

Mysticism In Wesley

Howard F. VanValin

Mysticism in Christianity

While Monasticism was "the discipline of the physical for the sake of the spiritual,"¹ Mysticism was "the discipline of the mental for the sake of the spiritual."² Therefore, it was consequential that in putting their bodies through inhumane treatments, the ascetics engaged their minds in mental gymnastics as well. Their minds were purified by a crucifixion of the body. So Mysticism was logically inherent within Monasticism.

There are many conceptions of mysticism which vary considerably. One secular encyclopedia broadly defined it as the "practice of uniting one-self with the Deity or other unifying principle of life, linked with religion; in a more popular sense any sort of non-rational belief."³ Harnack, the noted historian, says: "Mysticism is Catholic piety in general, so far as this piety is not merely ecclesiastical obedience, that is *fides implicita*..."⁴ Lehmann described this implicit faith as exemplified in the thoughts and life of Santa Teresa, the greatest mystic soul. Her life was not confined entirely to Catholic thought, for Lehmann says that she was "almost Protestant."⁵

Many writers have considered anyone participating in any sort of Mysticism as tainted with fanaticism and heresy. But many movements have become known by the extremists and distorters of the true picture. This has always been true in Mysticism, but Mysticism does have genuine Christian elements.

Union with God did not mean union in a pantheistic sense, but rather a transformation of soul through

¹ James De Forrest Murch, *Christian Education and The Local Church*, p. 56.

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³ William Bridgwater, *The Columbia Viking Desk Encyclopedia*, p. 669.

⁴ James Hastings, *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, p. 62.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

love, leading up to a condition of perfect acquiescence to the will of God.⁶

There have been as many varieties of mystics as there are religions. Harnack claims that there have always been "spurious" mystics in the church and always will be. "It was always the Ultra's, who, by making an appeal to them, brought discredit upon the 'Church' mystics."⁷ There is a mystical element in Christianity, but Christianity does not rest upon a mystical basis. The experience of the Christian "is mystical in proportion as the soul has direct personal intercourse with God through Christ."⁸ If this view is accepted, no evil stigmatism should be placed upon any mystic soul who does not delve into the "extremes" of holy living, but practices the presence of God on a Scriptural basis. The apostolic Christianity cannot be divorced from Mysticism, which has been defined as "the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God..."⁹ Thus, Rufus Jones says, "It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage."¹⁰

Though there were many extremists and heretics among the mystics of the Church, the numerous and varied "corruptions ought not to be identified with its essence."¹¹ Christian mysticism differs widely from the Platonic mysteriosophy with its pantheistic view and emphasizes upon the negative. Divine revelation cannot possibly be separated from true Mysticism, for "...not only in John, but also in Paul, there are plentiful traces of Mysticism."¹² Inge felt that the mystical elements of Paul's theology have been under-estimated; and that "all the essentials of mysticism are to be found in the epistles..."¹³ The most vital elements of Paul's Mysticism are derived from his vital intimate fellowship with the living Christ.

Both St. John and Paul agree:

...to the mystic idea of the believer's oneness with Christ, to the pre-eminence of Love, and to the Holy Spirit as the Source of knowledge of the things of God, the Giver and Sustainer of spiritual life, and the witness to the Divine sonship of believers.¹⁴

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Loc. cit.*

True mysticism was epitomized in the Scriptures.

The Christianity which is content to remain non-mystical is impoverished at the very center of its being....Had all Christians understood, and lived up to, their belief, they would all have been mystics.¹⁵

Prophetism

Mysticism was inherent within Monasticism and, no doubt, was stimulated by the monastic ideals; however, it did not originate within the monastic movement. All men are created with a capacity to desire and contemplate God in reverence and worship; hence, elements of Mysticism have always existed in the hearts of men and women. But some of the more distinguishing ideals of the mystical movement were more fully represented by the prophetism of the Old Testament, as well as the early centuries of the Church. The prophet was known for his outward manifestations of an inward communion with God.

... the characteristic of the 'prophet' was his extempore, some claimed his inspired, utterance. He was 'gifted' to speak the word of God in free spontaneous discourse, oftentimes in ecstatic forms.¹⁶

Prophets even existed in the days of the Apostle Paul, but the movement was suppressed by the growing sacerdotalism (priestly office and liturgy) of the Roman Church.

