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CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM: A STUDY IN
WALTER HILTON'S
THE LADDER OF PERFECTION

Many writers (including professional philosophers) often generalise about mysticism without a sufficiently close analysis of texts. Consequently the generalisations are often invalid. My present aim is to analyse one text and, in the light of this analysis, to offer some observations concerning mysticism in general and Christian mysticism in particular.

I have chosen Hilton's The Ladder of Perfection for two main reasons. First, it gives a complete account of the various stages of spiritual growth that culminate in mystical contemplation. It thus places the unio mystica in the total context of Christian faith and practice. Secondly, no other English manual of devotion has had a wider and more enduring influence.¹

Hilton, having begun by distinguishing between the active and the contemplative life defines the latter as one that consists in 'perfect love and charity inwardly experienced through the spiritual virtues, and in a true knowledge and perception of God and spiritual things' (p. 3). He then distinguishes between three degrees of contemplation. 'The first degree consists in knowledge of God and of spiritual matters. It is reached through the use of reason, through the teaching of others, and by study of the Holy Scriptures; it is not accompanied by feelings of devotion infused by a special gift of the Holy Spirit' (p. 3). Such knowledge 'is not true contemplation', and it can easily lead to pride (p. 4). The second degree 'is commonly attained by simple, unlearned folk who give themselves completely to devotion'; it consists in 'feelings of love and spiritual fervour' that are engendered by the Holy Spirit at the recollection of God's grace in Christ (p. 5). The third and highest degree is as follows:

'The third degree of contemplation, which is the highest attainable in this life, consists of both knowledge and love; that is, in knowing God and loving him perfectly. This is achieved when the soul is restored to the likeness of Jesus and filled with all virtues. It is then endowed with grace, detached from all earthly and carnal affections, and from all unprofitable thoughts and considerations of created things, and is caught up out of its bodily senses. The grace of God then illumines the mind to see all truth—that is, God—and spiritual things in him with a soft, sweet, burning love. So perfectly is this effected that for a while the soul

¹ Little is known about Hilton. He was, almost certainly, an Augustinian canon. He probably died in 1395 and he wrote his book for the guidance of an anchoress. For Hilton's background and his relation to other English mystics see The English Mystical Tradition by David Knowles. I shall use Leo Sherley-Price's modern rendering which is based on Evelyn Underhill's edition.
becomes united to God in an ecstasy of love, and is conformed to the likeness of the Trinity. The beginnings of this contemplation may be experienced in this life, but its consummation is reserved for the bliss of heaven. Saint Paul says of this union and conformation to our Lord: *Qui adhaeret Deo, unus spiritus est cum illo* (1 Cor. vi, 17). That is, whenever a soul is united to God in this ecstasy of love, then God and the soul are no longer two, but one: not indeed in nature, but in spirit. In this union a true marriage is made between God and the soul which shall never be broken.¹

After stressing that visions and other unusual sense-experiences are unimportant (and even sometimes deceitful) Hilton describes the means that are necessary for contemplation. The chief means are moral cleansing through meditation on Christ, belief in the teaching of the Church, and prayer. On the first Hilton writes: ‘For remember that until your heart is thoroughly cleansed from such sins by knowledge of the truth and by constant remembrance of Christ’s humanity, you cannot reach a true and spiritual knowledge of God. Christ himself witnesses to this in the Gospel: *Beati mundo corde, quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt* (Matt. v. 8)’ (p. 16). Hilton devotes many subsequent pages to the vices which the would-be contemplative must eradicate and the contrary virtues which he must acquire. Among these pride and humility occupy the chief place.

The second thing necessary for the contemplative is ‘a firm belief in all the articles of faith, and in the sacraments of the Church’ (p. 23). Doubts must be set aside; for they are suggestions of the devil. One must treat them as trials sent by God and conform one’s own faith wholly to the Faith of Holy Church.

Finally, growth in contemplation comes through prayer which ‘is nothing other than the ascent of the heart to God, and its withdrawal from all earthly thoughts’ (p. 29). There are three degrees of prayer. The first degree consists in the recitation of set prayers (principally the Our Father). The second degree is also vocal, but dispenses with set forms. ‘This is when anyone by the grace of God experiences the grace of devotion, and out of this devotion speaks to God as though he were bodily in his presence, using such words as best express his feelings and come to his mind at the time’ (p. 32). The third degree of prayer, which marks the summit of contemplation, ‘is in the heart alone; it is without words, and is accompanied by great peace and tranquillity of body and soul’ (p. 34).

