# Mysticism

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A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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GENERAL EDITOR Robert B. Kruschwitz

ART EDITOR Heidi J. Hornik

REVIEW EDITOR Norman Wirzba

PROCLAMATION EDITOR William D. Shiell

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Elizabeth Sands Wise

DESIGNER Eric Yarbrough

PUBLISHER The Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361

PHONE (254) 710-3774

TOLL-FREE (USA) (866) 298-2325

WEB SITE www.ChristianEthics.ws

E-MAIL Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

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# Christian Reflection

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**Focus Article:**

The Sign of Jonah (*Prophetic Ethics*, pp 54-59)

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### The Sign of Jonah

Jesus' mysterious invocation of "the sign of Jonah" became, for Christians facing persecution and death in the early third century, a promise of God's ultimate act of grace and deliverance: resurrection from the dead.

**Prayer**

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:38-41**

**Responsive Reading†**

The LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish:
**I called to the LORD out of my distress and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.**
Then he said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" The waters closed in over him; the deep surrounded him; weeds were wrapped around his head at the roots of the mountains.
**I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you raised me up from the Pit, O LORD. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!**
Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

**Reflection**

"In their speaking, art, and writing, in their music, hear God's voice. Why composer, painter, poet, why the note and color choice?" begins Terry York's new hymn (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 51). The Jonah marbles, which are a rare artistic creation dating to the third century A.D., and the many appearances of Jonah scenes on early Christian sarcophagi and catacomb paintings, indicate this story was one of the first narratives depicted in Christian art. These artistic expressions reveal important clues about the early church's theological imagination.

"Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and events as announcing and prefiguring the ministry of Jesus or the church," writes Hornik. "Their interpretation of the book of Jonah was inspired by Jesus' mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders demanding a prophetic sign."

Their demand followed Jesus' healing of a man's withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14), curing crowds of sick people (12:15), and returning speech and sight to a demoniac (12:22-23). By asking for a "sign," the religious leaders were not seeking additional miraculous healings; even Beelzebul can perform miracles and wonders, they charged (12:24)! Instead, they demanded an

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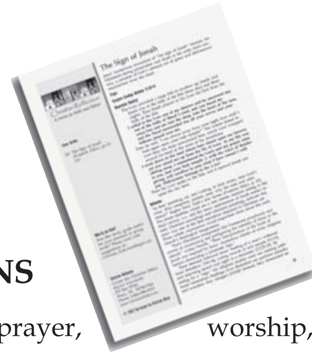

These six study guides integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in the *Mysticism* issue.

### What is a Mystic?
To dwell in God's love is an experience that lures and invites us. We hear of remarkable people—in the Bible and elsewhere—who pour themselves out for God. But can we be like them? What is the cost of coming so close to God that we want to give our lives to him? Will we be willing to pay it?

### How Mystics Hear the Song
Mystics show the power of the Song of Songs to shape our understanding of life with God. They give us hope that our languishing love can be transformed into radical eros—a deep yearning that knows only the language of intimate communion, the song of the Bridegroom and his Bride.

### Loosening Our Grip
Julian of Norwich offers an alternative to our desire to control the world: What if the cross and resurrection of Jesus really define the pattern of divine action in human history? What if compassion, understood as the embrace of suffering, is the soil from which human action should grow? Then, perhaps, we could begin to loosen our death grip on the reins of history.

### Prophetic Mysticism
Simone Weil is an edifying and brilliant example of a Christian who embodied both the mystical and prophetic elements of the faith. If her ideas offer us glimpses of the import of justice, her life more fully discloses its meaning. Her passion for truth and justice can ignite a spark in our hearts.

### The Mystic and the Church
Evelyn Underhill attempted to reconcile the inherent tension between mysticism and institutional religion. Her sympathy for mysticism nuanced her understanding of what it means to participate in the Body of Christ and was the basis for her ongoing critique of the foibles of the "visible church."

### Improving our Seeing and Listening
We must admit that we are not good at listening to God and seeing the world as God sees. Our culture does not help: it catches us up in busyness and distracts us with raucous noise and glaring lights. How will we recover our attentiveness which is essential to serving God in today's world?

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**Who are the Christian mystics and why do they matter today? What can we learn only from them about love of God, service to the poor, and the life of discipleship? Our contributors help us to explore the mystics' invitation "to walk into the world and be unleashed to care unselfishly."**

When Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., attended our Wednesday evening church supper, more people than usual filled the fellowship hall to meet the unassuming Peruvian priest whom some have called "the father of liberation theology." In his brief meditation after the meal, Father Gutiérrez startled everyone with his first words: "To truly serve the poor, we need the heart of a mystic. Unless we have the heart of a mystic, we may help the poor, but we will not truly love them."

Who are the Christian mystics? What can we learn only from them about love of God, service to the poor, and the life of discipleship? Emilie Griffin explores these questions in *Toward a Deeper and Godlier Love* (p. 11), even as she addresses our wariness about the mystics. "Why are we sometimes afraid?" she asks. "Do we find mystics rare and strange because they give themselves completely to God?"

Griffin emphasizes that mystical experience is a gift from God, not a human accomplishment; nevertheless, we can adopt some of the mystics' practices. For instance, they can teach us spiritually transforming ways of reading Scripture, Dennis Tucker suggests in *How the Mystics Hear the Song* (p. 20). Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross illustrate the power of the Song of Songs to shape our understanding of life with God. "They give us hope that our languishing love someday will be transformed into radical eros—a deep, abiding yearning that knows only the language of intimate and intense communion, the song of the Bride-

groom and his Bride." Teresa's transforming experience of this intense love is elegantly depicted in Bernini's masterwork, *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. As Heidi Hornik observes in *Yearning for God* (p. 60), the sculptor "has listened with his heart to Teresa's words and translated them into a powerful image of a woman overtaken by the love of the Holy Spirit of God."

And the mystics can repair our love for other people and the world. In the writings of Julian of Norwich, Frederick Bauerschmidt finds a salutary correction to our modern, controlling, and destructive stance toward evil. "We want solutions that will fix the evil we see—an incurable illness, a broken spinal cord, or an evil dictatorship," he notes in *Loosening Our Grip* (p. 29). "What Julian proposes instead is that we embrace the mystery of suffering. Only from within that embrace can action grow that truly accords with God's love." Alex Nava, in a similar way, is inspired by the social activism of the twentieth-century Christian mystic, Simone Weil. "She is precisely the type of thinker that we should pick up to read because she helpfully combines perspectives that we hold apart in unhealthy separation—such as mysticism and prophetic thought, spirituality and politics, and theory and practice," he urges in *Prophetic Mysticism* (p. 37).

"How does [mystical] contemplation prepare us to increase the love of God and of neighbor among humankind?" wonders Glenn Hinson in *Improving Our Seeing and Listening* (p. 77). Our culture "distracts us with raucous noise and glaring lights," Hinson observes. "Ours is the age of uncollectedness and mindlessness." Contemplation can help us recover our attentiveness which is essential to serving God in today's world.

Not only can we adopt the mystics' practices in our lives, Betty Talbert writes in *The Transparent Self* (p. 67), but we may see God through their lives. "True mystical experience changes the self, making it transparent before God and allowing God's light to shine through to others. It calls for an appropriate faithful response on the part of Christian recipients." St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi are two such transparent selves through whom many Christians have glimpsed the love of God and been inspired to love the world. In *Radiant with Great Splendor* (p. 56), Heidi Hornik explores Bellini's depiction of Francis' humility and love for all nature in *St. Francis in Ecstasy*. St. Clare's example is the subject of a fascinating contemporary work by Leah Rene Gregoire, *The Death of St. Clare.* "St. Clare became an exemplar for medieval women through her commitments to follow the Holy Spirit, live the teachings of St. Francis, and abandon every wish for temporal things," Hornik notes in *Surrounded by Witnesses* (p. 58). "Through her remarkable service to others, she drew closer to God."

Burt Burleson's service of worship (p. 50) allows the mystics' writings on obedience and love to draw us together into adoration of the living God. "To walk into the world and be unleashed to care unselfishly, / to offer presence undefiled by greed or fear or love beguiled, / O God, this is our deepest prayer, O God, this is our deepest prayer," writes Burleson in

a new hymn that serves as the concluding prayer. The beautiful music, DAYSPRING, is contributed by his good friend Kurt Kaiser (p. 47).

Whenever and wherever mysticism has been "divorced from all institutional expression," Evelyn Underhill once observed, "it tends to become strange, vague, or merely sentimental." In her lifelong study of mysticism, she became increasingly aware of the Church's role in structuring the mystics' practice and the mystics' role in reforming a culture-distracted Church, as Dana Greene explains in *The Mystic and the Church* (p. 70). "For the reality of the Church does not abide in us; it is not a spiritual Rotary Club," Underhill wrote. "Its reality abides in the One God, the ever-living One whose triune Spirit fills it by filling each one of its members."

"Should Christian ministers and deacons and teachers be more like mystics than prophets?" asks Brent Beasley in *Do You Love Me?* (p. 63). He finds the answer in Jesus' haunting question to Simon Peter, "Do you love me?" Beasley writes, "As I read this biblical story, I realize that I know what I am supposed to believe, I know how to be obedient, I know how to be busy at good things, and I have well-informed opinions on the burning ethical issues of our day. But I do not know how to be in love with Jesus."

The renewed interest in the lives and works of Christian mystics, especially among a general audience, "may result from a need within the Church at large—a hunger for a radical encounter with the presence of the Triune God," Yolanda Robles speculates in *Meeting Christian Mystics* (p. 85). She praises three books—Ursula King's *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages*, Bernard McGinn and Patricia Ferris McGinn's *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Visions of the Spiritual Masters*, and Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman's anthology, *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*—that help us recover this part of Christianity's legacy. As we study the lives and works of the mystics, she hopes, "we may yet learn to embody a prophetic stance within the world while at the same time growing in our awareness and love for God."

Finally, in *Why the Mystics Matter* (p. 89), Michael Sciretti wonders if "twenty-first century men and women living in a globalized, individualistic, and technocratic world can learn anything from these mystics." In reviewing three books—Emilie Griffin's *Wonderful and Dark is This Road: Discovering the Mystic Path*, Dorothee Soelle's *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* by Dorothee Soelle, and Frederick Bauerschmidt's *Why the Mystics Matter*—Sciretti discovers "we must be careful not to turn to mystics for purely pragmatic reasons, such as to cope with the problems of the modern world." For, as Bauerschmidt concludes, the mystics "matter because they can help us see and receive the deep mystery that pervades the world. They matter because they can carry us into the depths of divine love."

# Toward a Deeper and Godlier Love

BY EMILIE GRIFFIN

**To dwell in God's love is an experience that lures and invites us. We hear of remarkable people—in the Bible and elsewhere—who pour themselves out for God. But can we be like them? What is the cost of coming so close to God that we want to give our lives to him? And will we be willing to pay it?**

*What is mysticism, and why are we hearing so much about it lately?* The question was raised at a United Methodist church in Natchitoches, Louisiana, where I was facilitating a Sunday night series on prayer and the spiritual life. I was surprised. I had said little or nothing about mystics or mysticism. "Mysticism" is a term I use sparsely. These pleasant, studious women had been paying closer attention than I realized.

Yet I was secretly pleased by the question. It was the same question I had raised thirty years before when I was yearning to know about the spiritual life. That question had driven me into a bookstore near Columbia University in New York City to buy a copy of Evelyn Underhill's slender book I had glimpsed in the window: *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People.*

"What makes you think we are hearing so much about mysticism lately?" I countered. The questioner (and several others) had recently read about women and mysticism in a church magazine. Still they pressed me to know more.

"A mystic is a person who is very close to God," I began, "one who is far advanced in the spiritual life. But sometimes the word sounds strange to us because it isn't in the Bible. There *are* mystics in the Bible—Abraham,

Moses, the prophets, and certainly Paul—but the word 'mystic' doesn't come in until the year A.D. 500."

I did not think they wanted a history of mysticism, but rather an answer to a much more urgent question: "Can I be a mystic? What does mysticism have to do with me?"

To dwell in the love of God is deeply attractive, an experience that lures and invites us. We hear of remarkable people—in the Bible and elsewhere—so beloved of God that they want to move mountains for him. We hear of men and women who pour themselves out for God. We hear of them and admire them. But can we be like them? And what will be the cost of coming so close to God that we want to give our lives to him? What is the price? And will we be willing to pay it?

In my account of the spiritual life, *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer*, I described seven moods or phases in the life of prayer. One of these moods I called "fear of heights," by which I meant not only fear of a spiritual high, but rather the fear of what God may ask of those he calls close to him.[1]

Why are we sometimes afraid? We notice how certain men and women have been transformed by grace. We see how these grace-filled men and women are willing to live completely for God. We know that many of Christ's first apostles went to their deaths for his name. We know that many even today are so filled to the brim with Christ that they are called to difficult missions, demanding tasks, even to the point of death: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Edith Stein come to mind at once.

Is this why some are wary of mysticism? Do we find mystics rare and strange because they give themselves completely to God?

### WHAT MAKES US WARY?

Not long ago, while working on a short anthology of Underhill's writing, I wrote to my friend John Williams at his home outside London via e-mail. He had a lifelong interest in mysticism and was well-read on the subject. I mentioned that many people I knew were wary of the word "mysticism," preferring to speak of "contemplation" instead. His reply, entitled "Mysticism and…," on October 7, 2001, was sharp:

> About mysticism: why are people wary of the word? Too strong? It is what it is. Contemplation is usually a part of being a mystic but I was taught while studying the Spanish mystics (St. Teresa de Avila, St. John of the Cross, possibly Fray Luis de Leon) that truly to become one with God (the aim of the true mystic) a lot more is needed. The second edition of the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines "mysticism" as "the beliefs or mental tendencies characteristic of mystics; belief in the possibility of union with or absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender; belief in or reliance on the possibility of spiritual apprehension of

> knowledge inaccessible to the intellect." I remember that a lot of commentators and writers I read thought that a true mystic fits into a certain physical/mental/psychological/spiritual profile. Not everyone can become one….
>
> Sorry to rabbit on, but I just don't think you can equate contemplation and mysticism. They are steps on the same journey, but millions more can contemplate, or learn how to, than can become a true mystic. That is something that cannot be learnt.

Though my friend John Williams was no theologian, he had struck on precisely the point that fits perfectly with a theologically Christian view of mysticism. This state of intimate communion with God that sets mystics apart is a gift of grace.

The mystics do not ask to be mystics. They want to know God as deeply as they can. And they know their limits. They admit their flaws and sinfulness, their need of God's redeeming grace. They come as beggars to the throne, not saying, "Lord, please make me a mystic," but rather, "Lord, I want to know you better."

I would agree with John Williams, as with many other commentators on mysticism, that contemplation is not mysticism, but a step along the way. At the same time, those who are called to prayer, contemplative prayer, and (perhaps ultimately) mystical prayer must choose to accept the gift. People like these (on the way to being mystics) have opened themselves up to the practice of the spiritual life, including Christian forms of meditation and prayer.

## A CAUTIONARY LETTER

In "Christian Meditation: A Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith offers a few cautions for Christians who are attracted to Eastern meditation.[2] "The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be 'mastered' by any method or technique. On the contrary, we must always have our sights fixed on Jesus Christ, in whom God's love went to the cross for us and there assumed even the condition of estrangement from the Father (cf. Mark 13:34). We therefore should allow God to decide the ways he wishes to have us participate in his love."

The letter on Christian meditation carefully states that most of the great religions have sought union with God and also have suggested ways to go about finding that union. Quoting from the Vatican Council document, *Nostra Aetate*, the letter reads: "Just as 'the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,' neither should these ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian." At the same time the letter voices a concern about experimentation on the part of Christians whose spiritual lives are not well formed.

From the earliest times, these church fathers seem to be saying, the church has advised the practice of *sentire cum ecclesia*—that is, thinking with the church. Spiritual masters or guides, following this practice, warn and caution their pupils against inappropriate teachings and practices; at the same time, the spiritual master leads his or her pupil into the life of prayer by example, heart to heart, seeking always the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

"With regard to mysticism," the letter continues, "one has to distinguish between the gifts of the Holy Spirit (mentioned in Galatians 5) and the charisms granted by God in a totally gratuitous way. The former are something which every Christian can quicken in himself by his zeal for the life of faith, hope and charity." The document refers to the Apostle Paul's cautions in 1 Corinthians 12:14-26 that the variously gifted members of the body of Christ should care for one another. It also points out that the gifts of the Spirit are not the same as extraordinary mystical graces (Romans 12:3-21).

I do not find it strange that contemporary people are deeply attracted by mystical prayer, with its promise of a deeper knowledge of God's love. The stress and pressure of modern society and its demands, the emptiness and bankruptcy of many contemporary values and opinions, the sense of uncertainty and insecurity—all of these drive us (if we receive and welcome the grace) deeper into the heart of God. And the mystics show us what the heart of God is like: generous, compassionate, and overflowing with comfort and joy.

## WHAT IS A MYSTIC?

In the Western tradition, the mystical life is focused on union with or intimacy with God. Historically, the term "mystic" is drawn from the Greek word *mystikos*, which refers to one who has special knowledge. The term is applied to someone remarkable, someone spiritually advanced. For most of us, the term "mystic" suggests a person who has ecstatic experiences, visions, and other spiritual gifts. Yet I am sure this definition is too narrow. There are many quiet, unrecognized mystics, mystics who fly below the radar. They are close to God, transformed by that relationship, but may never look like "mystics" in the eyes of others. In fact, being a mystic has little to do with visions or ecstasies. Instead, a mystic is a person far advanced in the spiritual life, one who very likely spends time in prayer and worship with a disciplined regularity. Wouldn't such a definition include a large number of people? Not only that, but also no formal process exists to identify the mystics. The title of "mystic" is awarded by an informal consensus, a common opinion.

Today it has become commonplace to speak of the spiritual life as a journey, or sometimes a "walk," with Christ. Although those who are plunged into the life of the Spirit may not have enough objectivity to describe where they are on that journey, the terminology is still useful. Early Christian thinkers suggest that the spiritual life is a recognizable path often

described in terms of awakening, purgation, illumination, and union. Most of us receive that wisdom and abide by it. We are glad to know that a path exists and anticipate what may lie ahead. But spiritual directors and guides continually remind us that the grace of God is highly unpredictable. God's plan for each person is unique to that person. The idea of recognized stages is reassuring, but it should not be confining. No one should be trying to second-guess God's leading: "Where am I on the path? Am I out of the purgative stage yet and into the illuminative way?" Usually spiritual teachers say that beginners in prayer get a great infusion of joy and delight, followed after awhile by a time of dryness. That may happen for most of us, but there really are no rules about the spiritual life. It is an adventure into uncharted waters.

### WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE MYSTICS

Evelyn Underhill suggests that the mystics are lamps to our feet, inspiring us to know the love of God firsthand. She calls them "expert mountaineers."[3] Many mystics write and speak passionately about a great love that has been poured out on them. Certain biblical texts give evidence of God's love and tenderness. Consider God's words to us in Jeremiah: "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3). Similar outpourings are found in Hosea 11 and in the Gospel of John. But the mystics (in many centuries) are not just *reading* about this love. They are experiencing it and giving witness of that intense love and friendship. They invite us to come closer to God, to risk experiencing such love, to be transformed by God's affections.

We are inclined to suppose that most mystics lived hundreds of years ago. Possibly we think so because the mystics *we have heard of* lived far in the past: Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, and her younger colleague, John of the Cross, widely known for his teaching on "the dark night of the soul." Yet many remarkable Christians of more recent date are truly mystics. I think of Thomas Kelly and Rufus Jones. These profound Christian writers are both twentieth-century Quakers. Frank Laubach, another Protestant spiritual giant, wrote a book called *Letters of a Modern Mystic.* Mind you, these servants of God would never seek the title, but they are just as intense and holy as those seventeenth-century figures, the Quaker prophet George Fox or the metaphysical Anglican divine George Herbert.

**I do not find it strange that contemporary people are deeply attracted by mystical prayer, with its promise of a deeper knowledge of God's love. The mystics show us what God is like: generous, compassionate, and overflowing with comfort and joy.**

## ARE THE MYSTICS BEYOND US?

For those overloaded with day-to-day responsibilities, the idea of becoming a mystic seems far from attainable. Many of us may want a deep relationship with God but feel that the mystic path demands too much. Such reluctance may be a kind of wisdom; it is not desirable to set for oneself impossible goals. We should not attempt the spiritual life as if we could (under our own steam) achieve a high level of greatness. Although a certain discipline is good, spiritual transformation depends upon the grace of God and comes as pure gift. It is best to stick to the gospel teachings about humility, adopting the tax collector's attitude rather than the attitude of the Pharisee.

Even so, I am moved by the words of C. S. Lewis, who was reticent about the inner life. Protesting that he was "not the man to speak" about such matters, he said this about the mystical knowledge of God:

> All that can be said here is that even on those high levels, though something goes from man to God, yet all, including this something, comes from God to man. If he rises, he does so lifted on the wave of the incoming tide of God's love for him. He becomes nothing in that ascension. His love is perfected by becoming, in a sense, nothing. He is less than a mote in that sunbeam, vanishes, not from God's sight, but from ours and his own, into the nuptial solitude of the love that loves love, and in love, all things.[4]

Nuptial solitude! Does that sound like the hale, hearty English professor who gathered his friends for a literary pub-crawl and loved long walks in the countryside and large cups of tea? The fact is that we ordinary men and women are among God's chosen, and the Lord wants to speak most intimately to our hearts. In his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," Lewis speaks in similar extravagant language about how we are to become gods and goddesses in the life to come.[5]

## A MYSTICISM OF SERVICE

Both Thomas Merton and Karl Rahner, modern Catholic thinkers, insist on a mysticism of ordinary living. For Merton, the incarnation has sanctified all of human life. Far from taking the contemplative person above and beyond the ordinary, contemplation, if it is authentic, roots the human being in the ordinary. The ordinary routine of daily life becomes the texture of contemplation for the devoted Christian. Merton insists there is a "latent, or implicit, infused dimension to all prayer." Thus Merton gives us a valuable insight into the possibility of an ordinary or hidden mysticism. He calls it "masked contemplation."

Perhaps this "masked contemplation" is like what John Wesley saw as "a mysticism of service," that is to say, a close friendship with Christ which expresses itself in love of neighbor.[6] Merton sees the hidden or "masked"

contemplative as one who finds God in active service to the poor, the despised, the people at the margins of life. These "masked contemplatives" do not have the luxury to spend long hours in silence and solitude, but their mystical encounter with Jesus comes in service to the littlest and the least. They are mystics, perhaps, without knowing it, for they are fully in touch with the heart of God. Nevertheless, their mysticism is authentic.[7]

In different language Karl Rahner makes a similar claim: everyone is called to the immediacy of God's presence. A supernatural, graced, "anonymously Christian" mysticism may even exist outside of Christianity; that is to say, Christ himself may be working outside of established Christianity to be in touch with mystics (known and unknown) in all parts of the world. Rahner sets no limits on the power of God.

Rahner writes: "In every human being…there is something like an anonymous, unthematic, perhaps repressed, basic experience of being orientated to God, which is constitutive of man in his concrete make-up (of nature and grace), which can be repressed but not destroyed, which is 'mystical' or (if you prefer a more cautious terminology) has its climax in what the older teachers called infused contemplation."[8]

This is no claim of universalism. Rahner says that God is everywhere at work, and everywhere takes the divine initiative. He does not say that all human beings equally recognize and respond to that call. But Rahner does not envision a mysticism of inwardness alone. Instead, he sees a mystical dimension in many aspects of living, a mysticism of eating, drinking, sleeping, walking, sitting, and other everyday events. Beyond these instances, Rahner sees Christ coming to meet us in our loneliness, our rejections, our unrequited loves, and our faith in the face of death.

**Far from taking the contemplative person above and beyond the ordinary, contemplation, if it is authentic, roots the human being in the ordinary. The ordinary routine of daily life becomes the texture of contemplation for the devoted Christian.**

## MYSTICISM STILL MATTERS

To speak of mystics today is to risk misunderstanding. A Jesuit scholar, Thomas Corbishley, has noted "a bewildering variety" in definitions and strains of mysticism. Many Christians (mistakenly, I think) associate mystics exclusively with cults and Eastern religions, ignoring our long Christian centuries of intimate union with God in Jesus Christ. Such a view is too limited. In biblical history, in the early Christian communities, in later Christianity, and in the church of today, mysticism still matters, for it brings us close to God who whispers and guides.

It is wrong, though commonplace, to equate mysticism with visions and ecstasies. A better interpretation may be found in the writings of Dallas Willard, a Baptist, who speaks of God's guidance as a reality in contemporary life. Willard writes eloquently of the way God speaks to us; he insists upon the Christian life as graced "renovation of the heart."[9]

Other twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christian writers speak of the mystical life, always with some modesty. I am thinking of such writers as Henri Nouwen and Richard Rohr, both Roman Catholics, and Richard Foster, a Quaker, who has renewed current interest in the many spiritual disciplines practiced by Christians in all centuries. In his book, *Streams of Living Water,* Foster describes six Christian traditions, all of which are rooted in Christ. One of the six is the Contemplative, or Prayer-Filled, Life.[10]

Caroline Stephen (1834-1909), a Quaker, has written: "A true mystic believes that all men have, as he himself is conscious of having, an inward life, into which as into a secret chamber, he can retreat at will. In this inner chamber he finds a refuge…from the multitude of cares and pleasures and agitations which belong to the life of the senses and the affections; from human judgments; from all change, and chance, and turmoil, and distraction. He finds there, first repose, then an awful guidance; a light which burns and purifies; a voice which subdues; he finds himself in the presence of his God."[11]

How like Paul's words to the Athenians: "God…is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28).

## NOTES

1 Emilie Griffin, *Clinging: the Experience of Prayer* (Wichita, KS: Eighth Day Books, 2003). I spoke of the first gift of oneself: *beginning*. The most perfect Christian, says John Henry Newman, is "ever but beginning" and comes home again like the Prodigal Son to be forgiven again and again. I spoke of *yielding* as a further phase of prayer. I mentioned *darkness*—times of dryness and God seeming far off, well described in the Psalms and elsewhere. I spoke of *transparency* (sometimes called "illumination") as a phase of prayer in which the universe seems lighted up from within. The overarching metaphor I used for prayer was *clinging*, again a term found in the Psalms and used by the Hebrew mystics. I spoke of *spiritual friendship* as one of the seven moods of prayer, using Shakespeare's comparison in *Hamlet*, "hoops of steel": "Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, / grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."

2 *Christian Meditation: A Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued over the signatures of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect, and Alberto Bovone, titular archbishop of Caesarea in Numidia, secretary, October 15, 1989.

3 Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: New American Library, 1955), 448.

4 C. S. Lewis, "Agape," in audio recording, *Four Talks on Love* (Atlanta, GA: The Episcopal Radio TV Foundation, no date).

5 "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses." C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses,* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 18.

6 "A mysticism of service" is Robert Tuttle's term, his way of describing Wesley's attraction to the mystics and his reservations about certain of their teachings. The term Wesley commonly uses for spiritual transformation is "Christian perfection." See Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1989).

7 Harvey Egan describes Merton's idea of the hidden contemplative in *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 58-60, and *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1984), 236-237.

8 Egan, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?* 98-99. Also see *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition,* 246-247.

9 Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) and *The Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003).

10 Richard J. Foster is the author of *A Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1979) and many other books on spiritual formation and transformation. He is the founder of the infra-church Christian renewal movement known as Renovare', a Latin word meaning "to renew."

11 Emilie Griffin and Douglas V. Steere, eds., *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 122.

**EMILIE GRIFFIN**
*is writer and editor of more than a dozen books on Christian belief and practice.*

# How Mystics Hear the Song

BY W. DENNIS TUCKER, JR.

**Mystics illustrate the power of the Song of Songs to shape our understanding of life with God. Can our languishing love be transformed into radical eros—a deep yearning that knows only the language of intimate communion, the song of the Bridegroom and his Bride?**

The language of the Song of Songs—so replete with sexual imagery and not so subtle innuendos that it leaves modern readers struggling with the text's value (much less its status as Scripture)—proved theologically rich for the patristic and medieval interpreters of the book. Rather than avoiding the difficult imagery present in the Song, they deemed it to be suggestive for a spiritual reading of the biblical text.

In the Middle Ages, more "commentaries" were written on the Song of Songs than any other book in the Old Testament. Some thirty works were completed on the Song in the twelfth century alone.[1] This tells us something about the medieval method of exegesis. Following the lead of earlier interpreters, the medieval exegetes believed the Bible had spiritual meaning as well as a literal meaning. From this they developed a method of interpretation to uncover the "fourfold meaning of Scripture": the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the mystical.[2] Medieval interpreters pressed beyond the literal meaning to discover additional levels of meaning.

## A MONASTIC APPROACH

Before we look at how three great mystics in the Christian tradition—Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross—made use of the Song, let's consider a larger issue: Why did the Song generate such personally intense reflections in the works of the mystics?

The form and focus of "monastic commentaries" in the medieval period was well suited for a spiritual reading of the Song. The writers tended to prefer an individual, personal interpretation of a text instead of a collective

interpretation.[3] Thus, monastic commentaries on the Song concentrated on the relationship between Christ (the Bridegroom) and the soul (the Bride), rather than Christ and the church universal.[4] In addition, the love of God was a primary theme in these commentaries, surpassing notions of faith or revealed truth. The graphic content of the Song as a "love song" was a rich source for reflecting on this theme. Yet in the medieval commentaries the emphasis usually was on the human response to divine love, not on divine love alone. God's love was assumed while our response to such love became the subject of intense reflection.

Perhaps the Song of Songs received significant attention precisely because it is a wedding song. For medieval interpreters the wedding day represented a liminal state, a threshold between betrothal and sexual union that mirrored their existence as monastics. As Denys Turner explains, they sensed that their "life of partial withdrawal from the world situated them at a point of intersection between this world and the next, between time and eternity, between dark and light, between anticipation and fulfillment."[5] Thus the wedding day envisioned in the Song became symbolic of the monastic life. All of life is a liminal moment—living in this world, yet longing for the next. The language of anticipation and fulfillment in the Song was an ideal vehicle for expressing the monastic perspective. Its imagery is fluid enough to convey the tension between the "now" and the "not yet" of the spiritual life.

Contemporary readers of the Song are plagued by modern ideas of the erotic. For the monastic writers, however, *eros* had a richer meaning, that of yearning. Even as the Bridegroom longs for his bride, so too did these writers yearn for the "kisses of his mouth" (Song of Songs 1:2). Indeed they welcomed the language of *eros*, of yearning, as an apt way to describe the human response to God's love.

Bernard of Clairvaux and Teresa of Avila reflected on the Song in the style and manner just described, in order to illuminate the fundamental aspects of the spiritual life. Although John of the Cross did not write a commentary on the Song, he allowed its language and imagery to mingle freely with his own prayers to the Beloved.

## BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Bernard, who became an abbot at the young age of twenty-four, composed eighty-six sermons on the Song over a period of eighteen years to instruct his order, a twelfth-century Benedictine reform movement known as the Cistercians of Clairvaux.[6] As we might expect in a commentary in the monastic tradition, his sermons are not exegetical but are in the tradition of *lectio divina* (or divine reading)—a careful listening to Scripture "with the ear of our hearts" as Benedict says in the Rule for these communities. Bernard notes the original setting of the Song and concludes, "here too are expressed the mounting desires of the soul, its marriage song, an exultation of spirit poured forth in figurative language pregnant with delight" (*Ser-*

*mon* 4:8). The setting as well as the text of the Song become occasions for thinking about the love of God and, hence, for devotional reflection.

The primary task for Bernard was not so much "to explain words as it is to influence hearts" (*Sermon* 16:1). He did not try to write an exegesis of the text or a theological synthesis (in the manner of the Scholastic theologians), but "to teach thirsting souls how to seek the one by whom they themselves are sought" (*Sermon* 84:7). Without dismissing either the literal or allegorical methods of interpretation, Bernard explored the benefits of a moral reading of the Song.

**Reading the Song, Bernard of Clairvaux suggests, can lead the "thirsting soul" to rediscover the power of love—redirecting our love back to God and restoring (with God's grace) our ability to love generously.**

A careful and reflective reading of the Song, he suggests, can lead the "thirsting soul" to rediscover the power of love. Through this programmatic reading, Bernard seeks to redirect our love back to God and restore with the aid of God's grace our ability to love generously. "What a great thing is love, provided always that it returns back to its origin," he writes; "flowing back again into its source, it acquires fresh strength to pour itself forth once again" (*Sermon* 83:4). Thus, union with God is a homecoming of sorts, as one's languishing and desiccated spirit returns home to find new life in the deep waters of God's great love. But, he notes, just when we think we are the ones who have made this homecoming journey, we discover that it is not us at all—it is God:

> I could not perceive the exact moment of his arrival. He did not enter by the senses, but whence did he come? Perhaps he did not enter at all…. But I found him closer to me that I to myself. How can I perceive his presence within me? It is full of life and efficacy and no sooner has he entered than my sluggish soul is awakened. He moves, and warms, and wounds my heart, hard and stony and sick though it be. It is solely by the movement of my heart that I understand that he is there and I realize the power of his action. (*Sermon* 74:6)

Through reflection on the Song, we discover that the journey to God's love does not consist in finding a path, as much as in being found on the path by the Bridegroom who passionately seeks his bride.

Like many of the medieval mystics, Bernard proffers a vision of the soul's ascent to experience God. His point of departure is the bold proclamation that opens the bride's *epithalamium*, or love song: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (Song of Songs 1:2). For Bernard, the bride is

the "thirsting soul," and the kiss is a metaphor for union with God. Yet to receive the kiss, he suggests, we must approach the Bridegroom in appropriate fashion:

> It is my belief that to a person so disposed, God will not refuse that most intimate kiss of all, a mystery of supreme generosity and ineffable sweetness. You have seen the way that we must follow, the order of the procedure: first, we cast ourselves at his feet, we weep before the Lord who made us, deploring the evil we have done. Then we reach out for the hand that will lift us up, that will steady our trembling knees. And finally, when we shall have obtained these favors through many prayers and tears, we humbly dare to raise our eyes to his mouth, so divinely beautiful, not merely to gaze upon it, but—I say with fear and trembling—to receive its kiss. (*Sermon* 3:5)

Though the path to the divine kiss is a slow and arduous journey, it begins and ends in God's presence. The moment of ascent to the face of God is anticipated by numerous moments of "prayer and tears," yet the humble and penitent spirit is steadied by the guiding hand of the Bridegroom who raises the bride to stand before him face to face. Finally at the moment of the kiss, when the soul experiences the face of God, the soul becomes "one spirit with him" (*Sermon* 3:5).

This union with the Divine generates a love bathed in action. "Then once again, having tasted the inebriation of contemplative love," writes Bernard, "[the soul] strives to win souls with its habitual fire and renewed courage" (*Sermon* 58:1). He explains that "love reveals itself, not by words or phrases, but by action and experience" (*Sermon* 70:1). Thus Bernard's moral reflection on the Song is not merely an exercise in our personal experience of God. Such contemplation, no matter how exalted, is never complete unless it leads us to love our neighbors.

### TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa of Avila's brief *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, written to her "sisters" and "daughters in the Lord," was the first treatment of this biblical book by a woman before the twentieth century.[7] Apparently her confessor at the time gave Teresa permission to record her reflections on the Song. Yet her later confessor and a theologian of the Inquisition, Diego de Yanguas, read *Meditations on the Song of Songs* and ordered it burned. She complied, but by this time the nuns had made additional copies that were preserved.

Teresa limits her comments to just a few texts—Song of Songs 1:2; 1:2b; and 2:3-5. Her object, like Bernard's, is not to grasp the literal meaning of the text, but to be seized by the text itself. To this end, she avoids any discussion of the literal context of the book. "I interpret the passage in my own way," she explains, "even though my understanding of it may not be

in accord with what is meant" (*Meditations* 1:8). While Teresa did not believe her instruction supplanted the meanings that the "learned men" and "doctors" had provided, she was certain that the understanding she had received from God would provide "delight and consolation" to the sisters. This two-fold approach to Scripture characterized by humility and delight guides the writing of Teresa throughout her treatment of the Song. As Carole Slade observes, "According to Teresa, women usually advance toward union more quickly than men because education in rational analysis of Scripture, an education available only to men, inhibits rather than enables the enjoyment of Scripture."[8] Thus, Teresa invites us not to explain but to enjoy Scripture as it leads toward divine union.

The love of God is central to the entire work, for Teresa laments that we "practice so poorly the love of God" (*Meditations* 1:5). For her then, the Song requires a moral reading—one that will lead us back from a lack of love, to love most fully realized:

> Along how many paths, in how many ways, by how many methods You show us love! ...[Not] only with [Your] deeds do You show this love, but with words so capable of wounding the soul in love with You that You say them in this Song of Songs and *teach the soul what to say to You*. (*Meditations* 3:14, italics added)

The Song is not merely for our instruction in truth, but it is the pathway to Truth itself. We desperately need to learn the language of love, for "we, inexperienced in loving [God], esteem this love so poorly" (*Meditations* 1:4).

Following Origen and Bernard, Teresa interprets the kiss in Song of Songs 1:2 as a mystical union with God, but she develops this theme in terms of friendship. The kiss of God awakens the soul from its slumber (*Meditations* 5:8) and allows it to enjoy the peace and friendship of the Divine Bridegroom. Because numerous types of false peace may attempt to deceive the soul, Teresa encourages us to remain fervent in prayer, penance, and humility, for the friendship of God will come to those "who beg the Lord for it with continual tears and desires" (*Meditations* 2:30).

