

David Ranson,
Between the “Mysticism of Politics”
and the “Politics of Mysticism”:
*Interpreting New Pathways of Holiness
within the Roman Catholic Tradition.*
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Over half a century after the Second Vatican Council, we are in danger of taking for granted one of its great achievements: the validation and encouragement of the pathway toward holiness for all the baptized, and emphatically not only for those called to holy orders or the religious state. David Ranson’s study retrieves this history, particularly of lay spirituality, and situates it in the earlier ecclesial context of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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Ranson’s introduction discusses the “Ascent of Lay Consciousness” and the “Descent of Holiness,” wherein he notes Vatican II’s shift in focus toward the Christian vocation of the laity within their own secular context. While this shift in focus is apparent in the nineteenth century, Ranson cites figures such as Jacques Maritain and his quest for an “integral humanism” and studies such as Yves Congar’s *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity* as preparing for that new context (xiv). Writers such as Chenu and De la Bedoyere throw into the mix an expanding interest in democracy and secular learning (xvi). Earlier, in response to the Reformation, wherein the church was seen as a lay society, the theology of the church, according to Congar, began to be “elaborated rather one-sidedly as theology *only* of her institution and hierarchical power of mediation” (xviii), what he called “a hierarchology” (xviii).

The first draft for what was to become the Vatican Council’s Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity reflected this clericalized mindset, along with what Klostermann called “a world-alienated angelism” (xix). There was also the separation in later scholastic theology between the ascetical and the mystical, where “the latter is reserved to a spiritual elite” (20). So Thomas Merton could remark, “We tend to think that nothing in man’s ordinary life is really supernatural except saying prayers and performing pious acts of one sort or another, pious acts which derive their value precisely from the fact that they rescue us, momentarily, from the ordinary routine of life” (xxi). However, this attitude was already being reversed in the twentieth century, not least by the popes, for example, Pius XI, writing here in 1923 on St. Francis de Sales: “The truth [is] that holiness of life is not the privilege of a select few. All are called by God to a state of sanctity and all are obliged

to try to attain it” (xxii). Pius XII wrote in 1947 regarding secular institutes that God “has sent out his invitation, time and time again, to all the faithful, that all should seek and practice perfection, wherever they may be” (xxiii).

Vatican II ended any consideration of the laity as being held to a lower standard of holiness. As Wulf notes in his commentary on the chapter on the laity in *Lumen Gentium*: “A one-sided attitude that was taken for centuries towards the relationship of Christians with the world, its goods, its arrangements, and its history, has now been abandoned in the Church and in her doctrinal pronouncements” (xxiv). The Decree on Religious Life itself insisted on the universal call to holiness of all Christians, and Ranson remarks that the “theological basis for such universality is to be discovered in Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium*, on ‘The People of God.’ By virtue of their baptism each member of the church shares in the priesthood of Christ, all are consecrated to be ‘a spiritual house and a holy priesthood’” (xxvii).

In the light of this “democratisation of holiness” (xxix), Ranson writes that the “intrinsic unity between mysticism and politics has emerged as a critical consideration in contemporary theology” (xxx). However, because of the deep philosophical and practical commitment that each area demands, efforts at a genuine integration of the two are rare. He states, “This study attempts to provide such an articulation. It examines the way in which ‘the mystical’ and ‘the political’ coalesce in twentieth century Roman Catholic thought” (xxxi). Ranson believes that understanding how these two factors interact provides a key to understanding contemporary ecclesial movements within the church, along with “new paradigms of Christian spirituality” to meet the challenges of our time (xxxii).

Chapter 1 asks, “What is ‘the mystical?’ What is ‘the political?’” (1). His interpretative categories are, however, constituted by the interplay between both the mystical and the political, as he points out in a key passage:

What I will go on to propose is that in the attempt to achieve a relationship between “the mystical” and “the political” a tendency arises toward a further polarity—that of a “politics of mysticism” and a “mysticism of politics.” In various ways a “politics of mysticism” is what emerges when what might be initially described as pertaining to the trajectory of “the mystical” is engaged and employed for predominantly political purposes, understanding “political” in this sense as a certain exercise of social power for the purposes of asserting social identity. Conversely, a “mysticism of politics” can be suggested as that which presents when the trajectory of “the political”—understood as the engagement of the public sphere—is seen as the very means by which spiritual experience becomes manifest. (1)¹

Ranson is happy with Evelyn Underhill’s classic notion of “the mystical” as “essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality” (4). He sees *genuine* mysticism as expressing itself in service of others (5). He understands “the political” to refer to the range of activities often covered today by the phrase “civic society” but also to the political philosophies of

1. Perhaps Dr. Ranson has drawn his categories from a 1974 study co-edited by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Claude Geffré, *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, with Gutiérrez’s editorial entitled “A Prophetic Theology.” See 204n65.