Hilton then develops the theme of meditation. ‘At the beginning of his conversion, a man who has been tainted by worldly and bodily sins usually thinks mostly on his sins. He feels great compunction and heartfelt sorrow for them, with grief and tears, humbly and urgently asking God’s mercy and forgiveness for them’ (p. 38). Afterwards, and sometimes simultaneously, such a person meditates on the humanity of Christ. ‘When you are moved

¹ Pp. 7-8.
to meditate on God, your mind is suddenly withdrawn from all worldly and material things, and you seem to see our Lord Jesus in your soul in bodily form as he lived upon earth' (p. 39). Through meditating on the humanity of Christ, and especially on his passion, the soul is drawn towards the perception of his divinity.

The aim of contemplation, prayer and meditation is to destroy the 'image' of sin and replace it by the 'image' of the tri-une God—an image which is grievously defaced by both original and actual sin. Hilton describes the first 'image' partly in Biblical terms when he identifies it with Pauls' 'body of sin' (p. 64), and partly through the Augustinian concept of *privatio boni* when he calls it a 'nothing' which 'is none else than darkness of mind, and lack of love and light' (p. 65). He describes the second image as a restoration of the dignity and happiness lost through Adam's fall. 'And although we may never attain it in this life, we should desire to recover some degree and likeness of that dignity, so that the soul may be re-formed by grace to a shadow of the image of the Trinity which it once had by nature, and which it will have fully in heaven' (p. 55).

This reformation of the soul occurs in two ways: by faith alone, and by faith and experience (or feeling). Hilton distinguishes between these ways thus. 'The first may be had while the image of sin is still active within us; for though a person may be conscious of nothing but sinful impulses and carnal desires, yet if he does not willingly assent to them, he may be reformed by faith to the likeness of God. But the second type of reformation eradicates from the soul all carnal impulses and worldly desires, and allows no imperfections to survive' (p. 121).

To those who are reformed in the first sense Hilton applies the words of St Paul in Romans V. 1: *Justificati ex fide, pacem habeamus ad Deum*; for 'between God and ourselves, who are justified and reformed through faith in Christ, there is peace and concord, despite the sinful feelings astir within us' (p. 127). This concord is made possible by the sacrifice of Christ who, as God Incarnate, was alone able to make amends for Adam's sin. The sinner receives the effect of this sacrifice, and so obtains his own peace with God, through the sacrament of Penance and his heartfelt contrition. Provided the penitent avoids mortal sin and does his best to live in charity with his neighbour he is assured of a heavenly reward.

However, the Christian ought not to be content with this initial state. 'It is most dangerous for a soul that is reformed in faith alone to make no effort to seek God and grow in grace, nor to engage in spiritual activity. It

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1 Hilton makes it clear that in calling sin 'nothing' he means that it has no distinctive form of being (and *a fortiori* no form of being that is independent of God who obliterates it by his sovereign love). But Hilton does not mean that as a perversion of creaturely good sin lacks reality and power. On the contrary the 'image of sin' is 'a false and misguided love of self' which 'will poison all the flowers in the garden of your soul' (pp. 66–7).

2 Pp. 114–16.

may so easily lose ground already gained, and fall back again into mortal sin' (p. 148). All Christians therefore must seek spiritual perfection by self-denial, prayer, and meditation. All these means can be used variously. ‘For although the desire and longing of your heart for Jesus should be constant and unchanging, you are at liberty to vary your spiritual exercises in order to stimulate this desire, and they may well be changed when you feel that grace moves you to do so’ (p. 158).

Those who wish to attain the reformation of experience must be prepared to enter a night of the soul.¹ No one can pass immediately from the light engendered by intimacy with and love for the world to the light engendered by closeness to and love for Christ. In passing from the one light to the other the soul must endure a darkness constituted by the fact that although it has withdrawn its attachment to earthly things it is not yet united to God. Yet ‘this is a night pregnant with good, a glowing darkness, for it shuts out the false love of this world and ushers in the dawn of the true day’ (p. 165). If entered often ‘it will gradually become easier and more peaceful’ (p. 166). The condition of this peace is ‘a simple desire for Jesus’ (p. 168).

If, then, the contemplative encourages this desire for Jesus (even when he is troubled by unprofitable thoughts and bodily desires) he will grow gradually in spiritual understanding. Ultimately, purified by his trials (which are always commensurate with his longings) he ‘will burn with perfect love and shine with the knowledge of God and spiritual things’ (p. 173). A soul in this state is not subject to onsets of religious emotion which are signs of spiritual immaturity and instability; ‘for inwardly it is now wholly at peace, and there is little outward indication of fervour’ (p. 185).

