

Mystics of the Church 1

Nature and Foundation of Mysticism

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Nature and Foundation of Mysticism

- The focus of this study the mystics of the church will be the notable witnesses in the human quest to know God, to experience the Presence of God. We recognize that other religions have known mystics whose experience coincided with that of Christian mystics and may at times have intersected with them. The search for God, as a matter of fact, extends well beyond religion or religious bodies and has influenced the Christian search, as we see in the confluence of Christian mysticism with Neoplatonism. One of the first things we need to do in a course on the Mystics of the Church is to define the subject. Who is a mystic? What is the nature of mysticism?

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- I. The Nature of Mysticism
 - A. Essence and Marks of Mystic Experience
 - 1. In her classic on *Mysticism* Evelyn Underhill cited as the first doctrine of mysticism the scripture text “In that thou hast sought me, thou hast already found me” (Isa 65:1). A second is that “only in so far as the self is real can it hope to know Reality; like to like’s *Cor ad cor loquitur*.” The whole claim and practice of the mystic life depends on these two assumptions, she said (23). Proceeding further, she added, “In theological language, their theory of knowledge is that the spirit of man, itself essentially divine, is capable of immediate communion with God, the One Reality.” (24)

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- 2. The object of the mystics is “the apprehension of, or direct communion with,” the Transcendent (68). Over against William James’s (*Varieties of Religious Experience*) four marks of mystic experience—ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity—she cited these four:
 - a. True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect holds an opinion.
 - b. Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe.

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- The mystic brushes aside that universe, even in its supernatural manifestations. Though he [or she] does not, as his [or her] enemies declare, neglect his [or her] duty to the many, his [or her] heart is always set upon the Changeless One.
- c. This One is for the mystic, not merely the Reality of all that is, but also a living and personal Object of Love; never an object of exploration. It draws his [or her] whole being homeward, but always under the guidance of the heart.
- d. Living union with this One—which is the term of his [or her] adventure, is a definite state or form of enhanced life. . . .

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- Mysticism, then, is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge. On the one hand, it is not merely the power of contemplating Eternity. On the other, it is not to be identified with any kind of religious queerness. It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God; the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of [humankind]. Or, if you like it better—for this means exactly the same thing—it is the art of establishing [the mystic's] conscious relation with the Absolute. (81)

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– B. Varieties of Mysticism

- 1. What does it take to make a mystic? More than apprehension of God or passion for the Absolute, she insisted. Mystics must combine “an appropriate psychological make-up with a nature capable of extraordinary concentration, an exalted moral emotion, a nervous organization of the artistic type.” (91) She added as a corollary of her four qualities “that True Mysticism is never self-seeking.” (92)

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- 2. Underhill divided mystical theory into two forms: the *emanation*-theory and the *immanence* theory. The *emanation*-theory of Platonism conceives God as beyond knowing, utterly transcendent (97). We will see later that an exponent is called *Wesenmystik* and the application of the theory to theology *apophatic*. The *immanence*-theory leans toward pantheism (99). In current usage we usually speak of *panentheism*, for instance, in Teilhard de Chardin. An exponent of this approach is usually called a *Brautmystik* and the application to theology *kataphatic*. Christian mystics have held both theories. The doctrine of Incarnation permits them “to describe and explain the nature of the inward and personal mystic experience.” (118)

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– C. The Mystic Way

- Underhill outlined the mystic way in the following stages:
- 1. **Awakening or conversion of the self.** This is marked by three characteristics: (1) a sense of liberation and victory, (2) a conviction of the nearness of God, and (3) a sentiment of love towards God (179).
- 2. **Purification of the self.** The self “must be purged of all that stands between it and goodness” and put on “the character of reality instead of the character of illusion or ‘sin’.” (199) There are two stages: (1) detachment and (2) mortification. They entail “the remaking in relation to reality of the permanent elements of character.” (216)

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- 3. **Illumination of the self.** Illumination involves “a lifting of consciousness from a self-centered to a God-centered world” (234). It is not yet union with God. The mystic “has now got through preliminaries; detached himself [or herself] from his [or her] chief entanglements; re-orientated his [or her] instinctive life.” This leads to “a new and solid certitude about God, and his [or her] own soul’s relation to God: an ‘enlightenment’ in which he [or she] is adjusted to new standards of conduct and thought.” The mystic now attains “a real vision and knowledge, a conscious harmony with the divine World of Becoming: not yet self-loss in the Principle of Life, but rather a willing and harmonious revolution about [God], that ‘in dancing he may know what is done’.” (234)

