



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

The Center thanks the
Cooperative Baptist Fellow-
ship for its financial support
of these study guides.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

Study Guides for **Mysticism**

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us explore the mystics' invitation "to walk into the world and be unleashed to care unselfishly." Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

What is a Mystic? 2

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 4

Mystics show the power of the Song of Songs to shape our understanding of life with God and 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 6

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 8

Simone Weil is a 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 10

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 12

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?



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Toward a Deeper and Godlier Love
(*Mysticism*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Do You Love Me?
(*Mysticism*, pp. 63-66)
- 📖 Meeting Christian Mystics
(*Mysticism*, pp. 85-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

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?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21

Responsive Reading

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Lord our God.

We come together before 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 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.

Reflection

"To speak of mystics today is to risk misunderstanding," Emilie Griffin warns. "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."

Bernard McGinn defines Christian mysticism as a form of spirituality that "concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to...the immediate or direct presence of God." Mystics describe their experience in various ways—as union or communion with God, ecstasy or intimacy, seeing visions or hearing voices, and so on.

Nevertheless, Griffin suggests, "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?"

To clarify the nature of Christian mysticism, she emphasizes three ideas:

- ▶ *Intimacy with God is a gift.* "The mystics do not ask to be mystics," and they offer us no spiritual algorithm to manipulate God's presence. Mysticism is not magic. Instead, the mystics wait humbly before God: "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 mys-



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

tic,' but rather, 'Lord, I want to know you better.'" The mystics invite us to open ourselves to the spiritual life, including Christian forms of meditation and prayer. Yet "we should not attempt the spiritual life as if we could (under our own steam) achieve a high level of greatness," Griffin warns. "Although a certain discipline is good, spiritual transformation depends upon the grace of God and comes as pure gift."

- ▶ *Our experiences of God are diverse.* Many Christians have suggested a path in the spiritual life, from awakening to purgation, illumination, and union. "The idea of recognized stages is reassuring, but it should not be confining," she writes, for "the grace of God is highly unpredictable. God's plan for each person is unique to that person."
- ▶ *Mystics need to "think with the church."* Some Christians are experimenting with spiritual techniques from other religious traditions. Griffin finds wisdom in the letter to bishops titled "Christian Meditation," which counsels caution in using these techniques. "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," she writes. "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."

God proclaims, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3). The mystics, Griffin says, "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."

Study Questions

1. The term "mystic" was not used until A.D. 500. However, which biblical figures encountered God intimately and directly in what might be called "mystical experience"?
2. Who are some Christian mystics over the ages? Have you benefited from their writings or experiences?
3. According to Griffin, why are we wary of mysticism? Do you have other worries about Christian mysticism?
4. What does Thomas Merton mean by "masked contemplation"? How is it "an ordinary or hidden mysticism"?
5. What aspects of the mystics' experience do we deeply desire according to the hymn "Our Deepest Prayer"? Do you agree?
6. Discuss Brent Beasley's suggestion that Christian ministers and deacons and teachers should be more like mystics than prophets. He quotes Henri Nouwen approvingly: "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?"
7. For Beasley, in what sense is Jesus' question, "Do you love me?" an invitation to a mystical encounter with God?

Departing Hymn: "Our Deepest Prayer"



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 How Mystics Hear the Song
(*Mysticism*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Yearning for God
(*Mysticism*, pp. 60-62)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Song of Songs 1:1-4; 2:3-5

Responsive Reading: Psalm 34:8-14

O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.

**The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.**

Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?

**Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.**

**Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.**

Reflection

“What makes this congregation so different?” Vicki and I asked the pastor of the appealing church we were about to join. “We’re searching for a deeper, richer tradition,” he began. “We’re asking what Christians were doing more than a few hundred years ago, and letting that shape our worship and what we study together.”

As Dennis Tucker notes, we may be surprised to learn what our ancestors in the faith read and how it informed their discipleship. Christians in the Middle Ages studied the Song of Songs—a book that scandalizes us with its erotic language and sexual innuendos—and allowed it to teach them to love God. They wrote more “commentaries” on it than any other Old Testament book. How did the medieval mystics hear the Song?

- ▶ *They listened to the Song “with the ear of our hearts.”* That is how Benedict describes *lectio divina* (or divine reading)—a careful listening to a short passage of Scripture read aloud several times, separated by silence. The “commentaries” by Bernard of Clairvaux and Teresa of Avila are devotional reflections based on such a reading. Bernard says his goal is not so much “to explain words as it is to influence hearts,” because a meditative reading of the Song can “teach thirsting souls how to seek the one by whom they themselves are sought.”
- ▶ *They identified with the context of the Song.* “The wedding day envisioned in the Song became symbolic of the monastic life” especially, and Christian life generally, writes Tucker. “All of life is a liminal moment—living in this world, yet longing for the next. The language of anticipation and fulfillment in the



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

Song was an ideal vehicle for expressing...the tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of the spiritual life."

- ▶ *They let the Song's words reshape their view of life with God.* We are inexperienced in loving God, Teresa laments. The Song rekindles our love even as it teaches us to express it. "Along how many paths, in how many ways, by how many methods You show us love!" she writes. "[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.*"

John of the Cross, rather than writing a commentary on the Song of Songs, "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." His remarkable poetry models the spiritual life for us, for as we dwell with the Song and with these medieval sisters and brothers, Tucker concludes, "we will find our own voice in this journey toward love."