The knowledge of God obtained in the third degree of contemplation differs in kind from the knowledge obtained by the believer who is reformed ‘by faith alone’. It differs in three crucial ways. First, it cannot be acquired by human efforts; ‘it is the free gift of God’s grace, and is received only after great bodily and spiritual struggle’ (p. 206). Secondly (and correlative) it is received in a mood of passivity. God’s love ‘directs the soul, causing it to forget itself and be conscious only that God’s love is working within it. The soul is then more passive than active, and this is the work of pure Love’ (p. 207). Lastly, in this highest degree God confers his Spirit with a directness that is not present in lower degrees. ‘For in those whose love of God is imperfect his love works indirectly through the natural affections; but in those whose love is perfect God works directly, implanting his own spiritual affections, and destroying all worldly and natural affections’ (p. 208).

Hilton affirms that this supernatural transformation of the soul—this complete response to the Spirit—can be obtained by those who pursue the ‘active’ as well as those who pursue the monastic or solitary (and, in the narrower sense, ‘contemplative’) life. Thus he affirms that ‘divine love effects

¹ Here Hilton anticipates St John of the Cross.
this transformation not only in those who have no worldly possessions, but also in some who enjoy high rank and have great riches at their disposal' (p. 220). A felt, unique, and strictly supernatural union with God is accessible to all persons ‘whether the person be a religious or a layman’ (p. 221). All can enter into this beatifying ‘holy inactivity and most holy rest’ (p. 224). This is the ultimate goal which must be sought by all men; ‘for every rational soul should desire with all its strength to draw close to God, and to be united to him by its awareness of his unseen presence’ (p. 233).

It is not expected that this supernaturally granted awareness of Christ’s presence will remain at one sustained pitch. ‘The awareness of special grace that accompanies the invisible presence of God and makes the soul perfect in love, does not always continue at its highest intensity, but comes and goes unpredictably as I have said’ (p. 234). Yet the effects of grace remain as long as the soul keeps itself pure, and does not wilfully lapse into carelessness and worldliness, or take refuge in outward things (p. 235). Moreover, these effects ensure that the consciousness of God will return. The moral power possessed by the soul that has been supernaturally united to Christ encourages the hope of his return. Such a soul remains in watchful tranquility—in the ‘wakeful sleep of the spouse of which Holy Scripture says: *Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat* (Song of Solomon v. 2)’ (p. 228). In his own good time ‘God returns, full of grace and truth, and visits the soul which is fainting with desire and seeking his presence with so much love’ (p. 231).

At the height of contemplation the soul has an entirely new, non-discursive, understanding of divine truth. First, it has a new understanding of the Scriptures. ‘It sees the truths of Holy Scripture clearly and marvellously revealed in a manner far beyond the reach of arduous study or natural intelligence’ (pp. 240–1). The soul further perceives God through created things in general and rational souls in particular. ‘It is wonderful for the eyes of the soul to see God in the material universe, and to see his power, his wisdom, and his goodness in the ordering of it. But it is far more wonderful to see him in spiritual beings’ (p. 248). The soul then has a ‘real affinity and fellowship’ with the angels by whose aid it grows in the knowledge of Christ and of the Blessed Trinity.1 ‘All this knowledge of God’s creation and of God himself, the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe, which is infused into a soul by grace as I have mentioned, I call the fair words and communications of God to the soul chosen as his true spouse’ (p. 252).

On the basis of this analysis I wish to state one principle and to raise three questions.

The principle I wish to establish is this. Hilton’s book exhibits a distinctively theistic and (more narrowly) Christian form of mysticism. By ‘distinctively’ I mean a form which is essentially different from other forms and which therefore cannot be grouped with them as members of the same class

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1 Pp. 250–1.
or a diversification of the same essence. I can best express my point by
recording my dissent from the view maintained by Ninian Smart in an
article entitled ‘Interpretation and Religious Experience’.