"The prophet was thus essentially a preacher, generally a traveling preacher, though, unlike the apostle, he was not deprived of the liberty of settling down in one place."¹⁷ Not being a teacher, "the emphasis was laid upon intuition and not assimilation."¹⁸ He did not instruct, but warned; was not a pastor, but an ante-evangelist; and as such, his supreme function was the proclamation to backsliders of the forgiveness of their sins.

Upon a closer examination of early Prophetism, a fundamental agreement is found between it and primitive Methodism.

The two movements, in fact, stand for the same liberty of prophesying. The enemies of the two were the same--occasional inner extravagance, the oppo-

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.* (Quote from Moberly).

¹⁶ Herbert B. Workman, *The Place of Methodism in the Catholic Church*, p. 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

sition from without of those with whom order is paramount. The duties of the two were much the same, even to the matter of wandering, and the manner of payment of those who rested for the while on their 'circuits.' But most important of all is the witness borne by both movements to the free utterance of the Holy Spirit as one of the elemental facts of a living faith. This utterance neither the growth of sacerdotalism, nor the claims of decorum, nor even the 'foolishness of preaching' itself is able to destroy. That 'Prophetism' is an essential part of Methodism is not only demonstrated by her early history, but also by one curious fact. When at times Methodism has 'feasts' and 'band-meetings,' in the ministrations of her local preachers, or otherwise, she has always seen the rise, commonly by a secession from her own ranks, of a movement reviving the 'prophet.'¹⁹

Thus, there are some noteworthy parallels between Methodism and Prophetism characterizing both movements: outward antagonists being formalists; internal enemies being fanatics; itinerate preaching; and a strong belief in the free utterance of the Holy Spirit.

Mysticism before Conversion

Until he was twenty-two years of age, Wesley was satisfied with the formalism of the Anglican Church. His early home training under the Church of England, his parents once Puritan, demonstrated to him the outward signs of the Christian life. However, in his public school days, he became indifferent to his Puritanic training, and excused himself for backsliding into habitual sins. Thus, he began "taking refuge in the defense that he was not 'so bad as other people.'"²⁰ This attitude of spiritual complacency continued until he received his B.A. degree from Oxford in 1724; and then, upon counseling with his father concerning choosing his vocation for life, he decided upon the ministry. For three years he sought to improve his spiritual status by various reforms, devotions, introspection, continual counsel from his virtuous and pious mother, and an extremely self-disciplined life.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* , pp. 58, 59.

²⁰ Mary Alice Tenney, *Blueprint for a Christian World*, p. 65.

In 1727 Wesley contacted a book that was to change his thinking and bear influence upon him for the rest of his life. Upon reading William Law's *Treatise on Christian Perfection*, he was "seized with an idea that never after let him go."²¹ There were men in past history of the church who influenced Wesley, although their touch was not direct. Boehm was one of the great mystics who influenced William Law. He influenced Arndt, Spener, Francke, and Fox, all of whom produced works which Law read previously to preparing his *Christian Perfection*. Thus, there were quite a few mystics who assisted in swaying Wesley's mind to the thinking of that gigantic intellect of the eighteenth century, William Law. John Wesley was deeply moved by the life of Madame Guyon and her books, and even after his conversion and repudiation of mysticism, he wrote very favorably of her.

Law and Wesley had much in common. Both claimed strict religious backgrounds; were deeply intellectual; disparaged public opinion for the sake of their convictions; and were intent upon disciplined living. After reading Law's book, Wesley desired to meet him personally and consult his opinion upon such a life as he was propagating. So he walked to his home at Putney, outside London (in order to save money for the poor he refused to hire a ride), and visited with the man who was to play a great part in his life. At first Wesley was prepared to object to Law's views as too high for any human to attain, but Law replied, "We shall do well to aim at the highest degrees of perfection, if we may thereby at least attain to mediocrity."²² Therefore, Wesley set about to try to imitate the ideals of William Law; some of which never left him.

Law said that God, in relation to man, is "an all-speaking, all-working, all-illuminating Essence that becomes the true light of our Minds here."²³ This he accepted from the Friends but denounced both the cold formalism and the wild "enthusiasm" of the two prevalent, opposite extremes within the Friends' movement. Between these two ultra views he felt a mean should be established; then true form and inward enthusiasm would take their proper places.