Teresa often employs sensory language, particularly the words associated with taste.[9] She sometimes reverses the assumed gender of the Bridegroom in order to attribute maternal characteristics to him (e.g., when she reads Song of Songs 1:2, "your breasts are better than wine"). This extended metaphor illustrates how she shifts the sensory language:

> It seems to the soul it is left suspended in those divine arms, leaning on that sacred side and those divine breasts. It does not know how to do anything more than rejoice, sustained by the divine milk with which its Spouse is nourishing it and making it better…. When it awakens from that sleep and that heavenly inebriation, it remains as though stupefied and dazed and with a holy madness. (*Meditations* 4:4)

Teresa frequently commingles marital and maternal metaphors to express the ecstasy of the soul's union with the Divine. Her sensory language echoes the highly sensual language of the Song itself, suggesting its influence on her and other interpreters who "taste all the words" of the Song (*Meditations* 5:2).

Like Bernard, Teresa sees that divine union must be linked with obedient action. Drawing on the contrast in Song of Songs 2:5, "Sustain me with raisins, / refresh me with apples; / for I am faint with love," she reflects on the relationship between the contemplative life and the active life epitomized by Mary and Martha:

> Martha and Mary never fail to work almost together when the soul is in this state. For in the active—and seemingly exterior—work the soul is working interiorly. And when the active works rise from this interior root, they become lovely and very fragrant flowers.... The fragrance from these flowers spreads to the benefit of many. (*Meditations* 7:4)

This "exteriority" of faith comes to a focus in the final chapter of *Meditations*. Only disciples who both pray with fervent desire and care for their neighbors "imitate the laborious life that Christ lived" (*Meditations* 7:8).

The impassioned language of the Song, suggests Teresa, kindles our emotions when we read it, generating within us a desire for the fullness of experience associated with divine union. And in loving God so intimately, we discover our true life in the peace and friendship of the Divine Bridegroom.

### JOHN OF THE CROSS

John of the Cross, who was trained as a poet at the University of Salamanca, offers a third way of reading the Song. Instead of writing a long commentary like Bernard's or a brief meditation on the text like Teresa's, John appropriates the language and imagery of the Song in his own poetry, most notably *The Spiritual Canticle*.[10]

Many images in the *Canticle* (e.g., wine, water, springs, flowers, gardens, mountains, stages, oils, vineyards, and fruits) mirror the metaphors of the Song. The *Canticle's* overt structure of a dialogue between a Bride and Bridegroom mimics the implied structure of the Song. And similar to the Song, the Bride and Bridegroom are found hiding, fleeting, wounding, seeking, finding, and embracing. John invokes many physical aspects of the lovers' bodies—eyes, heart, hair, breasts, blackness of

**Divine union must be linked with obedient action. Only disciples who both pray with fervent desire and care for their neighbors "imitate the laborious life that Christ lived."**

skin, neck, and arms—to recapture their sense of *eros* or yearning. This excerpt of canticles 34-39 illustrates the nature of John's work:

*Bridegroom*

The small white dove
has brought back the branch to the Ark;
and now the turtle-dove
has found the mate of her longing
on the river's green banks.

She lived alone,
in solitude she made her nest;
in solitude he guided her,
his loved one, he alone,
he, too, wounded by a lonely love.

*Bride*

Rejoice with me, my love
come, see us both one in your beauty,
come to the mountain slope and hill,
where pure waters flow,
with me wend deep in the woods.

Then on to the caverns we press,
hidden so high among the rocks
so well concealed;
there we will enter it
and taste the pomegranate's juice.

There you will let me see
what my soul has longed for;
there you will give me,
there, you, my life,
what you told me of that day.

The air's breathing,
the sweet nightingale's song,
the grove in its loveliness,
in the calm of night,
with a flame that fires without pain.

In poetic form the *Canticle* resembles the Song, but its imagery is recast as an overt love song between the soul and God. No longer just a lyrical ode to a human bride and bridegroom, it employs the language of love to express our longing for divine union and the ecstasy of God's embrace.

## THE SONG RECONSIDERED

The mystics Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross, each in their way, illustrate the power of the Song to shape our un-

derstanding of life with God. Their writings continue to offer insight to modern readers.

Bernard and Teresa demonstrate the significance of the biblical text for shaping their vision of spiritual union. Employing *lectio divina*, or spiritual reading, they open themselves to hear a word *from* God as they seek to consider the Word *of* God. Contrast this to the approach to Scripture in modern biblical studies, which remain firmly entrenched in historical and critical methods. Though these methods provide helpful information, they tend toward an *informational* reading of Scripture rather than a *formational* reading. The mystics believe that while the informational reading of Scripture (or what Origen called an historical or literal reading) is helpful, only the formational reading of Scripture can yield the insights necessary for spiritual transformation. They challenge us to release our grip on an Enlightenment mentality and to lean into the "divine breast," that we might be nourished, "completely drenched in the countless grandeurs of God."[11]

The sexually explicit language of the Song (which can be so problematic for modern readers) allowed the mystics to express their personal yearning for the Divine and to inspire a love of God in those under their care. Only the Song's language of intense and intimate love could convey their longing for and separation from the Divine Bridegroom. Our own expressions of a longing for, and love of, the Divine Bridegroom frequently falters. Our language lacks the intensity and intimacy expressed by the Song and invoked by the writers. While our love of God may not be any less than theirs, our ability to articulate such love has surely suffered from our neglect of such rich images. The mystics remind us that what is on our lips most surely expresses what is in our hearts.

In John of the Cross we see the benefits of the three-fold emphasis in Benedictine spirituality on reading Scripture, prayer, and "holy reading" (or reading spiritual writings that transform us by the work of the Spirit).[12] So shaped is he by this spirituality, that in the *Canticle* John weaves together the words of Scripture with the words from previous Christian writers into a powerful prayer that expresses the intensity of his love for God. The mystics remind us of the need to find our place within the long history of sisters and brothers who have gone before us—to learn from those who have yearned with the *eros* of the Song, to reflect on those who have ached with the passion of Teresa, and to rejoice with those who have discovered their own song like John. As we dwell with these sisters and brothers, we will find our own voice in this journey toward love.

On the path to faithful living and the journey to divine union, we will discover a "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12) has walked this same path. And in that we may take great hope. Our languishing love someday will be transformed into radical *eros*—a deep, abiding yearning that knows only the language of intimate and intense communion, the song of the Bridegroom and his Bride.

## NOTES

1 For a brief overview of the history of interpretation related to the Songs of Songs, see Roland Murphy, "Patristic and Medieval Exegesis—Help or Hindrance?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981): 505-516. For an extended treatment, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1990).

2 The four meanings of Scripture are also called historical, typological, tropological, and anagogical. For example, beyond its primary historical reference, the Exodus story could be interpreted as (2) an allegory of our redemption through Christ, (3) an injunction for us to turn from sin and to accept God's grace, and (4) our passage from slavery to sin in this world to eternal glory with God. On the nature of medieval exegesis, see the definitive work of Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture, Vol. 1*, translated by M. Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

3 On the nature of the medieval commentary, see Jean Leclercq, "Le commentaire de Gilbert de Stanford sur le Cantique de Cantiques," *Analecta* 1 (1948): 205-238.

4 Earlier interpreters, including Origen, preferred the collective interpretation in reading the Song: the two lovers depicted in the text were understood as Christ and the Church. See R. P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957).

5 Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1995), 20.

6 Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Songs of Songs,* volumes 1-4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1971-1980).

7 Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, volume 2, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980). Her more familiar works, *The Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*, merit sustained attention as well.

8 Carole Slade, "Saint Teresa's *Meditaciones Sobre Los Canteres*: The Hermeneutic of Humility and Enjoyment," *Religion and Literature* 18:1 (Spring 1986), 32.

9 Language associated with the sense of smell appears frequently as well. Teresa writes that during prayer "in the interior of the soul a sweetness is felt so great that the soul feels clearly the nearness of its Lord…. It is as though there were poured into the marrow of one's bones a sweet ointment with a powerful fragrance" (*Meditations* 4:2).

10 John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, revised edition, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

11 Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works*, 4:4.

12 For a helpful presentation of the Benedictine approach, see Joan Chittester, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

**W. DENNIS TUCKER, JR.,**
*is Assistant Professor of Christian Scriptures at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*

# Loosening Our Grip

BY FREDERICK CHRISTIAN BAUERSCHMIDT

**Julian of Norwich offers an alternative to our desire to control the world: What if the cross and resurrection of Jesus really define the pattern of divine action in human history? What if compassion, understood as the embrace of suffering, is the soil from which human action should grow? Then, perhaps, we could begin to loosen our death grip on the reins of history.**

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The twenty-first century is off to an inauspicious start. Since September 11, 2001, the world seems to have shifted into crisis mode. But anxiety and uncertainty are nothing new for the human race. In the late 1970s, Barbara Tuchman wrote a book entitled *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* with the thesis that we could find in the upheavals of the fourteenth century a "mirror" of our own calamitous era. Certainly the fourteenth century, which saw a decades-long war between France and England, a fracturing of the church into two and then three parts under rival Popes, and a plague that killed as many as half of Europe's population, can lay as much claim as our own to being an "age of anxiety." And if we can see in the mirror of the fourteenth century a reflection of our anxiety and uncertainty, perhaps we can also discern in that mirror the resources for hope to sustain us in anxious times.

The writings of Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416), collected in a single book known today as *Showings* or *Revelations of Divine Love*, might not seem at first glance a particularly promising resource. Her writings take a form that will strike many modern readers as bizarre: commentary on a visionary experience that occurred during a serious illness, in which she sees a

crucifix bleed and speak and undergo various other transformations. Further, these writings come from a context that seems alien to our own: Julian's book was composed during the latter half of her life, when she lived in a small two-room structure built into the side of a church in Norwich, the door to which was sealed, with only a window allowing contact to the outside world. In our secularized world of instantaneous communication, Julian might seem quaint at best and delusional at worst, locked away from reality in a kind of spiritual autism. But, to invoke Tuchman's image, the past is important not only because it is a "mirror" of the present, but also because it is "distant," and its very difference from us it can give us a sort of critical distance on our own age, in which we are so immersed that we cannot even notice its pathologies.

### SEEING VISIONS

Save for the book she left behind (in two versions, an earlier short account and a later long account), Julian is one of the many medieval people who are in a sense lost to history. We know almost none of the facts of her life except that she had a visionary experience that led her, at some later point in her life, to become an anchoress—a kind of recluse living in the midst of a city who devoted herself to prayer and contemplation and occasionally acting as a spiritual guide. We do not know if she was ever married or had children, whether she was a nun, or what theological training, if any, she might have had. We do not even know her real name; she is known as "Julian" because she lived in a structure attached to St. Julian's church. What we do know, on the basis of her book, is that she was an extraordinary woman, who dared to write theology in a time and place when women's opinions on the things of God were not held in much account.

Julian divides her revelatory experience into fourteen visions or "shewings," as she called them in her Middle English. Most of these have as their focal point the crucifix that had been placed before her as part of the medieval rites for the dying. In this crucifix, an image that seems to sum up all of the pain and violence of the world, Julian sees an image of immense comfort because she sees in it an image of divine love so all-encompassing that even human sin cannot mar its perfection. The visions manifest God's love in various ways: she sees a small object in her hand that represents all of creation in its littleness in comparison with God; she enters into the wound in Christ's side to discover "a fair, delectable place, large enough for all humanity that shall be saved to rest in peace and in love"; she sees the discoloration of Christ's face at the moment of his dying; she sees Christ reigning in her soul, like a king in his kingdom. She also comes, after years of reflection on the visions, to certain insights that she feels are inspired by the Holy Spirit—a kind of extension of the initial revelation throughout her life: there is no wrath in God, but only in us; our "substance" (what a more technically trained theologian might call the *imago*

*Dei*) is held unfallen within the humanity of Christ; God will work a great deed at the final Judgment that will reconcile God's universal will to save with the reality of human sin. Perhaps most famous today is her insight that "our savior is our true mother in whom we are endlessly borne." Christ is like a mother, who carries us within himself and feeds us with his own body.

Julian finds her revelations comforting, because they speak of divine love, but also troubling, because they conflict with the image she had of God previously as wrathful and punitive. She had been taught that God hated sinners and punished them, but her visions seemed to speak of a God who loved sinners and sought to heal the damage that sin inflicted upon them. This conflict is simply an aspect of a more encompassing tension between what we can know of God now, in our fallen state, and what we will know in the vision of God in eternity. This tension defines the condition of our life in this world, even the life of one who has been granted an extraordinary revelation. Julian writes, "I saw him and sought him; I had him and wanted him."

## TRUSTING GOD'S PROVIDENCE

After years of reflecting on her visions, Julian derives a seemingly simple, even puerile, message: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." At one point she expands on this: "And I saw truly that nothing is done by happenstance nor by chance, but all things by the foreseeing wisdom of God: if it be happenstance or chance in the sight of human beings, this is because of our blindness and our lack of foresight." Seeming to speak from within an unquestioning faith in divine providence, this seems hardly adequate to address the complex anxieties and uncertainties of the twenty-first century, which demand some evidence that such providence is in fact exercised. Even if we are convinced that God is on our side, we live in an era in which we believe that we must take in hand the reins of our own historical destiny in order to make things turn out according to God's will. Julian, in contrast, seems to prescribe inactivity in the face of life's calamities. When she considers the great act by which God will make all things well, she writes, "Our Lord God revealed that a deed shall be done, and he himself shall do it, and I shall do nothing but sin, and my sin shall not hinder his goodness working."

We might think that people in the fourteenth century relied on prayer and providence because they did not have sufficient technological means to determine their own destinies. But the matter is more complex than this. Julian was well acquainted with techniques that, even if they could not secure peace or health in this life, were seen as a way of securing the grace needed to attain salvation after this life. She calls such techniques "means," that is, the various ways in which grace is mediated to us through the common devotions of the late medieval Church: prayers to the precious blood

or the holy cross, requests for the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the other saints, and piety focused on Christ's humanity. She does not reject the use of such devotional techniques, but she says that they must be seen fundamentally as gifts given by God to help us and, therefore, as signs of God's gracious goodness: "it pleases him that we seek him and worship through means, understanding that he is the goodness of them all." In other words, Julian does not reject human activity in the realm of devotion—what we might call the "technology of prayer"—but rejects the view that these devotions give us any measure of control over our salvation. Instead, she locates our activity within the prior act of God.

**To see the world as a self-contained system that we must "work" through technological manipulation is not primarily a philosophical mistake, but a spiritual one. It is a lack of trust that God wills good for us.**

This is significant for Julian because she sees our desire to have control through "technique" as revealing a fundamental distrust in God's goodness. For Julian, the chief problem that we have is not that we do not believe that God is sufficiently powerful or wise to bring about what is best for us. Rather, it is that we do not believe that God loves us sufficiently to will our good. "Some of us believe that God is almighty and may do all, and that he is all wisdom and can do all; but that he is all love and will do all, there we stop short. And this unknowing is what most hinders God's lovers, as to my sight." In other words, if we understood God correctly, we would be freed both from our desire for control and from the unbearable anxiety from which that desire springs.

### UNDERSTANDING GOD'S GOODNESS

The misunderstanding of God against which Julian reacts is one that seems particularly characteristic of the modern world. Already in the late Middle Ages certain theological currents had begun to understand divine power as the absolute capacity to bring things about, a capacity unconstrained by anything except God's own willing. God's will is no longer constrained by God's nature; rather, God's nature is unconstrained will. This tendency of thought reaches its most extreme formulation in early modern thinkers like Descartes, who seem to exempt God even from the laws of logic. It God had wanted to make 2+2=5, he could have done so.

Of course, thinkers like Descartes believe that God has ordained a certain order of things, an order in which 2+2=4, in which objects fall down rather than up, and in which gluttony is a vice rather than a virtue. Furthermore, this order operates with law-like regularity—a regularity that

we can discover through the scientific method. Indeed, scientific, empirical investigation is the *only* way in which we can discover the nature of the order of things, since that order is the result of an entirely arbitrary divine choice. The system of cause and effect that science can investigate offers us a kind of "shelter" from absolute divine omnipotence, a realm from within which we can exercise a sovereign control; through technology we can, as it were, "work the system" that God has put in place. The great irony in all of this is that the radicalization of divine power tends to make God irrelevant to human inquiry. Our task as humans is to investigate a system that God has created, but its origins in God's arbitrary choice we cannot investigate. Indeed, for the most part, modern science proceeds on this assumption of the irrelevance of God.

Julian's remarks about our failure to recognize that God is all-love can be seen as a criticism of all views that exalt divine power to the detriment of divine love. While it is true that God is all-powerful and all-wise, it is no less true that this divine power and wisdom operate within the limits of God's all-loving nature. The order of things in our world is not simply the result of God's absolute, unconstrained choice. Rather, it is the outworking of love and is always in accord with love. To see the world as a self-contained system that we must "work" through scientific investigation and technological manipulation is not primarily a philosophical mistake, but a spiritual one. It is a lack of trust that God wills good for us; it is the view that we are in some sense left on our own to eke out of nature whatever good we can. Of course, in a calamitous time like the fourteenth century, such lack of trust is certainly understandable. Can we really believe that a God who allows war and plague and schism has our best interests at heart? Isn't such a God rather some sort of tyrant, who offers only slim hope of shelter from his wrath through the ecclesiastical system of the intercession of the saints and the grace of the sacraments?

Today we might ask whether or not we can really believe that a God who allows terrorism and AIDS and environmental devastation has our best interests at heart. Are we not, in fact, left on our own to work a system that God has left to run on its own? Today, of course, that system is not the sacramental system of the Church, but the inexorable system of the laws of nature and the will to power. Is it not incumbent upon us to throw ourselves into the various technologies through which power is channeled and, we hope, contained? Given the problems that the human race faces today, is it not irresponsible simply to sit back and say, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well"? What evidence do we have that this is true?

### FOCUSING ON THE CRUCIFIED

For Julian, it is the image of the crucified Jesus that is the focal point of her visions, is her primary "evidence." This, of course, is a peculiar sort of

evidence, as Julian herself realized. Her initial reaction is to presume that she had lost her mind and had been "raving." Even once she had realized that these were genuine revelations, their meaning remained dark and obscure to her. It is only with time and prayer that she could begin to discern that the cross itself is evidence of the divine love that pervades all times, places, and events. It is only when she begins to see that God is not only all-powerful and all-wise, but also all-loving, that the form of the crucified Jesus can be perceived as the form of God's power to make all things well. God repairs the world's pain, not by standing apart and commanding all things to be well, but by entering into that pain and healing our sad history from within through an act of love. The cross shows the paradox of God's defeat of evil through submission to it out of love, and as such is the antidote to our desire to fix things through our mastery of them.

