

Mystery . . .



Alison Morgan writes

For most of us, a mystery is something that's hard to explain – like a murder mystery – or something unknown and secret – like a mystery parcel. But that of course is what you get when you slither down the slide of linguistic history and find yourself sitting on the 21st century mat at the bottom. Mystery is a word with a serious and complex heritage, and so a word that opens doors – doors, it turns out, into both light and darkness.

Just occasionally I have walked into places where suddenly everything has seemed bigger than me, where a veil has seemed to hang between me and some other kind of reality. When I

was very small, I used to feel at such moments that I was like a goldfish, shrunk into a bowl whose invisible glass barrier separated me from – I knew not what; but from something. As I grew older, I began to wonder if God was the word people used for this thing. Visiting a friend in Oxford, I found myself standing in Christ Church Cathedral, watching light pour through a stained glass window to form a moving, multi-coloured pool on the old stone floor; and for the first time, the spatial distance of the goldfish became an emotional distance, a sense that there was not just something, but Someone, on the other side of that glass. A leap through another boundary a couple of years after that connected me at last to what was on the other side – and my suspicion hardened into fact: it was God, and He loved me.

Faith is a mystery revealed

Faith, Paul tells us, is a mystery. More specifically, it is a revealed mystery; something which was not clear, but now has been made clear. It is something which, kept secret for long ages, is now disclosed, according to the command of the eternal God, in

order to bring about the obedience of faith. This mystery is nothing less than Christ in us, the hope of glory; it is the Gospel.¹ The Greek word for it is *mysterion*, which comes from a verb meaning 'to close the eyes.' Originally coined to describe the secret initiation rites of the Greek 'mystery' religions, it was used by Paul to describe the fulfilment of something long awaited – the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. We may not fully understand it, but we do now know it: 'Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.'² And, eventually, recognised by me, and by you.

The rise of mysticism

For Christians, closing the eyes is what we do, not as we are initiated into secret rites, but as we pray. With the increasing busy-ness of the empire and consequent secularisation of the Church, people began to withdraw first to deserted places, then to monasteries, convents and eventually hermitages where they could prioritise prayer



Illumination from the *Liber Scivias* showing Hildegard receiving a vision and dictating to her scribe and secretary

over everything else, seeking deeper and deeper emotional and spiritual engagement with God. They became known as mystics, people who moved, in prayer, beyond study and even beyond contemplation, towards a deeper union, one which to most people remained hidden.

Some of the greatest writers of the Middle Ages were mystics. Many were women – people like Hildegard of Bingen, devoted to prayer from the age of nine and recipient of many visions which she recognised as revelations from God; or Elisabeth of Shonau, visited with ecstatic visions of scenes from the life of Christ and the saints; or our own English Mother Julian, who had a series of visions of God which she wrote up as *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*. Others were monastic theologians or hermits whose work included treatises on personal spirituality – Hugh of St Victor in France, St Bonaventure in Italy, Walter Hilton and Richard Rolle in England. The best known is probably the last of the line – St John of the Cross, a sixteenth century Carmelite who said that verse penetrates much further into mystery than prose, and expressed his deepening relationship with God in the most beautiful lyric poetry.

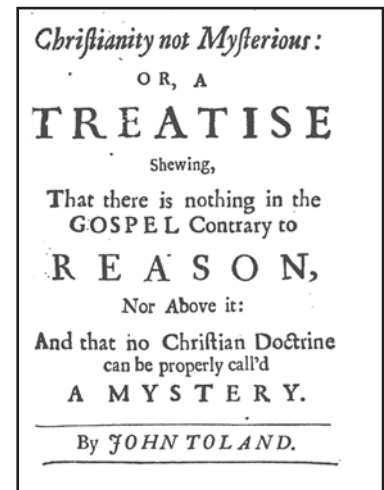
Many of these writers used the poetic language of imagery, rather than the analytical language of contemporary scholasticism, to describe their journey beyond the veil of knowledge and into the revealed

presence of God. For Bonaventure and Hilton the life of prayer was like the ascent of a ladder, an image which can be traced back to Jacob's vision of the angels in Genesis 28; it was a journey undertaken in carefully planned stages, so that *'from the visible things of the created world one rises to consider the power, wisdom and goodness of God, until finally one achieves a spiritual and mystical ecstasy in which rest is given to our intellect when through ecstasy our affection passes over entirely into God.'*¹³ For the modestly anonymous author of the fourteenth century work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the image of choice was a cloud. This writer is quite sure that the mysteries of God cannot be apprehended through study or even run of the mill contemplation, for *'all . . . men have in them one principle working power which is called knowing power, and another principle working power which is called loving power; love may reach to God in this life, but not knowledge.'*¹⁴ So everything you know, you must cast into an imaginary cloud of forgetting in order to venture into the cloud of unknowing – in the hope that God will *'perhaps, at some time, send out a beam of spiritual light that pierces the cloud of unknowing that is between you and Him, and show you some of His secrets which no man can nor may put into words. Then you will feel your affection ablaze with the fire of His love'* – and you will know more of God than you could have discovered by any amount of purely mental activity.⁵

Christianity not mysterious . . .