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between an *informational* reading of Scripture and a *formational* reading? Do we need one or the other, or both? How would you study Scripture in each way?
2. Medieval interpreters believed the Bible has layers of meaning. Discuss what they called the "fourfold meaning of Scripture." Do you agree the Bible has these layers of meaning?
3. The relation between faith and works, or God's grace and our moral efforts, is difficult to understand. How does Bernard of Clairvaux approach this puzzle in the quote that begins, "I could not perceive the exact moment of his arrival" (p. 22)? How does John Newton address the problem in the sixth verse of "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds"?
4. In *Canticle* 34-39 by John of Cross (p. 26), what insights do you find into our love for God?
5. Read the report by Teresa of Avila of the "transverberation" (p. 61), the event portrayed in Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Can we learn anything from Teresa's unusual vision, or does it simply make her a religious eccentric?

Departing Hymn: "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" (verses 1, 5, and 6)

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
in a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
and drives away his fear.

Jesus! my Shepherd, Husband, Friend,
O Prophet, Priest, and King,
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart,
and cold my warmest thought;
But when I see you as you are,
I'll praise you as I ought.

John Newton (1779), alt.

Tune: ST. PETER (Reinagle)



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Loosening Our Grip
(*Mysticism*, pp. 29-36)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

Loosening Our Grip

Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416) 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

Response to the Scripture†

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.

Reflection

In an era so filled with war, disease, and religious splintering that it was every bit as calamitous as our own, a remarkable woman known as “Julian of Norwich” reflected on fourteen visions. Most involved the crucifix 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,” explains Fred Bauerschmidt. The visions were comforting, but also disturbing to Julian for “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.” Yet she writes, “I saw him and sought him; I had him and wanted him.”

If we examine our lives and the world through the eyes of Julian of Norwich, we gain new insight into

- ▶ *Trusting God's goodness.* Behind our desire to control the world through techniques, or “means,” that secure health and prosperity, Julian sees a fundamental distrust of God. “For Julian, the chief problem that we have is...that we do not believe that God loves us sufficiently to will our good,” Bauerschmidt notes. “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.”

The misunderstanding of God against which Julian reacts may be seen today in our approach to science and technology, he suggests. “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.”

- ▶ *Focusing on the Crucified.* In the midst of terrorism, AIDS, and environmental devastation, how can we believe that God has our best interests at heart, or that we are not simply left to “work” a natural system that God has left to run on its own?



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

Is it not irresponsible to say with Julian, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well"?

In her vision of the crucified Jesus, Julian grasps that "God repairs the world's pain...by entering into that pain and healing our sad history from within through an act of love," says Bauerschmidt. "The cross...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 also 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. The final repair of fallen creation is a work of God that we hope for but cannot anticipate."

- ▶ *Acting in the world.* Our action "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," Bauerschmidt concludes. Julian asks us to "embrace the mystery of suffering, and it is only from within that embrace that action can grow that truly accords with God's love."

Study Questions

1. What events today make it difficult for people to believe that God is wholly good? How might Julian respond?
2. "All shall be well" runs counter to our self-image. In what ways do we have a "death grip on the reins of history"?
3. Describe Julian's critique of efforts to manipulate God with devotion, or "religious techniques." Is it still relevant?
4. Julian says a Christ-like life is filled with compassion or suffering-with. How is this different from appeals to compassion to support physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia of disabled newborns, stem cell research, or deposing a dictator?

Departing Hymn: "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); trans. J. L. Borthwick (1855), alt.
Tune: FINLANDIA

†Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Prophetic Mysticism
(*Mysticism*, pp. 37-46)

Suggested Article:

📖 Surrounded by Witnesses
(*Mysticism*, pp. 58-59)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

Prophetic Mysticism

Simone Weil (1909-1943) is a 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Meditative Reading

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.[†]

Reflection

As the young social activist Simone Weil (pronounced "vey") was meditating on George Herbert's poem for comfort during her violent headaches in 1938, its words became a prayer on her lips. "During one of these recitations," she says, "Christ himself came down and took possession of me." The consequences of this mystical experience were profound, Alex Nava writes, "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."

Weil's life and writings continue to attract many Christians 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." Nava urges, "She is precisely the type of thinker that we should pick up to read as we embark on the new millennium."

From one perspective, mystics and prophets have a lot in common: both are countercultural, startling, and disturbing of the norm. Yet they are very different. Biblical prophets, and their



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

spiritual progeny, are “passionate in their concern for the poor and the oppressed, widows and orphans, strangers and aliens. An ethics of justice pervades their proclamations,” Nava notes. “Mystics, by contrast...[are concerned] with beauty rather than moral goodness.... 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.”

Most of us can recognize a need for both mystics and prophets. Nava sees the need for mysticism in his “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.” He sees the wisdom of many mystics in how they understand that language is so limited in speaking of God and in how they celebrate the role of intense and intimate love in the life of discipleship.

“The prophets, on the other hand, remind me of the needs of the dispossessed and disenfranchised,” he writes. “Love without justice, they insist, is too cheap and sentimental, too emotional and individualistic. 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.”

Study Questions

1. In Alex Nava’s summary of Simone Weil’s adult life (pp. 41-45), what are her prophetic activities? Are the mystical and prophetic aspects of her discipleship integrated, or do they remain separated?
2. Discuss Weil’s view: “Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment. The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors.”
3. Why was Weil never baptized? Do you sympathize with her reasons or find them to be troubling?
4. What mystical themes do you find in the meditative reading, George Herbert’s famous poem, “Love (III)”?
5. In Gregoire’s *The Death of St. Clare*, and in the fifteenth-century masterwork to which it responds, why are the virgin martyrs the witnesses who comfort St. Clare? Is it important that Gregoire signifies the martyrs by iconographic symbols?

Departing Hymn: “Eternal God, Whose Power Upholds” (verse 2)

O God of love, whose Spirit wakes
in every human breast,
whom love, and love alone can know,
in whom all hearts find rest,
help us to spread your gracious reign
till greed and hate shall cease,
and kindness dwell in human hearts,
and all the earth find peace!

Henry H. Tweedy (1928), alt.
Tune: FOREST GREEN

[†]George Herbert, “Love (III)”



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 The Mystic and the Church
(*Mysticism*, pp. 70-76)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Transparent Self
(*Mysticism*, pp. 67-69)
- 📖 Radiant with Great Splendor
(*Mysticism*, pp. 56-57)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

The Mystic and the Church

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) 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 on-going critique of the foibles of the “visible church.”

Prayer

Almighty and Merciful One, Lord God of all Creation, may our respect and humility honor your transcendent holiness.

May the attention we offer mirror your immanent presence; 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.**

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:38-42

Reflection

Evelyn Underhill was not “brought up to religion.” The child of a wealthy London lawyer, “she believed in God and in helping the poor, but saw religion as dogmatic and bigoted and the clergy as pompous and narrow,” Dana Greene writes. Today we might call Underhill in her early adult years a “seeker,” for she returned to take part in the Anglican Church, the religion of her birth, by the long route of her desire to understand the mystics.

In her pioneering book, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, Underhill presented the mystics as loners, unencumbered by religious institutions. Gradually in her life and later writings, she came to realize the genius of institutional religion as well as mysticism, and she tried to reconcile the tension between them. “The result,” Greene notes, “was a creative exploration of two important phenomena, both needed for a full Christian life.” Underhill discovered that

- ▶ *In order to flourish, mysticism needs the church.* Mysticism can tend to strangeness, vagueness, and sentimentality. Mystics who are not anchored in the church may drift into unintentional irrelevance. Underhill came to realize that church life “fostered group consciousness, gave a sense of unity, and offered both a ready-made discipline and a capacity to hand on a culture,” writes Greene.
- ▶ *The church needs its mystics.* Parochial, dogmatic, and conservative churches, she believed, had departed from their central mission, “to redeem the world by forming souls and fostering holiness among them.” Yet a vigorous and socially active church may not be much better, for “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.” The mystics recall us to this loving center “where we are anchored in God.”
- ▶ *The experience of God is always a vocational experience.* The mystical encounter with God, she believed, “always impels to some



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

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." She lived out her vocation in a rigorous schedule of leading retreats and in her lonely advocacy of Christian pacifism on the brink of World War II.

"The reality of the Church does not abide in us; it is not a spiritual Rotary Club," Underhill wrote in her winsome summary of mysticism's role in the church. "Its reality abides in the One God, the ever-living One whose triune Spirit fills it by filling each one of its members.... 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."

Study Questions

1. According to Underhill, what do Christian mystics contribute to the church? Why does their mysticism need the structure of the institutional church?
2. Christian discipleship "means an immense widening of the arc of human sympathy," Underhill wrote, "and this is not possible to do properly unless we have found the centre of the circle first." How do many growing congregations, conservative and moderate, miss this mark?
3. Comment on Betty Talbert's view that "mystical experiences of God often occur in childhood and at midlife" (*Mysticism*, p. 68). Why does she think this, and do you agree?
4. The ancient Greek Fathers of the Church taught that mystical experience, gladly received, makes us transparent to God's light. For Talbert, in what three ways can we cooperate with God's initiative to transform us so that our transparent selves become a catalyst for the conversion of others?
5. St. Francis of Assisi was just such a transparent self for the artist Giovanni Bellini. In what aspect of the mystic's life, depicted in *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, did Bellini find inspiration?

Departing Hymn: "God Speaks to Us in Bird and Song" (verses 1, 3, and 4)

God speaks to us in bird and song,
in winds that drift the clouds along,
above the din and toil of wrong,
a melody of love.

God speaks to us in darkest night,
by quiet ways through mornings bright,
when shadows fall with evening light,
a melody of love.

O Voice divine, speak thou to me,
beyond the earth, beyond the sea,
first let me hear, then sing to thee,
a melody of love.

Joseph Johnson (1888)

Tune: CHILDHOOD



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Improving Our Seeing and Listening
(*Mysticism*, pp. 77-84)

Suggested Article:

📖 Why the Mystics Matter
(*Mysticism*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

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?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:14-24

Response to the Scripture[†]

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.

Reflection

The Apostle Paul concludes his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, with these instructions: "seek to do good to one another," which might mean admonishing the disorderly, encouraging the faint-hearted, or assisting the weak; and "do not quench the Spirit." The latter includes listening with care and discernment to the prophets among us, but it also involves what we might call "keeping in touch" with God's presence. We do this, Paul says, by rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks—constantly.

Keeping in touch with God's presence may seem especially difficult today because our lives are so busy and the world is so distracting. Yet "we do not have to invent something brand new," Glenn Hinson writes. "Believers have wrestled with this question for centuries and offer us ample guidance.... 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*." We can come to know and love God

- ▶ *Through nature.* The psalmist says that creation "[tells] the glory of God" and "proclaims his handiwork" (19:1). Yet *hearing* its proclamation is not as simple as listening to a physical sound (19:2-4), for our hearts must be attuned morally. So, Psalm 19 concludes with a confession: "But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults" (19:12). Likewise, Jesus draws object lessons from nature: the kingdom of God, he says, is like freshly sown seed or a budding tree (Mark 4:1-9; 4:26-29; 4:30-32; 13:28-32; and parallels). But he warns that one needs a discerning heart to perceive this: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Mark 4:9, and so on).
- ▶ *Through history.* In Scripture, God communicates through *all* history, but especially in certain segments of history. "For the Jewish people, the story of stories is the exodus from Egypt," Hinson notes. "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."



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

► *Through our own lives.* “If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us,” writes Michel Quoist, “our whole life would become prayer. To *see* and *listen* so that all of life becomes a prayer is the goal of our discipleship.

To recover our attentiveness to God, says Hinson, “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....* [Yet] 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.” He recommends four types of retreats: a *daily retreat* of meditation, a *monthly retreat* of sending a day “sparing time for God” and for ourselves; a *semi-annual retreat* for thirty-six to forty-eight hours, and a *sabbatical* “to be refreshed and renewed and re-created.”

“Relax! It’s all about Grace,” Hinson reminds us. “All too often, people who become serious about their spiritual life start straining, as if it all depended on them.” As the Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely.... The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

Study Questions

1. How have you experienced God through nature, history, and your own life?
2. A healthy spirituality, Hinson says, balances “experiential, intellectual, social, and institutional dimensions.... 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.” Which element is most developed in your life? Is one of them neglected?
3. Describe the four types of retreat that Hinson recommends. What things might you do on each sort of retreat in order to renew your attentiveness to God?
4. “Mysticism is resistance,” Dorothee Soelle writes in *The Silent Cry*. In order to stay attentive to God, what aspects of culture do we need to resist? Michael Sciretti notes that Soelle articulates three “‘vows’ of today’s mystic: ‘ego-lessness,’ ‘possessionlessness,’ and ‘nonviolence’.... [O]ur 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.’” Do you agree with her list? How can meditation on a spiritual retreat help us to resist these values?
5. Comment on Frederick Bauerschmidt’s claim that the Christian 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.”

Departing Hymn: “Our Deepest Prayer”

†Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

What is a Mystic?

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan	Dual Session (#1)	Dual Session (#2)
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	John 21:1-19
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss Beasley, "Do You Love Me?"
Questions 1, 2, 3, and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4	Questions 5, 6, and 7
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To clarify the nature and range of Christian mysticism.
2. To discuss both our attraction to and our wariness of this aspect of the Christian tradition.
3. To consider whether or not all disciples, and Christian leaders specifically, should be more like the mystics.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"What is mysticism, and why are we hearing so much about it lately?" Emilie Griffin was surprised when a woman raised that question at a United Methodist Church in Natchitoches, Louisiana, where she was facilitating a Sunday night series on prayer and mysticism. "I had said little or nothing about mystics or mysticism," Griffin continues. "'Mysticism' is a term I use sparsely. These pleasant, studious women had been paying closer attention than I realized...."

"'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?'" (*Mysticism*, p. 11).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will be rooted and grounded in love in their conversation and reflection together.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 3:14-21 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Emilie Griffin connects mysticism to "ordinary" Christian life. She begins with a broad definition of Christian mysticism, which is generous enough to include "mystics who fly below the radar." These quiet, unassuming disciples are transformed by being close to God through prayer and worship and service to others. She believes that Christian mystics are not spiritual athletes who achieve ecstasies and visions by their own efforts, but are humble recipients of a gift of grace. They follow no formula—and

have no spiritual algorithm to teach us—because the working of God’s grace is mysterious and unique in each disciple’s life. Mystics, like everyone else, are called to “think with the church” and to worship and serve God communally.

In this introductory study, encourage group members to express their questions and worries about mysticism, share experiences of reading the mystics’ writings, and discuss the value of mystical experience in their lives. Later study guides will introduce individual mystics who can show us how to read Scripture with spiritual discernment and truly love those whom we serve.

Your group may want to extend its discussion of this material. In the first session, you might introduce the tradition of Christian mysticism. In a second session, use study questions 5, 6, and 7 to discuss Brent Beasley’s reading of John 21:1-19 as a call for all disciples, and especially Christian leaders, to be more like mystics.