Julian devotes her life to letting this antidote work its way into her soul. But she realizes that in this life we can never fully be healed of the blindness to God's love that is the source of our desire to control events. Put differently, exactly how the love shown on the cross will make well all that is not well will remain God's secret until the final consummation of things. It is only then, Julian says, "when the judgement is given and we all are brought up above," that "we will see clearly in God the secrets that now are hidden from us." It is only then that "none of us will be moved in any way to say 'Lord, if it had been thus, then it would have been completely well'; but we shall all say with one voice, 'Lord, blessed may you be! For it is thus, and it is well.'" The realization of our present blindness to the solution of evil and pain, our inability now to say "it is thus and it is well," is itself the beginning of the healing of our blindness, for it relieves us of the illusion that we have insight sufficient to master events and make them, by our own power, turn out right. The final repair of fallen creation is a work of God that we hope for but cannot anticipate.

This is not, however, a counsel of inaction. Rather, it says that our action ought to conform to what we *do* see of God's work of reparation. And what we do see is the cross. All that we do should be modeled on the paradox of the cross: action shot through with passion, mastery expressed in taking on the form of a slave, and the fulfillment of human life found in the laying down of that life. Julian speaks of this cruciform life as one of "compassion" or of suffering-with, and it is this life which testifies to the presence of Christ within us. When we act in such a way as to enter into the suffering of others, understood as a participation in the suffering of Christ, we act in accordance with what we see of God's great deed of reparation.

### ACTING IN THE WORLD

We hear a lot about compassion today, at least in selected spheres. We hear about compassion manifested in physician-assisted suicide or the euthanasia of severely disabled newborns. We have our compassion appealed

to in order to elicit our support for embryonic stem cell research and to justify military intervention to depose foreign governments that oppress their people. Whatever one may think of the various moral issues raised in these cases, it is clear that this is not what Julian means by compassion. For all of these supposed acts of compassion are really cases where we wish to master suffering rather than entering into it. We want solutions that will fix the evil that we see, whether this is the evil of incurable illness, a broken spinal cord, or an evil dictatorship. What Julian proposes instead is that we embrace the mystery of suffering, and it is only from within that embrace that action can grow that truly accords with God's love.

This is a difficult lesson for us to learn today. Our technological mastery has grown to such an extent that it really does seem to offer us a kind of secular salvation. The pains of life can be taken away; the end of life can be deferred and perhaps even eliminated. These hopes seem more realistic than the pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by offered by religion. Science makes advances every day. Of course, we have no real "evidence" that suffering and death can be definitively conquered by technical means. It is something that we take on faith, because the alternative seems unbearable to contemplate. But is this faith in worldly salvation really any more believable than Julian's faith in a salvation beyond this world? In a way, her faith seems far more realistic in its assessment of our existence here and now, because it accepts the inevitability of suffering and death but sees within them the seeds of a redemptive possibility that goes beyond our capacity to imagine.

**The final repair of fallen creation is a work of God that we hope for but can't anticipate. This is not, however, a counsel of inaction. Rather, it says that our action ought to conform to what we do see of God's work of reparation. And what we do see is the cross.**

Of course the desire to master and control does not belong exclusively to those with a secular worldview. The desire to seize the reins of history and make things turn out right is no less a temptation to those who claim to believe that the world's fate rests in the hands of God. We see religious fundamentalists who are willing to fly planes into buildings in the execution of a holy war against the godless West. We see the world's sole remaining superpower fight a devastating war in the name of its divinely sanctioned mission to spread freedom and democracy. At every turn, it seems, we encounter the swaggering, phony certainty that anxiety and uncertainty often engender. We act in God's name, resolutely and even brutally, to insure that the world conforms to *our* idea of God's will.

Julian offers us an alternative. What if the cross and resurrection of Jesus really do define the pattern of divine action in human history? What if compassion, understood as the embrace of suffering, is the soil from which our human action should grow? Julian realizes that here and now, from within the suffering of human history, we cannot yet say “it is thus, and it is well.” But if we shape our lives around the hope that we one day shall be able to see God’s will in all things, then perhaps even here, even now, we can begin to loosen our death grip on the reins of history, so that with open hands we can receive what God wills to give us.

**FREDERICK CHRISTIAN BAUERSCHMIDT**
*is Associate Professor of Theology at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland.*

# Prophetic Mysticism

BY ALEX NAVA

**In the life and thought of Simone Weil we have an example—and an edifying and brilliant one at that—of a Christian who embodied both the mystical and prophetic elements of the faith. If her ideas offer us glimpses of the import of justice, her life more fully discloses its complete meaning. Her daring passion for truth and justice can ignite a spark in our hearts.**

Susan Sontag describes our age as stained by the nightmare of history. It is fragmented, broken, and deafened by contradictory historical and intellectual experiences. If the term "postmodern" has any meaning for us, it is precisely that the celebrations of reason, confidence in human achievement, and belief in progress have collapsed. Modern history is filled with too much ambiguity and our globe is brimming with too much poverty and violence for us to remain untroubled and naively sanguine.

No wonder, then, that the voices we most appreciate and cherish are the countercultural ones, the prophetic voices that disrupt our complacency and triumphal confidence. The voices of mystics and prophets, of the marginal and afflicted, become for many of us—even when regarded as mad and neurotic—the voices of wisdom and truth. If madness looms over mystics and prophets, these figures also expose the madness of reason and the insanity of much of our politics, economics, and social lives. After all, voices of madness, as Michel Foucault once argued, can be more visionary, real, and lucid than many of the most reasonable of our philosophers and scientists. "Ours is an age," writes Sontag, "which consciously pursues health, and yet only believes in the reality of sickness. The truths we respect are those born of affliction. We measure truth in terms of the cost to the writer in suffering—rather than by the standard of an objective truth to

which a writer's words correspond. Each of our truths must have a martyr."[1] Sontag penned these words with direct reference to Simone Weil.

One can question Simone Weil's sanity: she was extreme in many of her convictions and judgments. She espoused and practiced an extreme of body denial, she was uncompromising in her hatred of Roman civilization and aspects of Judaism, and she spurned any philosophy of happiness and pleasure. There is insanity in much of this. No one can doubt, on the other hand, Weil's sacrifices on behalf of truth, her pursuit of a wisdom born of suffering, her passion for spiritual truths, and her devotion to justice. Weil sought to live the philosophical life with intensity and depth, integrity and compassion. Her vision of philosophy is in accord with the ancient import of the word, "love of wisdom." The modern separation between theory and practice, or reason and spirituality, struck her—as it would most ancient philosophers—as a peculiar and distorted understanding of the meaning of philosophy. She sought to embody and practice the philosophical life. Philosophy was a spiritual discipline for her.

**Christian mysticism is "the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to . . . the immediate or direct presence of God." Mystics describe this intense consciousness in various ways but agree on the immediacy with which they experience God.**

It is for this reason that Weil's life and thought has attracted me for so many years. Her life is as unique and extraordinary, brilliant and mysterious, as her philosophical and theological thought. I think most of us want the guidance of not only great thinkers but of those who have lived fully and authentically, with intensity, love, and justice. There is indeed a particular appeal about intellectuals who offer more than theories of justice or truth, but who provide us with hints and suggestions on how we are to live our lives. If their ideas offer us glimpses of the import of justice, their examples can be gifts that unveil and more fully disclose its complete meaning. It is the union of their ideas with their lives, their daring and uncompromising passion for truth or justice, which has the potential to ignite a spark in our hearts.

### MYSTICS AND PROPHETS

Mystics and prophets are certainly countercultural. They challenge the norms of their time and transgress the border of the reasonable and predictable, of the normal and ordinary. Their pronouncements and judgments are startling and disturbing. They speak truths few want to hear and communicate realities that few can understand. No wonder they often are considered mad and are shunned and persecuted.

If mystics and prophets share these commonalities, there are characteristics that distinguish these two figures from one another. Christian mysticism, for the sake of definition, is a form of spirituality that "concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to…the immediate or direct presence of God."[2] Though mystics describe this intense consciousness in various ways—as vision or union with God (or the cosmos), deification, ecstasy and rapture, auditory communications, otherworldly journeys, birth of the Word in the soul, and so on—they agree on the sense of immediacy with which they experience God.

Of course, some biblical prophets also experienced God in a direct manner—recall Ezekiel's vision of the chariot (Ezekiel 1) and Isaiah's vision of God in the Temple (Isaiah 6:1-8). What distinguishes the prophet from the mystic, however, is the prophet's emphasis on proclaiming the Word of God, usually by rebuking the sins of particular individuals or communities. Even if it is overstated that ethics is the key element of their message, it is not wrong to interpret the prophets as passionate in their concern for the poor and the oppressed, widows and orphans, strangers and aliens. An ethics of justice pervades their proclamations.

Mystics, by contrast, may seem to be preoccupied with ahistorical realities and otherworldly truths. Aesthetics rather than ethics, or a concern with beauty rather than with moral goodness, is prominent in their lives. Many of the great mystics taught a nature-oriented and liturgical form of theology; they encountered the face of God in the beauty, grandeur, and mystery of the cosmos. The prophets regarded this with suspicion: lurking behind the reverence felt for nature or the beautiful, they warned, is the demon of idolatry. If you are looking for God, look here in the face of the other, in the face of the hungry and needy. Beware of your reverence for this particular mountain, this tree, this rock. Fidelity to the God of history, to the God revealed through the Sacred Book and revealed through the events and circumstances of the nation Israel will not be discerned or read in the book of nature. Unknown gods lie beneath rocks and trees.

Though there are real differences between mystics and prophets, most of us recognize a need for both. Even if we are attracted more by one tradition, we can see the wisdom that the other one offers. Sparked by a comment by the theologian David Tracy—that one major task of contemporary theology is to interpret the hyphen in the term "mystical-prophetic"—I have been attracted to thinkers that represent both elements of the Christian tradition, the mystical and prophetic.

I see the need for the mystical all around me—in my college students' insatiable quest for spiritual fulfillment and in the appreciation and reverence for beauty that is manifest in nature, art, liturgy and ritual, or music and dance. I see the wisdom of many mystics in their brilliant philosophical ruminations concerning not only the possibilities but also the limits of language when speaking of the Divine reality, what Meister Eckhart calls the

"God beyond God." I recognize the truth of the mystics' celebration of love—sensual, erotic, and agapic.

The prophets, on the other hand, remind me of the needs of the dispossessed and disenfranchised. Love without justice, they insist, is too cheap and sentimental, too emotional and individualistic. They do not let me forget that God is present in the events of history and exigencies of society, and that I must be vigilant to respond to God in the concrete circumstances of life. The biblical prophets teach a hard truth: that God is manifest in the lives of the afflicted and oppressed and that wisdom is not merely the fruit of learning, but a knowledge born of suffering.

Fortunately, in the life and thought of Simone Weil, we have an example—and an edifying, brilliant one at that—of a Christian who embodied both the mystical and prophetic elements of the faith. Weil helps us to make sense of the hyphen that connects the mystical-prophetic traditions.

## A SAINT "FOR THE PRESENT MOMENT"

Simone Weil's life and philosophy resonates with me for many reasons, but one dimension of her life is especially captivating: her brilliant intellectual achievements joined with a commitment to manual labor, especially factory work. Not only did Weil study the working conditions in the 1920s and 1930s, she also entered the factories to experience firsthand the life of a worker in France. Are her reflections on the conditions of factory work still relevant today, given the many changes in industrial capitalism since the early twentieth century? I think they are very relevant because of the increasingly oppressive and exploitive working conditions in factories in developing countries. She anticipated the concerns that many are expressing now about sweatshop labor in Latin America and Asia. As an increasing number of U.S. companies are moving their enterprises across the border in order to avoid paying livable wages, to avoid decent and safe work conditions, and to escape environmental restrictions, Weil's insights are perspicacious and prophetic.

Make no mistake about it: Weil was a great intellectual, not simply an activist. She was an intellectual, however, who discerned with great lucidity and passion the shortcomings of academic life. When Weil wrote "Intellectual: a bad name, but we deserve it," she stated nicely her ambivalence toward her undeniable intellectual gifts and interests. Gustavo Gutiérrez, who many call a "liberation theologian," is another intellectual in this vein, an academic who finds much that is abstract, unreal, and trite about the self-contained ideas of the academic community. In both of their cases, the world of ideas is only legitimate when it thoughtfully articulates the experiences and struggles of the poor and afflicted and inspires solidarity with such communities and histories.

"Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment," Weil warns. "The

world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-striken town needs doctors."[3] When she says that a new saintliness is required in our time, she has in mind the need for sages who are capable of addressing in thought and action the problems and injustices of our world.

### "POURED OUT LIKE WATER"

At the age of seventeen, Weil wrote an essay on the story that Alexander the Great, while crossing the desert with his army, poured out his allotment of water in order to share his soldiers' suffering. Her comments on this story foreshadow her entire life. "His well-being, if he had drunk, would have separated him from his soldiers," she notes. "Sacrifice is the acceptance of pain, the refusal to obey the animal in oneself, and the will to redeem suffering men through voluntary suffering. Every saint has poured out the water; every saint has rejected all well-being that would separate him from the suffering of other men."[4]

A few years later, while Weil was preparing to take the entrance exam for the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, she was approached by the young Simone de Beauvoir who was fascinated by the reputation of Weil's intelligence, ascetic appearance, and sensitivity to others' suffering (apparently some students had found Weil weeping for famine victims in China). During their conversation, Weil proclaimed that the only thing that mattered was the revolution that would feed all the starving people on earth. Beauvoir responded by saying that the problem is to find the reason for human existence. Looking her up and down, Weil retorted, "It's easy to see that you've never gone hungry."[5] It is clear that Weil, in spite of being born into a privileged family, was determined from her youth to know what it is like to suffer in body and spirit.

Weil's education was exceptional. She became a student at age sixteen of the distinguished philosopher Alain. Three years later, she had the highest score on the entrance exam for the École Normale Supérieure, with the second highest score going to Simone de Beauvoir. At the École Normale, she began reading Marx and dedicated herself to issues pertaining to the working classes, the poor, and the cause of France's unions. By the age of twenty-one, she had finished her thesis on *Science and Perception in Descartes* and had begun teaching philosophy to young girls in the city of Le Puy.

**"The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-striken town needs doctors," Weil warns. We need sages who are capable of addressing in thought and action the injustices of our world.**

She allied herself with the unemployed of Le Puy and led a demonstra-

tion before the city council. Her concern with the issue of colonialism was also strongly ignited at this time. After reading an article on the condition of France's colonies, she remarked that she could hardly bear the description of "the condition of the Indo-Chinese, their wretchedness and enslavement, the perennially unpunished insolence of the whites."[6] Her activism in the community of Le Puy displeased the school's administrators and soon she was transferred to Auxerre. Her term did not last long there either because she refused to teach her students the kind of rote learning the school expected. By 1933, she was teaching again at Roanne. She participated in a major event on behalf of miners and the unemployed, the March of the Miners, which only confirmed her growing reputation as a dangerous leftist.

**"She was convinced that hard physical work was essential for an intellectual," Robert Coles writes, "lest the mind become all too taken with itself, all too removed from the concrete realities of everyday life, the burdens that rest upon the overwhelming majority of the earth's population."**

Weil continued to struggle during this period to clarify the direction of her life: would she be an intellectual or an activist? This is when, following neither a purely intellectual nor political activist vocation, she decided to work in a factory to get firsthand experience of the daily circumstances of the working poor. "She was forced to think that where theoretical thought could not find a solution, actual contact with the object might suggest a way out," her biographer, Simone Petremont, writes of Weil's decision. "The object was the misery for which remedies had to be found. If she herself plunged into this misery, she would be able to see more clearly what remedies were appropriate to it."[7] Another biographer, Robert Coles, explains the significance of this decision to enter the factory: "She was convinced that hard physical work was essential for an intellectual, lest the mind become all too taken with itself, all too removed from the concrete realities of everyday life, the burdens that rest upon the overwhelming majority of the earth's population."[8] Simone Weil recognized the limits of pure theory and the necessity of committed action in history and society.

In 1935, she took up work on the assembly line in the Renault automobile factory. In addition to the physical pain and exhaustion that Weil endured while working there, she suffered severe migraine headaches. Her parents convinced Weil, because of her worn-out condition, to join them on a vacation in Portugal. In a small village, on the day of the festival of its patron saint, the conviction was born in her that Christianity is a religion of slaves and she could not help being one of them (WFG, p. 67). The

simple faith of the lowly—in this case, the peasants of this Portuguese village—imparts a wisdom that is born from their experiential contact with suffering, a wisdom inaccessible to many of the privileged of the world. The outcasts and the poor are bearers of truths about God, the human condition, and even nature that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, shame the powerful and wise of the world (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26 ff.).

### "LOVE BADE ME WELCOME"

Prior to this, there had been a notable absence of any clear interest by Weil in Christianity or religion. She was raised in a secular Jewish home and was not exposed to any regular form of worship or religious belief. Her education, shaped by the classics of Western thought from Greek tragedy and philosophy to Descartes and Marx, did not have a religious focus. Though she had not ignored the question of God (she had taken it up in her thesis on Descartes, for instance), it is striking that in her early writings Weil considered God to be an object of intellectual abstraction, an omnipotent being who is the source of the power of the mind.[9] The God about whom she spoke after her time with the peasants was quite different; she described God as "the Good." Her experience in Portugal, then, represents a turning of her soul that profoundly marked the direction of her life.

In 1937 and 1938, she had more intense experiences of God. She writes that in Assisi, Italy, in 1937, something compelled her for the first time in her life to go down on her knees (WFG, pp. 67-68). In Solesmes in 1938, she witnessed the liturgical celebrations from Palm Sunday to Easter. She describes the beauty of these celebrations—the music, ritual, and church architecture—as filling her with pure joy. During this time at Solesmes, she met a young English Catholic who introduced her to the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. She embraced this poem, the well-known "Love (III)" by George Herbert, with a passion:

> Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
>     guilty of dust and sin.
> But quicked-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
>     from my first entrance in,
> drew near to me, sweetly questioning,
>     if I lack'd any thing.
>
> A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
>     Love said, You should be he.
> I the unkinde, engrateful? Ah my deare,
>     I can not look on thee.
> Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
>     who made the eyes but I?
>
> Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
>     go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes love, and taste my meat:
so I did sit and eat.

She made herself meditate on this poem during her violent headaches. "I used to think I was reciting it as a beautiful poem," she writes, "but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me" (WFG, pp. 68-69). Weil later explains that God had prevented her from reading the mystics so that, given her critical and skeptical mind, it should be evident to her that she had not invented this completely unexpected contact.

The implications of this spiritual transformation in the life of Simone Weil were profound, but one potential implication certainly did *not* follow: namely, an abandonment of her commitment to social justice. Hers was not a dualistic spirituality; her concern for addressing the material needs of the human spirit was just as passionate as before her religious transformation, only now it was more consciously related to an awareness of the presence of the crucified Christ in the faces of the afflicted. Her involvement in the Young Christian Worker's Movement illustrates her interest in imbuing social and political reform with a Christian spirit. It is quite clear that Weil's nascent mystical consciousness only intensified and deepened her attention to the invisible and powerless of history and society.

