DEISSMANN, *Die neutestamentliche Formel in Christo Jesu*, Elwert, Marburg 1892.

² Cfr. R. REITZENSTEIN, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen: nach ihren Grundgedanken und Wirkungen*, B.G. Teubner, Berlin-Leipzig 1920². Reitzenstein based his study on different mystery cults and hermetic literature, in particular, the *Poimandres*. On the latter, cfr. also his work *Poimandres. Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur*, Leipzig 1904.

³ Cfr. the texts cited by R. PENNA, *Problemi e natura della mistica paolina*, in E. Ancilli, M. Paparozzi (a cura di), *La mistica: fenomenologia e riflessione teologica*, Città Nuova, 1, Roma 1984, 181-221, here 182, note 3.

⁴ Cfr. W. BOUSSET, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenäus*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1967⁶ [orig. 1921]; on Paul's mysticism, cfr. *ibidem*, 104-154.

⁵ Thus for example K. DEISSNER, *Paulus und die Mystik seiner Zeit*, Leipzig 1921²; H.E. WEBER, *Die Formel «in Christo» und die paulinische Christumystik*, «Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift» 31 (1920) 213-260.

⁶ This is the position for example of E. VON DOBSCHÜTZ, *Der Apostel Paulus I: Seine weltgeschichtliche Bedeutung*, Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, Halle 1926, 42, and P. FEINE, *Der Apostel Paulus. Das Ringen um das geschichtliche Verständnis des Paulus*, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann 1927.

⁷ Cfr. A. SCHWEITZER, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1930.

⁸ Cfr. the critiques of Schweitzer by M. BOUTTIER, *La mystique de l'apôtre Paul. Rétrospective et prospective*, «Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses» 56 (1976) 54-67; E. GRÄSSER, *Albert Schweitzer als Theologe*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1979, 176-205; my work *The Christological Assimilation of the Apocalypse*, Four Courts, Dublin 2004, 23-30.

however, in that the God of Christians is transcendent in respect of the created world, and divine presence is to be found fully only in the future. Within the debate on Pauline mysticism, Schweitzer's principal contribution lies in denying that Paul's experience can be explained as a variety of oriental mysticism, for the latter does not respect the eschatological structure typical of Christianity. However, he goes on to explain that God *has* acted directly within the created sphere in and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result, God's supernatural action is now powerfully at work in the world, though not in a fully visible way. Thus Schweitzer speaks of an "eschatological mysticism" by which the believer, through Christ's action made present in Baptism, lives at once in the temporality of the present moment and in the eternity of the future, dying and rising with Christ. It should be added that in Paul's writings, Schweitzer finds what he calls a *Christusmystik*, a mysticism centred on Christ, but not a *Gottesmystik* as such, centred on God.¹ In this way, he safeguards the distance separating divine infinity from human finitude.

After Schweitzer, the topic is studied by Martin Dibelius,² who argues that Paul's spirituality is predominantly prophetic rather than mystical.³ The latter position had been held, years before, by Friedrich Heiler.⁴

Catholic authors also paid attention to the topic. The best known study is that of Alfred Wikenhauser, *Christ in the Mystical Teaching of St Paul*, published in 1956.⁵ He insists on the objectivity of Paul's mysticism and, like Schweitzer, distances the latter from Oriental experiences. Less attentive to the dynamic of Christ's death and resurrection, Wikenhauser concentrates on the anthropological implications of Paul's mysticism as expressed in the formula "in Christ". The exegete Lucien Cerfaux in a series of works spanning the period 1951-1962 interprets "mystical" affirmations in a more metaphorical way, arguing that Paul lived out his own theological convictions deeply, in intimacy with God, and attempted to communicate this experience to other believers.⁶

Leaving aside some notable exceptions, interest in Paul the Mystic dwindled somewhat in the 1960s and 70s. The neo-Lutheran view of forensic, or extrinsic, justification advanced by Rudolf Bultmann and his disciples⁷ contributed decisively to this decline, as they considered Paul's mystical affirmations in some-

¹ He takes this from BOUSSET, *Kyrios Christos*, 104-154.

