

Catholicism, Mysticism Don't Mix, Vatican Warns

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By Geraldine Baum, Newsday Religion Writer

The Vatican cautioned Catholics yesterday not to mistake the warm and fuzzy feelings of some forms of Eastern mysticism for genuine communion with the Holy Spirit, saying this non-Christian prayer could lead to a "psychic disturbance and at times, to moral deviations."

A document approved by Pope John Paul II and issued by his office of orthodoxy, said that blending Catholic and Eastern meditation was, in fact, dangerous. Methods such as Zen, yoga and transcendental meditation were specifically mentioned but the document also appeared to be warning Catholics away from a wide variety of Eastern practices.

"One can take from them what is useful as long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured," the document said.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, president of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that issued the 23-page report, told reporters yesterday in Rome that it should not be viewed as a condemnation of Eastern methods but as an elaboration on guidelines for genuine Christian prayer.

Either way, said Robert Thurman of Columbia University's comparative religion department, the document sounded to him like "paranoia and exclusivism."

"There is this underlying flavor that only Christian prayer is right," said Thurman, who teaches Buddhism. "Other religious leaders will be distressed when they hear this."

Julie Winter, a "science of mind practitioner" in Manhattan, was also suspicious of the church's intentions in issuing the document. "There are many doors to God," said Winter, who does "channeling" on a cable television program, said she believed the church should be open to unlimited visions of prayer. "Didn't Jesus meditate in the garden?" she said, "I think that any spiritual involvement when approached with integrity and honesty as part of a search for God is valuable."

The Church document did not specify what kinds of spirituality were acceptable but did object to what it said were forms of "Eastern psychological symbolism" that "degenerate into a cult of the body." "Some physical experiences," the report said, "automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings to authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life." And such false mystical experience could be "a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations."