

Mentoring the Unchurched Spiritual Generation

Mariska van Beusichem¹

Comments from Beweging editor: According to Mariska van Beusichem, many spiritual seekers are learning from a form of mystagogy or mysticism that helps them derive meaning from their experience of the Holy and to anchor that into their lives. Whether these experiences point to an objective reality cannot be determined scientifically, but they *can* be studied phenomenologically. They are worthy of being taken seriously, for these experiences are reported on a large scale and can also be experienced by others. The Christian tradition today can render great service to spiritual seekers by opening up her treasure house containing centuries-old mystical or mystagogical texts.

I cannot escape the impression that currently many people in our society are searching for meaning. It appears that in one way or another a conjecture has become popular that our reality contains a secret, something substantial, that forms the core of all that is. In these people a longing appears to have awoken. It can be the beginning of a journey of discovery.

My impression is confirmed by the results of the research *God in the Netherlands 1996-2006*. The keyword here is “individualization.” In the new spirituality lies an emphasis on personal experience, on a critical stance vis a vis traditions and a permanent search: “quest is best.” This search, however, brings only a few into the established churches.

Many sociological studies of religion are devoted to the question why so many people during the last century have exchanged the familiar ecclesiastical institutions for an individual search. Sociologically speaking, this is indeed an intriguing phenomenon. But even from the spiritual point of view, there is an interesting question here: What is the actual motivation for this search. What is it that awakens this longing that it leads them to leave the familiar forms with their well-defined systems of thought and to risk a journey into the uncertainties of temporary insights and truths. Can it be that perhaps deep down, probably unconsciously, people have a realization somewhere of a deeper dimension of reality that gives them meaning? We will never be able to confirm that with any certainty. We can only phenomenologically research the stories that people themselves tell us about longings for this deeper dimension.

¹Original Dutch title: “*Een Mystagoog helpt zoeken*,” or “A Mystagogue Helps in the Search.” Transl. Jan H. Boer. *Beweging*, Fall 2010, pp. 14-17. *Beweging* is one of the two precedents of *Sophia* magazine. The author is ordained in the Protestant Churches of The Netherlands and is working on a doctoral dissertation about the spiritual journey of Therese van Lisieux.

Numinous Experiences

Tjeu van den Berk has collected reports of such experiences and devoted a study to the subject.² He focuses especially on experiences people have had during their childhood, when they still lacked every interpretive framework. Following the theologian Rudolf Otto, he calls them “numinous experiences.” He concludes from these reports that in the eyes of the people themselves, these experiences are part of the most fundamental quest in their lives.

The first example of a numinous experience adduced by Van den Berk is that of the author Nescio, who at age 30 recorded a memory of a personal experience he had while he was fifteen years of age. When that short report resurfaced when he was 60, he published it in his last collection of stories. Van den Berk cites the story completely and I, in turn, do the same:

May God have mercy over the cynic. I am now a cynic. Perhaps it would have been better if I had gone totally crazy or if a tram had ridden over me, something that almost happened many times. In my earlier years I was a poet. But as a cynic I say: It was no joke, not for me, not for anyone.

I still remember very clearly how it all started. It was in the first week of October, around half past five in the evening. Since then I have gone through many Octobers and it has been half past five innumerable times. I was fifteen years of age and sat on a bench in the Amsterdam zoo Artis, wearing short pants. It has to happen to me as cynic that I have to speak about Artis! But that's how it was. Everyone had left; it was deathly quiet so that I could hear the rustling of the leaves on the trees. In the distance, I could hear the crunch of gravel. Somewhere else, a pail was placed on a wooden floor. It heard it all, but I could not see it.

Following the stem of a tree, I looked up and saw that evening had not yet come, for it was lighter above than it was down below. The leaves shimmied and turned for a moment; a yellow leaf let go and fell onto the grass. Then I felt that all was good and that something was coming, later. Simultaneously, I felt a great sense of satisfaction and a great longing. And the certainty that this day would never return. Then the gravel crunched even harder and a man said, “Young man, you have to go; we are closing.”

²Tjeu van den Berk, *The Numinous*. Zoetermeer, 2008.

May God have mercy over the cynic. I wish I could once more almost grin without knowing why and hope for something that will never come.

Van den Berk remarks that per definition the heart of experiences such as that of Nescio cannot be rationally understood; it can only be felt on basis of similar personal feeling or intuition. According to Van den Berk, there is every indication that many people have such experiences during their childhood without remembering it. And that's fine, he says. These experiences continue in their wake unconsciously. The proof lies in the ability to feel sense or feel along with a description as that of Nescio. Of course, you can only feel along with something what you yourself have experienced at your deepest, whether conscious of it or not.

The term "numinous," as already indicated, is originally Rudolf Otto's, who was convinced of the irrational character of this type of experiences. Van den Berk says that Otto was very much aware that he was neither able to explain this concept rationally nor throw light on it from a moral perspective, but that it does stir one's emotional life. Something arises unconsciously and comes to the surface of consciousness.