Given this powerful interest in Christianity, and Roman Catholicism in particular, why is it that she refused to be baptized? Her answer to that question is a further instance of the strength of her convictions. She tells us that her love of non-Christian traditions and spiritualities (from ancient Greece, Egypt, India, and China) kept her from entering the Church (WFG, pp. 94-95). Given the negative attitude of the institutional pre-Vatican II Church toward the world's religions and secular traditions, Weil felt that a decision to enter the Church would signify a betrayal of the wisdom and truth that lies outside of the Church. This fidelity reveals her desire to be in solidarity not only with the European traditions of Christianity, but to embrace the histories and cultures of non-European peoples, "all the countries inhabited by colored races," in her words (WFG, p. 75). Thus, while Weil confesses that she loves "God, Christ, and the Catholic faith," she understood her vocation to be one in exile from the Church, to be a witness to the truth of Christ wherever she discerned truth to exist.

## SIMONE WEIL'S INFLUENCE

The list of figures who have been inspired by Simone Weil is quite extensive. Albert Camus thought that her essays on Marx and on social and political themes, collected under the title *Oppression and Liberty*, were "more penetrating and more prophetic than anything since Marx."[10] In his intro-

duction to Weil's *The Need for Roots*, the poet T. S. Eliot remarked, "we must simply expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, of a kind of genius akin to that of the saints."[11] Pope John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council, mentioned Simone Weil as a significant influence on the development of his thought. Such testimonies by very different individuals suggest the breadth and complexity of Weil's thought.

Not all the responses to her life and thought are affirmative. Charles de Gaulle didn't mince words: "She's out of her mind."[12] Georges Bataille called her with disgust "the Christian" and, in *The Blue of the Sky*, describes in the following way a character that he modeled on her: "She wore black, ill-fitting, and dirty clothes…. I felt that such an existence would only have sense for men and a world doomed to misfortune."[13] Perhaps Weil would have conceded that her existence is unintelligible in a world devoid of affliction and misfortune, but, tragically, these are all-too-real in the time and space we inhabit. In Weil's own perspective, the suffering of the world, the mark of slavery, and the mark of the cross had entered into her person and contributed to the construction of her unique and transgressive identity.

The relevance of Simone Weil has never been greater. She is precisely the type of thinker that we should pick up to read as we embark on the new millennium because she helpfully combines perspectives that we hold apart in unhealthy separation—such as mysticism and prophetic thought, spirituality and politics, and theory and practice. And Weil's books are very readable. Her writing, like her way of life, is direct, honest, unsentimental, precise, and bare. In this light, her close friend Gustave Thibon expresses well the unity of theory and practice, form and content, and mysticism and prophecy in her life: "She did not write one line which was not the exactest possible expression of an irresistible inspiration and, at the same time, an invitation and an engagement to remain faithful to this inspiration, to embody in her whole life and to the very depths of her being what her spirit had glimpsed."[14]

## NOTES

1 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta Books, 1966), 49-50.

2 Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, volume 1 in *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), xvii.

3 Simone Weil, *Waiting For God* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951), 99 (further page citations will be in the text).

4 Simone Petremont, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 37.

5 Ibid., 51.

6 Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 43.

7 Simone Petremont, *Simone Weil*, 204.

8 Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987), 10.

9 See Simone Petremont's discussion of Weil's thesis in *Simone Weil: A Life*, 64-68.

10 See Henry Leroy Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 59.

11 T. S. Eliot, "Preface" in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2001), viii.
12 "Preface," in Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, new edition (New York: Routledge, 2001), xii.
13 Quoted in Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil*, 124-125.
14 Joseph-Marie Perrin and Gustave Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 135.

**ALEX NAVA**
*is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona.*

# Our Deepest Prayer

BY BURT L. BURLESON

To see beyond what eyes can see,
a boundless realm in ecstasy,
where heart and soul are unconfined
by habit's rule or reason's mind,
O God, this is our deepest prayer,
O God, this is our deepest prayer.

To rest within a trusting sleep,
to know our dreams are language deep
and everything a sacred sign
revealing truth and paths divine,
O God, this is our deepest prayer,
O God, this is our deepest prayer.

To walk into the world and be
unleashed to care unselfishly,
to offer presence undefiled
by greed or fear or love beguiled,
O God, this is our deepest prayer,
O God, this is our deepest prayer.

To live above what life we've known,
True Being seen, a vision shown:
that in Love's heart by grace we dwell,
and all are one and all is well,
O God, this is our deepest prayer,
O God, this is our deepest prayer.

*© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, Waco, TX*

# Our Deepest Prayer

BURT L. BURLESON KURT KAISER

1. To see be - yond what eyes can see, a bound - less
2. To rest with - in a trust - ing sleep, to know our
3. To walk in - to the world and be un - leashed to
4. To live a - bove what life we've known, True Be - ing

realm in ec - sta - sy, where heart and soul are un - con-
dreams are lan - guage deep and ev' - ry - thing a sa - cred
care un - self - ish - ly, to of - fer pres - ence un - de -
seen, a vi - sion shown: that in Love's heart by grace we

fined by hab - it's rule or rea - son's mind, O God, this
sign re - veal - ing truth and paths di - vine, O God, this
filed by greed or fear or love be - guiled, O God, this
dwell, and all are one and all is well, O God, this

is our deep - est prayer, O God, this is our deep - est prayer.
is our deep - est prayer, O God, this is our deep - est prayer.
is our deep - est prayer, O God, this is our deep - est prayer.
is our deep - est prayer, O God, this is our deep - est prayer.

*Music © 2005 Kurt Kaiser*
*Text © 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics*
*Baylor University, Waco, TX*

Tune: DAYSPRING
888888

# Worship Service

BY BURT L. BURLESON

*Call to Worship*

Leader: Grace and peace to you in the name of the Lord our God,
Creator of all things, the One who knit our very beings together.
**People: We come to worship God, whose vastness is**
**beyond our knowing but in whom we are fully known.**
Grace and peace to you in the name of our savior, Jesus Christ.
**We gather to worship in the name of Christ,**
**who lived and died among us, imparting life to each of us.**
Grace and peace to you, by the living power of the Holy Spirit.
**We open our hearts to this Eternal Spirit,**
**who moved over the face of the deep and who is with us now.**

*Chiming and Silent Meditation*

I, God, am in your midst.
Whoever knows me can never fall,
not in the heights,
nor in the depths,
nor in the breadths,
for I am love,
which the vast expanses of evil
can never still.

*Hildegard of Bingen* (1098-1179)

*Unison Invocation*

Almighty and Merciful One, Lord God of all Creation,
receive our worship this day.
May our respect and humility
honor your transcendent holiness.
May the attention we offer
mirror your immanent presence.
May each word of prayer and proclamation
point to your truth.

May every thought
be large enough to be worthy of your mystery.
May the lives we live
be as loving and full as the one you lived…
in Christ and for your kingdom's sake. Amen.

## *Hymn of Praise*

"Holy, Holy, Holy"

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
which wert and art, and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,
though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see,
only thou art holy; there is none beside thee,
perfect in power, in love and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

*Reginald Heber* (1826)
*Tune:* NICEA

## *Scripture Reading:* Psalm 139:1-18

*First Reader*: O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
*Second Reader*: You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
*Third Reader*: You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted
with all my ways.
*First*: Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
*Second*: You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

*Third*: Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
*First*: Where can I go from your spirit?
*Second*: Or where can I flee from your presence?
*First*: If I ascend to heaven,
*All*: you are there;
*First*: if I make my bed in Sheol,
*All*: you are there.
*First*: If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
*All*: even there your hand shall lead me
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
*Third*: If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
*Second*: For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
*First*: I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
*All*: Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
*First*: My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
*Second*: Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
*Third*: How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—
*All*: I am still with you.

### *The Silent Prayers of God's People*

In the quietness of this moment, will you offer your prayers to God?
God is here, above all and in all and through all.
God is listening as we pray for our world.
And as we pray for one another.
And as we pray for ourselves.

## *Hymn of Reflection*

"Be Still, My Soul" (verses 1, 2, and 4)

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in every change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
to guide the future, as he has the past;
your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

*Katharina A. von Schlegel* (1752); *translated by Jane L. Borthwick* (1855), alt.
*Tune:* FINLANDIA

## *Offertory Prayer*

Teach us, God, to serve you as you deserve;
  to give and not to count the cost.
To labor and not ask for reward,
  save in the knowledge that we do your will.

*Ignatius Loyola* (1491-1556)

## *Offertory Hymn*

"Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise"

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life thou givest to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish—but naught changeth thee.

Great father of Glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all praise we would render; O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee!

*Walter C. Smith* (1876)
*Tune:* ST. DENIO

*Old Testament Reading:* Isaiah 6:1-8

*New Testament Reading:* Acts 10:9-23

The Word of the Lord for God's People.
**Thanks be to God.**

*Song of Preparation*

"Break Thou the Bread of Life" (verse 4)

O send thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,
that he may touch my eyes and make me see:
show me the truth concealed within thy Word,
and in thy Book revealed I see thee, Lord.

*Alexander Groves* (1913)
*Tune*: BREAD OF LIFE

*Sermon*

*Reflection and Response*

At this point in my thinking,
it is not enough for me to proclaim
that God is responsible for all this unity.

Instead, I want to proclaim that God is the unity—
the very energy, the very intelligence,
the very elegance and passion that makes it all go.

*Barbara Brown Taylor*

## *Hymn of Commitment*

"My Deepest Prayer"

*Burt L. Burleson*
*Tune:* DAYSPRING (pp. 48-49 of this volume)

## *Benediction:* Ephesians 3:14b-21

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit and your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

**And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—**

that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

**Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.**

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**BURT L. BURLESON**
*is Pastor of DaySpring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas*

This photo is available in
the print version of *Mysticism*.

**A mystic's relationship with God is very difficult to articulate in words. From Francis's words Bellini paints an image that becomes yet another way we attempt to come closer to God—the goal we share with the mystics.**

*Giovanni Bellini* (c. 1431-1516). *St. Francis in Ecstasy, c.1485. Oil and tempera on panel, 49" x 55 7/8". The Frick Collection, New York. Photo: © The Frick Collection, New York. Used by permission.*

# Radiant with Great Splendor

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Notice that St. Francis's feet are bare. Giovanni Bellini, in his intensely religious works of art, is meticulous about the details of the biblical narrative or religious event he depicts. In his masterpiece *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, he elevates the importance of the saint's mystical experience by portraying him as barefoot, like Moses was before the burning bush. Francis is standing on holy ground and in the presence of God.

Some historians say the painting shows Francis receiving the stigmata, the wounds of Christ, on the feast of the Holy Cross in 1224 on Mount Alverna. Yet the wounds are barely visible and the crucified seraph who brought the stigmata to Francis from God is not shown. A recent interpretation suggests the painting depicts the *Hymn of the Sun* that the saint wrote in 1225 after his annual fast in Assisi. The fast had been particularly difficult as he could not bear the sight of light and was plagued by mice. Francis emerged from his cell only after God convinced him that he would enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Francis addresses "Brother Sun, who gives the day…[and] is beautiful and radiant with great splendor," yet Bellini does not paint the sun in his composition. The Venetian artist invites us to imagine Brother Sun and God, its creator of whom it is a symbol, beyond the tree on the left that bends away from God's magnificent presence. In the background the heavenly Jerusalem rises majestically beyond the river, prepared for the souls of the blessed who will arrive on judgment day.

The cave in the right foreground symbolizes the saint's hope to receive salvation through an ascetic life, and because Francis refers to his body as "Brother Ass," a donkey stands in the meadow. The figure of Francis is a small presence within the wideness of nature, expressing the saint's belief that God created humanity to enjoy and be blessed by the world.

Bellini may have been inspired by these words from the *Hymn of the Sun*:

Be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures,<br>
    above all Brother Sun,<br>
    who gives the day and by whom you shed light on us.<br>
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor.<br>
Of thee, Most High, he is a symbol.

**St. Clare (1194-1253) became an exemplar for medieval women through her commitments to follow the Holy Spirit, live the teachings of St. Francis, and abandon every wish for temporal things. Through her remarkable service to others, she drew closer to God.**

*Leah Rene Gregoire. The Death of St. Clare, 2004. Intaglio. (Responding to the Master of Heiligenkreuz, The Death of St. Clare, c.1400. Oil on panel. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.) Photo: used by permission of the artist.*

# Surrounded by Witnesses

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

When the eighteen-year-old Clare heard the Lenten sermons of Francis of Assisi, she begged him to allow her to live "after the manner of the holy Gospel." During mass at the cathedral on Palm Sunday, when others moved toward the altar rail to receive a branch of palm, she stayed in her place as if in a dream. That evening Clare secretly left her father's home and went to Francis, who placed her with the Benedictine nuns in a nearby village. When her father tried to take her home, she and a younger sister fled to the chapel of San Damiano and formed the first community of the Order of the Poor Ladies, or Poor Clares, as the second order of St. Francis came to be known.[1]

Leah Gregoire's *The Death of St. Clare* interprets an early fifteenth-century oil painting by the Austrian artist known as the Master of Heiligenkreuz.[2] In that painting the death scene is a vision by St. Benevenuta, one of Clare's followers. Clare lies in a bed surrounded by women who are witnesses to Clare's selfless life: the Virgin Mary, virgin martyrs, and several Poor Clares.

Gregoire's interpretation replaces several of the virgin martyrs with their iconographic symbols. The wheel symbolizes St. Catherine of Alexandria, whom the Emperor Maximinus had condemned to die on a wheel before it disintegrated at her touch. The lamb indicates the presence of St. Agnes of Rome, for each year two lambs are blessed at her church in Rome and their wool is woven into palliums, or bands, that the pope confers on new archbishops. The dragon of St. Margaret of Antioch is at the foot of the bed, for she had met the devil in the form of a dragon. A distant tower represents St. Barbara, who was locked in a tower by her pagan father because of her beliefs in Christ.

## NOTES

1 For background, see Paschal Robinson, "St. Clare of Assisi," and Edwin V. O'Hara, "Poor Clares," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* online *(www.newadvent.org/cathen/)*.

2 An illustration of this fifteenth-century masterwork, which hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, is online at *www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=41425+0+none*. Gregoire's work appears in *Silver*, a collection of twenty-five contemporary artists' interpretations of Old Master works of art organized by Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA), online at *www.civa.org/exhibitions.php?subID=78*. We thank Ms. Gregoire for permission to reproduce *The Death of St. Clare* and for her gracious assistance in the research for this article.

This photo is available in the print version of *Mysticism*.

**Bernini's elegant sculpture is Italian Baroque art at its best, combining theater, drama, and religious meditation. The artist invites us to kneel at the marble balustrade and ponder the writings of St. Teresa.**

*Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). THE ECSTASY OF ST. TERESA, 1645-52. Marble, lifesize. Cornaro Chapel, Sta. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.*

# Yearning for God

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Perhaps the chapel decoration in the Roman church Santa Maria della Vittoria began as an opportunity for two men to seek the worldly recognition they coveted, but it endures as one of Bernini's most loved accomplishments.

Bernini was a devout Catholic and creative genius who served the papacy most of his career. Yet because he was very opinionated, he would occasionally fall out of favor with a pope and an enterprising individual could hire him for a private commission. When Pope Innocent X had a dispute with the artist, Cardinal Federico Cornaro asked Bernini to create a family chapel dedicated to St. Teresa of Avila in the left transept of the Santa Maria della Vittoria church. The Cardinal had papal ambitions and hoped the new chapel would draw attention to him, which it definitely did. He also was sympathetic to the Discalced Carmelites, the order that was founded by Teresa and affiliated with Santa Maria della Vittoria. Four Spanish saints were canonized in 1622—Isidore of Seville, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis of Xavier, and Teresa of Avila—and only Teresa had not been honored yet with a church or chapel being dedicated to her.

The chapel is a theater stage-set complete with a sculpted audience (deceased members of the Cornaro family) seated to the right and left of the central sculpture. The artist installed a window glazed with yellow glass in the ceiling to cast golden light on the figures of an angel and Teresa. In the vault above, scenes from the saint's life are painted to look like gilded bronze reliefs. The ceiling fresco of clouds and angels features an image of the Holy Spirit descending into the chapel.

The primary sculpture depicts the saint's "transverberation," her mystical vision in 1559 of an angel plunging a flame-tipped arrow into her again and again. Here is Teresa's report:

> I saw in [the angel's] hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The

> soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.[1]

Interpreters have struggled with the apparently erotic pose in Bernini's sculpture. In the eighteenth century one scholar quipped, "If that is divine love, I have known it!" Twenty-first century art historians have come to the defense of Bernini's (and Teresa's) honor. "Bernini evidently did not intend a lascivious interpretation as he covered Teresa's body with layers of heavy drapery so that only her face, one limp hand, and her feet can be seen," Ann Harris observes. "Her unfocused eyes and open mouth convey her absorption in this miraculous experience."[2]

Perhaps Bernini was willing to sculpt a posture of physical love in order to express the soul's yearning for God, much as several medieval monastics employed the erotic language of the Song of Songs to convey our communion with God. The artist has listened with his heart to Teresa's words and translated them into a powerful image of a woman overtaken by the love of the Holy Spirit of God. His realistic depiction invites us to reflect carefully on Teresa's writings and the drama of her mystical experience rather than view these with the same clouded eyes as Teresa's confessor and theologian of the Inquisition who, after reading her *Meditations on the Song of Songs,* found it evil and ordered that it be burned.

## NOTES

1 Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus,* translated by David Lewis (New York: Benziger Bros., 1904), chapter 29, section 17 (*www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8trsa10h.htm#l13.0*).

2 Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art & Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2005), 111.

**HEIDI J. HORNIK**
*is Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*

# Do You Love Me?

BY BRENT BEASLEY

**Being moral persons who are eager to help our fellow humans is very valuable and important. But Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" We know what we are supposed to believe, how to be obedient, and how to be busy at good things. But do we know how to be in love with Jesus?**

Should Christian ministers, deacons, and teachers be more like mystics than prophets? "For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required," Henri Nouwen asserts in his book, *In the Name of Jesus*[1]. He explains:

> It is not enough for priests and ministers…to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are [they] truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word and to taste fully God's infinite goodness? (pp. 29-30)

Unfortunately, debates in the Church on issues such as abortion, women in ministry, homosexuality, and euthanasia take place on a primarily moral level, Nouwen laments. Therefore our battles are removed from the experience of God's love and "seem more like political battles for power than spiritual searches for truth" (pp. 30-31). He argues that it is not enough for Christian leaders to have well-informed opinions on the burning issues of our time; their leadership must be rooted in a contemplative love of God.

After Jesus' resurrection, Peter and some of the other disciples went fishing. They went out in a boat but failed to catch anything. Then at day-

break, the Gospel of John says, they saw on the beach about a hundred yards away the glow of a charcoal fire and a man standing by it whom at first they did not recognize. The man asked them if they'd had any luck, and when they said they had not, he told them to try throwing their nets off the other side of their boat. This time they were lucky to the tune of a hundred and fifty three fish. When they figured out that the man by the fire was Jesus, Peter hurled himself into the water and somehow swam and scrambled his way to shore ahead of everyone else.

