



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

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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-



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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"

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.