

# Deep Calls to Deep

*Mysticism, Scripture,  
and Contemplation*

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## Introduction

What is the point of religion? What motivates our religious practices and church activities? This book argues that being religious is not simply a matter of believing in something in order to score points with the Rule Keeper to gain entry to the afterlife. Nor is the primary purpose of religious communities to raise money, maintain a building, create community, care for people, or even engage in mission. Rather, the point of being religious and belonging to a religious community is to cultivate awareness of the presence of God and to be transformed by that encounter. Any “religious” action should be a response to such a growth in awareness.

This perspective is echoed by Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) in a letter she wrote to Archbishop Lang of Canterbury, a copy of which was found among her papers after she died. In this letter she presented to the bishops of the Anglican Communion for the upcoming Lambeth Conference of 1930 what she thought should be the first duty of the priest. Speaking of the church, she wrote:

Her deepest need is a renewal, first in the clergy and through them in the laity, of the great Christian tradition of the inner life. The Church wants not more consecrated philanthropists, but a disciplined priesthood of theocentric souls who shall be tools and channels of the Spirit of God: and this she cannot have until Communion with God is recognized as the first duty of the priest.

She continues:

God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God. But only a priest whose life is soaked in prayer, sacrifice, and love can, by his own spirit of adoring worship, help us to apprehend Him. . . . However difficult and apparently unrewarding, care for the interior spirit is the first duty of every priest. Divine renewal can only come through those whose roots are in the world of prayer.<sup>1</sup>

By arguing for the importance of the inner life, I am not promoting a quaint medieval curiosity, an antiquated relic better left in historical texts on dusty library shelves. On the contrary, the inner life, as Underhill advocates, is an integral part of the religious enterprise. Early twentieth-century British scholar Friedrich von Hügel specifically

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Underhill, "A Letter from Evelyn Underhill to Archbishop Lang of Canterbury," <http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/underhill/UnderhillLettertoArchbishopLangofCanterbury.pdf>.

addresses this point. For von Hügel, there are three elements always present in any religious tradition. The first is the institutional element. This includes the physical buildings, priests and ministers, hierarchy of leadership, creeds, traditions, and rules that communities of faith have followed throughout their history. The second is the intellectual element. Theology fundamentally is “faith seeking understanding.” The intellectual element of a religion attempts to make sense of inherited scriptures and doctrines in dialogue with the contemporary world. This work is done in universities, seminaries, and church fellowship halls. The third element is the experiential or mystical. Von Hügel writes, “Here religion is rather felt than seen or reasoned about, is loved and lived rather than analyzed, is action and power, rather than external fact or intellectual verification.”<sup>2</sup> For von Hügel, all three elements are essential in any healthy religious tradition. When any of the three is missing, an imbalance occurs that impoverishes the whole.<sup>3</sup> This means that the mystical is not a fringe element of religion. Contrary to those who emphasize one element of religious life at the expense of the other two, the mystical is an essential element of religion, and the tradition misses a dynamic source of life and vitality when it is omitted.

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion: As Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 21.

Today, many are moving away from institutional religion. The “nones”—those unaffiliated with traditional religious communities—are on the rise.<sup>4</sup> This is due, in part, to religion being distracted from its main purpose—connecting with the Divine. When religion is used to divide people or is reduced to a political platform, many conclude that its primary purpose has been abandoned. German theologian Karl Rahner (1904–84), writes: “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all.”<sup>5</sup> This suggests that we must either stop using religion as a vehicle for things for which it was not intended or risk losing it entirely. Fundamentally, Rahner’s claim indicates that we should not neglect the mystical because it is an essential element of religion.

Interest in mysticism has risen dramatically over the past fifty years. Most treatments of the mystical element of Christianity address this phenomenon through historical figures and their writings. The text most Christians understand their faith through, however, is the Bible. Therefore, our main objective is to explain the central themes of Christian mysticism through this primary mystical text. This approach is fitting because the original understanding of the term *mystical* referred to the search for hidden

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<sup>4</sup> See Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christian Living Formerly and Today,” in *Theological Investigations* VII, trans. David Bourke (Herder and Herder, 1971), 15

meaning in scripture. It described the insights uncovered by those who discovered God's word for them personally. Our goal is to show how a mystical approach to Christian faith through an exploration of biblical passages, the teachings of a variety of mystics, and practices such as contemplation cultivates intimacy with God, which, in turn, can help readers experience mystical consciousness for themselves.

Note, however, that this is not a book of biblical scholarship; neither will it attempt to address the whole of scripture. We will focus on specific biblical texts that evocatively convey aspects of the phenomenon of mysticism. Furthermore, we will incorporate the insights of scholars and practitioners to understand better the mystical element of Christianity and how it is practiced. Finally, we will explore how mystics read the Bible, their understanding of God and what it means to be human, their descriptions of religious experience, and how they relate to their fellow human beings and the natural world. In the process we will glimpse how to reapproach the Bible after years of reading it through an overly historical lens and discover in the mystics a profound resource for contemporary Christians as they live out their faith today. As we proceed, the case will be made that Christianity is fundamentally a mystical tradition that is most fruitfully approached from this perspective.