**What if Jesus does not ask me if I have been obedient? What if he does not ask me about what I believe? What if the question he asks is, "Do you love me?" Am I ready for that?**

Peter's brief conversation with Jesus continues to haunt me because of the one question that the Lord asked him three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:15).

Peter and the other disciples believed in the Resurrection, but they had a hard time figuring out its meaning for their lives and mission. I can relate to that. They were doing their best to obey Jesus' commands; indeed, only when they obeyed what he told them to do—cast their net on the other side—could they recognize Jesus for who he really was. I can relate to that.

Jesus did not ask Peter what he believed about the Resurrection, salvation, the end times, or any other theological issue. He did not even ask Peter how he was doing on being obedient to his commands. Three times he asked Peter one question: "Do you love me?"

"Do you love me?" That question on the lips of Jesus haunts me like no other. "Do you love me?"

I imagine that when I meet Jesus face to face and he asks if I have been obedient, I can reply, "You know, I have not been perfect, but, all in all, I have been pretty good. At least compared with a lot of people, I have done okay. I have not committed any major crimes or been a part of any scandal or anything like that."

And then if Jesus asks me a tough theological question, if he asks what I believe about certain doctrines like the Resurrection or salvation or something like that, I will have it made—four years of religion courses as a college undergraduate, three years of religion courses in seminary, and four years of study for the Doctor of Ministry degree, not to mention going to Sunday school my whole life. I have been preparing my whole life for Jesus to ask me a theological question when I see him face to face. I am ready.

But what if Jesus does not ask me if I have been obedient? What if he does not ask me about what I believe? What if the question Jesus asks is,

"Do you love me?" What am I going to do then? Am I ready for that? Now you see what scares me in this story of Jesus' encounter with his disciples by the sea.

"Do you love me?" As I read this biblical story, I realize that I know what I am supposed to believe, I know how to be obedient, I know how to be busy at good things, and I have well-informed opinions on the burning ethical issues of our day. But I do not know how to be in love with Jesus.

Being moral persons who are eager to help our fellow humans is very valuable and important. But Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" In other words, are we mystics? Do we practice the presence of God?

Henri Nouwen presses the point: the focus of our lives must be "the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, 'Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?' It is the discipline of contemplative prayer" (p. 28).

The ancient church told this story about prayer:

> Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: "Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and, again as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then, the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him: "If you really want, you can become all flame."[2]

Why are we satisfied with anything less than becoming all flame in our love for God? We must, as Nouwen says, move on from the moral to the mystical.

About 10:00 P.M. one evening, I was sitting downstairs by myself when I heard my five-year-old daughter Ivy's loud whisper from upstairs: "Daddy, Daddy?" My daughter's quiet voice is louder than most people's loud voice.

"What?"

"Will you come tuck me in?"

It had been a very busy day. I had worked hard at the office. And because my wife had a class that evening, I had picked up Ivy and our son Sam from school and made dinner for us. Well, to be truthful, I had removed the Chick-Fil-A nuggets from a bag, put them on the table, squirted out the ketchup, and so on.

"See that Sam does his homework. Get the kids in the bath. Go upstairs to get them in bed. Close the shutters. Pull back their comforters and sheets. Help get the right cat in the right bedroom—Nash to Sam's and Betty to Ivy's. Turn off the lights. Tell Sam goodnight. Tell Ivy goodnight." My checklist was completed.

My wife had come home and gone to bed, and I was settling into the couch to watch SportsCenter when I heard Ivy's loud whisper: "Daddy, Daddy? Will you come tuck me in?"

"No. I already tucked you in an hour ago," I whispered back. "Go to bed."

She began to cry and said, "I just want you to tuck me in."

What she was trying to say, what she would have said if she were able, is this: "Yes, you picked me up from school today, got me dinner, started my bath, pulled back my covers, turned out my light, and put my cat Betty in my room. I know you've been busy and done a lot of good things on my behalf, but do you love me?"

Jesus asked Peter one question three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" There is a lot more to the story. This is not even the main point of this story. This is only the beginning. But I cannot get past that one question.

Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?

## NOTES

1 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 32. Further citations will be in the text.

2 Joseph of Panephysis 7, from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. This translation is in John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 100-101.

**BRENT BEASLEY**
*is Senior Pastor of Second Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee.*

# The Transparent Self

BY BETTY W. TALBERT

**The ancient Greek Fathers of the Church taught that all Christians, through mystical experience of God, can become windows through which the light of God shines without hindrance. How does mystical experience, gladly received, transform us so that our transparent selves become a catalyst for the conversion of others?**

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The children's Sunday school class members were now old enough to take a walking tour of "big church" where the lovely stained glass windows depicted past heroes of faith like Francis of Assisi, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, and John Wesley. So the teacher asked the children, "Who were the saints?" For a moment there was silence. Then a boy grinned and replied confidently, "The saints are the Christian heroes in the windows of our church. They are the people the light shines through."

Indeed, these heroes' mystical experiences of God had the effect of making them transparent for God's light to shine through their lives to others. The example of their lives raises the question: How does Christian mystical experience, gladly received, transform such individuals who are so illumined that their transparent selves become a catalyst for the conversion of others?

Mystical experiences of God often occur in childhood and at midlife. The young seem by their very nature to be especially open to God. Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century church reformer, refocused the piety of his day on the earthly Jesus because of a vision he had as a six year old during midnight Mass. He dreamed that he was present at the birth of Jesus, and this gave him a sense of a familial connection to Jesus throughout his life. In the fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena was about the

same young age when she saw a vision of God above a Dominican church in her village. As a result, she served the Lord as a Dominican for the rest of her life. These childhood mystical experiences that bore fruit throughout the lives of these saints offer an important reminder to the Church today. God continues to touch and call our children in the present. We should be prepared to nurture such experiences and direct their effects.

At midlife, when their self-constructed self-images and worldviews broke apart, some of our heroes found themselves vulnerable, lonely, and desperate for a new identity. Francis of Assisi was such a man. Having failed at his life goal of becoming a chivalrous knight, he turned to plead with God for help. Looking up at the crucifix in the church of San Damiano, he saw Jesus weeping real tears. This awakened Francis to the call to be the greatest evangelist of the thirteenth century. John Wesley in the eighteenth century and Frank Laubach in the twentieth century, both failed missionaries, are other saints who experienced God's mystical touch in a time of spiritual failure. As a result, their lives were changed and their ministries greatly expanded. The crises of midlife often create a second openness not unlike the openness of childhood. In the context of this openness, a life-changing experience with the numinous can become the cornerstone on which to build a new life and a touchstone to which one returns during periods of doubt and discouragement.

What would we look like today if, like the spiritual heroes of the past, we enjoyed a mystical experience of God? The young boy's comment in Sunday school that "the saints are the people the light shines through" says a lot about what happens when we open ourselves to God in mystical experience. The promise of the Christian past is that we too may become so transparent to God's light that other people will be able to see through us to God.

The ancient Greek Fathers of the Church taught that all Christians, through mystical experience of God, can become windows through which the light of God shines without hindrance. They made three suggestions about how we can cooperate with God's initiative in making us transparent for God's light. First, they advised purgation. This means using the light we have from the experience of God and from Scripture to wash out of our lives those thoughts and habits that obscure the light of God in the self. Second, they advocated frequent participation in Holy Communion. That is, they encouraged meeting with other Christians regularly and, after confessing our sins, eating the ritual meal Jesus established. This allows God's grace to work in our lives to cleanse the window of the self. Third, they urged us to enter daily and deeply into silent prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to take away all that is false within the self. Purgation, participation in Holy Communion, and silent prayer are how we cooperate with God who comes to us in mystical experience.

Surveys indicate that most Americans believe they have had a mystical experience of some kind or other. Christian theology instructs us that the test of legitimate mystical experience with God is found in the effects of the encounter. True mystical experience changes the self, making it transparent before God and allowing God's light to shine through to others. It calls for an appropriate faithful response on the part of Christian recipients. The saints model both the transformative effects of their mystical experience and the appropriate faithful response to God's gracious gift.

**BETTY W. TALBERT**
*is Director of Spiritual Formation at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*

# The Mystic and the Church

BY DANA GREENE

**Evelyn Underhill attempted to reconcile the inherent tension between mysticism and institutional religion. Her sympathy for the mystical tradition nuanced her understanding of what it means to participate in the Body of Christ and was the basis for her ongoing critique of the foibles of the "visible church."**

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) is best known for her pioneering work, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness.* First published in 1911, it saw twelve editions and established Underhill as the leading authority on mysticism writing in English. She was a prolific writer, authoring or editing thirty-nine books and hundreds of articles and essays.

She came to the subject of mysticism with a bias against institutional religion, but later recognized the human need for participation in some collective expression of worship of the Divine. Her sympathy for the mystical tradition nuanced her understanding of what it means to participate in the Body of Christ and was the basis for her ongoing critique of the foibles of institutional religion. Underhill's major achievement was a lifelong pursuit of the love of God and her unique ability to express that search in writing. Her understanding of mysticism and the church and the necessary tension between them is best understood by tracking her own deepening appreciation for both phenomena.

## AVOIDING RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Although she was baptized and confirmed in the Anglican Church, Underhill, an only child, inherited her religious skepticism from her barrister father. She claimed not to have been "brought up to religion." Her early adolescent writing attests to this. She believed in God and in helping

the poor, but she saw religion as dogmatic and bigoted and the clergy as pompous and narrow. The exclusiveness of institutional religion was particularly off-putting; she urged her youthful readers to experience the liberation of nature and art. Beauty appealed to her, but she found none of it in English churches. In her late twenties, however, she began to make regular trips to Italy; there she was able to experience beauty firsthand in religious art, architecture, and ritual. Italy, she claimed, was "the only place left…that is really medicinal to the soul…. There is a type of mind which must go there to find itself." In Italy she did find herself, experiencing a slow "unconscious growing into the understanding of things."[1]

This experience led her to participate in the Golden Dawn, a Rosicrucian society much in vogue in London in the early years of the twentieth century. But she soon withdrew from participation, realizing that what she was attracted to was not magic but mysticism. She began her lifelong commitment to exploring the riches of this long-buried tradition.

In a white heat of enthusiasm, she began to research and write her major work, a five-hundred-page exploration of the Western mystical tradition, a labor to which she gave her complete attention for almost four years, consulting some one thousand sources in the process. At this same time, she had become convinced that she should join the Roman Catholic Church, but the papacy's condemnation of Modernism, the movement to bring historical and scientific evidence to bear on religious questions, delayed her entrance, as did the opposition of her new husband. In the end she never joined, but for almost a decade and a half she hung on the edges of institutional commitment, unable to "go over to Rome" but dissatisfied with Anglicanism. Her writing did not abate. She turned out biographies of mystics and edited their writings, all the while broadening the sources of her inspiration to include the French philosopher Henri Bergson and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. Yet neither her writing nor her spiritual counseling of others gave her solace or reprieve from her sense of personal isolation and detachment. By the end of the century's second decade, she wrote that she "had gone to pieces."

In desperation she did two things: she visited Baron Friedrich von Hügel, the most prominent Catholic theologian in Britain and someone familiar with but critical of her work on mysticism, and she began to participate reluctantly in the liturgical life of the Anglican Church.

Von Hügel was of great assistance to her; she claimed, somewhat hyperbolically, that she owed her whole spiritual life to him. But he did help her as she struggled with inwardness, detachment, a transcendent flight from a sinful world, and her anti-institutional bias, all of which she attributed to her "white-hot Neo-Platonism." Von Hügel, responding to her great psychological need, nudged her toward a more embodied spirituality and an acceptance of God's love. He sent her out to work among London's poor and reaffirmed her fragile commitment to live within the Anglican

communion. He appreciated the mystical tradition and saw it as an essential element of religion but recognized the institutional and intellectual elements as essential as well. He served as her spiritual director from 1921 until his death in 1925.

Even before meeting with von Hügel, Underhill had begun to be aware that her bias toward institutional religion as exclusive and narrow was a limited one. Her brief encounters with the work of Sorella Maria and the ecumenical Spiritual Entente which this Italian Franciscan nun founded convinced Underhill that Christ could be known in a variety of ways and in the many parts of the Christian church. As well, she became increasingly aware of the need for an alliance between institutional religion and mysticism. In 1918, she wrote:

**Divorced from the institutional church, mysticism can "become strange, vague, or merely sentimental. True mysticism is the soul of religion, but, like the soul of man, it needs a body if it is to fulfill its mighty destiny."**

> [Mysticism] flourishes best in alliance with a lofty moral code, a strong sense of duty, and a definite religious faith.... [It] is more likely to arise with than without the great historic churches and faiths. To these churches and faiths it has again and again brought its gift of fresh life, of renewed and intensified communion.... It is in this direction that its future may most hopefully be looked for, since divorced from all institutional expression it tends to become strange, vague, or merely sentimental. True mysticism is the soul of religion, but, like the soul of man, it needs a body if it is to fulfill its mighty destiny.[2]

Underhill's realization of the reciprocal need of institutional religion for mysticism and vice versa was tentative; it would take time for her to grow into that understanding. That growth was already evident in *The Mystics of the Church,* published in 1925. In this, Underhill's last book on the mystics, she presented them as "life-giving" members of the church who helped create and sustain its mystical character. This was in contrast to her portrayal in the earlier *Mysticism* where she emphasized their independence from religious institutions.

### RECLAIMING THE CHURCH'S MISSION

For Underhill, the frowziness, parochialism, dogmatism, and conservatism of the church were symptomatic of a more fundamental problem, namely that the church was not focused on its central mission: to redeem the world by forming souls and fostering holiness among them. In fact, it

too often created dependent and obedient believers and was suspicious of individual intuition and direct spiritual experience.

Underhill distinguished between what she called the "visible" and the "invisible" church, that is, the institutional church and the mystical body of Christ, a divine society linking a communion of saints—past, present, and future. She appreciated the tension between these two, and counseled those who sought her wisdom about how to deal with negative aspects of the church "visible." Her advice was often homey: "The Church is an 'essential service' like the Post office, but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them."[3] The point was to build up the "invisible" church and in so doing revivify the "visible" church that was either moribund or not focused on its mission to form souls. In 1921 in *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, she summarized the importance of the spiritual life to the church:

> Thus it means an immense widening of the arc of human sympathy; and this is not possible to do properly unless we have found the centre of the circle first. The glaring defect of current religion—I mean the vigorous kind, not the kind that is responsible for empty churches—is that it spends so much time in running round the arc and rather takes the centre for granted…and it is at the centre that the real life of the spirit aims first; thence flowing out to the circumference—even to the most harsh, dark, difficult and rugged limits—in unbroken streams of generous love.[4]

While she appreciated the need of the mystical tradition to feed the invisible church as it fulfilled its mission, she was also aware that mysticism unattached to a religious tradition was perilous. She knew this from personal experience. She had come, at least intellectually, to the position that the mystical tendencies toward strangeness, vagueness, or sentimentality could be countered by being anchored in corporate religious life. Such life fostered group consciousness, gave a sense of unity, and offered both a ready-made discipline and a capacity to hand on a culture. She wrote later in her last major book that corporate life "checks religious egotism, breaks down devotional barriers, obliges the spiritual highbrow to join in the worship of the simple and ignorant, and in general confers all the supporting and disciplinary benefits of family life."[5] In short, corporate and personal worship complete, reinforce, and check each other. But the priority must be given to that which creates "living" religion and forms souls because it is focused on the priority of God.

> For the reality of the Church does not abide in us; it is not a spiritual Rotary Club. Its reality abides in the One God, the ever-living One whose triune Spirit fills it by filling each one of its members.

> We build up the Church best…by opening ourselves more and more with an entire and humble generosity to that Spirit-God Who is among us as one that serveth, and reaches out…towards the souls of men. Thus the real life of that Church consists in the mutual love and dependence, the common prayer, adoration and self-offering of the whole interpenetrating family of spirits who have dared to open their souls without condition to that all-demanding and all-giving Spirit of Charity, in Whom we live and move and without Whom we should not exist.[6]

**Underhill sensed she was a "cell in a boundless living web" through which redeeming work could be done. Her new vocation, the care of souls through retreat work, not only gave her a great sense of joy and freedom, it cemented finally her ability to stay within the Anglican communion.**

By the time Underhill sought out von Hügel for help, she knew both that she needed the context of institutional religion and that institutional religion, if it was to be true to its mission, needed to be regenerated by the mystical element. Having rejected the Roman church for its exclusiveness and anti-Modernist tendencies, she saw her only alternative in the church of her baptism, the Church of England. She considered Anglicanism a "bridge" church and called it a "respectable suburb of the city of God" but all the while a "part of the greater London."

### RESPONDING TO HER VOCATION

Underhill's reluctant participation in the Church of England gradually became more palatable when, at the invitation of a friend, she attended a retreat in the Anglican retreat house in the village of Pleshey in 1922. There she experienced a sense of connectedness and belonging to a community of belief. She wrote to von Hügel that she felt satisfied as an Anglican, having found both a place where she would fit and those with whom she could sympathize and work. She sensed she was a "cell in a boundless living web" through which redeeming work could be done. Her new vocation, the care of souls through retreat work, began to take shape. As part of the burgeoning retreat movement in the Anglican Church, from 1924 on she gave six or seven retreats a year. While most who sought her out were women, even some clergy attended. In 1927, she became the first woman to give a retreat in Canterbury Cathedral. This work not only gave her a great sense of joy and freedom, it cemented finally her ability to stay within the Anglican communion. She was fifty years old when she wrote, "Now

the experience of God…is, I believe, in the long run always a vocational experience. It always impels to some sort of service: always awakens an energetic love. It never leaves the self where it found it. It forces the experient to try and do hard things."[7]

Underhill's vocational commitment as retreat conductor dominated her later life. Through it she hoped to renew the Anglican Church. Her contemporary, T. S. Eliot, acknowledged that contribution, saying her work captured "the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world,"[8] and Michael Ramsey, a subsequent Archbishop of Canterbury, attested that she had done more than anyone else to keep the spiritual life alive in the Anglican Church in the period between the wars.[9] Her care of souls continued to be carried out through correspondence, and in person through retreats given across England. These retreats reached a larger audience through publication. They represent her mature thinking on a variety of aspects of what she called the spiritual life, that life of prayer, love, and holiness which is "simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God…."[10]

Although Underhill remained committed to the Church of England, her outlook was ecumenical, and her focus was always on building up the life of the spirit within the church. It is no surprise that her final book, *Worship*, in 1936, was about corporate adoration. In it Underhill defines the elements of worship and examines eleven different institutional expressions, each of which she claimed was like "a chapel in the Cathedral of the Spirit." *Worship* was an extraordinarily inclusive study of the human impulse toward the Divine, the self-offering of the individual in the worship of God expressed historically and institutionally. It reflects Underhill's commitment to institutional religion and her deep appreciation of its variety of forms. Its appreciative ecumenicity was remarkable for the time.