² M. DIBELIUS wrote two essays on the question: *Glaube und Mystik bei Paulus* in 1931, and *Paulus und die Mystik* in 1941, both published in *Botschaft und Geschichte. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Tübingen, II, Mohr 1956, 94-116 and 134-159 respectively.

³ Cfr. *ibidem*, 98, 136.

⁴ F. HEILER, *Die Bedeutung der Mystik für die Weltreligionen*, E. Reinhardt, München 1919.

⁵ Cfr. A. WIKENHAUSER, *Die Christusmystik des Apostels Paulus*, Herder, Freiburg i.B. 1956². Likewise J. HUBY wrote a useful work on the question entitled *Mystiques paulinienne et johannique*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1946.

⁶ Cfr. L. CERFAUX, *Le Christ dans la théologie de saint Paul*, Cerf, Paris 1951; *La mystique paulinienne*, «*Vie spirituelle, supplément*» 6 (1952) 413-425; *Le chrétien dans la théologie paulinienne*, Cerf, Paris 1962.

⁷ Cfr. my work *Fides Christi. The Justification Debate*, Four Courts, Dublin 1997, 155-158.

what metaphorical terms.¹ The doctrine waned further in the face of psychological critique, a greater focus on ecclesiological and sacramental motifs in Paul, and a more attention being paid to the experience of the action of the Holy Spirit and the charismatic gifts.²

One of the principal contributions to the debate in recent times is Ed P. Sanders', *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, first published in 1977.³ Although most of Sanders' work deals with Jewish religion (he shows that with negligible exceptions Judaism is not a religion of works but of grace), the central part attempts to recuperate Schweitzer's insights into Paul's "objective" mysticism. What comes first in Paul, he says, is not "justification by faith", as Lutheran Christians taught, but the realism of incorporation into Christ, and hence the importance of what he calls "participationist" categories. Instead of "mysticism", Sanders' prefers to speak of a dynamism of *transfert* in Paul. He insists that Paul's experiences is not the fruit of human effort, but of divine self-giving: divine grace is paramount. Sanders' view has confirmed a similar trend in Lutheran theology over recent decades.⁴

Further studies in recent decades have substantially confirmed Sanders' insights. Consistent studies undertaken by Giovanni Helewa, Romano Penna and Elizabeth Salzer should be kept particularly in mind.⁵

¹ The role of mysticism in Paul was openly denied by R. BULTMANN, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1965⁵, 312, 328, and his disciples G. Bornkamm and H. Conzelmann. For an account of the ebb and flow of recent Pauline exegesis, cfr. J.D.G. DUNN, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, W.B. Eerdmans, T. & T. Clark, Grand Rapids, Michigan-Cambridge 1998, 390-412. On the reception of the notion among exegetes, cfr. MARGUERAT, *La mystique de l'apôtre Paul*, 307-329, especially 308 ff.

² Cfr. DUNN, *The Theology of Paul*, 392 ff.

³ Cfr. E.P. SANDERS, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, SCM Press, London, 1981. On the importance of this book, cfr. my work *Fides Christi*, 170-172.

⁴ The works of the Lutheran exegete E. KÄSEMANN are particularly important, especially his brief 1961 essay *The Justice of God according to Paul*, published in his work *New Testament Questions of Today*, Fortress Press, London-Philadelphia 1989, 168-182. On the development of Lutheran theology in respect of the "justice of God", cfr. my work *Fides Christi*, 185-194. Important elements of this development are to be found in the 1999 Lutheran-Catholic agreed statement on justification.