Study Questions

1. Members might mention Jacob, Moses, Abraham, Elijah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel. The apostles Peter, John, and Paul have visions, and John the revelator sees into heaven. Mary (the sister of Martha) is held up as a model of contemplation and devotion to Christ.
2. Here is a short list of “famous” mystics: Origen, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and Symeon the New Theologian in the early centuries; Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of St. Victor, Bonaventure, Clare of Assisi, Francis of Assisi, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Catherine of Genoa, Catherine of Siena, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Gregory Palamas, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler, the author of *Theologia Germanica*, Julian of Norwich, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Jacob Boehme, Brother Lawrence, George Fox, Francis of Sales, and Jeanne de Chantal in the late middle ages through the counter reformation; Jeremy Taylor, Thomas Traherne, Jonathan Edwards, William Law, John Wesley, George McDonald, Vladimir Solovyov, Theresa of Lisieux, Dag Hammarskjöld, Thomas Kelly, Frank Laubach, C. S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, Tielhard de Chardin, and Evelyn Underhill in the modern era.
3. Griffin suggests we may “find mystics rare and strange because they give themselves completely to God.” In this, the mystics are countercultural. Members may have other concerns—e.g., that mystics value unusual experiences, are spiritual “loners,” and so on.
4. “Masked contemplation” occurs when the ordinary routine of daily life is infused with prayer and contemplation. When this happens, people “find God in active service to the poor, the despised, the people at the margins of life,” Griffin writes. “They are mystics, perhaps, without knowing it, for they are fully in touch with the heart of God.”
5. Verses one and two describe an awareness of what is beyond the practical world—“to see beyond what eyes can see...where heart and soul are unconfined by habit’s rule or reason’s mind.” Verse three expresses the moral transformation of the mystics’ vision—to “be unleashed to care unselfishly”—and verse four describes intimacy with God, “Love’s heart.”
6. Following Nouwen, Beasley says “it is not enough for Christian leaders to have well-formed opinions on the burning issues of our time; their leadership must be rooted in a contemplative love of God.” He believes this would make Church debates on controversial moral issues such as abortion, women in ministry, homosexuality, and euthanasia be more like “spiritual searches for truth” and less like “political battles for power.” Do members agree that a spirituality of waiting silently before God would change the tone of Church debates?
7. The story about his daughter, Ivy, calling him to tuck her into bed powerfully expresses Beasley’s point. She asks for his loving presence, which alone can set and confirm the context for his deeds on her behalf. He hears a similar call in Jesus’ question, “Do you love me?” Feeding Jesus’ sheep, or caring for our fellow disciples and neighbors, must grow out of and cannot replace our stillness before the loving presence of our Lord.

Departing Hymn

“Our Deepest Prayer” is on pp. 47-49 of *Mysticism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

How Mystics Hear the Song

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 3 or 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish a *formational* reading of Scripture from an *informational* reading.
2. To introduce the moral interpretation of the Song of Songs given by medieval mystics.
3. To sample what we might learn about the life of discipleship from the medieval “commentaries” on the Song of Songs.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds,” locate the tune ST. PETER (Reinagle) in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

Dennis Tucker notes that “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 falter. Our language lacks the intensity and intimacy expressed by the Song and invoked by [the mystics]. 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” (*Mysticism*, p. 27).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking the Holy Spirit to teach us language of the heart to express our love for God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Song of Songs 1:1-4; 2:3-5 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

What do the mystics have to teach us, and how can their writings inform our discipleship? Dennis Tucker believes the mystics can help us to recover a *spiritually formational* way of reading Scripture and to love God and other people with more focus and passion. He explains this through a brief tour of the writings of three mystics and saints—Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and John of the Cross (1542-1591)—on the Song of Songs.

There is a distance between the mystics’ *spiritually informing* way of reading Scripture and our Enlightenment-shaped way of reading the Bible for *information*. Grasping this distinction is as important for us as

appreciating their interpretation of the Song. Early Christians recognized a “fourfold meaning of Scripture”; beyond its literal meaning, the Bible has spiritual meaning. The point is not that “anything goes,” or that the Bible means whatever an interpreter wants it to mean. Each level of meaning must be discovered and confirmed in the community of faith, as we offer our findings for examination and review by other believers.

The mystics understood the Song to be erotic love poetry that expresses the love between a man and woman on the occasion of their wedding (the “literal” meaning). But they also interpreted the poems as describing the relation between God and the soul (the “allegorical” meaning) and instructing us in how to love God and neighbor (the “moral” meaning).

Study Questions

1. The *informational* reading of Scripture is Tucker’s term for the use of historical and critical methods to gather information about the probable author and original audience, the literary form, and the historical and cultural context of a passage of Scripture. A *formational* reading yields “the insights necessary for spiritual transformation.” Correct information about a passage of Scripture can point us to a spiritually formational reading of it. But don’t we sometimes become so sidetracked in developing and judging our informational theories about a passage that we do not allow it to judge us and develop our character?

Encourage members to discuss how they pursue *informational* and *formational* readings of Scripture. How are these two forms of reading related in their experience? What methods of reading the Scripture, what additional books or information, what guidance from others, and what methods of sharing their findings with others have they found to be most helpful?

2. A passage (1) describes an historical person or event, (2) is an allegory or type of Scripture’s larger story of creation, sin, redemption, and restoration, (3) gives guidance for character development and moral living as a disciple, and (4) foreshadows God’s ultimate judgment of the world. Terms for the four meanings vary from “literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical” to “historical, typological, tropological, and anagogical.” Here is an example: the Exodus story is (1) a description of an historical event, (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) a picture of our passage from slavery to sin in this world to eternal glory with God.