In the final years of Underhill's life, there is a renewed tension between what she considered to be the demands of the life of the spirit and the orientation of the institutional church. In 1939, as war loomed over Europe, she became a pacifist, joining the tiny Anglican Pacifist Fellowship and writing for their publications and those of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Although her position was incomprehensible to most of her fellow believers, Underhill held that pacifism followed naturally from the demands of universal charity. She urged believers to stay steady and close to God in this harsh wilderness of war and to give themselves to God in intercessory prayer for the good of the world. Her requests to pray for the so-called enemies, Hitler and Mussolini, so that their hearts might be changed seemed bizarre to a nation enduring the Blitz. Yet she persisted, even as the Anglican Church officially denounced the pacifist position. She called the attitude of the Church toward the war "sub-Christian" and claimed that contemporary Christianity was "impoverished," "second-hand," and "incapable of the transformation of life" which was needed.

She believed that the Church should be the rallying point for all those who believed in the creative and redeeming power of love, but that it was incapable of seizing this opportunity because its supernatural life was so weak and ineffective. She urged believers to pray and, thereby, transform the hatred of the world. Prayer not only steadied the Christian, but also increased one's consciousness of complicity with the war effort.

Underhill feared the alliance of religion and war and the claim that God was an ally as one performed irreligious acts. For her, pacifism was an entire orientation of life, following from faith and hope in a God whose purpose was love. Pacifism was then an extension of the love of God, and hence a vocation. In those dark and uncertain times she continued to maintain that one could not fight evil with evil, that only love could overcome, and that any new life which would well up would come from the deepest sources of prayer. The long winter of 1941 brought her great physical suffering from persistent asthma; she died at age sixty-five in mid-June.

In both her writing and her life, Evelyn Underhill attempted to acknowledge the genius of mysticism and institutional religion and to reconcile the inherent tension between them. The result was a creative exploration of two important phenomena, both needed for a full Christian life.

## NOTES

1 Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), 13.

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3 "To G. F., St. Francis, 1932," in Charles Williams, ed., *Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 208.

4 Evelyn Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 220-221.

5 Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), 84.

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8 T. S. Eliot, MS A. ff. 90, 91. Cited in Helen Gardner, *The Composition of the Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 69-70.

9 Michael Ramsey, "Foreword," in Christopher Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writings* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), x.

10 Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1984), 32.

**DANA GREENE**
*is former Dean and CEO of Oxford College of Emory University in Oxford, Georgia.*

# Improving our Seeing and Listening

BY E. GLENN HINSON

**If we are honest, we must admit that we are not good at listening to God and seeing the world as God sees. Our culture does not help: it catches us up in busyness and distracts us with raucous noise and glaring lights. How will we recover our attentiveness which is essential to serving God in today's world?**

How does contemplation prepare us to increase the love of God and of neighbor among humankind, which is H. Richard Niebuhr's definition of the purpose of the Church and its ministry?[1] By "contemplation," I mean prayer in the sense of attentiveness to God—listening and seeing the Beyond in the midst of our lives. As I would understand our Christian perspective, at some point we have entered into a covenant relationship with God which, not surprisingly, has been viewed throughout Jewish and Christian history as analogous to the covenant relationship of marriage. What we try to do in the course of our lives is to develop a deeper and deeper covenant relationship and to let that transfuse and transform everything we do. Ideally, we want to make all of life a prayer.

A seventeenth-century Carmelite lay brother Nicholas Hermann, or Brother Lawrence, spoke of practicing the presence of God. For about ten years after entering a Carmelite monastery, he tried the rigorous Carmelite disciplines, but they merely frustrated him. Washing dishes in the convent kitchen, he discovered that he could talk to the God of pots and pans. In everything he was doing, he could maintain an attitude of attention to the presence of God, or as he expressed it in another place, he could maintain a passionate regard for God. "I turn my little omelet in the pan for love of

God," Brother Lawrence said.[2] After dozens of readings of his classic, I have decided that what he did was to fall head over heels in love with God and let that transfuse everything he was doing. Wisely, though, he reminds us that "we must know before we love and to know God we must think often of [God]."[3]

## GETTING TO KNOW AND LOVE GOD

How can we not only deepen our knowledge of God but also our love for God? Fortunately, we do not have to invent something brand new. Believers have wrestled with this question for centuries and offer us ample guidance. Indeed, scriptures remind us that God has built messages into the order of things or, to put it another way, is always beaming messages to us. The Hebrew people believed that God communicates through nature, through history, and through our own lives. What we have to learn is to *see* and to *listen.*

*Through nature*. You know Psalm 19: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge." The psalmist recognized, just as we should, that it's not a matter of physical sound. "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4). Psalm 8 reminds us that the task of *seeing* is ours. "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; [then I must ask], what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4). Readers of the Gospels will discern, too, how Jesus drew object lessons from nature. "Stop worrying!" he commanded the anxiety-ridden of his day. "Look at the birds in heaven, that they do not sow nor reap or store in barns, and yet your heavenly Father cares for them. Aren't you worth more than they are?" (Matthew 6:26; my translation). God is intimately involved in the human story. Indeed, God, as it were, numbers every hair of your head (Luke 12:7)!

*Through history*. Although the Jewish people believed God communicates through nature, they had still greater confidence that God beams messages to us through history. That is true of *all* history, for God is Lord of all history. Thus Isaiah could call Cyrus, the Persian king, "the Lord's anointed" (Isaiah 45:1). Nevertheless, it is truer still of certain segments of history. For the Jewish people, the story of stories is the exodus out of Egypt. From time immemorial they have gathered at Passover to observe a *seder* commemorating the exodus. According to the instructions of Jesus' day for that observance, after a meal of lamb and herbs the youngest child was to ask, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The oldest person would then tell the story of the exodus from Egypt. To those directives, a rabbi named Eliezer added, "Do this as if you yourselves were

going out from the exodus in Egypt!" For Christians there is another story of stories—the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is no accident that Christian meditation through the centuries has focused on the Gospels, for it is they which contain the greatest story ever told. By coming like a little child and entering into the story, the story can do a job on you. What job? It forms in you the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5).

The Hebrew way of knowing differed from the Greek way precisely at this point. The *Greek* way is the way of empirical observation and rational reflection. You look, listen, touch, taste, smell, and then reflect rationally to arrive at an understanding. In the seventeenth century, Descartes and Bacon framed this in a scientific method, and it has served us well since. The *Hebrew* way is the way of story. Within nature is a story. Within history is a story. If we will enter into it to make it our story, it will open up insight about the world, God, and ourselves. If you will reflect a bit, you will realize that who you are is a complex of stories that have molded and shaped your attitudes and responses. What we seek in meditation on the Jesus story is that it may form in us the mind of Christ and his way of responding to our world.

*Through our own lives*. If we have gained some insight into who God is through nature and history (especially those "great moments" in the story), we may surprise ourselves by discovering that further knowledge may come through ordinary, everyday life. In a wonderful collection of prayers, Michel Quoist reminds us that God "has put us into the world, not to walk through it with lowered eyes, but to search for [God] through all things, events, people. Everything must reveal God to us."[4] "If only we knew how to look at life as God sees it," he insists, "we would realize that nothing is secular in the world, that everything contributes to the building of the Kingdom of God."[5] More important still, "If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer."[6] Yes, that is precisely what we want to have happen. We want to *see* and *listen* so that all of life becomes a prayer. Jesus told parables precisely to get people to do so.

## HOW TO IMPROVE SEEING AND LISTENING

If we are honest, most of us will admit that we are not doing too well with our seeing and listening. Our culture does not help us in our quest. For one thing, it catches us up in busyness. We run, panting and frantic, through crowded calendars. We engage in what Thomas Merton called "activity for activity's sake." Nothing deeper informs what we are doing. For another, it distracts us with raucous noise and glaring lights. Ours is the age of uncollectedness and mindlessness. How will we recover our attentiveness which is essential to serving God in today's world?

At the outset let us recognize what thoughtful believers have acknowledged throughout history: God is essentially "beyond knowing." We

would be very presumptuous to assume that we can "know" in an intimate way the Creator of a universe of one hundred and fifty billion galaxies. Jacob (Genesis 32:30) and Moses (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 5:4) and some other saints may have seen God "face to face," but the Apostle Paul warns the rest of us that we now see God as in a mirror and only at the end "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Limits of our humanity notwithstanding, however, God has planted in us a desire to know God. Like the psalmist, we, too, cry, "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (Psalm 42:1-2).

**Few in our culture can sustain a high level of attentiveness to God if they do not draw back on occasion and get away from the press and struggle of every day.**

How, then, will we fulfill our heart's desire in a culture that puts so many obstacles in our path? Through the ages the saints have come up with two solutions that are polar opposites. One is *to spend time among people who are hurting*; the other is *to draw back and spend time in solitude and in silence*. When Evelyn Underhill, already an established expert on Christian mysticism, asked Baron Friedrich von Hügel to serve as her spiritual director, he told her first to spend two afternoons a week in the ghetto. "It will, if properly entered into and persevered with," he assured her, "discipline, mortify, deepen and quiet you. It will, as it were, distribute your blood—some of your blood—away from your brain, where too much is lodged at present."[7] Most of us learn quickly, however, that we cannot stand an uninterrupted diet of exposure to human suffering. After a while it may harden and callous our hearts. That is why the saints have gone in the opposite direction, retreating to find solitude and silence.

Our goal, remember, is to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Few in our culture can sustain a high level of attentiveness to God, however, if they do not draw back on occasion and get away from the press and struggle of every day. I recommend four types of retreats: daily, weekly or monthly, thirty-six to forty-eighty hour retreats twice a year, and sabbaticals.

My *daily retreat* consists of a forty-five minute walk before breakfast every morning. Walking is very meditative. I cannot tell you exactly what I do because it varies: sometimes I just walk, and other times I meditate on a passage of Scripture or pray for someone. But I can tell you the result. When I finish my walk, I am collected. I get more done. My thinking deepens. And I am present where I am—really present. In addition, I am convinced it accounts for good health.

Not all can walk as I do, and you will need to find what works best for you. Some use the "centering prayer" that Thomas Merton developed. Father Thomas Keating suggests that one find a quiet place and spend twenty minutes twice a day being present before God. Douglas Steere began each day with thirty minutes of silence followed by thirty minutes meditating on a passage of the Gospels. Dietrich Bonhoeffer required seminarians at Finkenwalde to meditate on the same passage of Scripture for thirty minutes each morning for a week.

Most of us need longer retreats. At least once a month—perhaps, for some people, once a week—we should spend a day "sparing time for God" and for ourselves. Just idle your motor. Twice a year, we would benefit from retreats that last at least thirty-six to forty-eight hours, over two nights. Often it takes us that long to become inwardly quiet wherein we can hear "the still, small voice" of God. Finally, there is an urgent need for sabbaticals. Once the privilege of professors, they need to become common practice for many other professionals and even non-professionals. Many churches now make provision for their pastors and other staff to have sabbaticals not just to study but to be refreshed and renewed and re-created.

## A BALANCING ACT

Jesus taught us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27; cf. Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:33). This means that a vital and healthy spirituality will balance experiential, intellectual, social, and institutional dimensions. These are like four legs under a table. Take away or shorten one leg and the table will wobble; take away or shorten more than one, it will fall. Sadly, many persons think of the spiritual life as entirely a matter of experience and neglect the other elements which would account for a well-rounded approach to faith.

Of course, the spiritual life is experiential. Faith begins in awe, not in cognition. "When mind and soul agree, belief is born," Abraham Heschel has written. "But first our hearts must know the shudder of adoration."[8] Generation after generation of saints have confirmed that, while all human efforts to reach God will fall short, God takes the initiative to get in touch with us. "We love because God first loved us," an early believer concluded (1 John 4:19). No one made it clearer than Bernard of Clairvaux, the great twelfth-century Cistercian: "Every soul among you which is seeking God will know that [God] has gone before and sought you before you sought [God]."[9] When we think about expanding the experiential aspect of our spiritual lives, therefore, we should keep in mind that it is first and foremost a matter of opening to accept God's love. That is what prayer is. Prayer is opening like a flower to the morning sun to let the energy of God's love illumine our hearts.

Opening to accept God's love is not as easy for most of us as it may sound. We have experienced storms in life that have caused us to pull our

shutters closed and bar our doors from the inside. Pride makes us want to earn, merit, and deserve what we receive, so we have trouble accepting grace. When we are mired in a ditch, pride is our first and greatest obstacle to taking the hand God stretches toward us. Jesus reminds us that if we can do like the tax collector—lay aside all dignity and open to God—God's love will flow in and help us cope with our fear and anxiety, those blood brothers who prevent us from becoming whom God wants us to be (Luke 18:9-14). "Perfect love casts out fear," John says (1 John 4:18). He does not mean that we will lose every trace of fear. Some fear is healthy and helpful. No, he means that God's love will bring fear under control and turn it into a positive force. So, too, does Paul counsel the Philippians about anxiety: "Stop worrying about everything!" he urges. "Rather, in every circumstance in prayer and entreaty with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the *shalom* of God which passes all human comprehension will throw a guard around your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7; my paraphrase).

Our faith journey, therefore, starts with experience. Nevertheless, anyone who has entered into a relationship with God experientially will want to understand, to "hit the books" as it were. That is what the first of the great medieval schoolmen, Anselm, calls "faith seeking understanding." Where should we seek? Through the centuries Christians have pointed to Scripture as central to the search. On one level this would entail reading and studying it, using the best translations and aids available to discover what the writers were saying to the first readers. At another level it would involve meditation, listening to scripture passages to discover through them God's Word to us today. "In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day and for our Christian life," Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained to seminarians at Finkenwalde, "that it is not only God's Word for the Church, but also God's Word for us individually."[10]

Besides Scripture, many have found grace and insight in the classics of Christian devotion, other writings, and, today, other media such as movies and plays. Classics which have touched many lives include Augustine's *Confessions*, *The Imitation of Christ*, Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Teresa of Avila's *Autobiography* and *The Interior Castle*, John of the Cross's *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Pascal's *Pensées*, Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Woolman's *Journal*, William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, Sören Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Teilhard de Chardin's *The Divine Milieu*, Thomas R. Kelly's *A Testament of Devotion*, and Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Novels and plays and other writings may open wide windows in our walk with God, too. As western culture has shifted from a more typographic to a more iconic and tactual character, many are discov-

ering grace in movies such as *A River Runs Through It*, *Nell*, *Schindler's List*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and many others.

When we enter into a covenant with God, we also enter into a relationship with humankind and come under a social obligation. God created humankind out of love with a desire that all may be one. When we disrupted God's plan, God called a people and then God sent his Son to bring humankind together, and God sends us, the Church, to continue the Son's mission. Our first task is to *live* in community like those first Christians tried to do. We do not stop with that, however. To continue the mission of Christ in the world should lead us to social service and social action, meeting human need wherever or in whatever form we find it. Multitudes of Christians have experienced their most significant spiritual growth as they have forgotten themselves and followed Jesus into the world.

The social dimension suggests another element of a Christian's spiritual life: the institutional. Since the turbulent sixties, "baby boomers," people born between 1946 and 1965, have adopted a highly critical attitude toward "religion," which they identify with institutions. Over against this view, however, we must recognize that Christianity is the most institution-creating of the world's faiths. That has something to do with our concept of incarnation. God entered into human life in Jesus of Nazareth. In the same way, we embody our faith in institutions, e.g., in Scripture, meetings for worship, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and even buildings. As a matter of fact, most persons will depend on regular gatherings for the nurturing of their spiritual life. Notwithstanding the fault they find with institutional Christianity, "boomers" will depend on institutions to find both the spirituality and the community that they covet!

Let me emphasize once again the importance of balance in the spiritual life. If you rely too heavily on the institutional, you may need to pay more attention to your life of prayer, lest you end up with a religion of form without its power (2 Timothy 3:5). If, on the other hand, you get too caught up in the experiential and neglect the intellectual, social, or institutional, you may "burn out," consuming all of your spiritual energy in seeking spiritual "highs," as many did during the revivals of the "Great Awakening" in the eighteenth century. A whole section of New York became known as the "burnt-over district." It is easy, too, to get so caught up in social concerns that you pull the plug from the spiritual socket which generated those concerns in the first place.

## CONCLUSION

If you do not remember anything else from this article, remember this: *Relax! It's all about Grace*. All too often, people who become serious about their spiritual life start straining, as if it all depended on them. Please, hear this: *Your spiritual growth doesn't depend on you***.** The Apostle Paul underscores the point in his letter to the Corinthians. "I planted. Apollos watered. God caused the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

## NOTES

1 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1956), 31.
2 Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, translated by E. M. Blaiklock (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1981), 85.
3 Ibid., 52.
4 Michel Quoist, *Prayers*, translated by Agnes M. Forsyth and Anne Marie de Commaille (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 17.
5 Ibid., 11.
6 Ibid., 29.
7 Quoted by Margaret Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1958), 75.
8 Abraham J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 1951), 74.
9 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 84 on the Song of Songs, in *Selected Works*, translated by Gillian R. Evans (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 275.
10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), 82.

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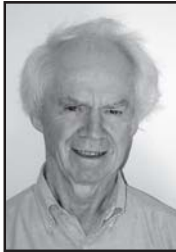

**E. GLENN HINSON**
*is Senior Professor of Church History and Spirituality at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky.*

# Meeting Christian Mystics

BY YOLANDA ROBLES

**These three books, representative of a spate of recent publications, point to a renewed interest in the lives and works of Christian mystics, especially among a general audience. This may result from a need within the Church at large—a hunger for a radical encounter with the presence of the Triune God.**

In her introduction to *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2001; 270 pp., $20.00), Ursula King says her aim is to "open a window on [the] rich heritage of Christian mystical experience which speaks so strongly across time and place to our own need and circumstance" (p. 7). All three books under review here share the goal of introducing us to Christian mystics' lives, works, and contributions to mystical theology. They invite us to consider how these mystics speak to our own circumstance and what we stand to gain by studying this aspect of our Christian heritage.

Bernard McGinn and Patricia Ferris McGinn note in *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Visions of the Spiritual Masters* (New York: Crossroad, 2003; 256 pp., $18.95) that the mystics sought to attain deeper contact with God (p. 12). An immediate concern, however, is whether or not intimate contact with God, often characterized by mystics as an extraordinary encounter, is a practical possibility for average Christians who, for the most part, do not share in the ascetic, rigorous lifestyles most mystics led. Can these Christians speak to us today in the midst of contemporary consumer culture?

The authors answer this question by demonstrating that mystics do not represent an elite class within the Christian faith. Divine encounters like those that the mystics experienced are accessible to all Christians by an extension of God's grace. The lives and works of mystics give insight into the steps required to achieve this intimacy in our relationship with God.

## INTRODUCING THE MYSTICS

Ursula King's *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages* is best suited for those with little or no knowledge of mystical theology or its primary figures. She begins by describing the background and fundamentals of Christian mysticism, noting its scriptural foundations and the cultural context of the early church. King then proceeds chronologically, devoting chapters to early Christian, medieval, early modern, and modern mystics as she discusses central figures such as Clement of Alexandria, St. Catherine of Siena, George Fox, and Evelyn Underhill.

