

**Mysticism**  
**in the**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**by**

**Sally Smith**

*“To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*  
Colossians 1:27

**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

## **Introduction**

In this essay I want to define mysticism, looking at the mystics of old through to modern day. In the discussion I hope to clarify misunderstandings about the word mysticism, where in some cases it has evoked suspicion and fear, that that would no longer be the case. I will discuss spiritual direction and its importance to those who have mystical experiences in their Christian walk. I will include reflections from my own journey of learning about mysticism. An interview with four people, about their Christian walk, will also be summarised and discussed.

A contemporary mystical description taken from Paul Hawker's *Secret Affairs of the Soul*,<sup>1</sup>

“I cannot say how long it took to develop, but the ecstasy lasted over roughly three weeks. The main sensation was of being loved, a flood of sweetness of great strength, without any element of sentimentality or anything but itself. The description is quite inadequate. I also felt a unification of myself with the external world: I did not lose my own identity, yet all things and I somehow entered into each other; all things seemed to “speak” to me. Something was communicated to me, not in words or images, but in another form of knowing.” (man aged 47)

## **My own experience**

For many years I have been drawn to the mystics of old, their depth of intimacy with God, their quaint ways of describing their loving relationship with God and their mystical experiences of God. But I have often wondered if I could ever experience the nearness to God which they seemed to have. Hence my desire to explore mysticism, and how it applies to Christians today. Are there mystics still alive today? What is mysticism? Is mysticism equivalent to spiritual experience? Is mysticism elitist? Is mysticism achieved according to the degree in which you are willing to sacrifice and suffer in following Christ? How would a mystic live in today's society? What about other religions – do they also experience the mystery of God? How is that different from Christian mysticism?

So many questions have drawn me to this topic and I begin this project with a passion to find out more!

---

<sup>1</sup> Hawker, Paul: *Secret Affairs of the Soul*; pg 44

## **Definition**

Firstly, I will comment on the terms mysticism and ‘spiritual experience.’ I believe that the two terms can be used interchangeably. Throughout this essay I have used the term mysticism but with modern thinking it could easily be interchanged with spiritual experience.

The term mysticism has often been regarded with suspicion from some Christian traditions as it is seen to be linked with Eastern religions and New Age beliefs. Mysticism and meditation gurus from Asia have been sought by many in the western world who have a hunger for intimacy with God and a desire to awaken their spiritual centre.<sup>2</sup> William Johnston writes, “The mystical path in all religions is similar and we Christians can learn from others, yet each mystical tradition has its own distinctive features. The Christian mystical path is above all a following of Christ in love.”<sup>3</sup> So mysticism in Christianity is centred on Christ.

Some of the fear around mysticism comes from the fact that when entering into contemplative prayer one is willing to let the Other reveal himself<sup>4</sup> as he wills. The prayer is a letting go of preconceived ideas and a willingness to be open to however the Other wants to convey Himself. It requires trust in God and a willingness to surrender our will to God’s will. Not always an easy place to be.

In order to define mysticism I have given a biblical view and several different historical views held by many mystics over time.

## **Biblical Understanding**

The word mystery (Greek ‘*mysterion*’) appears in the NT and is related to the verb ‘*myein*’ which means, ‘to close,’ e.g. to close eyes or lips. It “conveys a sense of what is hidden or secret.”<sup>5</sup> This use of the term is best understood by looking at the OT

---

<sup>2</sup> Johnston, William: *Arise, My Love...Mysticism For a New Era*; pg 90 He is an Irish Jesuit, has lived more than forty years in Japan. A professor of religious studies and director of the Institute of Oriental Religions of Sophia University, he has lectured world-wide on East-West mysticism.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg 101

<sup>4</sup> ‘The Other’ is understood to be both male and female

<sup>5</sup> Downey, Michael: *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*; pg 682

background. The Israelites thought of God being above, in the heavenlies, and with him were a council of advisors e.g. “the council of the holy ones” (Psalms 89:7), “all the host of heaven” (1 Kings 22:19)<sup>6</sup>. The decisions they made were hidden from humans except the prophets. In the NT Christ tells his disciples “the mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you” (Mk 4:11). The mystery is about God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, that he and others are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). The same word *mysterion* appears often in Paul’s letters referring to the “mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:4) that Gentile as well as Jew can be saved. In Col 1:26,27 he writes of a personal closeness “the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past” is said to be “Christ in you, the hope for glory”. Mystics often talk of the indwelling Christ dominating their lives,<sup>7</sup> as it did in Paul’s life expressed in Gal 2:20 “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.”