Aristotle, Michael Oakeshott, and Pierre Manent (5). While he does point out that “not all assertion of power is necessarily pejorative” (12), it is the pejorative meaning of the phrase that seems to predominate in the book.

Chapter 2 examines the mystical and the political as dualities. He shows how Augustine, while fully aware of the difference between the spiritual and temporal spheres, also realizes that the members of political society are members of the church, too, so that both spheres are inextricably intertwined (14). Luther, on the other hand, considered that both spheres should be kept totally separate, so that Luther, in the words of Bradstock, “offers no space for a Christian critique of structural injustice” (17). Max Weber’s sociology of religion, thought by Ranson and others to derive from Calvinist asceticism (21), separates the mystical from a thoroughly disenchanted secular world. In that secular world, rational means-end practicality rules, while the mystical is characterized by an “‘other-worldly’ concern which seeks quietude only in a subjective illumination and union with ultimate meaning” (22). On the other hand, Ranson notes that “the spiritual is achieved through the secular for Péguy, the eternal through the temporal, the intentions of the heavenly city through the efforts in the earthly city” (27).

Ranson himself accepts that David Tracy echoes “Reinhold Niebuhr’s dialectic of love and justice.” Ranson writes: “For Tracy, therefore, the ‘prophetic’ and the ‘mystical’ require each other. It is ‘the prophetic’ which maintains the commitment to justice with a certain kind of publicness and it is ‘the mystical’ which prevents such a struggle from becoming mere self-righteousness and becoming exhausted” (52). We can also get a flavor of Ranson’s view in his contrast of Cavanaugh’s approach with that of Maritain:

Even though their primary concern is the relationship between church and state, nonetheless, each in their own way conjectures how “the mystical” and “the political” coalesce. Through the lens of the mystical-political dialectic it would appear that Maritain will be criticised by Cavanaugh for the possibility of dissolving “the mystical” into “the political.” However, Cavanaugh himself might be criticised, in turn, for the opposite—dissolving “the political” into “the mystical.” (53)

In this regard, the author quotes from Maritain’s *Integral Humanism* that the aim of a Christian culture is “no longer that of realizing a divine work here on earth by the hands of men, but rather the realisation on earth of a human task by the passage of something divine, that which we call love, through human operations, and even through human work.” Ranson remarks that Maritain “positions the democratic project within a fundamentally theocentric determination whilst being clear that such a perspective should not devolve into some kind of theocracy” (56). Maritain envisaged a Christian culture that would overcome any dualism or separatism between the sacred and the secular, allowing for what he saw would be “co-operation on the temporal level between believers and non-believers” (59n24).

In Chapter 5, Ranson proposes that Johannes Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx provide an alternative perspective on how Maritain’s view need not dissolve “the mystical” into “the political” as Cavanaugh claimed (79). Christian love for Metz “must be understood as the unconditional commitment to justice, freedom and peace *for others*. Understood in this way, love contains

a power of social criticism” (85). He advocates for what he calls a political mysticism, one not of power and domination but of “a mysticism of open eyes,” in no way cut off from the sufferings of the world and rooted in the forsakenness of Christ on the Cross: “Jesus’ God-mysticism is also a part of this tradition. His is in an exemplary way a mysticism of suffering unto God. His cry from the cross is the cry of one forsaken by God, who for his part has never forsaken God” (89).

Commenting on Schillebeeckx, Ranson remarks that “both the call of God and our response to that call” are only known “through self-giving to [others] in a world [which we are] to humanize” (104). Further, “for Jesus, it is . . . his mystical ‘Abba’ experience that is the source of his prophetic activity: ‘In such mysticism, love for all men and women and all-embracing love for fellow creatures as an expression of love of God can come fully into its own’” (105). For Ranson, Schillebeeckx proposes “a fundamental unity between ‘the mystical’ and ‘the political,’ forged in the memory of suffering” as a religious and political soteriology where “the progressive and political meaning of the religious is stressed” (106).