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- Three main types of experience may accompany illumination: (1) “joyous apprehension of the Absolute,” what many contemplatives call “the practice of the Presence of God,” (2) clarity of vision of the phenomenal world, (3) enormous increase in the energy of the intuitional or transcendental self (240). In illumination the individuality of the subject remains separate and intact, as contrasted with union (246).
- 4. **The Dark Night of the self.** The Dark Night is an intense period dividing the **Illuminative Way** from the **Unitive Way**. It is “generally a period of utter blankness and stagnation, so far as mystical activity is concerned.” It is “seldom lit by visions or made

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- homely by voices.” During it, the mystic seems to have lost entirely the power of contemplation (381). Psychologically it is like a reaction to stress. It may come in different forms for various personalities: (1) For those who focus on the Absolute it seems as if God has deliberately withdrawn. (2) For those focused on sanctity it is “less a deprivation than a new and dreadful kind of lucidity.” (390) (3) For some it results in complete emotional lassitude (391). (4) For others it may result in a stagnation of will and intelligence (392). (5) Still others experience “a wild and unendurable desire to ‘see God’” which they see satisfied only by death (394). The way out of the Dark Night lies in complete self-forgetfulness and surrender to God.

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- **5. Unitive Life.** What is the experience of union with God? (1) Metaphysical mystics for whom the Absolute is impersonal and transcendent describe it as *deification*. (2) Mystics stressing more intimate and personal communion use the image of *Spiritual Marriage*. The three chief features are: (a) absorption in the interests of the Absolute, (b) consciousness of sharing God's strengths, etc., and (c) establishment of the self as a "power for life," that is, a center of energy (416).

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- **Postscript**
- Bernard McGinn draws from Teresa of Avilá the phrase "presence of God" to describe mystical experience. He quoted her *Life*:
 - I used sometimes, as I have said, to experience in an elementary form, and very fleetingly, what I shall now describe. When picturing Christ in the way I have I mentioned, and sometimes even when reading, I used unexpectedly to experience a consciousness of the presence of God of such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that he was within me or that I was wholly engulfed in him. This was in no sense a vision: I believe that it is called mystical theology. (*Life*, trans. Allison Peers, 1.10, p. 119.)

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- McGinn insists on keeping experience and interpretation together in defining mysticism. He understands the word under three headings: “mysticism as a part or element of religion, mysticism as a processor way of life, and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God.” (*The Foundation of Mysticism*, xv-xvi.) With reference to the third he says, “Thus we can say that the mystical element of Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.” (*Foundations*, xvii.)

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- II. Biblical Backgrounds
 - Although Platonism had much to do with the development of Christian mysticism, the mystics of the Church sought for roots in the scriptures, building on the practice of psalmody and *Lectio Divina*. At the heart of Jewish and Christian understanding of faith was the covenant God had chosen to enter into with the Hebrew people. The covenant could be understood as applying both to the relationship between the people and God and between the individual believer and God. Among the Psalms those recording personal experience proved especially useful, therefore, as a means of understanding covenant intimacy with God. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, the Psalms did not match the influence of the Song of Songs, a poem hymning the love tryst between newlyweds, for getting into the depth of the covenant relationship both corporately and individually. Jewish rabbis evidently blaze the way for using the Song of Songs in this way, and Origen followed in their footsteps.

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- For the New Testament Pauline and Johannine writings provided a direct line to mystical theology. Paul's "in Christ" mysticism gave a special slant to consciousness of the presence of God. The Risen Christ indwells and empowers a believer. Note Philippians 4:11-13: "Not that I speak out of need, for I have learned in whatever circumstances I am to be content. I know both what it is to have plenty and to be in need. In every circumstance and in all circumstances I have been initiated into starving and being full, to have plenty and to be needy. I have strength for all occasions in the one who empowers me." The Johannine writings directly tied Platonism and biblical understanding together.

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- A. The Psalms and the Mystics
 - 1. Quotations from the Psalms appear often in the writings of the mystics. The *Opus Dei* eight times a day obviously made an impact on the thought and practice of contemplatives, who accounted for most of the mystics. Mystics drew inspiration from Psalm 63: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name." Psalm 42 inspired longing for God: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" (42:1-3)

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- 2. Psalm 139 made mystics conscious of the inescapable nearness of God: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. . . . Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there?” (139:1-2, 7-8) From Psalm 62 they learned the importance of silent waiting: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.”