One of the greatest strengths of *Christian Mystics* is the fifth chapter that focuses on Eastern Orthodox mystics. Many introductory books either fail to mention figures in the Eastern Church who made substantial contributions to mystical theology and practice or focus only on a few early theologians like Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. King surveys the broader scope of Eastern Orthodox mysticism, including the author of *The Way of the Pilgrim* and Vladimir Solovyov in the nineteenth century, and analyzes how Orthodox mystical thought diverges from Christian mysticism in the West.

Another of the book's strengths is the emphasis on lesser-known female mystics. King examines several Beguines, such as St. Mechtild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, "laywomen who lived an ideal of Christian spirituality in self-sufficient communities in different parts of Europe" (p. 89). Through her discussion of these women, she demonstrates the specifically female characteristics of Christian spirituality, which include an emphasis on affectivity and experience, the exploration of Christ's humanity, and the Eucharist. King provides much insight into this little-explored aspect of Christian mysticism.

## EXPLORING THE MYSTICS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Readers who have an introductory knowledge of Christian mysticism will find Bernard McGinn and Patricia Ferris McGinn's *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters* to be a challenging but rewarding read. This book is an adaptation of the first half of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn's four-volume magisterial study. Thus *Early Christian Mystics* is a more accessible version of the information in *The Presence of God*, a work that is better suited for seminarians and academicians.

However, *Early Christian Mystics* is not as undemanding as you might think. Each of the twelve chapters (a number chosen by the authors for its sacred significance) presents a single figure from Origen to William of St. Thierry, discussing his or her life, background, theological position, and contribution to mysticism. The text does not cheat us by giving an oversimplified presentation of the mystics' thought.

This more technical quality of the book makes it better suited to readers who have some familiarity with Christian mysticism. Also, as the title

*Early Christian Mystics* suggests, its scope is limited to the beginnings of Christian mysticism, through the year 1200. While they do not cover the breadth of history that King does, McGinn and McGinn provide more information on the mystics they consider, giving us a detailed account of their theological positions and special contributions they made to the development of mystical thought and practice.

*Early Christian Mystics* also addresses the question of why these twelve mystics matter today. The chapter on Gregory the Great, for example, highlights his insistence that God can be contemplated in this life by every Christian and not just by the monastics (which was a radical idea coming from this monk who became pope at the end of the sixth century). This suggests that contemplation is a viable practice for ordinary Christians today. Helping us discern how early Christian mysticism applies to our faith and practice today may be this book's greatest contribution.

The suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter are very helpful guides to navigating the volumes of scholarship on each mystic, including the best translations of the mystic's writings, other introductory texts, and helpful scholarly studies.

### LETTING MYSTICS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman's anthology, *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, second edition (New York: Paulist Press, 2001; 463 pp., $24.95), allows the Christian mystics to speak for themselves through a thoughtful selection from their writings. It gives general readers the necessary background and context to study works they might not otherwise read or grasp. Each chapter surveys the life of a mystic, provides a few well-chosen readings for an overview of the mystic's contribution to theology, and describes the significance of his or her works.

This version of *Light from Light* is fully updated and revised. Gone are some figures that readers found to be less interesting in the 1988 original volume, such as Henri Le Saux, William Law, and Maximus the Confessor. In their stead, figures like Francis and Clare of Assisi, Jeanne de Chantal, and Evelyn Underhill have been incorporated into the anthology.

Dupré and Wiseman admit that they have included some figures who do not meet all of the characteristics we associate with the terms "mystic" and "mysticism." Some, like Thérèse of Lisieux and Evelyn Underhill, did not have an extraordinary encounter with the divine presence. Defending the inclusion of such figures in the volume, Dupré and Wiseman note that "through the centuries we have come to consider certain texts mystical more for the unique insight—at once cognitive and affective—in the spiritual nature of reality they convey to the reader than for the assumed (but totally hidden) experience that led to their writing" (p. 5). In other words, Dupré and Wiseman consider those individuals who convey a special religious vision of reality, which unites the cognitive and affective functions of the mind, to be mystics. Such a view prevents us from getting caught up in

the individual's personal experience and subjective feeling and leads us to focus instead on the content of their thought and work.

Like King's book, *Light from Light* covers a broad spectrum of Christian mysticism, examining not only the famous but also some lesser-known figures from the early church down through the twentieth century. The readings come in a rich variety, from treatises to poetry and personal letters. Some of these minor works include Clare of Assisi's *Letters to Blessed Agnes of Prague*, St. John of the Cross's *Stanzas Concerning an Ecstasy Experienced in High Contemplation*, and Jeanne de Chantal's *Letters of Spiritual Direction*. Also, much like *Early Christian Mysticism,* each chapter concludes with a selected bibliography that guides us to primary source material and studies of the mystic. *Light from Light* could serve as an introductory textbook on Christian mysticism.

## CONCLUSION

The recent publication of these and many other books on the lives and works of Christian mystics points to a renewed interest in them, especially among a general audience with no formal training in church history and theology. This interest may result from a need within the Church at large—a hunger for a radical encounter with the presence of God.

Of course, in a culture that is increasingly antagonistic to the Christian perspective and lifestyle, the possibility of a distinctly Christian mystical encounter with the Triune God is generally denied. Such an encounter is deemed subjective and individualistic and, therefore, is devalued. As a result, the reliability and credibility of Christian mystics' personal accounts of their encounters with the divine presence has come under fire. Much skepticism surrounds orthodox Christian mysticism as a whole.

Yet in spite of this skepticism, many people today want to understand Christian mysticism. Perhaps they want to counteract the line of thought that calls into question this part of the rich heritage of Christianity and to participate with the mystics in an ineffable encounter with God. However we characterize their motives, those who are delving into a study of Christian mysticism are taking a radically countercultural stance. Students of mysticism stand in opposition to a society that denies the real presence of God. In recovering this part of Christianity's legacy, we may yet learn to embody a prophetic stance within the world while at the same time growing in our awareness and love for God.

**YOLANDA ROBLES**
*is a Ph.D. candidate in religion and literature at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*

# Why the Mystics Matter

BY MICHAEL D. SCIRETTI, JR.

**In our utilitarian, individualistic culture where we often feel abandoned and disconnected, the Christian mystics help us realize that we are at home in God's awe-full world. The mystics can help us cope with the problems of the modern world because they "carry us into the depths of divine love."**

Who are the Christian mystics? Do they really matter today? The history of the Church is filled with great saints who are considered to be mystics, and many of these great souls have played crucial roles in the development of Christian thought and practice. Nevertheless, can twenty-first century men and women living in a globalized, individualistic, and technocratic world learn anything from these mystics?

## LEARNING THE MYSTICS' WAYS

While not intended to be a "how-to book for becoming a mystic," Emilie Griffin's *Wonderful and Dark is This Road: Discovering the Mystic Path* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004, 191 pp., $15.95) is a helpful primer on Christian mysticism. With a casual, conversational style, Griffin weaves together stories and writings of mystics in order to explore several distinctive features of the mystical life. Griffin shines in her use of the life stories of mystics to describe certain aspects of mysticism.

After defining mysticism as "close intimacy with a loving God," Griffin emphasizes in her first two chapters that mystics choose to open themselves to God's grace. This necessarily flows into a "mysticism of ordinary living" and a "mysticism of service." In other words, a Christian mystic is one who lives the life Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount.

The remaining chapters of the book sample different aspects of the mystics' path. Chapters that are particularly praiseworthy include "The

Way of Affirmation," "The Way of Negation," and "World-Transforming Mysticism." Griffin illustrates the two primary "ways" by describing some of their more famous practitioners. For example, Francis of Assisi, Dante Alighieri, Teresa of Avila, and Brother Lawrence practiced the way of affirmation; they affirmed that God can be found in creation and in the things of the visible world. Yet the way of negation claims that God dwells in darkness and that the only way to truly experience God is through abandoning one's self to God. Besides John of the Cross, Griffin identifies Gregory of Nyssa, the *Cloud of Unknowing* author, and Jean-Pierre de Caussade as articulators of this way. Also helpful in this chapter is her insistence (following Thomas Merton) that the two "ways" are essentially describing the same experience but in different terms, much like "positive" and "negative" are aspects of the same photographic image.

Yet Griffin's final chapter, "World-Transforming Mysticism," may be the most creative and timely in the book. Here we understand why the mystics really matter to Griffin. For while they are important because the Bible is full of them, and since they show us that our journey to God is one of grace and choice, they ultimately matter because they show us that "the world is deeply connected within the Divine Reality" (p. 151). They can lead us, therefore, toward a less hostile and more peaceful world civilization since they are conscious of the truth that God is within the world yet beyond the world. For these reasons, Griffin believes that the mystics are spiritual guides who can help awaken us to the interconnectedness of all humanity and lead us into a more peaceful world.

## RESISTING THE WORLD'S THOUGHTLESSNESS

*Wonderful and Dark is This Road* is a good place to begin one's study of the mystics since it largely summarizes the work of other scholars of mysticism, most notably Evelyn Underhill, Harvey Egan, and Bernard McGinn. However, for a provocative and timely reinterpretation of mysticism, I highly recommend Dorothee Soelle's *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001, 325 pp., $21.00). This stimulating book accomplishes two goals: to show the democratizing effect of mysticism and to develop the relationship between mystical experience and social-political behavior.

In our utilitarian, individualistic culture where we often feel abandoned and disconnected, Soelle contends the experience of mysticism makes us feel at home in God's awe-full world. Two medieval sources serve as her compass: a letter written by an anonymous late medieval German mystic and the writings of the Sufi mystic, Jalal Al-Din Rumi. Using these sources, Soelle guides the reader through a new way of becoming one with God in perceiving, understanding, and acting in the world. When one experiences God, who is the paradoxical silent cry, one cannot help hearing the silent cries of God's oppressed people throughout the world. We awaken from the slumber of our imprisonment. Thus, Soelle elucidates

a new yet ancient way of understanding mysticism, what she names a "mysticism of wide-open eyes" to the beauty of God in the world and to the present injustices of the world.

In a section called "What is Mysticism?" Soelle articulates new mystical language for the journey today. Drawing from diverse writers such as Meister Eckhart, Rumi, William James, and C. S. Lewis, Soelle begins by showing how all of us are mystics—we all have the ability to be amazed and experience awe. The climax of this first section is her new outline of the mystical journey for today, for which she draws heavily from two unlikely persons: the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Thomas Müntzer and the contemporary Episcopalian priest Matthew Fox. In the place of the three ways of classical mysticism (purification, illumination, and union), Soelle suggests new stages for the mystical journey today: amazement, letting go, and resisting. This one small section contains the seed from which all of Soelle's later reflection grows and blossoms.

In "Places of Mystical Experience," Soelle pursues her aim of "democratizing mysticism without trivializing it" (p. 97). Her premise is that the realm of God's self-communication is not in extreme ascetic behavior but rather in human experiences of nature, eroticism, suffering, community, and joy. Particularly poignant is her chapter on a mysticism of suffering, where she discusses the "dark night of the world," a contemporary appropriation of what John of the Cross called the "dark night of the soul."

Soelle concludes with her main point, that "mysticism is resistance," through a reinterpretation of the monastic vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity. Soelle names two trends that determine the prison of our culture: globalization and individualization. She then articulates the "vows" of today's mystic: "ego-lessness," "possessionlessness," and "nonviolence." Soelle's grasp of the heart of the mystical tradition is acute at this point. She counsels that our consumer ego must be freed from the values of the First World kingdom (power, possessions, and violence) if we are ever to escape from our "common blind captivity to the world."

**Mystics ultimately matter because they show us that "the world is deeply connected within the Divine Reality." They are spiritual guides who can help awaken us to the interconnectedness of all humanity and lead us into a more peaceful world.**

Though her final chapter is entitled "A Mysticism of Liberation," she chooses "resistance" as her operative word because resistance seems more appropriate for a people who live in exile and are immersed in the thoughtlessness of the world. Rather than being tied to specific historical,

liberating events (e.g., the exodus from Egypt), resistance is the "long-term praxis that is learned in the Babylonian exile: refraining from eating the fruits of apartheid, publicizing the profits of arms manufactures and traders" (p. 204). To grow in this type of resistance is to be empowered, to begin living as if we already lived in a liberated world.

*The Silent Cry* is a work of great intricacy, but it is by no means dense. Each chapter contains many stirring symbols of mysticism and resistance, such as Francis of Assisi, Marguerite Porete, John Woolman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dag Hammarskjöld, and Dorothy Day. Soelle's insight into the lives of these saints is acute. She is to be commended for integrating the lives and writings of the mystics with the contemporary critiques of liberation theology, feminist theology, and creation spirituality, as she charts an ancient-future way of being and acting in the twenty-first century.

### COPING WITH THE WORLD'S CHALLENGES

A more devotional approach is taken by Frederick C. Bauerschmidt in *Why the Mystics Matter Now* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003, 154 pp., $12.95). Of all three books, this one most easily initiates the beginner into the world of Christian mysticism by showing how certain mystics can help us journey through the challenges of contemporary life.

In his introduction, which is one of the most clear and succinct explanations of the mystical journey I have read, Bauerschmidt explains the meaning of "mysticism," the threefold journey to God (through purification, illumination, and union), and the dominant mystical themes of "seeing" and "receiving." He candidly reviews the problems of our modern world and examines how the mystics, when we attentively listen to them, can "open a space in our self-confidence" (p. 21). If we allow this to happen, we may see that our most fundamental reality is that we are loved by God and are meant to receive this love as a gift, both in life and in death.

Unlike Griffin who did not set out to tell us "how-to" be a mystic, Bauerschmidt has written a clever "how-to" book on living in the contemporary world in light of the teachings of seven mystics. Chapters include "How to Live in A World Without God" (Thérèse of Lisieux and the trial of faith), "How to Live in a World with Too Many Gods" (Ignatius of Loyola on the discernment of spirits), "How to Receive" (Meister Eckhart on detachment), "How to Give" (Catherine of Siena on love of God and neighbor), "How to Be Green" (Hildegard of Bingen on *viriditas*), "How to Be Blue" (Julian of Norwich on happiness and depression), and "How to Live and How to Die" (Thomas Merton on following a path). In short, Bauerschmidt offers us a manual for living and a fine introduction to how the mystics are relevant to ordinary people living in a confusing world. While all the chapters are very beneficial, the chapters on loving our neighbor, depression, and living and dying are particularly insightful.

Each chapter has four sections. For example, the chapter on Thomas Merton begins with his famous prayer in *Thoughts in Solitude*, "My Lord

God, I have no idea where I am going...." Next, Bauerschmidt discusses how we are lured by our technological savvy into thinking we can control life and death. However, as he illustrates through the life of Merton and a commentary on his famous prayer, the only way to overcome our loss of control is to confess the lostness around us (the path we are on) and the lostness within us. Only then can we begin to see that God is in the darkness, and that life is a gift from God whom no mind can grasp. Finally, Bauerschmidt concludes with a concise summary of why Merton matters now—because he summarizes the heart of the mystical tradition. According to Bauerschmidt, all these mystics tell us that "we see best when we see our blindness; we walk most confidently by letting ourselves be led, by relinquishing our plans and programs, by living our lives as a gift received rather than a prize won" (p. 152).

## CONCLUSION

*Why the Mystics Matter Now* would be perfect for a small group desiring to learn more about the Christian mystical tradition. After studying Bauerschmidt's book, I would suggest moving on to Griffin's summarization of Christian mysticism. Finally, for those brave of heart and comfortable with the language of mysticism, I recommend immersing oneself in Soelle's articulation of the mystical journey for today.

As we apply teachings of the mystics to our lives, we must be careful not to turn to them for purely pragmatic reasons, such as to cope with the problems of the modern world. While coping skills are good, living in loving intimacy with God is about much more. All three authors urge us to take a wider view of the mystics. "They matter because they can help us see and receive the deep mystery that pervades the world," Bauerschmidt concludes. "They matter because they can carry us into the depths of divine love" (p. 154).

**MICHAEL D. SCIRETTI, JR.**
*is a Ph.D. candidate in church history at Baylor University and Minister to Youth at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.*

# Editors

**ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ**
General Editor

Bob Kruschwitz is Director of The Center for Christian Ethics and Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University. He convenes the editorial team to plan the themes for the issues of *Christian Reflection*, then he commissions the lead articles and supervises the formation of each issue. Bob holds the Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin and the B.A. from Georgetown College. You may contact him by phone at 254-710-3774 or by email at Robert_Kruschwitz@baylor.edu.

**HEIDI J. HORNIK**
Art Editor

Heidi Hornik is Professor of Art History at Baylor University. She selects and writes analysis of the artwork for *Christian Reflection*. With the M.A. and Ph.D. in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University and the B.A. from Cornell University, her special interest is art of the Italian Renaissance. With Mikeal C. Parsons, she co-edited *Interpreting Christian Art* and co-authored *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting*. You may contact her by phone at 254-710-4548 or by email at Heidi_Hornik@baylor.edu.

**NORMAN WIRZBA**
Review Editor

Norman Wirzba is Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Georgetown College. He designs and edits the book review articles in *Christian Reflection*. Norman holds the M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy from Loyola University of Chicago, the M.A. in religion from Yale University, and the B.A. from the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. His research interests include the intersection of Christian theology and environmental ethics. You may contact him by phone at 502-863-8204 or by email at Norman_Wirzba@georgetowncollege.edu.

## WILLIAM D. SHIELL
Proclamation Editor

William D. Shiell is Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. He has served on leading committees of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. After receiving the B.A. in religion from Samford University, he earned the M.Div. in theology from George W. Truett Theological Seminary and Ph.D. in religion from Baylor University. His weekly sermons are published online in audio format at *www.fbcknox.org*. You may contact him by phone at 865-546-9661 or by email at shiell@fbcknox.org.

# Contributors

**FREDERICK CHRISTIAN BAUERSCHMIDT**
Associate Professor of Theology, Loyola College, Baltimore, MD

**BRENT BEASLEY**
Senior Pastor, Second Baptist Church, Memphis, TN

**BURT L. BURLESON**
Pastor, DaySpring Baptist Church, Waco, TX

**DANA GREENE**
Former Dean and CEO of Oxford College, Emory University, Oxford, GA

**EMILIE GRIFFIN**
Writer and editor

**E. GLENN HINSON**
Senior Professor of Church History and Spirituality, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

**HEIDI J. HORNIK**
Professor of Art History, Baylor University

**KURT KAISER**
Songwriter and composer, Waco, TX

**ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ**
Director, Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University

**ALEX NAVA**
Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

**YOLANDA ROBLES**
Ph.D. candidate, Department of English, Baylor University

**MICHAEL D. SCIRETTI, JR.**
Ph.D. candidate, Department of Religion, Baylor University, and Minister to Youth, Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, TX

**BETTY W. TALBERT**
Director of Spiritual Formation, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

**W. DENNIS TUCKER**
Assistant Professor of Christian Scriptures, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University