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## BY ERIC ANDERSON

**T**he word ‘mystic’ is as dangerous as the word ‘poet,’ says Kathleen Norris, who is both a poet and a writer on Christian spirituality. “When we describe someone as a ‘poet’ or ‘mystic,’ we generally mean it as a warning—here is someone whose head is in the clouds and who can’t get places on time.”<sup>1</sup>

Evelyn Underhill, another poet and student of spirituality, complained that the words “mystic” and “mysticism” were so misused that they were in danger of losing their meaning. She noted how many things are carelessly labeled mystical: “any vague sense of spiritual things, any sort of symbolism, any hazily allegorical painting, any poetry which deals with the soul—worse than that, all sorts of superstitions and magical practices.”<sup>2</sup>

Some people today claim that what they call “mysticism” is the common denominator of all spirituality, the core of truth surrounded by an irrelevant rind of dogma, creeds, and organization. But this idea is as foolish as assuming that sea voyages are all the same. As C. S. Lewis has reminded us: “All who leave the land and put to sea will ‘find the same things’—the land sinking below the horizon, the gulls dropping behind, the salty breeze. Tourists, merchants, sailors, pirates, missionaries—it’s all one.” But, he adds, this “identical experience” tells us nothing about “the utility or lawfulness or final event of their voyages.”<sup>3</sup>

If this much-abused word is used correctly, however, I may be a “Christian mystic.” Let me quickly explain myself—before readers write me off as superstitious or silly. In doing so, I want to draw attention to an experience that is at the heart of Christian life, and to testify how Christian mysticism, rightly understood, has changed my life.

A mystic may be defined simply as someone who claims to have had a direct experience (or intuition) of God. The word is correctly used to describe a person whose “religion and life are centered, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he regards as firsthand experience.”<sup>4</sup> Mystics believe that they are somehow in communication with transcendent reality; thus, a Hebrew prophet having a vision and a Christian believer communicating with God in prayer are both mystics in this general sense.

A “Christian mystic,” however, experiences God in ways consistent with the Christian revelation in Scripture. Such “mystics” live within a biblical framework and have no desire to encounter powers or realities that are unholy or hostile to Jesus, the Logos, who is the light of the world. They build their lives around Jesus’ promise: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).

To be as clear as possible, a Christian mystic practices “companionship with Christ”<sup>5</sup>—to use Ellen White’s luminous phrase.<sup>6</sup> This isn’t meant to be mysterious. In a faltering way, I have now and then encountered God; I now long for deeper and more transforming encounters, and I am encouraged in this longing by “all the saints” of Christian history.



## Union With Christ

The essence of Christianity, let us remember, is not a set of unique ethical prescriptions or secret information about current events. It is, instead, in the language of the New Testament, “union with Christ” (Col. 2:10, NLT),<sup>7</sup> “[putting] on Christ” (Gal. 3:27, KJV), having the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), and “[participating] in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).<sup>8</sup> These startling expressions, as C. S. Lewis put it, mean “that a real Person, Christ, here and now, in that very room where you are saying your prayers, is doing things to you. It is not a question of a good man who died two thousand years ago.”<sup>9</sup>

Christ has promised to heal us now, to change us, to alter our nature. What shall we call that promise if not mystical; that is, a direct experience of God? Such teaching certainly is not peripheral, nor aimed at a few spiritual athletes. By its very nature it is central. To use a kitchen metaphor, it’s much more like leaven than frosting.

Some “liberal” Adventists wish to make the social gospel the heart of Christianity, encouraging their fellow believers to downplay Daniel and Revelation in favor of social reform or service. Some “conservative” Adventists want to make

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evangelism the sole essence of our faith, taking for granted such historic goals as right worship and Christian nurture.

For me, a biblical balance was articulated by two women: one unfamiliar; the other well known to Adventists. The English writer Evelyn Underhill first studied mysticism as a scholar and artist, but then was converted to Christian faith and drawn into Christian spirituality as a participant. As a believer she wrote *Concerning the Inner Life*, a small book based on a series of talks that she gave to a group of English ministers in 1926.

The work of a pastor, according to Underhill, is to be a “contagious Christian,” a person from whom others “catch the love of God.” The first duty of a pastor, or any other Christian, she said, is to receive God’s loving gifts. “Only when our souls are filled to the brim can we presume to offer spiritual gifts to other [people].”

