



Andrzej SIEMIENIEWSKI:
O doświadczeniu mistycznym i obecności Maryi
[On the Mystical Experience
and the Presence of Mary],
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Andrzej Siemieniewski, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Legnica, professor of theological sciences specializing in the theology of spirituality, and a teaching and research fellow at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Wrocław, is a leading expert in contemporary spirituality, particularly in its charismatic, evangelical, and ecumenical dimensions. His notable contributions to this field include several influential publications, such as *Ewangelikalna duchowość nowego narodzenia a Tradycja katolicka* (Evangelical Spirituality of the New Birth and the Catholic Tradition; Wrocław, 1997), *Ochrzczeni w jednym Duchu: Perspektywy integracji mistycyzmu pentekostalnego z duchowością katolicką* (Baptized in the Same Spirit: Perspectives on the Integration of Pentecostal Mysticism with Catholic Spirituality; Wrocław, 2002), *Boży płomień. Chrzest w Duchu Świętym* (God's Flame: Baptism in the Holy Spirit; Wrocław, 2017), *Chrześcijańskie Ruchy Charyzmatyczne. Nowość czy kontynuacja tradycji?* (Christian Charismatic Movements: Novelty or Continued Tradition?; Poznań, 2019). In addition to his academic work, Bishop Siemieniewski actively engages with interdenominational dialogue through organizations like the Polish Christian Forum and regularly participates in meetings, conferences, and congresses at both national and global levels, fostering collaboration among Christian community leaders.

In this context, it is important to note Andrzej Siemieniewski's most recent book entitled *O doświadczeniu mistycznym i obecności Maryi* (On the Mystical Experience and the Presence of Mary) published by Sumus Publishing House in 2023. The book contributes to the dispute on the role of broadly understood mysticism and religious experience in spiritual growth. The dispute can see the lingering notion that mysticism is limited to extraordinary phenomena or is accessible only to a select group of devout individuals, such as monks or nuns in contemplative orders. The work emphasizes that while the teachings of figures like St. Teresa of Jesus, St. John of the Cross, the representatives of Hesychast tradition in Orthodox Christianity and Rhineland, Dutch, and English mystics, as well as the so-called *devotio moderna*, remain vital, the Church's historical approach to mysticism has often been marked by a certain reserve and distance — in the post-Tridentine Church, as well as the Churches that emerged from the Wittenberg and Swiss Reformations. A significant shift occurred with the rise of the Holiness Movement, drawing chiefly on John Wesley's experience and teachings, and more prominently, the Pentecostal revival of the early 20th century. Pentecostalism, along with charismatic experiences in traditional churches, especially the Catholic Church, and their greater openness to spiritual charisms and manifestations of the Holy Spirit sparked debate about the authenticity and legitimacy of such experiences. At the same time the Pentecostal and charismatic communities' emphasis on experience sparked concerns that personal spiritual experience might overshadow and stifle or at least severely undermine the intellectual and volitional dimensions of faith. However, because it is rather difficult to dismiss experiential faith, a proper balance between all components of the religious act is advocated. It would also be inappropriate to treat experience as merely a stepping stone for the immature, while those considered spiritually mature view it as redundant.

The increasing globalization of modern life — marked by travel, broader interpersonal interactions, and migration — has brought questions about diverse religions into the lives of ordinary people, not just scholars or participants in official interfaith dialogues. This trend coincides with rising secularization, where many individuals drift away from traditional forms of religious practice and even the foundational tenets of their faith, often turning their attention toward other religious traditions and cultures.

In this theological and social context, Bishop Andrzej Siemieniewski's publication bears particular relevance. It explores the multidimensional nature of religious experience and its significance in contemporary life, including with respect to the shifting definitions of spirituality, religiosity, and the challenges posed by the growing secularization.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first one, entitled "Experiencing the Presence of God: An Elitist Experience or the Foundation

of Mature Faith?,” examines different perspectives on mystical experience. One view, a minimalist stance, suggests that rather than deepening one’s relationship with God such experiences merely register it in psychological consciousness. Proponents of this view argue for caution, as even if one cannot deny the feeling of God’s presence (psychological aspect of faith), it remains difficult to confirm the reality of encountering God directly. Eventually, “in the human psyche, God is more often a tragic absence than a joyful presence” (p. 24). The second view is theological optimism about mystical experience. Siemieniewski draws on Polish theologian Wincenty Granat’s work *Personalizm chrześcijański* (Christian Personalism; Poznań, 1985), which argues that “since love, as a theological virtue, is uniformly present in those with sanctifying grace, mystical experiences rooted in this love are not distinct from the broader life of grace” (p. 25). The first chapter also highlights two theological perspectives. The first one has been developed by Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, who emphasized the sensation of faith’s light and the gradual process of divinization as normative elements of the spiritual journey. The second perspective was developed by German theologian Heribert Mühlen, who said that the presence of the Holy Spirit can be perceived with senses. This optimism makes mysticism a constitutive element of the Church’s life and identity.

