



## 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](mailto: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](http://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

# 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](http://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.