Ranson turns in chapter 7 to the twentieth-century lay movements. Using his preferred (but by no means easy to tie down) categories of “the politics of mysticism” and “the mysticism of politics,” he explores what have been called the new ecclesial movements by focusing on the Catholic Action initiative begun earlier in the twentieth century, particularly under Pope Pius XI, that, both for him and for Pius XII, were primarily understood as lay collaborations with the hierarchical apostolate (145). For Ranson, Catholic Action thus was an example of “the politics of mysticism” in the sense that, according to church historian Roger Aubert, its aim was to “re-catholicise society, enabling Catholics to resume

political power” (150). However, Ranson also notes Pius XI’s enthusiasm for the Young Christian Workers (YCW) and the pope’s awareness that “Catholic Action was not only a defence against the rise of secularism but it was, in fact, an instrument by which secularity might be entered” (154). The charismatic founder of the YCW, Joseph Cardijn, expressed the universality of his ideal like this: “The YCW wins new members for the Mystical Body of Christ, in order that the Mystical Body may grow ever larger and may gradually reach the size of humanity itself, and that the Mystical Body and humanity may truly become one and the same thing” (159). Due to this universal reach, along with an increasing recognition of the positive challenge of the modern world, Ranson notes in a movement like YCW a shift from “the politics of mysticism” to “the mysticism of politics” (164). Ranson concludes:

What began as an innately defensive posture toward the emergence of secularity, becomes, in fact, through the influence of Cardijn, the cornerstone of the major writings of the Second Vatican Council on the pressing need for the Church’s engagement with the world: *Gaudium et Spes*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, *Ad Gentes*, *Dignitatis Humanae* and the significant documents of John XXIII which preceded them such as *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963). (164)

Next, Ranson discusses the development of later lay movements within the church, some of which did not fit within traditional boundaries, like Opus Dei and the Charismatic Movement. He points out that Hans Urs von Balthasar provided a theological foundation for what became known as the secular institutes,

forms of lay spirituality that carried out the Son's mission from the Father to the world in order to bring the world back to the Father (173). However, Ranson notes that the new ecclesial movements went beyond the language and experience of the secular institutes. Quoting Piero Coda: "The new movements are constitutionally open (by virtue of their original charism) to all the vocations and to all the states of life present in the People of God" (175). These new ecclesial movements go beyond the juridical confines of the secular institutes, presenting "a consecration to a full life of Christian discipleship not separate from the secular but lived out within the secular for the transformation of the secular" (180).

Ranson quotes Enzo Pace on four criteria for classifying the new ecclesial movements:

firstly, by the "spiritual life" proposed; secondly, by the leadership structure and the division of powers and knowledge within the organization; thirdly, by the relationship between religious choice and active commitment in society and in the *polis* (directly or indirectly in political life); and fourthly, by the attitude towards the virtue of obedience (to the authority of the church's magisterium). (186)

Pace suggests two types of ecclesial movements, with the first focusing on conversion and the founding of a community of faithful under a mostly lay leadership. Here, the world "is approached as a locus for an evangelisation that is aimed at consciences rather than towards institutions. The question of obedience is resolved by the official approbation of the movement or is placed more diffusely within the context of fidelity to the charism by which the

organisation lives" (186). For Pace, the second type of movement finds its identity in "a certain defence of Catholic identity which is regarded as being threatened by modern individualism and ethical relativism," with clerical leadership. The world presents to this second type of movement "a readiness for reconquest, particularly in those spheres no longer under the influence of Catholic thought, which range from economics to politics, culture to educational systems, media to human relationships." Obedience to church authority is the basis for the movement's legitimization. (186) For Ranson, movements of the first type exemplify what he has been calling "the mysticism of politics," while those of the second are agents of his "politics of mysticism" (187).

Ranson continues by first examining those movements that for him express "the politics of mysticism," mentioning Opus Dei, the Neocatechumenal Way, Communion and Liberation, and Regnum Christi. He notes how Fr. Jose-Maria Escrivá de Balaguer, Opus Dei's founder, "was committed to the possibility of both sanctity and the development of competence in secular professional life, the 'two wings of sanctity' in Opus Dei" (190). Ranson wonders whether there is a tendency, noted by some who are critical of Opus Dei, to enter into the public, especially the political, arena as a way of carrying out their apostolate. While admitting that criticisms of its alleged political involvement are "largely anecdotal and journalistic in tone" (192), he nevertheless takes them seriously: "The heavily debated question is to what extent has the agenda of the evangelisation of professional life, be it economic, political, in education or the arts, also represented the pursuit of gaining political power for the organisation both within society and the Church" (191). Ranson will make an equivalent point

about the Neocatechumenal Way, this time regarding its attitude toward the church. And, as a result, for him both movements are candidates for his category of “the politics of mysticism”:

Both Opus Dei and The Neocatechumenal Way present primarily as spiritual pathways, as means of encountering God in a deeper personal way, and are therefore oriented in their rhetoric towards “the mystical.” Nonetheless, precisely in that orientation both envisage that something else is to be achieved—either social or ecclesiastical reform. Their mystical orientation is, thus, at the service of a certain political agenda, either within society itself, as in the case of Opus Dei, or within the Church, as for The Way. (198)