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- 3. Psalms 51 and 32 taught humility as the gateway to a sense of the Presence of God: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit” (51:10-12). “While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (32:3-5).

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- 4. The Psalms gave them images of a God who comes near. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul” (23:1-2). “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns” (46:1-5).

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- B. The Song of Songs and the Mystics
 - 1. From Origen (185-254/5) on, contemplatives applied the Song of Songs to the love relationship between Christ and the Church or between Christ and the individual soul. As Ann Matter has observed in her study of medieval interpretations of the love poem, they inherited this usage from Judaism, while strongly opposing the latter. Bernard of Clairvaux represented the high point of application of the Song of Songs to the relationship of Christ to the individual. By a curious twist some also portrayed the love tryst as the love between God and the Virgin Mary during feasts of the Virgin. Mary is the bride of God and the mother of God; she represents both the Church and each individual Christian. (Ann Matter, *The Song of My Beloved* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990], 15.)

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- 2. For the mystics, of course, the intimacies between Christ and the individual soul would have the greatest importance. Human beings cannot describe God or the love of God directly because they lie beyond human experience or imagination. The best we can do, then, is to use analogies, and the most fitting analogy to understand the covenant God entered into with Israel or with the individual is the marriage covenant. In marriage two lovers seek by all means to “know” one another physically, mentally, and emotionally. In the relationship with God the contemplative covets the same. But in both we are conscious always that, just as we can never unravel the mystery of the other human, even more so we can never unravel the mystery of the divine. It’s the search that must continue forever and forever. Occasionally, however, we may experience for a moment what we covet for eternity.

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- C. The Mysticism of Paul and the Mystics
 - 1. The mysticism of Paul has been characterized as “in Christ” mysticism. The formula “in Christ” or “in the Lord” occurs 164 times in his writings. Adolf Deissmann called it “the characteristic expression of his Christianity.” (*Paul*, 140.) Deissmann classified Paul as a “reacting mystic” and a “communio-mystic” who expected God to approach him in Christ and sought fellowship with God. The nearest New Testament parallel to Pauline mysticism is in the Johannine writings. The “in Christ” relationship ruled Paul’s thinking. Salvation is by faith “in Christ.” Being “in Christ” we are justified, reconciled, forgiven, redeemed, and adopted by God. We also share in the afflictions of Christ through union with his Body, the Church.

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- 2. Some debate raged during the early 20th century about the source or sources of Paul's mysticism. Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reitzenstein argued that Paul derived it from the Hellenistic mystery religions. Albert Schweitzer firmly rejected that view and insisted that it was connected with Jewish apocalyptic. Paul's, he insisted, differed from Hellenistic mysticism in several ways: (1) His was never God-mysticism but Christ-mysticism. (2) He left no place for the ideas of rebirth or deification. (3) His view was dominated by the apocalyptic idea of predestination. (4) He had a realism foreign to Hellenistic mysticism. (5) The symbolism that played so essential a role in the sacramental side of Hellenistic mysticism has no part in Paul's thought. (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*) Paul's "in Christ" concept revolved around the Church as the Body of Christ. Being "in Christ" determines the Christian life.

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- 3. Deissmann thought that Paul's mysticism had three sources—the Greek Old Testament, other living elements of the Jewish religion, and revelations of God given by Jesus. Paul counted his conversion one of the experiences (Gal 1:14), but he also claimed what is best described as ecstasy or rapture in 2 Cor 12:1-10: "I know a person in Christ about fourteen years ago—whether in the body or apart from the body, I don't know, God knows—that such a person was seized up to the third heaven. Now I know such a person—whether in the body or apart from the body, I don't know, God knows—that he was seized into paradise and heard unutterable words that a human being is not permitted to speak" (12:2-4). The mention of fourteen years almost certainly ties this to Paul's conversion, but it is the experience mystics covet, and later mystics often cited it in trying to interpret their experience of God. Teresa of Avilá viewed ecstasy or rapture as a higher stage than union sought by mystics.