...it is the running away from this Enthusiasm that has made so many great Scholars as useless to the Church as tinkling cymbals, and all Christendom a

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73

²² Robert Southey, *The Life of John Wesley*, p. 47.

²³ Richard Green, *John Wesley, Evangelist*, p. 75.

mere Babel of learned Confusion.²⁴

After digesting both Law's devotional books, *A Treatise on Christian Perfection*, and *The Serious Call*, Wesley wrote:

...although I was much offended at many parts of exceeding height and breadth and depth of the Law of God. The light flowed in so mightily upon my soul, that everything appeared in a new view. I cried to God for help, and resolved not to prolong the time of obeying Him as I had never done before.²⁵

Another strong mystical influence upon Wesley was the reading of *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* in 1725, upon the invitation of a deeply pious friend, Betty Kirkham. More will be said in relation to his ascetic practices as derived from Jeremy Taylor, but this saint of the Church directly influenced Wesley in his mystical views. The following are some of the rules that Jeremy Taylor advised for deep contemplation upon God.

Think often of God's omnipresence.

Let everything you see represent the excellency and power of God.

In retirement, speak frequently with God.

Offer acts of love and fear to God.

Walk as in God's presence--contemplate Him.

Remember God is in thy brethren--treat them as such.²⁶

Wesley began to arduously follow these rules, and throughout his life they characterized his actions and ideals.

Wesley, the Evangelical Mystic

John Wesley reached a climax in his life upon his return from his painful and unsuccessful trip to Georgia. He came home a failure--a new experience for this brilliant young clergyman, for he had always been at the top of his class and a leader among his colleagues. John accused himself of unbelief, pride, gross fears, levity and luxuriancy of spirit; and of many words in his speech which were unedifying. This extremely self-disciplined man was extremely liberal in the condemnation of himself. He feared he was unsaved, and then he was not sure, writing:

²⁴ *Loc. cit.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19 (Quoted from George Eayrs' *Letters of John Wesley*).

²⁶ Jeremy Taylor, *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living*, pp. 30 f.

I think verily if the gospel be true, I am safe; for I not only have given and do give all my goods to feed the poor; I not only give my body to be burnt, drowned...but I follow after charity (though not as I ought, yet as I can), if haply I may attain it...I show my faith by my works, by staking my all upon it.²⁷

Not only was he uncertain about his salvation, but his doctrinal beliefs and opinions were sadly confused. Over ten years had passed since he had received his Master's degree from Oxford and yet his faith was seemingly grounded in sand. Ten years before, he had taken his mother's suggestion and undertook a serious self-examination, "to find whether he had 'a reasonable hope of salvation.'"²⁸ Her advice to him at the time was that assurance was through human attainment rather than a divine gift. Now after a decade, he was searching again in introspection, and was not satisfied with what he found. As to his doctrinal beliefs, he sadly admitted, "For many years I have been tossed about by various winds of doctrine. I asked long ago, "What must I do to be saved?"²⁹ He had been advised to not lay too much emphasis upon faith without works, and attempted to follow this by his many outward works. He was also warned against too many works, thus falling into the pit of the Roman Catholics, and here he also failed, for he was wholly depending upon human endeavors for his salvation. He disparaged Calvinistic doctrine in writing: "...I fell among some Lutheran and Calvinist authors, who magnified faith to such an amazing size, that it hid all the rest of the commandments."³⁰ He considered the Lutherans and Calvinists had plunged into the other extreme denying the value of works, and called them "these well-meaning wrong-headed Germans."³¹ And so Wesley went too far in the other extreme, failing for thirteen years to find the golden mean between Calvinism and Papism. Soon Wesley, by "extending antiquity too far;...believing more practices to have been universal in the ancient Church than ever were so,"³² was falling into the tenets of monastic Mysticism.

Wesley wrote of his gradual withdrawal into the extremes of Mysticism. This description was written after his conversion, when he realized the precarious position of his former beliefs.