Service or evangelism could not be first in the Christian leader’s life, she explained. We were created to adore God, to experience awe in His presence, and to serve Him—but in that order. If we try to start with service, we will wear ourselves out, and eventually have nothing to say. We may even succumb to the fatal temptation, as she put it, “to leave God for His service.”<sup>10</sup>

She told her audience of clergy that the cure for spiritual exhaustion and restlessness was a certain kind of prayer—the prayer of adoration. “This prayer of adoration exceeds all other types in educative and purifying power. It alone is able to consolidate our sense of the supernatural, to conquer our persistent self-occupation, to expand our spirits, to feed and quicken our awareness of the wonder and delightfulness of God.”<sup>11</sup> By the right kind of beholding, in other words, we are changed.

## What Does Ellen White Say?

In turning to a very familiar author, I discovered that Ellen White, who preceded Underhill by two decades, wrote much about the richness of a personal relationship with Jesus. In her 1903 book *Education* she notes God’s call “to come apart and commune with Him,” leaving behind the “maddening rush” and the terrible intensity of contemporary life. By refusing to wait and listen in “the circle of Christ’s loving presence,” many believers, “even in their seasons of devotion, fail of receiving the blessing of real communion with God.” She adds, “Not a pause for a moment in His presence, but personal contact with Christ, to sit down in companionship with Him—this is our need.”<sup>12</sup>

In her earlier description (1892) of the believer’s coming to Christ, White’s language is as richly mystical as the words of the New Testament Epistles. According to her, “when Christ dwells in the heart, the soul will be so filled with His love, with the joy of communion with Him, that it will cleave to Him; and in the contemplation of Him, self will be forgotten.” Without “this deep love,” religious claims are “mere talk, dry formality, and heavy drudgery.”<sup>13</sup>

“Union with Christ” is the basis of “our growth in grace, our joy, our usefulness.” She calls for “communion with Him, daily, hourly,” asserting that through the work of the Holy Spirit, the apostles (and God’s children today) could experience a union with Jesus “closer than when He was personally with them.”<sup>14</sup>

Her famous chapter on prayer resounds with the themes of what may accurately be called Christian mysticism. She makes interaction with God the core of religious life, speaking of meditating upon “His works, His mercies, His blessings,” opening “the heart to God,” and experiencing “the companionship of His presence.” Though she strongly rejects monastic withdrawal from the world, she endorses the goal of unceasing prayer. She writes: “Unceasing prayer is the unbroken union of the soul with God, so that life from God flows into our life; and from our life, purity and holiness flow back to God.”<sup>15</sup>

## Learning From Other Christians

Let us not miss echoes of other saints. Suspicious, sometimes, of instruction from other Christians, we should candidly acknowledge our multid denominational heritage, and admit that God’s true children include Methodists and Anglicans and even Catholics. Jesus’ solemn words bear remembering: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (John 10:16, NRSV).<sup>16</sup>



But we knew that all along, at least if we were paying attention to our church hymnals. These books exemplified a deep and theologically sound understanding of what Adventists share with other Christians. The lyricists are an amazingly broad representation of Christians. In addition to familiar Protestant names, ranging from Martin Luther to Charles Wesley and Fanny Crosby, we find hymns composed by, shall we say, pre-Reformation Christians such as Ambrose, Francis of Assisi, Thomas à Kempis, and Bernard of Clairvaux.

More important, of course, than the variety of writers in the hymnal is what these writers say. The hymnal is filled with rich, beautiful, theologically accurate Christian mysticism. “Jesus, the very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills my breast,” wrote Bernard of Clairvaux. He added in the

language of mystical communion, “But sweeter far Thy face to see, and in Thy presence rest.”<sup>17</sup> He was not referring to the distant future or the New Jerusalem.

“Breathe on me, breath of God,” says another hymn, “till I am wholly Thine, until this earthly part of me glows with Thy fire divine.”<sup>18</sup> Other, more familiar songs invite us to walk in the garden alone with our Master, to be drawn nearer in His embrace, to become wholly His. The hymnal is filled with songs of adoration and praise, recognition of God’s abiding presence, and deep appreciation of silence, meditation, and prayer.

The fact that the potent words of our hymns come from both ancient Christians and modern ones, from Protestants as well as Catholics, is highly significant. If non-Adventist hymn writers can accurately articulate the promise of union with Christ, perhaps we can safely imitate at least a few of the practices they have used to prepare their hearts for transformation.

Over the past three decades American Christianity has been revolutionized by a renewed emphasis on holy living and spiritual disciplines. Across many denominations people are talking about the central practices of a personal relationship with Jesus—spiritual growth, prayer, fasting, solitude, service, and sanctification. Unless we are determined to plug our ears and close our eyes, Adventists could share much with honest men and women drawn by the Spirit to know the Savior.