⁵ The bibliography on Pauline mysticism is vast. Until 1961, a complete list may be found in G. TURBESSI, *Saggio bibliografico sulla mistica paolina, inquadrato nella restante produzione letteraria relativa all'Apostolo*, «Rivista Biblica» 8 (1960) 225-250; 9 (1961) 19-41 and 123-143. In chronological order, cfr. DEISSMANN, *Die neutestamentliche Formel*; WEBER, *Die Formel in Christo*, and "Eschatologie" und "Mystik" im Neuen Testament. Ein Versuch zum Verständnis des Glaubens, Bertelsmann, Gütersloh 1930; DEISSNER, *Paulus und die Mystik*; E. PETERSON, *Zur Theorie der Mystik*, «Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie» (1924) 146 ff; FEINE, *Der Apostel Paulus*; A. SCHWEITZER, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*; F. BÜSCHEL, *In Christo bei Paulus*, «Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft» 42 (1942) 121-158; E. MORICE, *La vita mistica di san Paolo*, Società apostolato stampa, Roma 1944; HUBBY, *Mystiques paulinienne et johannique*; CERFAUX, *Le Christ, La mystique paulinienne*, and *Le chrétien dans la théologie paulinienne*; WICKENHAUSER, *Die Christismystik*; M. BOUTTIER, *En Christ. Étude d'exégèse et de théologie paulinienne*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1962; *La condition chrétienne selon saint Paul*; *La mystique de l'apôtre Paul. Rétrospective et prospective*, «Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses» 56 (1976) 54-67; B. REY, *Créés dans le Christ Jésus : la création nouvelle selon saint Paul*, Cerf, Paris 1966; E. SCHWEIZER, *Die Mystik des Sterbens und Auferstehens mit Christus bei Paulus*, «Evangelische Theologie» 26 (1966) 239 ff; BOUSSET, *Kyrios Christos*; P. STUHLMACHER, *Erwägungen zum ontologischen Charakter der kainê ktisis bei Paulus*, «Evangelische Theologie» 27 (1967)

II. WAS PAUL A MYSTIC?

Can we say, then, that Paul of Tarsus was a mystic? Two ways of approaching the question may be taken.¹

The first is phenomenological in character. As we have seen, several authors have denied that Paul's spiritual experience was a mystical one in the strict sense. After all, mystical experience is generally thought to involve fusion with the divinity and the consequent loss of self.² This brings us to ask what defines a mystical experience in the first place. Daniel Marguerat, drawing on Gershom Scholem's studies of Jewish mysticism, mentions three common features of mystical experience.³ *First*, the interiorization of religious consciousness, for mysticism in different religions generally involves a deepening in the practice of that religion.⁴ *Second*, a process of unification, between the divine and human; this process involves union, communion or contemplation. And *thirdly*, the resulting alteration of the one who lives the mystical experience. It is argu-

pp. 1-35; F.F. BRUCE, *Was Paul a Mystic?*, «Reformed Theological Review» 34 (1975) 66-75; J. RUMAK, *Mistica dell'apostolo Paolo*, Tipografia Porziuncola, Assisi 1977; B.M. AHERN, *Pauline Mysticism*, «The Way» 18 (1978) 3-12; A.M. ARTOLA ARBIZA, *Comprehensus a Christo Domino (Fil 3,12). La struttura dell'esperienza in Cristo in san Paolo*, in *Mistica e misticismo oggi*, Passionisti-CIPI, Roma 1979, 202-212; SANDERS, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*; HELEWA, *San Paolo*; K.H. SCHELKLE, *Im Leib oder ausser des Leibes. Paulus als Mystiker*, in *The New Testament Age. Essays in Honor of B. Reicke*, Mercer, Macon GA 1984, 435-465; PENNA, *Problemi e natura*, and IDEM, *Paolo (santo)*, in L. Borriello, E. Caruana, M.R. del Genio, N. Suffi (edd.), *Dizionario di mistica*, Lev, Città del Vaticano 1998, 974-978; J. LANZKOWSKI, *Paulus*, in P. Dinzelbacher (ed.), *Wörterbuch der Mystik*, Alfred Kröner, Stuttgart 1989, 397-398; A.F. SEGAL, *Paul the Convert*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1990, 34-71; S. VOLLENWEIDER, *Grosser Tod und Grosses Leben*, «Evangelische Theologie» 51 (1991) 365-382; B. MCGINN, *The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 1: *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, Crossroad, New York 1992, 69-74; C.A. BERNARD, *Le Dieu des mystiques*, CERF, Paris 1994; C. REYNIER, *Mystère et mystique chez saint Paul*, «Christus» 162 (1994) 205-213; MARGUERAT, *La mystique*; G. SELLIN, *Die religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergründe der paulinischen Christumystik*, «Theologische Quartalschrift» 176 (1996) 7-27; J.D.G. DUNN, *Participation in Christ*, in *The Theology of Paul*, 390-412; E.C. SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, in G. DE GENNARO (ed.), *Letteratura mistica*, Lev, Città del Vaticano 1999, 53-610.