### **Early Christian Mystics**

The early Christian understanding of “the mystical,” was the search for the ‘hidden’ presence of Christ in the scriptures and then, as a result, an experience of union with Christ.

Origen (185-253) wrote that to understand how all scripture centred on Christ did not just involve reading and interpreting the bible but to sense the inner meaning which was only revealed by grace (1 Cor. 2:16). It was not about some extraordinary mystical phenomenon but more about an understanding of scripture that pointed to words about the mystery of Christ. The presence of Christ was real and hidden in the scriptures and could only be seen with the eyes of faith. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) had a “doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility” in which he gave a narrative exegesis of scripture and then going back over it again to give the spiritual, hidden understanding. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) adds to the above with his interest in ecstasy and visions where “a person is taken beyond the normal bounds of sense perception.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Revised Standard Version

<sup>7</sup> Op cit. Johnston pg 112

<sup>8</sup> Op cit. Downey pg 686

## **Medieval Mystics**

During the Middle Ages many Christian mystics appeared, some well known, for example, St. Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich and many others not so well known.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) talked of the fact that Christ was hidden in a literal sense, that although he had no experience in his senses he knew at an affective interior level that Christ's presence was revealed to him. "Only by the warmth of my heart did I know that he was there...."<sup>9</sup>

Dominican Spirituality included many mystics like Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, Tauler and Suso. Henry Suso (1295-1366) wrote about mysticism as being "a place where the soul reaches the point where it loses the sense of being distinct from God, it arrives at union without distinction. The supreme union with God which is beyond all comprehension is arrived at by means of a stripping of self which results in a knowing that is direct and intuitive."<sup>10</sup>

## **Mystics of the Early Modern Period**

Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), another Spanish mystic, wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* where the main goal is to have a direct experience of God. He stressed the main aim of the spiritual life was to bring our will into line with God's will. He was able to achieve this surrender to God to a great degree and his life revealed a deep sense of the divine presence within Him.

In Carmelite spirituality, Teresa of Avila (1515-82) and John of the Cross (1542-91), wrote the goal of the contemplative life was that the soul be transformed by God to a union with God, in love. Teresa's many works include *The Interior Castle* in which she writes of "the highest experience of mystical union, the 'spiritual marriage' of the soul and God."<sup>11</sup> Her many experiences of trances, visions, and ecstasies counted less to her than the practical outworking of her faith in loving her neighbour. She would contemplate the 'Life of Christ' within her and with that would come "such a feeling

---

<sup>9</sup> Op cit. Downey pg 686

<sup>10</sup> Op cit. Downey pg 290

<sup>11</sup> King, Ursula: *Christian Mystics – The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*; pg 140

of the presence of God as made it impossible for me to doubt that He was within me, or that I was totally engulfed in Him.”<sup>12</sup> St John’s mysticism was apophatic where he describes the soul’s detachment from self leading to knowing only God. The ‘dark-night’ depicts the journey of detachment and purging, until the soul is completely conformed to the will of God.<sup>13</sup>

Some readers of the *Interior Castle*, especially the 6<sup>th</sup> mansion where extraordinary phenomena are extensively considered, gained the impression that Christian mysticism was something special and only for a selected few.

Augustin Poulain<sup>14</sup> supported this view in his work, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, where he wrote that there was an essential difference between mystical and ordinary Christians and the former were especially called to it. Poulain’s work came under strong criticism and there was a call to universal holiness that all Christians are to follow.

### **Mystics of our Time**

Tomas Merton (1915-1968), an American monk, was insistent on there being no distinction between ordinary and mystical Christians and that all are called to follow Christ. His description of mystical doctrine was based on the idea of consistently conforming to the will of God over many years. It begins with changing behaviour and then with a growing love for God. His approach calls for selflessness and dedication rather than concentrating on techniques. He writes, “to reach true awareness of God as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence discovering an inner centre of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light. Call it faith, call it contemplative illumination, call it the sense of God or even mystical union, all these are different aspects and levels of the same kind of realization, the awakening to a new awareness of ourselves in Christ, created in Him, redeemed by Him, to be transformed and glorified in and with him.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pg 140

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pg 145

<sup>14</sup> Augustin Francois Poulain was born in 1836 in France and entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1858. He had a long career as a priest, spiritual director, librarian, mathematician, author and scholar. After forty years of research and personal experience, he wrote his masterpiece, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, from which *Revelations and Visions* is excerpted. Father Poulain died in 1919.

<sup>15</sup> Merton, Thomas: *Contemplation in a World of Action*; pp. 175-176

David Steindl-Rast, a monastic writer, paraphrased what Ruskin wrote about being an artist: “A mystic is not a special kind of human being: rather every human being is a special kind of mystic.”<sup>16</sup>

Karl Rahner (1904-1984), a Jesuit priest, was an influential Catholic theologian. His message was simply to recognize and then live out “God’s self-gift” – the mystery that is called grace. He saw the grace of God available to all peoples, even those who are not Christians. He believes that to recognise and appropriate God’s self-gift we must pray. (James 4:8)<sup>17</sup> By prayer we recognise our hearts failures and in God’s own time He comes and transforms our hearts so that they come one spirit with him. Karl Rahner talks of “everyday mysticism” – where our ordinary daily activities and the day that is God’s become one reality, where our external activities become unified with our inward state through God’s grace and love.<sup>18</sup> His version of mysticism is not for the privileged few but “a feature of people’s everyday experience as they struggle to live the Christian way of life.”<sup>19</sup> He regards mysticism as not just an interior experience but as involving a self-emptying and giving ourselves in service to others.

So we can see how mysticism has changed from being elitist, for only a special few dedicated Christians, to being something accessible to all Christians. Previously being a monk or a nun, separating one’s self from world issues and from other religions, were prerequisites<sup>20</sup>, but now mysticism is for all.

A question arises then about mystical ascent and a perceived growth in grace. In 1944 Rahner wrote in an essay about the traditional ways of regarding Christian perfection and mystical ascent. He stated that such phrases can lead on to Christians thinking of the spiritual life in stages. As one progresses more grace is given, and certain tasks must be accomplished with people becoming more holy. Those who don’t achieve the tasks are further from God and less perfect. He refutes these ideas strongly,

---

<sup>16</sup> Steindl-Rast, David: *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*; pg 86

<sup>17</sup> RSV James 4:8 “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.”

<sup>18</sup> Carroll Patricia: *Moving Mysticism to the Centre*; pg 45 Patricia Carroll works in a London parish and is Course director in Education for Parish Service. She holds an MA in Christian Spirituality from Heythrop College, University of London, and has a keen interest in Karl Rahner.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Carroll pg 41.

<sup>20</sup> Op cit. Johnston pg 84

stating that grace and mystical ascent must be viewed as our response to God's grace and nothing more. Some people may develop higher levels of maturity due to their changing response to God. In other words a person's quality of prayer and experience of God's grace can be enhanced but it doesn't mean they have entered into another sphere of God. He never changes. God's gift of himself – grace – is still the same for everyone and no one is privy to more grace. Also wrong is the thought that everyday Christian living is a preparation for 'mystical union', which is in a different sphere. The traditional mystics may experience God's grace in an extraordinary way but all Christians experience it, perhaps in "a more hidden and less developed way."<sup>21</sup> Here Karl Rahner develops a more inclusive, rather than elitist, view of mysticism and Christianity. He writes that there is no need for Christians to remove themselves from everyday life to experience God but rather the 'Holy Mystery' is discovered in the midst of the world.

For me then, mysticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the spiritual experience of God's hidden grace manifest in our daily lives.

### **Spiritual Direction and Mysticism**

Spiritual Direction becomes very important when this loving Holy Mystery implodes upon a person's experience and they are trying to decipher the phenomena. As a spiritual director we may be able to assist the person to unpack the experience and help them to discern what God wants to reveal to them. In some cases this might be an isolated event in a person's life and ends there. Hawker in his book *Secret Affairs of the Soul* cites many such events. Many say these events – "times of ecstasy or mystic awareness"<sup>22</sup> - changed their lives and helped them to acknowledge a power greater than themselves. Here people have a choice to respond to God and seek out help to understand their experience, e.g. spiritual director or they may store it away as something to comfort them and look back on in times of difficulty.

