



## 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](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

### Christian Reflection

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# 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.<sup>†</sup>

## 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



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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)”

# 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](http://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](http://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.