One of the fascinations of faith is that what seems self-evident to one generation seems meaningless to the next. Within a century of the lyrical outpourings of St John of the Cross, the Enlightenment was gathering pace, and with it a new emphasis on those truths which are accessible to us through the exercise of reason. Are we sure that mystery is a genuine part of the Christian Gospel, or could it not be that we have become superstitious, John Toland asks in his splendidly titled 1694 work *Christianity Not Mysterious*. Toland offers a thorough Biblical study of the word 'mystery', demonstrating that Paul (who almost alone uses the word) understands it as something which can be known

only through revelation – a revelation which has now been made plain to us in Christ; 'God's mystery is Christ Himself.'¹⁶ Why does Paul use the word 'mystery', asks Toland – surely because he is writing to Gentiles whose background is the Greek mystery religions, helping them to understand that what in Ephesus, Colossae and Corinth is worshipped through dark and secret rites of initiation may now be abandoned for the revealed light of the Gospel of Christ. Toland goes



Title page of John Toland's 1694 work *Christianity Not Mysterious*.


further – so much further that his book is promptly and publicly burned in his native Ireland. He suggests that many of the 'mysterious' elements of contemporary Church practice are in fact adopted not from the teaching of Jesus or the practice of the early Church, but from those very same mystery religions Paul was at such pains to dismiss – stoles, mitres, candles, the ritualisation of baptism and communion, stately buildings, hidden sanctuaries, priestly hierarchies. Jesus didn't advocate any of this, He points out.

Mystery today

What then of us? Will we, with *The Cloud of Unknowing*, seek to develop our faith by moving beyond study and contemplation into a realm in which we open ourselves more fully to wordless, abandoned love? Or will we, with John Toland, stick to the plain teaching of Scripture, dismissing 'the Vulgar Notion of Mystery' and endeavouring in all things to preserve the practical, reasonable simplicity of Jesus?

continued on page 6 ➤



I suppose the answer to that can only be found by looking at our own culture and examining our own experience – for I suspect that it's as much the cultural context which determines the manner of our searching and of our following, as any absolute 'it must be done this way.' It is well to heed Toland's warning: the mystery of the Gospel has now been revealed, and we should not recreate it through conforming to 'pagan' rituals and practices, or claiming a special vested authority we do not in fact have. But perhaps now, as we emerge from three centuries of rather limiting rationalism, we don't need to be quite as rigid as Toland was. The truth is now plain, Toland was right about that. But it's also too big, and the author of *The Cloud* was equally right about that. Maybe the true mystery of our clearly revealed faith lies in the awareness that reality goes further than our minds can possibly follow. And maybe the benchmark for our own practice is the simple question 'can we get closer to Jesus by doing this?' 

Footnotes

¹Romans 16.25-26; Colossians 1.26-27

²1 Timothy 2.26

³Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, chapter 7

⁴*The Cloud of Unknowing*, translated by Peter Way, repr Anthony Clarke 1994, ch4, ch8

⁵*Christianity Not Mysterious*, Nabu Public Domain Reprints, ch26

⁶Col 2.2.

about the writer

The Revd Dr Alison Morgan is ReSource's thinker and writer. Alison has a PhD in medieval Christian literature, and is the author of *Dante and the Medieval Other World* as well as of *The Wild Gospel*, *The Word on the Wind*, and many other writings, all of which are available on our website. She is married to Roger, and they have three children. A full summary of *Christianity Not Mysterious* can be found under 'Book Summaries' on www.alisonmorgan.co.uk.

The goldfish bowl

by Alison Morgan

Thought wanders
unconfined
peaceful
over the white page
but once
it was not so.
When I was little
I saw the world
from behind glass
and thought lived
detached
in the goldfish bowl
of my mind.
When I grew bigger
I discovered Plato
and learnt about
Shadows and Forms
and things not being real
and so I settled
for the idea
that the goldfish bowl
was the way things were.
Then one day
I stood in a church
and watched rays of sunlight
melting through
the soft rich colours
of stained glass
and falling
in pools of glowing red and orange
on tombs
in the stoneflagged floor.
And I knew there was something
behind the glass
trying to get through
and that it was love
The love was pouring
through the window
onto the tombs
but the glass was
in between.
Later I found
what Plato never knew
that the love is God
that love is life
and that the life
is mine
and I swam out
of the goldfish bowl.