For Ranson, therefore, they are a kind of replication of nineteenth-century attempts at a Catholic restoration, which he discusses in his chapter 6, though I suspect that members of these movements would have a different experience of what they are trying to do. Perhaps a richer approach to differing charisms is one of complementarity, nicely evoked by Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, in relation to the Missionaries of Charity in a remark she made to Mother Teresa when she felt deeply humbled by the enormous witness of the Missionaries’ concrete love. But Mother Teresa said, “What you’re doing, we can’t do; and what we’re doing, you can’t do.” Charisms, it seems to me, complement, rather than contrast favorably or unfavorably with, each other.

As examples of “the mysticism of politics,” the author turns to the Community of Sant’Egidio and “those ecclesial forms which may be grouped under the heading of the spirituality of Liberation

Theology” (198). He lists the four “pillars” of the Community of Sant’Egidio:

The first and foundational is prayer, particularly through attention to the Scriptures and immersion in the Psalter as the prayer of the poor. The second is the communication of the gospel meditated upon. It understands itself as living a “missionary brotherhood.” This centrifugal impulse establishes thirdly, a community without borders or walls, an international fraternity. The fourth pillar is friendship with the poor which is the living dynamic of the community’s involvement. Critical to such friendship is the redress of those factors which contribute to poverty, particularly war. (199)

Ranson quotes Sant’Egidio’s founder, Andrea Riccardi, as refusing to let Sant’Egidio be categorized as either “active” or “spiritual”:

I remember in the 1970s when I went to Holland, everyone would ask me, “Are you an active community or a spiritual community?” We’ve always refused this definition. This is a firm point of Sant’Egidio. We’re an active community, and we don’t place limits on our activity. But the fulcrum of our activity is our spirituality, our prayer and our liturgy. (201)

Ranson sees liberation theology as a response to a wrong involvement of the church in Latin American politics, but not at all in the manner of the movements in the politics of mysticism tradition. Rather than a restoration of Christianity’s social position, “the practice of liberation spirituality quickly turns into a perspective firmly oriented to the mysticism of politics, that is,

the insight that in the struggle for political transformation, understood in the primary definition of ‘the political’ used in this thesis, God becomes manifest and is to be experienced” (204). Ranson describes what amounts to a third phase in the Christian maturation of liberation theology wherein contemplation and spirituality not rooted in the liberative mission of Christ are inauthentic. In a still greater maturation, among many methodological conflicts, Ranson writes, “Gutiérrez suggests that the political involvement envisaged by the project of liberation theology has a mystical genesis” (206). He refers to Jon Sobrino, who “defines holiness as the outstanding practice of theological virtues of faith, hope and love in discipleship of Jesus. By ‘political’ he means ‘action directed towards structurally transforming society in the direction of the reign of God.’” He also “identifies ‘political love’ as the basis for ‘political holiness.’ Such political love is the love for the most deprived in society, and kept subordinate to the kingdom of God” (211). Ranson’s concluding thought on his contrasting of types of politics of mysticism with types of mysticism of politics is that the latter is more relevant to contemporary conditions. Rather than aiming at a:

retrieval to a lost Christian order, more or less enforced by a Christian-inspired politics, “the mysticism of politics” emerges as the stronger option in those circumstances, and from those intellectual frameworks where there exists the experience of the instrumentality of human agency to transform the given social and political situation according to an evangelical vision. (214)

In the book’s conclusion Ranson again tackles the notions of “the political” and “the mystical” and remarks that integrating both in light of Vatican II’s universal call to holiness “is, perhaps, *the* spiritual challenge of the legacy of Vatican II” (217). Drawing on Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, Ranson says that the forms of spirituality most suitable for our time “are inclusive in character, and discovering themselves in the public square, will seek a greater integration between both the public and the personal, or to use Owen C. Thomas’ phrase, between exteriority and interiority” (224). This remark reminds this reviewer of Chiara Lubich’s proposal, drawing on and expanding Teresa of Avila’s category of the “interior castle,” that we develop an “exterior castle”: the presence of Jesus in the community that can be understood as a spirituality of communion in public life. This final chapter is too rich a reading of figures like John Henry Newman, Friedrich von Hügel, Thomas Merton, Johannes Metz, and David Tracy to be summarized here. It is the most original and stimulating section in the entire book! I strongly recommend this book to anyone who seeks a historical, theological, and mystical context for the ecclesial movements in the church today.