¹ On Christian mysticism in general, cfr. A. GARDEIL, *La structure de l'âme et l'expérience mystique*, Lecoffre - Gabalda, 2 vol., Paris 1927³; V. LOSSKY, *Théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*, Cerf, Paris 1944; A. SOLIGNAC, J. LÓPEZ-GAY, A. DEBLAERE, P. ADNÈS, P. AGASSE, M. SALES, *Mysticisme*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, x, col. 1889-1984; *Vita cristiana ed esperienza mistica*; ANCILLI, PAPAROZZI, *La mistica*; DINZELBACHER, *Wörterbuch der Mystik*; MCGINN, *The Presence of God*; BORRIELLO, CARUANA, DEL GENIO, SUFFI, *Dizionario di mistica*.

² Thus von Dobschütz: «It is proper to mysticism for the subject to become one with the divinity, to be freed from the self, to lose oneself in the Infinite. Mysticism is always and only a religion of sentiment, a delighting in the love of God, a moving away from ethical endeavour and human activity. And this cannot be applied to Paul», *Der Apostel Paulus*, I, 42. Bultmann's disciple G. BORNKAMM says the same thing as follows: «Mysticism essentially involves the obliteration of confines between God and man, the fusing between one and the other. But in Paul the qualitative difference between the two is clear: Christ is always the Lord, while the liberating union with Him takes place in his service», *Paulus*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1969, 157.

³ Cfr. MARGUERAT, *La mystique*, 311-313; and G. SCHOLEM, *La mystique juive*, Cerf, Paris 1985.

⁴ Cfr. SCHOLEM, *La mystique juive*, 22.

able that all three are to be found, to a greater or lesser degree, in Paul's spiritual experience.¹ We shall be able to see so in the coming pages.

But a second approach may also be taken. Bernard McGinn in his extensive study of the history of Christian mysticism points out that, historically speaking, Christian mysticism depends critically on Pauline terminology and Paul's own experience, as regards both content and criterion.² In simplistic terms it might be said that if Paul is not a mystic, then mysticism is absent from Christianity. Elisabeth Salzer, in a recent extensive study of Pauline mysticism, confirms McGinn's intuition: «The fact that many [Christian] mystics have used the Pauline formula as the most appropriate way of expressing their personal experience is surely an argument in favour of the opinion that St Paul enjoyed an experienced perception of the presence of Christ in the centre of his spirit».³

III. THE FUNDAMENTAL TRAITS OF PAUL'S MYSTICISM

Five fundamental traits may be found in Paul's spiritual experience.

The first is his awareness of the *ontological distance between God and man*.⁴ The union of God with humans is always the fruit of grace, of God's gracious self-giving: «What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?» (1Cor 4:7). Citing the prophet Isaiah, he places the following words in God's mouth: «I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me» (Is 65:1, in Rom 10:20). And elsewhere: «God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us» (Rom 5:8).

The second element is as follows: God does not reveal himself merely through the created world (Rom 1:19f) or through the infusion of wisdom (cfr. 1Cor 1:21), but definitively *in and through Jesus Christ*, especially at the high point of his Death and Resurrection. In that sense Paul's mysticism is primarily a *Christusmystik*, a mysticism of union with Christ, not as such a *Gottesmystik*, one of direct union with God, to use Schweitzer's terminology.

