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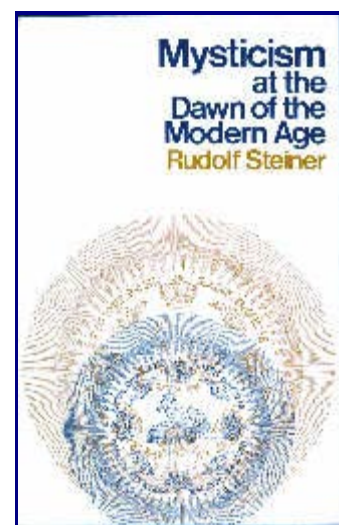
Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age, GA# 7

by
Rudolf Steiner

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003

The first ninety-six pages are devoted to an
introduction by Paul Marshall Allen entitled
"The Author, the People, and the



Background." Readers who customarily skip any material written before the Preface will miss an important part of the book. For example, he points out to us a salient change in the usage of our word *reality* during the past five hundred years.

[page 15] One need only recall that to the medieval mind the word *reality* referred exclusively to spiritual, heavenly things, to see how far-reaching was the change that occurred at the dawn on the modern world.

The higher one went, the closer one was to heaven, to the spiritual world, and thus people were afraid to approach high mountains, and climbing them for sport was unimaginable. When Petrarch, Italian poet of the Renaissance, climbed to the top of Mount Ventroux and found the clouds of heaven at his feet, he opened his book of Augustine's writings and his eyes fell on a line that warned "man never to lift his head out of the dust of the earth." (Page 15) Chastened, Petrarch descended in shame for having trespassed on a place forbidden by the Church Fathers. With the dawn of the Renaissance, even the courageous poets of that time scarcely dared to trespass the higher regions.

Johannes Eckhart (1260-1328) leads off the mystic entourage with his aphorisms that invariably began with the words, "A Master says . . ." His aphorisms enabled the average person to understand otherwise "learned, subtle arguments." For his great work, the teachings of Meister Eckhart (as he became known) were condemned as heresy after his death.

Johannes Tauler (1300-1361) was known as the originator of the Friends of God, which was no sect, had no dogma, but simply a communal bond that strengthened each other in their search for a living relationship to God. Tauler was always encouraging others to put their Christianity in action. He said, "Never trust a virtue which has not been put into practice." (Page 36) This admonition reminded me of a story about the installation of the first trans-Atlantic phone cable in the mid-1950's. The transistor had just been invented and showed the promise of long-life, maintenance-free, and low-power usage — all qualities highly prized for the cable's repeater-amplifiers that had to be sunk to the bottom of the ocean. On the other hand, vacuum tubes had a notorious short-life, would require frequent replacement, and used much more power than the transistors did. Which one did they use? The vacuum tube. Why? The promise of long-life was very real for the transistor, but it was only a promise, a projection — the vacuum tube had actual data for its life projections, and could be depended upon.

Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293 -1381) was another mystic of note who understand the power of his thoughts. When someone tried to get him to expound on the evils of the world, he said to him, "What we are, that we behold; and what we behold, that we are." (Page 48) This is the essence of EAT-O-TWIST, if I may conjure up one of my aphorisms (in the manner of Eckhart) that says Everything Always Turns Out The Way It's Supposed To. What we are determines what we suppose the world to be like, and that determines what we encounter in the world. If we change what we suppose, we become another person, and we behold a whole new world before us in time.

Nicholas Chrypffs of Cusa (1401-1464), the last great philosopher of the Middle Ages, "was to fling wide the doors of men's minds to the concept of a universe which is infinite." He was to lay the foundation upon which Giordano Bruno, Kepler, and Descartes were to build the edifice we know as modern science today.

Paracelsus (1492-1541), né Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, became a renown physician and apothecary. His work laid the foundation for the science of homeopathy with his concept of Signatures.

[page 65] One of Paracelsus' most far-reaching concepts is that of Signatures, that is, the idea that each single part of the microcosmic world of man corresponds with each single part of the macrocosmic world outside man.

[page 195-196] Paracelsus characterizes himself when he writes under his portrait, "No one who can stand alone by himself should be the servant of another." His whole position with regard to cognition is given in these words.

[page 205] The divine primordial essence *without* man is not what it is *with* man. "For nature brings forth nothing into the light of day which is complete as it stands; rather, man must complete it." This self-creating activity of man in the building of nature, Paracelsus call alchemy. "This completion is alchemy. Thus the alchemist is the baker when he bakes bread, the vintager when he makes wine, the weaver when he makes the cloth."

Valentine Wiegel (1533-1588) was a student, mystic, and author who sought the ultimate truth of things with in himself.

[page 69] Study nature, physics, alchemy, magic, and so on, but *it is all in you*, and you become what you have learned.

Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) saw the sunlight reflected in a pewter dish and came to a realization aptly expressed by Paracelsus (Note that *sidereal* refers to the star-body or astral body.) :

[page 72] "Hidden things which cannot be perceived by the physical sense may be discovered by means of the sidereal body, through whose organism we can look into nature just as the sun shines through a glass."

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was born in the shadow of a volcano and ended his life in a blaze of glory. He dared to question the teachings of Aristotle and proclaim, among other things, that there were mountains on the Moon. He wrote metaphysical works that dared to discuss the infinity of the universe. Invited to return to his native Italy from England and promised "safe passage" — he all too soon found his passage was to be to the stake in Rome where he was burned to death. The fire took his body, but his ideas rayed forth from that flame to enlighten our lives even today.

[page 225] Bruno said: "A thing however small and minute, if it finds the substratum to be suitable, strives to become a plant or an animal, and organizes itself into a body of some kind, which is generally called animated. For spirit is to be found in all things, and

there is not the most minute body which does not contain such a portion of it that it animates itself.

Angelus Silesia né Johannes Scheffler (1624-1677) took a medical degree from the greatest medical school of the time, the University of Padua. He wrote many poems and some of them are "among the best-loved hymns of the Protestant church." He manifested a spirit of peace and love that is best described in this quote he repeated often in the days before his death, "Tranquillity is the best treasure one can have." Here are a couple of other quotes from him.

[page 226] "The bird is in the air, the stone lies on the land; the fish lives in the water, my spirit is in God's hands."

[page 230] "What is it not to sin? Do not ask much; go, the silent flowers will tell you."

In the year that Columbus discovered America, Andrea della Robbia created a famous relief sculpture in the Loggia di San Paolo in Florence that depicts the historic meeting of St. Francis and St. Dominic. Paul Allen says, "when one contemplates what is represented there, one is reminded of the Scripture, 'Mercy and truth are met together.' An Italian, whose life-work was centered in a love which is ever merciful, embraces a Spaniard, whose striving for truth was expressed in knowledge of the eternal spirit." And he adds that Rudolf Steiner once observed that:

[page 95] "External events, which at first glance seem to be trifling occurrences in the course of history, are deeply and inwardly rooted in the evolution of mankind."

In the external events noted by the history of these eleven men, which Steiner talks about in this volume and of whose lives Allen gives a synopsis, one can find the evolution of human thought about the spiritual world deeply anchored. In his Preface to the 1923 Edition, Steiner tells us why he wrote this book by asking the following interesting question, "Why do mystically inclined souls find satisfaction in Meister Eckhart, in Jacob Boehme, etc., but not in the book of nature, insofar as, opened by knowledge, it lies before man today?" His answer cuts to the core of the evolution of consciousness that has proceeded since the time of the men in the book.

[page 98] It is true that the manner in which this book of nature is discussed today for the most part, cannot lead to a mystical disposition of the soul. It is the intention of this work to indicate that this manner of discussion does not have to be used.

By talking about those spirits, such as Nicolas of Cusa, who, by virtue of their immersion in the old disposition of soul, were able to assimilate the new way of thinking known as the Renaissance, Steiner shows us that "this manner of discussion" does *not* have to be used yet today. In other words, our modern scientific way of only accepting sensory evidence closes off a mystical disposition of our soul, up until now. And reading Eckhart, Boehme, et al, can restore our mystical disposition of soul by showing us that "present-day natural science, too, is capable of a mystical intensification."

Steiner uses the throwing of a stone horizontally and observing its trajectory to discuss the integration of one's inner thinking with the sensory inputs from the outside world. The ability to bring my inner thinking to resolve the horizontal component of velocity from the vertical acceleration is one that I acquired from my study of physics. It is a metaphor for how I establish a relationship between myself and the inner world. He quotes Goethe in this regard:

[page 122] "If I know my relationship to myself and to the external world, I call it truth. And thus everyone can have his own truth, and it is still always the same truth."

All meanings are true (AMAT) is one of my basic rules, and it is encouraging to find it echoed by Goethe. Given that one has one's individual meanings, how does one learn to transcend one's individual meanings? Hamerling says that one "cannot will what he wills, because his will is determined by *motives*." (Page 123)

And Steiner says that without a motive, the will is an "empty capacity." Every action without self-knowledge will be felt as a compulsion — only when an action is accompanied by self-knowledge is the motive clear and one feels free in one's actions.

[page 124] Only that acting which is inspired in each one of its parts by self-observation is free. And because self-observation raises the individual I to the general I, free acting is that which proceeds from the all-I.