²⁷ Southey, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

²⁸ Tenney, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²⁹ Southey, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ *Loc. cit.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

These considerations insensibly stole upon me as I grew acquainted with the mystic writers, whose noble descriptions of union with God and internal religion made everything else appear mean, flat, and insipid. But in truth they made good works appear so too: yea, and faith itself, and what not? They gave me an entire new view of religion, like any I had before. But alas! it was nothing like that religion which Christ and His apostles loved and taught... I had no heart, no vigour, no zeal in obeying, continually doubting whether I was right or wrong, and never out of perplexities and entanglements.³³

After forsaking Mysticism, Wesley considered it his worst enemy, and doing so, took an extreme attitude toward it. He expressed this attitude in writing:

... Nor can I at this hour give a distinct account how or when I came a little back toward the right way; only my present sense is this, all the other enemies of Christianity are triflers, the mystics are the most dangerous; they stab it in the vitals, and its most serious professors are most likely to fall by them.³⁴

Although Wesley repudiated the appellation of Mysticism, as a trichotomist, he viewed the spirit as the highest principle of man. This immortal spirit was the channel uniting man with God in faith. He believed God might send His Spirit directly and immediately into the soul of man. This is Scriptural Mysticism, therefore, it was the extremes of the radical mystics whom Wesley criticized in severe denouncement.

If a Mystic is one who denied justification by faith, ... who taught that God was unsusceptible of anger and that the work of God in the soul was best promoted by anguish and by spiritual martyrdoms by occasional absences of God; that joy in the Spirit was not to be indulged in nor God to be selfishly loved; who was guided solely by inward impressions and not by the written Word; who advised retirement and entire seclusion from men; who strove to fulfill the law by passivity... then Wesley's assertion that he was not to be numbered among them must be

³³ *Loc. cit.*

³⁴ John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* Standard Edition, I, p. 420.

accepted.³⁵

Even though Wesley discredits Mysticism completely as a "snake in the grass" of Christian doctrine that will poison the seeker, his conversion was a wonderful experience in which he sensed the Scriptural witness of salvation by faith. It was the inner mystical experience of the heart for which he expressed his desire "...of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved."³⁶ Being strongly influenced by the German, Peter Boehler, Wesley asked him if it would not be wise to quit preaching, since he felt that he did not possess the assurance that he felt was scripturally accessible. Boehler advised him, "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith."³⁷ Consequently, even though he did not possess this mysterious experience, and did not know how faith could be obtained instantly, he began to preach salvation by faith. Finally, on May 24, 1738, Wesley discarded the extremes of Mysticism in the scriptural epitome of the finest expression of mystical thought in Christian assurance. He met with a small group at Aldersgate Street, and was listening to the reading of Luther's preface to the Romans. He wrote in his diary the glorious account of the fruition of his new-found faith.

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed; I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.³⁸

He did not experience an exuberant ecstasy of joy in his conversion, as many of his converts manifested, but "His response was more intellectual than emotional"³⁹ in accordance with his personality. Far more important than a jumping spree or a tickling of his emotions, "...was the profound and abiding consciousness of the reality of God and spiritual values, which now possessed him and supplied the dynamic that had been missing."⁴⁰

It is evident that "Wesley was more influenced by Mysticism than he was aware, for mystical ideas had filtered into the

³⁵ Arthur Wilford Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism*, p. 94.

³⁶ Wesley, *op. cit.* , p. 14.

³⁷ *Loc. cit.*

³⁸ *Ibid.* , p. 475.

³⁹ Tenney, *op. cit.* p. 95.

⁴⁰ *Loc. cit.*

better religious life of his age from many sources."⁴¹ Mysticism has in all ages been a reaction against superstitious dependence upon humanistic grounds of Christian certitude. Thus, both Mysticism and Methodism build upon the foundation of conscious spiritual experience and its certitude within the heart. It is the doctrine of assurance, and is not far removed from that of the "inner light" of the Quakers. It is universally sound.

The faculty and action of the soul by which we have an immediate experience of objective reality, of the infinite and abiding, of a spirit not all unlike, yet distinct from our own, which penetrates and works within these our finite spirits and in the world at large, especially in human history... is met by the mystical and the directly operative element of religion.⁴²

The Methodist insistence upon conversion is based in evangelical argument upon the existence of a faculty different from, and superior to reason. This quality superior to reason is the intuitive faculty, and in both Mysticism and Methodism it reigns supreme. The great mystic, Ruysbroeck, says, "Above all things, if we desire to enjoy God, or to experience eternal life within us, we must rise far above human reason, and enter God through Faith."⁴³ God works through this intuitive faculty in the conveyance of spiritual knowledge. In this, Methodism locks step with Mysticism. Wesley has always tried to steer clear of the danger of this, which is the disparagement of learning.