Thus, numinous experiences are those that cannot be grasped rationally, but that do stir up people internally. They go together, according to Van den Berk, with the feeling that reality exists as a universe, a complete whole, and that I am part of it and am covered and carried by it. You could, in imitation of Otto, call them "experiences of the holy." They can take place in completely normal, every-day type of situations, but are nevertheless considered by the individual as the most fundamental experiences of their lives. Considering the fact that many people can feel the description of such experiences, we can assume that many have at one time or another have had similar experiences, whether they remember them or not. In my opinion, it is quite possible that the spiritual seekers of today are moved by such numinous experiences that they have and continue to undergo without reason or cause, outside of the grasp of their own organizing or framework of thought. These experiences arouse, as it were, a longing that sets their search journey into motion.

The Need for Mystagogy

Anyone who searches tends to ask others for direction. When you cannot find your keys, you ask each family member, "Have you seen my keys?" If you're looking for a pharmacy, you approach someone who gives the impression of knowing the neighbourhood. When you are on a spiritual search, you seek out a guide or mentor who knows the way in the spiritual landscape. In other words, spiritual seekers need mentors in mystagogy. That term for most people may need explanation.

Mystagogy has its roots in the mystery cults of the Hellenistic world, where students of spirituality were introduced by means of rites of passage, that was preceded by a certain level of instruction. After these initiating rites, the budding mystagogues would receive further lessons in mystagogy from an experienced mystagogue. That would be a teacher who would help them to develop inner knowledge and experience of the mysterious.

Mystagogy also played a role in the early church. It would take place during the week after the initiation of the catechumen by means of baptism and eucharist that would take place at Easter. Thus the baptized were helped to give order to, to point to, to account for and to anchor what they experienced in their baptism. What is striking here is that experience was preceded by knowledge: The emphasis of the initiation was placed on the experience of those baptized rather than on their knowledge of it. They first experienced God's acts of salvation in the rites and only afterward, after the consecration, they were helped to understand and to deepen the meaning of this holy mystery. After Vatican II, mystagogy is once again playing an important role in the church, especially due to the urgings of Karl Rahner.

Mystagogics distinguishes itself from every form of transfer of beliefs. It does not contribute a package of knowledge or information so much as it interprets the experience that is already there. It is meant to help people to express their experience of the holy, to us Otto's terminology, and to derive life from it. In that sense mystagogics can also be meaningful for today's spiritual seekers who feel themselves stirred by the secret of reality. It can help them to live more and more out of their numinous experience.

The Christian tradition as Treasure House

The Christian tradition can be of help here. It is often not realized that this tradition is a treasure house of texts with which people have verbalized their spiritual journey through the centuries and with which they have tried to guide others in their search. These texts have a mystagogical effect. The most fundamental mystagogical text of the Christian tradition is the Bible, but spiritual autobiographies and mystical texts can also have that effect on readers.

Waaijman says that mystical texts are written to make people conscious of the fact that God is present in their lives and that He is involved with them. Kick Bras says about these texts that they are written by people who have tasted the experience of unity with God or divinity, or who suffer from lack of such experience and but are overcome by a

longing for it. They feel themselves driven to go beyond themselves and to find unity with the very core of reality that has revealed itself to them as the fountain of life. Writers of mystical texts are people who feel for one reason or another that they cannot remain silent about what they have experienced, even if that could hardly be verbalized. They want to help readers who themselves have been touched by this divine instigation on their life's journey. Mystical texts are thus written to give guidance to spiritual seekers on their spiritual way. That is why the Christian tradition, according to my opinion, must open her treasure house for the benefit of today's seekers, so that they can understand their own experiences in conversation with the words of spiritual guides from through the ages, who have gradually learned to know the spiritual landscape through their own experiences. It would be a great service of the church to contemporary society to make these texts more accessible.

The Place and Function of Jesus Christ

When I propose that the Christian tradition can be of service to the many spiritual seekers of today, it is justifiable to ask about the significance of Jesus Christ in this context, since, after all, He forms the core of the Christian tradition.

In Jesus Christ we see God's unconditional love in the face. He is our Liberator. In His earthly life, He indicated to us of His awareness that He lived out of the love of God and that this love formed His deepest core being. Cost what it may, He was intent to be faithful to this mission. At this front He was a model whereby others can be so transformed that they also can increasingly have confidence in God's love. Thomas van Kempen devoted a mystagogical book to this subject in the late Middle Ages, that even today is being read worldwide. The title of his famous book is *Imitatio Christi* or *The Imitation of Christ*. The purpose of this book was to mentor young monks for their spiritual journey. Thomas encouraged his readers to imitate Jesus and to so meditate over His life that they could taste the Spirit Who stirred Jesus from within.

The significance of the spiritual way that Thomas ascribes to Jesus Christ is strikingly described by Hein Blommestijn, who says:

The goal of the spiritual life as Thomas... describes it in The Imitation of Christ, is the transformation of the person in Christ. By putting on or adopting more and more the lifestyle of Christ and, especially, His relationship to the Father, we are by grace transformed into the real Christ, namely the revelation of God's unconditional Love. On this spiritual journey, we liberate ourselves from ourselves, from our egocentrism and our conditionalities. Due to our status as a created being and the logic of our physical condition we obey the 'laws of the

flesh,' that is to say, our needs, longings and especially our passion for life. In the course of being transformed in Christ, we experience in ourselves a totally different logic, namely the law of divine Love. In spite of ourselves, we are drawn into the lifestyle of Christ. Finally we have been liberated and are born into the fullness of our humanness. This process and result are experienced as exuberant joy.