



Communion or union

by Kim Nataraja

The early Church fathers had no shadow of a doubt that union with the Divine is possible for all: "God is the life of all free beings. He is the salvation of all, of believers and unbelievers, of the just or the unjust, of the pious or the impious, of those freed from passions or those caught up in them, of monks or those living in the world, of the educated and the illiterate, of the healthy and the sick, of the young and the old." (Gregory of Nyssa)

The reason for this is to be found in their theology. The Greek philosophers, in particular Plato, were the first to formulate the idea of our having something essential in common with the Divine. They called it the 'nous', pure intuitive intelligence as distinct from rational intelligence. Having something like the Divine within us allows us to know the Divine, as the prevalent idea in early thought was that only 'like can know like'. Our everyday experience also confirms that. Only when we have something substantial in common with another person can we truly relate to them, can we be one in mind and soul.

The early Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, saw the correspondence between the concept of 'nous' and the one expressed in Genesis of us being created in the 'image of God'. The 'image' was for them comparable to the 'nous'. Following him Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers, Evagrius and even later Meister Eckhart all saw this 'image of God' as proof of our original and essential unity with God. The reason why we can touch and be touched therefore by this ultimate transpersonal reality is because there is something within us that is similar to this reality. The same conviction we also find in Jesus' words: 'The Kingdom of God is within you and among you.' (Luke 17:21) St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: 'Do you not know that your body is a shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit?' (1Cor 6:19). Meditation helps us to actually experience this reality, this living force as Christ within us, energising, healing, transforming and leading us to greater awareness, wholeness and compassion.

Similarity has always been accepted within Christianity – the soul as a mirror of God - but total identity has often been disputed. Yet we hear in the 'Gospel of Thomas': 'Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person.' In the 'Gospel of John' we find Jesus' beautiful prayer of unity: 'that they may be one, as we are one: I in them and Thou in me, may they be perfectly one.' (John 17:21) Constantly, mystics who experienced this identity and spoke about it were viewed with suspicion. Meister Eckhart talked about the birth of the 'Word' in the soul, by which he meant the realisation of the consciousness of Christ within us, which is our link with the Divine: "Similarly I have often said that there is something in the soul that is closely related to God that it is one with him and not just united." St Teresa of Avila talked in the 'Interior Castle' about the seventh dwelling place of the spiritual marriage as a permanent state of union beyond rapture, a total oneness.

Yet it is communion rather than union we are talking about in Christianity. It is not seen as a total merging, but "there is no doubt that the individual loses all sense of separation from the One and experiences a total unity, but that does not mean that the individual no longer exists. Just as every element in nature is a unique reflection of the one Reality, so every human being is a unique centre of consciousness in the universal consciousness." (Bede Griffiths 'The Marriage of East and West')