There are others who are seeking to "pay attention to God as he reveals himself"<sup>23</sup> and are purposefully pursuing a relationship with God. These are people for whom

---

<sup>21</sup> Op Cit. Carroll pg 49

<sup>22</sup> Op Cit. Hawker pg 35

<sup>23</sup> Barry, William A. & Connelly, William J.: *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*; Pg 46

spiritual direction can be very beneficial. The director is able to help them recognise their own reaction to God's communication and then help them to decide how they will respond.<sup>24</sup>

Spiritual Direction may also help a person become aware of the mystery within that had remained hidden to them. Maybe a person's prayer life has become dull and boring, and God seems far away. Encouragement to use their creativity in their walk with God, to become more aware of nature, to try new ways of contemplating scripture<sup>25</sup>, may open up new and previously hidden discoveries of the Mystery. Spiritual Direction is about "fostering discovery"<sup>26</sup> meaning that a person's discovery of God communicating with them is central to the relationship. "The Lord is mystery, the wholly Other ...and we assume that he wants to relate to his people."<sup>27</sup> The director is one person who is able to help the directee discover and uncover their own relationship with God.

Hopefully a person coming for spiritual direction is seeking a contemplative walk with God, where they are willing to let go of self and others and focus on God in their prayer. They are encouraged by the director to ask for what they desire<sup>28</sup> and then to look and listen for God to reveal himself. "To pray for the Lord's self-revelation opens the person up to the mystery of the Other. To contemplate means to try to let God be Himself and not our projection of him."<sup>29</sup> There is a need for openness to the mystery of God.

Extraordinary experiences of signs and wonders, visions and prophecies, may occur. But these are merely an expression of what the spirit is saying to the person's heart. Becoming preoccupied with signs and wonders can greatly distract a person from seeking the giver rather than the gift. Spiritual Directors offer help in discernment, distinguishing between "the communication of God and its interpretation."<sup>30</sup> Discernment of spirits, either the devil, the self, or God's Holy Spirit, is important.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Barry & Connolly pg 48

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Barry & Connolly pg 53 "Nature and the Scriptures are the privileged places most often recommended by spiritual directors" to put ourselves specifically in God's way.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Barry & Connolly pg 43

<sup>27</sup> Op cit. Barry & Connolly pg 31

<sup>28</sup> Mottola, Anthony, Ph.D.: *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*; pg 54

<sup>29</sup> Op cit. Barry & Connolly pg 51

<sup>30</sup> Op cit. Johnston pg 99

“To unmask and reject the tempter is the task of the contemplative and the one who guides.”<sup>31</sup> In 1 John 4:1 we read, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”

The contemplative experience though, is grounded in everyday life. This type of prayer is very much a part of active living, where the person reflects the Lord’s concerns for the people they are involved with.<sup>32</sup> The spiritual director’s role is to facilitate a person’s move towards contemplation and experiencing God’s self-gift – grace.

### **Responses from Questionnaire<sup>33</sup>**

I wanted to find out what is happening today in terms of peoples experience of God. So I met with four ordinary people from four different denominations, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal and Anglican. I asked the question, “what convinces you that God is real?” All replied with descriptions involving emotional, physical, cognitive and other felt responses. For example, an unexplainable sense of calm, happiness, “peace and joy in the midst of dreary and dark times,” a strong sense of his presence, an awareness of being loved and accepted by Him, “a flooding sense of his love and an awareness that I had a part in what He was doing,” “an inner prompting that guided me to what I needed to say to the other person,” a bubbling up of joy inside that was ready to explode, “a knowing, felt in my body.” All of these express, in a few words, the mysterious presence of a Holy Other.

These extraordinary, ordinary people then shared how over the years their prayers have changed. They explained how they pray not just at set times now but often through the day, how they rely on God when worried about something, bringing it to prayer, how they are so much more aware of the Lords prompting in prayer, how they trust prayer now and know how to pray, where their focus is more on God and not so much on their own weaknesses. Their prayers were “less mechanical and task focused (shopping list prayers) to through the day, spontaneous prayer. It continues to be scripture centred, less urgent and more relational with God.”