In the Christian's view of peace of soul, both Methodism and Mysticism touch the basic fact of spiritual consciousness, never more finely expressed than by the great mystic, St. Augustine, who in the opening page of his Confessions, wrote: "Thou has created us unto Thyself O God, and our heart finds no rest until it rests in Thee."⁴⁴ There is little difference in the words of the noted mystic writer, von Hugel, and a heart-warming hymn of Wesley in their essence.

...He it is who, however dimly yet directly, touches our souls and awakens them to that noblest, incurable

⁴¹ Workman, *op. cit.* , p. 79.

⁴² *Ibid.* , p. 80 (Quoted from von Hugel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol. II, p. 390).

⁴³ *Ibid.* , p. 81.

⁴⁴ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 1.

discontent with our own petty self and to that sense of thirst for the Infinite and Abiding, which articulates man's deepest requirement and characteristic: this is the first experience... without which all life, and life's centre, religion, are flat and dreary, vain and philistine.⁴⁵

Wesley also pens the beauty of his thought in deep contemplation and devotion to God.

Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
Whose depth unfathomed no man knows,
I see from far Thy beauteous light,
Only I sigh for Thy repose;
My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest, till it finds rest in Thee.⁴⁶

There are, however, some differences as well as likenesses between the essential qualities of Methodism and the mystical groups of the more popular varieties. The following are two qualities of the mystical which is basic to Methodism. First is ineffability, which is the state of feeling directly experienced and non-impartible to others. The experience of salvation and the daily walk with God are unique to each individual. The second is the noetic quality. This includes states of insight into depth of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. These demonstrate the doctrine of Assurance. There are also two more characteristics of Mysticism which are unique to that group, but have little place in Methodism. The first is transiency which is a more abnormal state, which Paul probably referred to as the third heaven. Methodism is not opposed to this, but little transiency occurs in its movement. Finally, where Methodism and Mysticism part company entirely is in the passivity of the Friends. Wesley abhorred this practice among the Quakers and excluded it from his practice among his societies. It is the doctrine of "Stillness," which is a do-nothing negative attitude. However, Wesley did encourage the tranquil tarrying before the Lord and the spiritual quiet, which was a contribution of the Friends of God and later the Quakers, but Wesley took a mean between the extremes of this "quietism" and the radical expression of the non-intellectual Ranters. Another difference might be considered--the verbal testimony of God's grace imparted in the life of believers. Tauler thought that the experience of close worship with God was indescribable and non-tellable. No one was

⁴⁵ Workman, *op. cit.*, p. 82 f. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

allowed to witness in words to what he felt in his heart. But Wesley took issue in the admonition of these lines:

What we have felt and seen
With confidence we tell;
And publish to the sons of men
The signs infallible.⁴⁷

Wesley also opposed the antinomian views of the Friends, as has already been mentioned, and their emphases upon seclusion solitude, and unsocial forms or religious expression. Although Wesley thought Mysticism was bound up with obscurity and irrationality, his doctrine had the following mystical elements in it: 1. Immediacy of first-hand religious experience; 2. Man has a sense other than reason by which he comes into relation with the Infinite; 3. Conversion re-establishes a vital union of the soul with God which sin had dissolved; 4. Illumination comes after purgation; 5. The "Inner Light" universal and preventing grace; and finally, 6. The scriptural doctrine of Hebrews that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:4).

Both of these movements have been sneered at as philosophical empiricism and a sentimental religion. Wesley despised this last accusation the worst, for he was anything but a sentimentalistic enthusiast. Mysticism has in the past and will be in the future

...the ferment of faith, the forerunner of spiritual liberty, the inaccessible refuge of the nobler heretics, the teacher of the despairing, the comforter of those who are weary of finitude.⁴⁸

Thus, the truths of genuine Mysticism neither grow old or die. In her unity with a sane and sensible Mysticism, Methodism will always have a most powerful weapon in the fight against the increasing materialism of thought and life.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* , p. 84.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* , p. 87 (Quoted from J. Royce, *The World and the Individual* , pp. 81-85).