
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 WAR Y?

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 oriented 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.

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.

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.

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.



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