Chapter Two, “Step into the Postmodern Future or Awakening the Spectre of the Past? Postmodern Mystical Spirituality according to Don Cupitt,” explores the ideas of Anglican theologian Don Cupitt, who views mysticism as a literary construct (no superiority of experience over language), framing it as a reaction against religious oppression and a path to reclaiming the joy of primitive religions. Cupitt draws parallels between mysticism and Marxist class struggle, suggesting that mysticism represents the search for an idealized, primordial religious community. Just as Marxism identified private property as the alienating factor (private property and feudalism were seen as roots of social conflict), Cupitt sees religious orthodoxy as the alienating force within faith traditions. Consequently, mysticism emerges as a form of rebellion against religious orthodoxy and dogmatic theology. The promotion of practices like Zen meditation is part of this, with religious anarchy being an ideal to strive for (like Marxism’s utopia of a property-free society). Don Cupitt’s worldview proposes Darwinism in the vein of Richard Dawkins.

Chapter Three, “Mysticism — The Universal Religion of Humanity?,” begins by examining mystical syncretism, which encompasses a variety of meditative practices such as Zen, yoga, and *satipatthana*, under the claim that meditation techniques transcend religious boundaries (as pointed out by Bede Griffiths). Then the author goes on to report on the key questions and answers about mystical irenicism, exploring the idea of

the Holy Spirit's universal presence and influence. He seems to oversimplify comparisons between Western and Eastern mystical traditions. Siemieniewski references theologians like Louis Bouyer, who opposes reducing mysticism to a universal phenomenon divorced from specific religion, and Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, who claims that "Jesus was the first to experience God's indwelling presence [...] this can be replicated in every human being through the imitation of Christ..." (p. 57). A crucial element was recalling William Johnston's assertion that the life of ancient Christian monks was not solely meditative but deeply rooted in Scripture and liturgy. It is also important to recognize the intentionality of meditative practice (Rudolf Otto). While some aspects of mystical practice are shared, the theological content carried by faith is significant.

Chapter Four: "Christian Mysticism and Non-Christian Mysticism — Defining the Limits of Similarity," first advocates a balanced approach to various religions and their mystical experiences. Siemieniewski then delineates the foundational sources of Christian mysticism, including numerous biblical passages that articulate the expected unity of God and humanity, the transformative experience of God's love, and writings by influential Christian thinkers (such as Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite, the Cappadocians, Evagrius, John Cassian, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Gerson, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* John Ruysbroeck, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Michael Palamas). Siemieniewski also presents 20th-century views on mysticism (citing figures like Augustine Poulain, Abbé Saudreau, Alois Mager, and Karl Rahner). In addition, the chapter addresses several challenges articulated in the modern era, including claims that mysticism begins where rationality ends, or that it is what psychological sciences discovered about the subconscious, or that it has evolved toward esoteric interpretations. The chapter ends with a strong appeal for preserving Christian mysticism's distinctive nature (distinguishing it from Buddhist or Sanjuanist emptiness; Christian non-discursive meditation is preceded by discursive prayer, deeply rooted in Scripture and the celebration of the liturgy).

Chapter Five, "Theology of Spirituality in the Face of Religious Diversity — A Challenge at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," highlights the positive value of learning about different religions as a foundation for meaningful dialogue. For theology, this entails attempting "to gain an overview of the world of diverse religions in their mystical aspect using the language of the Bible" (p. 95). Siemieniewski quotes John Paul II, who emphasized the need for a *dialogue of religious experience* to complement other forms of dialogue, such as the dialogue of life, the dialogue of deeds, and theological dialogue. Siemieniewski also answers the question whether different religions represent distinct paths to the

same ultimate summit or rather entirely different paths to separate goals. He draws on the perspective of John B. Cobb, who argues that each religion has a unique essence and destination, and Joseph Augustine Di Noia, who emphasizes that Christianity's focus on a personal relationship with God sets it apart from traditions like Buddhism. Therefore, as Louis Bouyer asserts, mystical experience always involves an intentional object. Contrary to the popular opinion, the phrase "different paths to the same summit" is true about various religions, not only Christianity. It is therefore difficult to maintain the religious pluralism postulated by thinkers like John Hick. This does not preclude mutual openness and appreciation of mystical values across different religions. It is necessary to beware of ideological pluralism. For syncretism ultimately leads to the alienation of individual religions.