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- 4. Paul connected this experience with his prayer for removal of a “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what the “thorn” was. Some have speculated that he suffered from epilepsy, others that he referred to eye problems alluded to in Galatians 4:15, and some even that he wrestled with sexual identity. We can’t be sure. We can be sure that he sought to be healed. “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.” Alas, that did not happen. Instead, the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). Paul proceeded to confess contentment with weaknesses, “for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). Why? Because then Christ empowered him.

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- 5. We can see this borne out in a number of Paul’s assertions about the human situation. In his letter to the Philippians he acknowledged that some proclaimed Christ out of envy and rivalry and selfish ambition, intending to increase his suffering in imprisonment. “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice” (Phil 1:18). Yes, he would go on rejoicing, “for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (1:19). He would prefer to depart and be with Christ,” but he needed to remain on their account (1:23-24).

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- 6. Throughout Philippians Paul projected his conviction that the living Christ indwelt and empowered him. That stands out starkly in his back-handed thank you for some kind of aid the Philippians had sent him. He was pleased they remembered him, but he wanted them to know that he didn't speak out of need, "for I have learned to be content (*autarkeia*) with whatever I have" (4:11). He knew what it was "to have little" and "to have plenty," to be well-fed and to go hungry, to have plenty and to be in need (4:12). What was the secret of *autarkeia*? "I have strength for all occasions in the one who empowers me" (4:13; my translation).

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- 7. In Colossians Paul laid out a foundation for mystic Christology that came to full expression in the Johannine school. In his prayer for them, Paul asserted, "[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13-14). He proceeded then to exult in the majesty of Christ, concluding with this: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (1:20).

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– D. Johannine Writings and the Mystics

- 1. The Gospel of John attracted the attention of Christian mystics at an early date. The Gnostic Heracleon wrote a commentary on it around 140 C.E. Predictably Origen also picked up on it, and it helped to lay the groundwork for the *Wesenmystik* tradition he espoused alongside the *Brautmystik* tradition of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. The Prologue of John's Gospel and Jesus' "high priestly prayer" in John 17 show why mystics would latch onto the Gospel as a major source of their theology. The Prologue weaves together, in much the same way Philo did for Judaism, elements of Platonism and Judaism. Most important as a foundation for both the *Wesenmystik* and the *Brautmystik* traditions is the final sentence of the Prologue: "No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God [or Son] who was in the bosom of the Father, he has exegeted God for us" (1:18).

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- 2. Platonism envisioned God (the One) far removed from human experience and understanding, a conviction that would undergird the apophatic theology of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius. We humans can only know who or what God is *not*; we can't say who God *is*. Like a sculptor, we chip away the excess in order to reveal the form latent in stone. As a Christian, however, John and those who followed him saw an answer to the problem created by Platonism in the biblical conviction that God has come to us. The eternally generated Logos, who is the whole fullness of God, pitched a tent among us so that we can know by love what we could never know by cognition.

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- 3. John did theology “from above.” All through the Gospel we see the Godhead thinly veiled in flesh. God is immanent, and we should expect to experience the Presence, the divine *doxa* (“glory”). The aspirations of mystics come to fruition in Jesus’ prayer for his disciples as he prepared to depart. “I do not ask for these alone, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that all may be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, that they may be in us, in order that the world may believe that you have sent me. And I have given them the glory you have given me in order that they may be one just as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may have been perfected into one, in order that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them just as you have loved me” (John 17:20-23). In John we do not await the return; we experience the return already in the Paraclete.

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- 4. Bernard of Clairvaux built much of his mystical theology around 1 John 4. God is Love (4:8). God both loves more and before we do. As the divine Lover, God takes initiative to approach us. We know love because God sent the only begotten Son. Before we could have any understanding of love, God loved us. “Beloved, we love because God first loved us” (4:11). That’s why we should love one another. In Bernard and many of his heirs we can see these themes from 1 John woven together with the Song of Songs.

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- 5. The Gospel according to John painted a very different portrait of Jesus than Mark, Matthew, and Luke did. Looking at the story from above, he viewed him as “the word who was with God and was God” (1:1) and as “the true light, which illumines every person coming into the world” (John 1:9). Throughout the Gospel the mystery of God shines through his words and actions. He instructed the Pharisee Nicodemus who came to him at night to be “born again” or “from above,” something Nicodemus couldn’t grasp. Meister Eckhart made this story the main theme of his preaching and his mysticism.