From Meister Eckhart we receive a pure *concept of freedom*, Steiner tells us, and that concept pervaded his *Philosophy of Freedom*. In that book Steiner laid the foundation for a true spiritual activity which he equated to freedom. He suggested, in light of the political interpretations of the word *freedom* in America, that the English title of his book be *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. In Eckhart's words, as he understood the meaning of freedom in his time:

[page 138] And the spirit can will nothing but what God wills; and this in not its unfreedom; it is its true freedom.

Steiner's great task at the beginning of the 20th Century was to convert this basic insight of Eckhart's into a terminology more suited to the new scientific age, and this he did quite admirably.

The great mystic Tauler taught us the following, according to Steiner:

[page 144] The knowledge of nature is not *enriched* by knowing God; it is *transformed*. The knower of God does *not* know *something different* from the knower of nature: he *knows differently*.

So much of what passes for knowledge of nature at the advent of the 21st Century is content knowledge ("knowledge of nature"), and thus the material scientist is ever at a loss to discover that process knowledge: the "knowing differently," up until now. Steiner recognized in Nicolas of Cusa someone who devoted his life to "knowing differently":

[page 167] Nicolas is the scientific thinker who wants to raise himself to a higher view as the result of his research into the things of the world . . ."

Nicolas professed to have a "learned ignorance," by which phrase he meant "knowing differently" versus the subordinate way of ordinary knowledge:

[page 175] Knowledge in the subordinate sense is the grasping of an object by the spirit. . . what the spirit forms in itself concerning things is the *essence* of things. Things are spirit. At first man sees the spirit only through the sensory covering. What remains outside the spirit is only this sensory covering; the essence of things enters into the spirit.

When this happens, there is no longer a knowing, but a "not-knowing" — the spirit looks upon itself — it "beholds, without grasping, its own life." Upon return from his trip to Greece, Nicolas' spirit was lifted and he received "an inspiration from on high, to the view in which God appeared to me as the highest unity of all contrasts." In the jargon of transformational grammar, it is as though we, as individuals, are the *deep structure* of God. We provide the contrasts, the distinctions, at our level and God provides the unity of these contrasts at the highest level.

Where are we to perceive the existence of spirit in the world around us? Is it to be found in the mediums who bring the dead to life in sensory form during seances and such? No, Steiner says, firmly, spiritualists who want "to see the spirit directly in something grossly sensory" make a gross error and show a lack of understanding of the sensory as well as the spiritual. It is not the rare and the unusual events such as spectacular miracles where one best locates the spiritual, but in the mundane experiences that surround us everyday.

[page 191] . . . what lives as "spirit in nature" reveals itself, for instance, in the collision of two elastic spheres, and not only in processes which are striking because of their rarity and cannot be immediately grasped in their natural context.

Even worse, spiritualists lower the spirit into the lower sphere of the material world when they explain perceptible sensory data based on spirits and thus equate the two. They reveal that they are incapable of looking at the spiritual world directly.

As for the mystics portrayed by Steiner in this book, how would they understand the world today in light of the evolution of consciousness that has taken place since their time, especially in the area of scientific advancements in our understanding of the processes of nature? They would have understood it very differently according to Steiner, because back then they could not yet "place the facts of nature into that light which had arisen in them," and if our modern science had been available to them, they certainly would have been able to do so.

[page 233] They could not do this, for no geology, no "natural history of creation" told them of the processes of nature. The Bible alone, in its own way, told them of such processes. Therefore, as well as they could, they sought the spiritual where alone it is to be found: within the human being. . . . Today they would entirely agree with those who seek the spirit as fact, not at the root of nature, but in its fruit.

Steiner tells us that the book of nature has a stronger effect on him than any holy book in this next passage when he explains the process in biology that we now know as "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny."

[page 234] I know of nothing in any "holy" book that reveals to me anything as sublime as the "dry" fact that, in the womb, every human fetus rapidly goes through a succession of all those forms through which its animal ancestors have evolved. Let us fill our mind with the magnificence of the facts our senses perceive, and we shall care little for the "miracles" which do not lie within the course of nature.

In this book Steiner takes us through the phyla of these great mystic thinkers so our thinking has a chance to evolve ontogenetically as we stand on the shoulders of these giants. In his Preface to the First Edition in 1901, Steiner wrote a summary that was to encompass this and all his voluminous works to come:

[page 242] I hope to have shown in my work that one can be a faithful follower of the scientific philosophy and still seek out the paths *to the soul* into which mysticism, properly understood, leads. I go even further and affirm: Only one who understands the spirit in the sense of *true* mysticism can attain a full understanding of facts in the realm of nature. One must only beware of confusing true mysticism with the "mysticism" of muddled heads.

With this last comment, Steiner explains pointedly why I stayed with his works after wading through a large number of muddle-headed mystics.

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