In the third place, divine revelation in Christ involves an experience of communion, in that believers are united with their Lord. Not only are they forgiven their sins, but the life of Christ is infused into theirs. Paul powerfully describes this process as a "new creation" (2Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15),⁵ which gives rise to the "new man" (Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). In his letter to Titus, Paul uses the term *palinggenesia* (3:5) to depict this transformation. This involves renewal, rebirth, regeneration.⁶

¹ For a list of authors who consider Paul as a mystic, cfr. SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 125-131.

² Cfr. MCGINN, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 1, 69f.

³ SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 469.

⁴ Cfr. PENNA, *Problemi e natura*, 195-197.

⁵ Cfr. *Ibidem*, 205-207; REY, *Créés dans le Christ Jésus*; P. STUHLMACHER, *Erwägungen zum ontologischen Charakter*; J. REUMANN, *Creation and New Creation: the Past, Present, and Future of God's Creative Activity*, Augsburg, Minneapolis 1973.

⁶ On *palinggenesis* in the New Testament, cfr. J.D.M. DERRETT, *Palinggenesia*, «Journal for the Study of the New Testament» 20 (1984) 51-58.

Going into greater detail, Romano Penna describes five dimensions of Paul's mystical experience of union with Christ: the individual, the communitary, the intellectual, the ethical and the eschatological.¹

Fourthly, communion with Christ (that is, union and distinction at the same time) is contextualized by two factors: the concept of *faith*, which expresses both union and distinction between God and the believer;² and what is called *eschatological reserve*, expressing the distance between the present situation of the believer and future consummation (cfr. Phil 2:12f.20).³ «Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror», we read in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, «but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known» (1Cor 13:12).

In the fifth place, lastly, Paul envisages mystical experience as belonging by right to *all Christian believers*, through the agency of the "mystical" sacraments, Baptism (Rom 6:3-5) and the Eucharist (1Cor 10:16).⁴ It involves a kind of equivalency or mutual interchange (what Sanders called *transfert*) between the life (and death) of Jesus and that of humans. «For if we have been *united* with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his» (Rom 6:5). The term "united" here does not adequately express the strong meaning of the Greek term *symphytos*, which is closer to "congenital" or "con-natural". Thus it would be more correct to say that "we have taken on his nature in a death like his". For Paul, in other words, at a mystical level all Christians are fundamentally identical. In spite of upbraiding believers at Corinth for their lax behaviour, Paul still calls them holy, "the saints".⁵ And if elsewhere Paul speaks about those who are "perfect" (1Cor 2:6) and "spiritual" (1Cor 3:1), he has no intention of establishing a hierarchy between different classes of Christians,⁶ for all are called to holiness.

IV. COMMON MYSTICISM AND PAUL'S OWN EXPERIENCE

So what difference may be found between common Christian mysticism and that of Paul of Tarsus? Content-wise, it would seem, they seem to coincide. Yet it is clear that Paul had a singularly intense experience of the divine, and this is documented on at least three occasions, in some cases in his autobiographical writings: his conversion experience on the road to Damascus (cfr. Gal 1:16; Act

¹ Cfr. PENNA, *Problemi e natura*, 205-217.

² Cfr. BULTMANN, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 315-324; SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 194-201.

³ On the link-up between Christian apocalyptic and the roots of Christian mysticism, especially in the context of Paul's rapture into heaven (1Cor 12:1-6), cfr. MCGINN, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 69f., especially note 20.

⁴ On the relationship between sacraments and mysticism in Paul, cfr. SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 439-450.

⁵ Cfr. for example 1Cor 1:2; 6:1.2.7.14; 2Cor 1:1; 8:4; 9:1.12; 13:12. Cfr. also Rom 1:7; Eph 1:1.15.18; 3:8.18; 5:3; 6:18; Phil 1:1; 4:21f; Col 1:1.2.4.22.26; 3:12; 1Tim 5:10; Filem 5; Heb 3:1; 6:10; 13:24; 1Pet 1:16.

⁶ Cfr. PENNA, *Problemi e natura*, 190 f., especially note 37.