---

<sup>31</sup> Op cit. Johnston pg 96

<sup>32</sup> Op cit. Barry & Connolly pg 63

<sup>33</sup> Appendix 1 for full questionnaire

Significantly, God's reality for all of these people was explained through their many experiences of 'a felt sense of God'. I was surprised by this and found the one hour I spent with each person went far too quickly. It was a delight and a privilege to be with them, and confirms my sense that many Christians today, across denominational traditions, experience God mystically. Two interviewees, from churches of widely different theological views<sup>34</sup>, both said they experienced God's presence with them. They both spoke of "overwhelming, unexplainable sense of happiness." Mystics can be found across the denominations. Their experience of God breaks down many of the differences that exist between the traditions. I expected a stronger link between mysticism and Catholicism than between Protestants and mysticism. However modern day Protestants spoke of an almost identical or very similar experience of mysticism.

In summary these people could honestly say that they knew of God's reality in their lives apart from theological teaching. They had experienced the hidden presence of Christ in their lives.

### **My own discovery continued:**

I have come to see verses such as Galatians 2:20 "*I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live, I live by faith in the son of God who died and gave himself for me,*" in a new light. Christ in me, God's own self in me, every day, never forsaking me, has made a strong impression. I have known this verse and others for a long time, memorised them when I first became a Christian but never really saw them in the light of Christ actually present in me. I agree with Karl Rahner when he talks of 'everyday mysticism,' His hidden grace present with me everyday, the unseen Holy Mystery of love. Mysticism in moments of unparalleled clarity, brief experiences of total union of mind, soul and Spirit, a deep sense of being known to ourselves and Another, moments where our hearts rise up in ecstasy experiencing a new dimension; these are grace gifts we can all experience as we walk the contemplative journey. They come

---

<sup>34</sup> Catholic and Pentecostal

from within and outside of us and transcend time frames, yet they are very much grounded in the relationship of our daily walk with God.

## **Conclusion**

I have found this to be a very rewarding project. It confirms for me the modern understanding that mysticism is not only for the elite but can be experienced by everyone who follows Jesus. I have tried to define mysticism clearly, by looking at the experiences of mystics of old to the modern day. A discussion on spiritual direction and mysticism revealed the important role a spiritual director has to play when a directee is seeking to explore their relationship with God.

## Bibliography

Barry, W. A. & Connolly, W. J.: *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*; 1982 The Seabury Press, N.Y.

Brother Lawrence: *The Practice of the Presence of God*; 1982 Whitaker House, New Kensington, USA

Carroll, Patricia: *Moving Mysticism to the Centre*; Article taken from 'Book of Readings' from Deepen in Christchurch. Can be downloaded from the web – [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

Downey, Michael: *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*; The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1993

Endean, Philip: *Karl Rahner, Spiritual Writings, Modern Spiritual Masters Series*; 2004 Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.

Hawker, Paul: *Secret Affairs of the Soul*; 2000 Northstone Publishing, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada

Johnston, William: *Arise, My Love.. Mysticism for a New Era*; 2000 Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.

King, Ursula: *Christian Mystics*; 1998 B.T. Batsford, London

Mottola, Anthony, Ph.D.: *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*; 1964 Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Pritchard, Sheila: *Spiritual Formation*; 1997 The Extension Studies Department, Bible College of New Zealand, Auckland, NZ

Telford, Carl, SM: *The Interior Castle of St Teresa of Avila*; booklet from Deepen course in Christchurch

Underhill, Evelyn: *What is Mysticism?* 1936 Morehouse Publishing Co. New York and Milwaukee

Sally Smith  
rs-smith@xtra.co.nz  
75 East Belt  
Lincoln  
Christchurch

## Appendix I:

### Interview Questions

1. What convinces you that God is real?
  
2. Have you had times when you have connected with God, in past/or recently? If yes, could you please describe one time?
  
3. At that time what was it that gave you an awareness of God's presence? For example, were you aware of an: (please tick as many as are relevant)
  - emotional response
  - a physical response
  - a cognitive response
  - an inner prompting
  - a conviction
  - a new truth
  - an extraordinary experience
  - other (please state) .....
  
4. What do you seek when you meet with God?
  
5. Has your experience of God changed over the years you have been a Christian? If yes, how has it changed?
  
6. Has your experience of prayer changed over the years you have been a Christian? If yes, how has it changed?