## My Personal Journey

I did not start out with a desire to be a mystic. Far from it. About 25 years ago I helped design a capstone seminar for honor students at Pacific Union College, and somehow we chose “the Christian tradition” as our theme. Each year we read great examples of this tradition, ranging from Augustine’s *Confessions* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy to Pilgrim’s Progress*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and the modern Japanese classic *Silence*.

Time and again these Christian classics spoke to us in mystical language. “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you,” declared Augustine in a famous passage. After he described how the created world had its reality in God, he suddenly shifted to intensely personal and concrete words: “You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”<sup>19</sup> It was only natural to ask my students, “Have you ever experienced anything like this?”—and hard to evade the question for myself.

About the same time I was teaching the junior honors seminar, I bought a copy of the Book of Common Prayer and began using it as a personal devotional book. I started reading Psalms each morning, a practice followed persistently through periods of great consolation as well as dryness. I found that by immersing myself in these Hebrew hymns, they spoke more and more for me and through me.

For many years I had been a leader in a religious discussion group that met Sabbath mornings in a music classroom. Though the choir room Sabbath school was marked by witty, wide-ranging, even scintillating discussion, it became less and less satisfying to me. Our strength was analysis, not action—and I was tired of merely identifying abuses of faith, rejecting historical errors, and creating clever questions. More and more I wanted to experience what was described in the writings of men and women who loved God intensely.

What I needed, though I did not know it, was more mysticism in my Christianity. But that is still analytical *observer* language. It might be better to say that for a long time God had been calling me. He used beauty to hint at holiness, drew me with mystery into awe, and showed me that love and fear were not opposites. He encouraged me to listen, and I found that sometimes I was not talking to myself.

I joined a weekly prayer group comprising both Adventists and non-Adventists, and together we read devotional writings, some old and some new, from different faith backgrounds. We praised God and prayed for each other, asking for comfort and healing and a closer walk with Him.

This commitment led us deeper into Christian devotion. We then planned a weekend retreat in the redwoods at a chapel overlooking a bay—the first of several. In each of these retreats I had a sense of God’s initiative, not mine. Often I arrived exhausted but left calm, refreshed, even elated two or more days later. We would spend time in prayer and silence, but God was not silent. I learned to surrender ambitions, confess hatreds, and offer praise. In the words of the Book of Common Prayer, God taught me to desire what He had promised.

By appreciating the mystical heart of Christianity and adoring God in the company of other Christians, I became more firmly rooted in Seventh-day Adventism and its distinctive teachings. From my silent retreats and other devotional experiences I emerged with a stronger understanding, for example, of the value of the Sabbath. Indeed, I have found that the best way to strengthen my commitment to Seventh-day Adventism is to remember that we Adventists are marching with the triumphant church invisible, spread out over the centuries, “terrible as an army with banners” (S. of Sol. 6:4, KJV). One important remedy for an ahistorical religion, for Christians without a vivid sense of Providence, for Adventists hesitant to converse with the larger Christian world, and for believers who have never experienced “the fear of the Lord,” is, in fact, Christian mysticism. In my pilgrimage I have learned that all of us require the powerful and repeated therapy of deeply reverent worship, the prayer of adoration, and listening for God’s voice.

If we seek companionship with Christ, He will lead us to richly satisfying springs of living water. And if I say, “I have learned this by firsthand experience,” I suppose that makes me a Christian mystic.

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1 Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 284.

2 Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1925), p. 9.

3 C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1964), p. 64.

4 Underhill, p. 10.

5 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903), p. 261.

6 Ellen White’s use of the term “mystic” (in its several forms, including “mysticism” and “mystic”) well illustrates the varieties of ways in which it can be used. “Mystic” as an adjective is often positive, and usually intended by her to mean “not easily understood,” as in Jacob’s “mystic ladder.”

“Mystical” and “mysticism” almost always connote a nonbiblical and theoretical speculation that is opposed to the Word of God. Her insistence that each believer needs a personal spiritual encounter and relationship with God makes the term as I have defined it appropriate to describe her. She insists that all Christian experience be evaluated within the careful controls of biblical revelation.

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8 See Rom. 6:8; Gal. 2:20; 3:27; 1 Cor. 2:16; 2 Peter 1:4.

9 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1952), p. 149.

10 Evelyn Underhill, *Concerning the Inner Life* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), pp. 18, 22, 48-50.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 46, 47, 50.

12 E. G. White, *Education*, pp. 260, 261.

13 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956), pp. 44, 45.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 75.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

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17 *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1985), no. 241.

18 *Ibid.*, no. 265.

19 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 201.

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