9:1-9; 22:6-21; 26:12-18);¹ the occasion on which he was drawn up into the "third heaven", hearing "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2Cor 12:2-4),² and the reception of special gifts of tongues (1Cor 14:18).³

On these occasions he "discovered" the common mysticism of Christians, but it is clear that the action of God on his own spirit, and the union with the Divine that ensues from this, was unique. God in Christ irresistibly "made him his own" (Phil 3:12). God revealed himself to Paul with a blinding light (cfr. 2Cor 4:6). As a result, Paul proclaims, in the first person, that «it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me» (Gal 2:20). Although the same fundamental presence of Christ may be found in other Christians (cfr. Phil 1:21; Col 3:3), it is indicative that Paul's declaration in Galatians speaks in the first person no less than *four times* in the single verse of Gal 2 we have just cited.

One particular feature of Paul's experience is that Christ's own life, especially his Death and Resurrection, is reproduced in his.⁴ He speaks of sharing «abundantly in Christ's sufferings» (2Cor 1:5). He always carries in his «body the death of Jesus» (2Cor 4:10). He is happy to suffer, he adds, and «complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions in my flesh for the sake of his body, that is the Church» (Col 1:24).⁵ In the midst of tremendous sufferings (fatigue, prison, the whip, shipwreck, hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness, dangers of all kinds: 2Cor 11:23-28) Paul perceived he had been conceded a special grace of union with Christ, that of suffering in Him, for Him and with Him. When he cries out to the Lord to save him from the "thorn in the flesh" (2Cor 12:7), Jesus replies: «My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness» (*ibidem*). On account of this certainty, he is glad to boast, not of his visions,⁶ but of his sufferings: «for when I am weak, then I am strong» (2Cor 12:9).

But what does Paul mean when he says that "Christ lives in me"? Could he be tacitly accepting Hellenic mystical categories, typical of the mystery cults of Persephone, Osirides, Adonis, Attis? If so, we would expect to find expressions in Paul's writings of depersonalised identity. The Japanese expert on Zen

¹ Cfr. my work *Fides Christi*, 170-183; SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 132-182.

² *Inter alia*, cfr. W. BAIRD, *Visions, Revelation, and Ministry. Reflections on 2Cor 12:1-5 and Gal 1:11-17*, «Journal of Biblical Literature» 104 (1985) 651-662; J.D. TABOR, *Things Unutterable. Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Context*, Lanham, Maryland 1986; C.R.A. MORRAY-JONES, *Paradise Revisited (2Cor 12:1-12). The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate. Part 1: The Jewish Sources; Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and its Significance*, «Harvard Theological Review» 86 (1993) 177-217; 265-292 respectively; M.E. THRALL, *Paul's Journey to Paradise. Some Exegetical Issues in 2Cor 12, 2-4*, in R. Bieringer (ed.), *The Corinthian Correspondence*, Leuven University Press - Peeters Press, Leuven 1996, 347-363.

³ Cfr. PENNA, *Problemi e natura*, 189f. For a more detailed explanation, cfr. MARGUERAT, *La mystique*, 318-320; SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 567-610.

⁴ On this question, cfr. SCHWEIZER, *Die Mystik des Sterbens und Auferstehens*.

⁵ Cfr. the commentary of PENNA, *Paolo*, 977.

⁶ Cfr. SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 413-439.

Buddhism, Keiji Nishitani, reflecting on Gal 2:20, “it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me”, asked: «who is speaking here? Paul? But Paul lives no longer. Who then is speaking?». ¹ We must conclude therefore that “Christ lives in me” in Paul must be understood in the context of its complement: “I live in Christ”. The fruit of Christ living in the believer is that the believer lives “in Christ”. ² That is to say, although Christ acted in him and through him, Paul was not “absorbed” by Christ (nor Christ by him). Rather Christ became his reason for living, his very identity. As if to emphasise the point, on many occasions Paul says that everything he does, he does it *with* Christ. ³ In this sense Christ does not take over Paul’s place, his personal role. Paul’s personality is not diminished but rather accentuated and reinforced by the life of Christ in him. ⁴ But Christ certainly acts through him and in him. This is a true, objective, mysticism. ⁵