Many fanciful allegorical, moral, and mystical interpretations of Scripture have been proposed over the centuries, but some very odd literal readings have also been given. Does this show that no interpretation is better than any other one? To decide whether this fourfold framework of interpretation is useful today, consider how Christian readers *should* interpret a verse like “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

3. Bernard finds God’s empowering presence in his heart, “full of life and efficacy,” but cannot recall a moment of God’s arrival. The work of moral improvement is all on God’s side: “He moves, and warms, and wounds my heart, hard and stony and sick though it be.” Tucker says that for Bernard, “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.”

John Newton has little to contribute to his moral improvement, for “Weak is the effort of my heart, / and cold my warmest thought.” Experiencing God’s love creates Newton’s new energy and responsiveness: “But when I see you as you are, / I’ll praise you as I ought.”

4. Love is possible because creation is restored, as after the Flood. God (the Bridegroom) has been “wounded by a lonely love” too. Our soul (the Bride) longs to be “one in [God’s] beauty” and enjoy the fruit of God’s promises. We seek the “flame that fires without pain.”
5. The dramatic details of Teresa’s experience may be unlike anything we have experienced, but have we been taken rapturously into God’s love in some way that is similar to the proper and unselfish human love of a parent or child or lover?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Loosening Our Grip

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Response to the Scripture	Response to the Scripture
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review how Julian of Norwich came to understand God's goodness and work in the world through her visions of the crucified Jesus.
2. To understand why Julian claims that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."
3. To consider her insights about how we fail to trust in God's goodness.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Be Still, My Soul," locate the tune FINLANDIA in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

As Frederick Bauerschmidt notes, the writings of the fifteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich "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...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" (*Mysticism*, pp. 29-30).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would draw us in love to trust his goodness more, even when we do not understand how he is working for our good.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 1:15-20 from a modern translation.

Response to Scripture

Read the response to Scripture aloud or invite the group to read it with you in unison.

Reflection

What can mystics teach us about the life of discipleship? Frederick Bauerschmidt thinks that Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416) can help us to understand and trust more in God's goodness, which in turn would allow us to approach problems in a less controlling and destructive way.

Study Questions

1. For events that make it difficult for people to believe that God is wholly good, members might mention harm to human beings, other creatures, or the environment through *natural catastrophes* such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, droughts, and so on; *human wrongdoing* in crimes, wars, acts of business or political malfeasance, abuse of the environment, and so on; or severe *individual or family suffering* through disability, chronic disease, epidemics, relational discord, sexual or emotional abuse, and so on.

Julian rejects the idea that the universe works in a cold way by inexorable laws of nature or the will to power. We are not “on our own” and the outcome does not depend entirely on our efforts. Furthermore, for Julian, “the order of things in our world is not simply the result of God’s absolute, unconstrained choice,” Bauerschmidt explains. “Rather, it is the outworking of love and is always in accord with love.” Thus magic, techniques of spiritual devotion, and scientific technology cannot manipulate or ‘work’ the world as a self-contained system.

The form of God’s power to make all things well is seen in the crucifixion of Jesus: “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....” This does not satisfy our desire to ‘know how it works’ and to master God’s power. “The final repair of fallen creation is a work of God that we hope for but cannot anticipate.”

2. “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well,” writes Julian. 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.” We lack such faith in divine providence, Bauerschmidt notes, for “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.”

Our “taking in hand the reins of history” has tragic results. Consider how we’ve abused military power to bring peace, technology to make the earth more habitable, and political systems to bring freedom and order. “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.”

3. “Julian calls these [religious] 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,” Bauerschmidt writes. “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. Rather, she locates our activity within the prior act of God.”

What devotional practices or rituals do we think will curry God’s favor, guarantee health and prosperity, fix our relationships, bring the government we want, and so on? It’s easy to think of practices that “those other Christians” abuse. Encourage members to identify misused devotional practices in their own tradition.

4. Bauerschmidt says the other appeals to 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.... 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.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Prophetic Mysticism

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditative Reading	Meditative Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the relation between the mystical and the prophetic aspects of the Christian tradition.
2. To consider how these two aspects of the Christian tradition were integrated by Simone Weil in her short life.
3. To become aware of mystical themes in Herbert's poem and Gregoire's artwork.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Eternal God, Whose Power Upholds," locate the tune FOREST GREEN in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Bob Kruschwitz tells this story: "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'" (*Mysticism*, p. 8). Why do we need the heart of the mystic as well as the heart of the prophet? Can these be combined in one life of discipleship?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will open members' hearts to welcome the mystical and prophetic aspects of their faith.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 from a modern translation.

Meditative Reading

Ask a group member to read George Herbert's poem "Love" as a prayer.

Reflection

Many of us easily embrace the prophetic tradition, but struggle to appreciate the mystical tradition of the Christian faith. Since the biblical prophets were concerned (in part) with justice for the poor and oppressed, we see how the heart of the prophet is central to our discipleship. We know that for our moral development, we should model ourselves on the prophets. But why would we also model ourselves on the mystics? Why is being like them essential to our discipleship? Studying the life of a believer like Simone Weil, who embraced and lived out the mystical as well as the prophetic tradition, can shed new light on mysticism and its relation to our moral formation.