Chapter Six, "The Relevance of the Testimony of Consecrated Persons at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," explores the core truth for Christian spirituality about the Church, which is one (spirituality of communion), holy (prayer), universal (spirituality of the Great Dispersion), and apostolic (the zeal of the apostles). Siemieniewski emphasizes the prophetic role of communities dedicated to consecrated life.

Chapter Seven, "Pursuing Holiness in the Example of Mary," reflects on the realism of incarnational spirituality through the life of Mary, who exemplifies openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. Marian spirituality underscores the primacy of God's initiative and God's triumph in the life of the believer. By embracing God's action, the faithful embark on a lifelong journey toward holiness.

Chapter Eight, "Experience of Faith — A Matter Serious Enough?," serves as conclusions of the book, emphasizing that the Catholic spiritual life is deeply rooted in the official teachings of the Church, and balancing both conceptual and affective dimensions. Siemieniewski quotes the *Directory on Popular Piety*, which underscores the value of extra-liturgical practices (e.g. prayer meetings and the Rosary).

Andrzej Siemieniewski's *O doświadczeniu mistycznym i obecności Maryi* is a significant contribution to the fields of theology of spirituality, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue. Its strengths lie in its accessible and communicative language, concise presentation of its ideas, and clear presentation of the issues (to engage both scholars of religious experience and general readers who may lack a theological background). The work is distinguished by its extensive use of source materials in Polish, English, Italian, German, and Latin. The bibliography offers readers a valuable resource for further study and in-depth research. Siemieniewski's book calls contemporary Christians to pursue a deeper spiritual life, encouraging them to explore forms of faith expression beyond liturgical practices, conceptual prayer, or rational Bible study. This is particularly relevant in

an era of increasing secularization of societies, which does not translate simply into a decline of spirituality. As Czech philosopher and theologian Prof. Tomáš Halík observes, people, including those who identify as “nones” with no formal religious affiliation, still express profound spiritual needs. In fact, one can speak of a crisis of the existing forms of religiosity rather than an elimination of religious life in general. Siemieniewski suggests that the Church should respond to this evolving landscape by engaging with such individuals through non-liturgical forms of spirituality, at least as a starting point. Deepening the understanding of mystical experience offers a meaningful path for pastors and spiritual leaders. This approach also includes fostering interreligious dialogue centred on shared inner and mystical experiences.

Bishop Siemieniewski’s book holds particular significance for one more reason: since — as numerous thinkers, including Pope Francis, believe — the renewal of the Church cannot occur without spiritual renewal, the theological understanding of mystical experience needs to be deepened and the inalienable importance of spiritual (or religious) experience in pastoral practice needs to be recognized. Both the Bible and the Tradition of the Church serve as primary sources for embracing mysticism in its broadest sense. The theological reflection on this topic is crucial to ensure it is not relegated solely to the domains of psychology or cultural studies. Mystical experience is a vital *locus theologicus* for both theology and the lives of the baptized. Andrzej Siemieniewski’s publication emphasizes the necessity of integrating mysticism, broadly understood, into the everyday lives of Christians. Moreover, it inspires readers to explore innovative forms of Christian engagement in contemporary societies.

From a holistic perspective, the book’s key content lies in Chapters One through Five. The final three chapters, while valuable, take — in my opinion — a more confessional, dogmatic and pastoral approach (focusing on the role of the Church, Mary, and piety in the lives of believers). This latter section feels somewhat loosely connected to the book’s main arguments. One notable editorial drawback is the use of endnotes instead of footnotes, which could hinder readability.

Considering all these observations, it can be said that *O doświadczeniu mistycznym i obecności Maryi* can be highly recommended to a wide audience, and researchers studying contemporary shifts in Christian spirituality may be inspired by Bishop Siemieniewski’s work for further scholarly exploration.