What did Paul encounter on the road to Damascus? What did he see? By all accounts, the Risen Lord Jesus, who in turn asked Saul, the persecutor of Christians: «why do you persecute *me*?» (Act 9:4). Traditionally, Christian authors have held that Paul’s resulting “conversion” consisted of a turning away from a religion of trust in good works to one of trust in God’s grace. ⁶ As a God-fearing Pharisee, it was said, he was scrupulously observant of the Law until God revealed to him the power of grace and the futility of the Law. However, in the wake of Ed Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* and other works, it is now generally accepted that Paul’s conversion was not from works to grace, but involved rather a “change in mission”. Instead of persecuting Christians for divulging divine treasures destined for the Jews alone (cfr. 1Cor 15:9), Paul discovered that the riches of God were destined to the whole of humanity. He discovered that he *had* to evangelize: «Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!» (1Cor

¹ Cfr. VOLLENWEIDER, *Grosser Tod*, 365.

² Studies of the Pauline expression “in Christ” are many. Apart from the works of Deissmann, Bousset and Schweitzer already mentioned, cfr. also WEBER, *Die Formel in Christo*; BÜSCHEL, *In Christo bei Paulus*; F. NEUGEBAUER, *Die paulinische In Christus*, «New Testament Studies» 4 (1957-58) 124-138, and *In Christus: En Christó. Eine Untersuchung zum paulinischen Glaubensverständnis*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1961; P. DACQUINO, *La formula paolina in Cristo Gesù*, «Scuola Cattolica» 87 (1959) 278-291; S. ZEDDA, *Vivere in Cristo secondo s. Paolo*, «Rivista Biblica» 6 (1959) 83-92; BOUTTIER, *En Christ*; A.J.M. WEDDERBURN, *Some Observations on Paul’s Use of the Phrases “in Christ” and “with Christ”*, «Journal for the Study of the New Testament» 25 (1985) 83-87; MARGUERAT, *La mystique*, 320-325; DUNN, *Participation in Christ*; my study *The Inseparability of Holiness and Apostolate. The Christian alter Christus, ipse Christus in the Writings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, «Annales Theologici» 16 (2002) 135-164, especially 139-146.

³ Cfr. E. LOHMEYER, *Syn Christó*, in *Festgabe für Adolf Deissmann zum 60. Geburtstag*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1927, 218-257; J. DUPONT, *Syn Christoi. L’union avec le Christ suivant saint Paul*, Abbaye de Saint-André-Nauwelaerts, Bruges-Louvain 1952; O. KUSS, *Mit Christus*, in *Der Römerbrief (1,1 - 6,11)*, F. Pustet, I, Regensburg 1957, 319-381; WEDDERBURN, *Some Observations*; DUNN, *The Theology of Paul*, 401-403.

⁴ Cfr. SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 89-131. The author explains how Paul was “situated” as it were within society, as a Roman citizen, a tentmaker, etc.: 103-107.

⁵ Cfr. the classic study of Peterson, *Zur Theorie der Mystik*, which insists on the objective, ontological aspect of Christ’s action on the believer.

⁶ On this question, cfr. my work *Fides Christi*, 169-185.

9:16).¹ «The love of Christ *synéchei* [...] controls us, drives us, possesses us», he says (2Cor 5:14). That was the essential core of his conversion, or “change of mind” (*metánoia*). In his letter to the Galatians we read: «When he who had set me apart before I was born and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles» (1:15f; cfr. 1Cor 9:1; 15:8; 2Cor 4:6; Phil 3:7; Eph 3:8; 1Tim 1:16).