Weil was an ardent and eager prophet, but a reluctant and surprised mystic. Long before she embraced Christianity, she expressed a passion for justice for the workers in her native France. She did not perform “spiritual exercises” or in any way seek a mystical experience, but was caught unawares by the gift of a vision of Christ. Yet her vision not only did not detract from her devotion to justice, it intensified and clarified her passion. Her welcome encounter with the Other—God who came to her in Jesus Christ—made her even more sensitive and present to the Other in the poor villagers and the auto workers whose wellbeing she cared so much about. She learned to love, not by working harder at a spiritual regimen, but by being open to a vision.

In our century we think of Mother Theresa of Calcutta who so ably integrates the mystical and prophetic. Leah Gregoire’s art reminds us of another Christian woman, Clare of Assisi, who found in her visions the transforming presence of God that reformed the way the Church assisted the poor. These women show that “mystical-prophetic” does not describe a strange and unstable hybrid, but represents what we are called to become as disciples.

Study Questions

1. In college, she “dedicated herself to issues pertaining to the working classes, the poor, and the cause of France’s unions.” As a school teacher, she led demonstrations for the unemployed and miners. She studied working conditions and experienced first-hand the exhausting assembly-line work in the Renault automobile factory. “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,” Nava concludes.

After her conversion, “her involvement in the Young Christian Worker’s Movement illustrates her interest in imbuing social and political reform with a Christian spirit,” writes Nava. “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.”

2. “She has in mind the need for sages who are capable of addressing in thought and action the problems and injustices of our world,” Nava writes. Do we do the world a disservice when we divorce mysticism from prophetic activity, or purity of heart from hard thinking?
3. Since she believed the pre-Vatican II Church was too dismissive of non-Christian traditions (from ancient Greece, Egypt, India, and China), she felt that baptism “would signify a betrayal of the wisdom and truth that lies [in] the histories and cultures of non-European peoples,” Nava says. “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.”

What understanding of baptism and the Church is behind Weil’s decision? Is it a case of a mystic, or one with special talent, thinking she is ‘above’ the need for a faith community?

4. The poem reports a mystical conversation with Christ (“Love”), who welcomes a disciple into deeper communion as a banquet “guest.” To the objection that the disciple is not “worthy to be here” because he is “unkinde, ungrateful” (unkind toward neighbors and ungrateful for God’s grace), Christ replies that he “bore the blame” and now shares his surfeit of love with the disciple. “Taste my meat” relates the encounter to the context of Communion.
5. In the fifteenth-century masterwork, Clare is surrounded by women who champion her selfless life of service: the Virgin Mary, virgin martyrs, and several Poor Clares (see this online at www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=41425+0+none). By replacing these witnesses with the martyrs’ iconographic symbols, is Gregoire suggesting that Clare died alone? Or is the artist indicating that the direct mystical vision of the virgin martyrs remains Clare’s alone, while our access to their presence is mediated by their stories and symbols in Church tradition?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Mystic and the Church

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Hebrews 12:1-2
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss the suggested articles
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4, and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the contribution of Christian mysticism to the community of faith.
2. To clarify the mystics' need for the institutional church.
3. To consider how we cooperate with God's initiative to transform us so that our transparent selves become a catalyst for the conversion of others.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God Speaks to Us in Bird and Song," locate the tune CHILDHOOD in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Quote

*Evelyn Underhill once described the relation between mysticism and the church this way: "[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" (quoted in *Mysticism*, p. 72).*

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by leading members in the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the text in bold.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 10:38-42 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Often we view the mystic as a spiritual loner whose exceptional experience of God removes any need for the mystic to participate in corporate worship or to receive guidance from the wider thinking of the church. Furthermore, since mystical experience is a rare gift from God that we cannot "bottle" and share through a church program, we might think that mysticism is irrelevant to the ordinary discipleship of the "rest of us" non-mystics. This study invites us, however, to explore some positive relationships between mysticism and the life of the church.

Though she became the preeminent interpreter of mysticism in the early twentieth century, Evelyn Underhill was not a mystic. She wrote as one of the "rest of us"—looking in from the outside and trying to interpret sympathetically the experience and role of the mystic. Ironically, her desire to embrace and be fully involved in the institutional church (she had been baptized into the Anglican Church) developed through her study of Christian mysticism.

Your group may want to extend its discussion of this material. In the first session, you might review Underhill's view on the mystic and the church. In a second session, use study questions 3, 4, and 5 to explore how those who are drawn close to God in mystical experience may become exemplars of others' discipleship in the church. In Talbert's words, they may become "windows...transparent for God's light to shine through their lives to others."

Study Questions

1. Christian mystics can give the institutional church a "gift of fresh life, of renewed and intensified communion." They call us to "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....'"

Mysticism requires the institutional church, for mysticism "flourishes best in alliance with a lofty moral code, a strong sense of duty, and a definite religious faith." Underhill came to understand that congregational "life fostered group consciousness, gave a sense of unity, and offered both a ready-made discipline and a capacity to hand on a culture," Greene notes. "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.' 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."
2. It is tempting to "cast stones" of criticism at congregations that are different from our own. Encourage members to examine their own practices as well. Note that Underhill criticized "the vigorous kind" of congregations, not the lifeless ones with "empty" buildings.

Congregations may be socially busy—even supporting many good programs that help the poor and marginalized in society—but in a way that ignores the profound and energizing center of our faith, which is transforming souls through experience with God.

Or they may honor politically correct belief, either of the political left or right, in a way that avoids this energizing center. Underhill noted the "frowziness, parochialism, dogmatism, and conservatism of the church" that "too often created dependent and obedient believers and was suspicious of individual intuition and direct spiritual experience."
3. "The young seem by their very nature to be especially open to God," Talbert writes. "We should be prepared to nurture such experiences and direct their effects." If this is so, what experiences cause us to lose this openness to God later in life? We are open to God at midlife, she suggests, when our "self-constructed self-images and worldviews [break] apart," leaving us "vulnerable, lonely, and desperate for a new identity." Perhaps a common thread between childhood and midlife is that we do not have firmly established views about ourselves and about the world that rule out direct experience of God.
4. We cooperate with God through (1) *purgation* (allowing "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"), (2) *frequent corporate worship that includes confession and the Lord's Supper* (allowing "God's grace to work in our lives to cleanse the window of the self"), and (3) *daily silent prayer* ("asking the Holy Spirit to take away all that is false within the self"). How do members of your congregation encourage one another to pursue each of these practices?
5. Bellini probably is depicting St. Francis's (1) ascetic practice of fasting and prayer, (2) gift for seeing the Creator *through* his rich experience of the created world (expressed in the *Hymn of the Sun*), (3) humility (evidenced by the "Brother Ass," which was the saint's term for himself), and (4) hope (depicted by inclusion of the heavenly Jerusalem).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Improving Our Seeing and Listening

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Response to the Scripture	Response to the Scripture
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3 or 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the Apostle Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" in terms of staying attentive to God and seeing the world as God sees it.
2. To review how we come to know and love God through nature, history, and personal experience.
3. To discuss the variety of spiritual retreats and their importance for our discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Glenn Hinson tells the story of "a seventeenth-century Carmelite lay brother Nicholas Hermann, or Brother Lawrence, [who] 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,' he said."

Hinson concludes that what Brother Lawrence "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]'" (*Mysticism*, pp. 77-78). How can we think often of God in our busy lives?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members would grow in listening to God and seeing the world as God sees it.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Stepping away from our busy lives through spiritual retreats is one of the ways that saints have taught us to recover our attentiveness to God which is essential to serving God in today's world. Glenn Hinson provides very practical guidance about making time for and planning the content of a spiritual retreat. This is an opportunity for your study group to plan a retreat together.

First of all, we come to know and love God, Hinson reminds us, through nature, history, and our personal experience. During a spiritual retreat we might focus on one of these avenues or a combination of them.

While a spiritual retreat will enhance our own experience of God's presence, it should also renew the intellectual, social, and institutional dimensions of our discipleship.

Finally, Hinson sees value in four types of retreat that vary in schedule and duration: a *daily retreat*, a *monthly retreat*, a *semi-annual retreat* for thirty-six to forty-eight hours, and a *sabbatical*.

Study Questions

1. Some members may recount dramatic experiences of God. Others will be more like Brother Lawrence, who "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." As we hear others' stories, we may become more attuned to God's presence in these three modes.

We may know and love God through nature as we travel to distant places, or when something changes how we look at familiar places. We may encounter God in history as we meditate on Scripture or learn about times of great suffering, discovery, endurance, or joy in history (e.g., the Holocaust, fall of the Berlin Wall, sacrifice in exploration, signing a peace treaty, etc.). We may encounter God not only in meditative experiences, but also in celebrating a child's birth, grieving a loved one's death, enduring a disability, or serving others.

2. The *experiential* dimension "is first and foremost a matter of opening to accept God's love," Hinson writes. "That is what prayer is." The *intellectual* aspect includes reading, study, and meditation. The *social* aspect involves "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 *institutional* aspect includes worship—"most persons will depend on regular gatherings for the nurturing of their spiritual life," Hinson notes—but also our service of the world through building and maintaining Christian hospitals, schools, and social services.

How does the neglect of one dimension affect the others? If one is neglected, how does your congregation help members strengthen and develop that dimension?

3. Encourage members to report on their experience in spiritual retreats. In a half-hour *daily retreat* we might meditate on a passage of Scripture, pray for someone, practice wordless "centering prayer," write in a spiritual journal, or reflect on a short devotional reading. During longer *monthly* or *semi-annual retreats* we can get away from our daily responsibilities to spend time in guided conversation and prayer with spiritual friends, study of a classic of Christian spiritual writing, or watching and reflecting on a movie or play. Several Christian publishers offer books of guided readings to structure these multi-day retreats. On a *sabbatical* of several weeks or months duration, we might visit a retreat center, follow a course of spiritual study, or explore another avenue of Christian service.
4. An early Christian list of culture's distorting values, which overlaps with Soelle's list, is the seven capital vices: lust, gluttony, greed, anger, envy, spiritual apathy, and pride. On a spiritual retreat, we might set aside time for reading, conversations, and personal reflection to make us more aware of these distorting values. Journaling can help us articulate how we are captured by them and how we intend to change our patterns of living, and prayer can bring our concerns before God for divine guidance and grace to resist them.
5. Sciretti says this about Bauerschmidt's claim: "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" (*Mysticism*, p. 93). The same word of caution applies to spiritual retreats: we should not value them only for pragmatic reasons, such as relieving stress, resting from a busy schedule, and so on.

Departing Hymn

"Our Deepest Prayer" is on pp. 47-49 of *Mysticism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.