Paul's mystical union with God through Christ, though deeply personal, led him to the conviction that this kind of union was open to the whole of humanity. Mystical experience revealed the dignity of *each* human being. Paul did not take his vivid and visible experience of God as a privilege, but rather as a tangible assurance of his calling to communicate God's life in Christ to the whole of mankind. His mysticism was essentially apostolic in character.²

V. CONCLUSION

I may conclude this reflection by returning briefly to the three issues mentioned in the opening paragraph. In the *first* place it is clear that Paul's mystical union with the Divinity is not amorphous or depersonalising. His union is with the Father, the God of Jesus Christ.³ The other side of this is that there is no such thing as Christian mystical experience in the absence of God's grace. In the *second* place, we have seen that the personality and energies of Paul, far from being absorbed into the Divinity, were brought to their fullness. This may be seen both in his ethical and evangelising endeavours, for Christ lives and acts in him and through him. *Thirdly*, we have seen that just as Paul's mystical experience was not centred on himself, but on *God*, so also the finality of his experience was that of communicating the possibility for all humans to experience mystical union with the Divinity.⁴

ABSTRACT

In questa nota mi soffermo sulla questione del misticismo di san Paolo. La prima parte offre una breve storia degli studi del xx secolo sulla questione, specialmente in autori protestanti come Richard Reitzenstein e Albert Schweitzer. Nella seconda parte si va-

¹ On the apostolic or missionary side of Paul's mysticism, cfr. Penna, *Paolo*, 976; MORICE, *La vita mistica di san Paolo*, 303-366; SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 368-396; PRÜMM, *Diakonia Pneumatos*, 290 f; Helewa, *San Paolo*, 73 f.

² Helewa, *San Paolo*, 65-74, speaks of Paul's “mystical certainties”, communicated to believers and expressed in the following texts: «our competence is from God» (2Cor 2:6); «When I am weak, then I am strong» (2Cor 12:10); «My grace is sufficient for you» (2Cor 12:9). McGinn says that “Paul, like Peter, Stephen and other Christian leaders, was a visionary [a mystic] as well as an apostle”, *The Foundations*, 70.

³ On God the Father being the object of Paul's vision, what he calls “the mystery hidden in God” (Col 1:26; 1Cor 2:7f), cfr. SALZER, *San Paolo mistico*, 229-298, who refers to the classic study of D. Deden, *Le “mystère” paulinien*, «Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses» 13 (1936), 405-442.

⁴ On the idea that Paul's mystical experience is to be understood in terms of its content and mission, and not simply in terms of union with the Godhead, cfr. PENNA, *Problemi e natura*, 217 f.

luta se Paolo può essere considerato un mistico o meno, concludendo che sicuramente lo è. La terza parte dello studio tenta di sintetizzare i tratti fondamentali del misticismo paolino. Questo include, tra l'altro, una chiara consapevolezza della distanza ontologica tra Dio e l'uomo; l'unione di Paolo con Cristo, e non tanto con Dio; la vita mistica infusa per mezzo dei sacramenti mistici, il battesimo e l'Eucaristia; la vita mistica è contestualizzata dalla fede e dalla "riserva escatologica"; e infine include che l'esperienza mistica paolina appartiene in linea di massima a tutti i credenti cristiani. L'ultima parte dello studio tenta di distinguere tra il misticismo cristiano comune e l'esperienza personale di Paolo. Quest'ultima è collegata certamente ad una esperienza forte e singolare della grazia di Dio e dell'obbligo di realizzare un'evangelizzazione universale.

In this paper I discuss the question of the mysticism of St Paul. The first part offers a brief historical overview of studies on the topic throughout the 20th century, especially by Protestant authors such as Richard Reitzenstein and Albert Schweitzer. This is followed by a second part which considers whether or not Paul may truly be considered a mystic. We conclude in the positive. The third part attempts to summarize the fundamental traits of Paul's mysticism. Among other things, this involves an awareness of the ontological distance between God and man; that Paul's mystical union is with Christ, rather than with God; that mystical life is infused by the mystical sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist; that it is contextualized by faith and eschatological reserve; and finally that the mystical experience Paul speaks of belongs by right to all Christian believers. The fourth part attempts to distinguish between common Christian mysticism and Paul's own experience. The latter is certainly related to a strong experience of God's grace and the obligation to undertake a universal evangelization.