Smart begins by stating R. C. Zahner’s distinction between panenhenic,
monistic, and theistic mysticism. He holds that while the first and second
types are based on different experiences, the experiences underlying the
second and third types are alike. The second and third differ only in the
ways in which mystics interpret their experiences. Moreover, the principles
of interpretation are derived (wholly or for the most part) from non-mystical,
non-experiential, sources. Thus the Hindu mystic interprets his experience
as an identity of his soul with the Supreme (Atman with Brahman) because
this identity has already been taught in his metaphysical tradition. ‘Likewise
the theistic mystic, in thinking that he has attained a kind of union with God
must already have the concept of God—as a personal Being, creator of the
world, author of revelation, etc. His description of his experience, where
this includes mention of God, is thus not derived simply from the nature of
that experience. The mystic does not know that God is creator from a mere
inspection of an interior state; rather he relates that inner state to beliefs
which he already has’ (p. 78).

Smart concludes by affirming the three-fold thesis that ‘phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same’; that
‘different flavours, however, accrue to the experiences of mystics because of
their ways of life and modes of auto-interpretation’; and that ‘the truth
of interpretation depends in large measure on factors extrinsic to the mystical
experience itself’ (p. 87).

Smart seems to me to be right on three crucial points. First, mystics
interpret their experiences through categories that they derive from non-
mystical sources. Secondly, we must distinguish between ‘auto’- and ‘hetero’-
interpretations. Thus the description that a monistic Hindu gives of his
experience is one thing; the further interpretation which the Christian
theist gives of this experience is another. Thirdly, the truth or falsity of the
cognitive claims made by mystics must be judged in the light of criteria that
are, necessarily, extrinsic to their experiences.

However, I cannot agree with Smart’s thesis that the experiences of all
mystics are phenomenologically identical. The thesis is conclusively dis-
proved by the preceding summary of Hilton. If we abstract the theistic—

1 Religious Studies, October 1965.
2 In mysticism of the first type (usually known as ‘nature mysticism’) the barrier between the
self and its world seems to vanish; all is felt as one and one as all. In mysticism of the second type
the soul experiences itself as being substantially identical with (or at least participating in) the
Absolute. In mysticism of the third type there is union of love between the soul and a substantially
distinct God.
3 Similarly Smart claims that the Buddhist experience of Nirvana implies a doctrine—the doctrine
of rebirth—that must be non-mystically guaranteed (p. 80).
4 By ‘auto-interpretation’ Smart means an interpretation given by the mystic himself. A ‘hetero’-
interpretation is an interpretation ‘which may be placed upon it from a different point of view’
(p. 80).
indeed, the Christian—elements in his book, nothing remains. The whole life of contemplation that he describes is indissolubly linked to belief in Christian doctrines, in the authority of the Church, in the objective efficacy of the sacraments, and in the necessity of acquiring the Christian virtues. The only mystical experience he knows is one of loving union with God Incarnate, and his only aim is to achieve the spiritual perfection that this union confers.

Throughout the whole of Hilton’s book there is not the slightest hint of any gap between experience and interpretation, contemplation and dogma, the individual mystic and the mass of non-mystical Christians. Hilton, admittedly, wrote an objective treatise; he does not refer to his own experiences. But the same unity was affirmed autobiographically by another great English mystical writer, Julian of Norwich, who wrote that ‘for all things in this blessed shewing of our Lord I beheld as one with the teaching of Holy Church’.¹

Let us consider Hilton’s initial summary of mystical contemplation. Admittedly some parts of it, if taken in isolation, would be equally applicable to Advaitin mysticism. Four examples are his statements that the soul is ‘detached from all earthly and carnal affections’, ‘caught up out of its bodily senses’, and ‘united to God’ so that ‘God and the soul are no longer two, but one’. But the context shows that both the conceptual meaning and the experiential reference of these expressions are exclusively theistic and Christo-centric. Spiritual detachment is achieved when ‘the soul is restored to the likeness of Jesus’ and ‘endowed with grace’. The soul is united with God in ‘an ecstasy of love’ whereby it is ‘conformed to the likeness of the Trinity’. Moreover, God and the soul are one ‘not indeed in nature, but in spirit’.

The Christo-centric nature of Hilton’s mysticism prevents it from being classed even with bhakti-mysticism. Hilton speaks, not of a general love for God, but of a love for him as he is revealed in the humanity and deity of Christ. The aim of the contemplative is ‘to feel the close and peaceful presence of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ’ (p. 60). In order to achieve spiritual perfection ‘set your heart on one thing, that is, on our Lord Jesus Christ alone, who is the blessed one, both God and man. Let him be the sole object and inspiration of your soul’s desire, and the light of your heart’ (p. 108).

I do not wish to claim that all Christian mystics exhibit such a complete (or at any rate such an articulate) interpenetration of Christian dogma and mystical experience. Yet this one, major, instance of the interpenetration is sufficient to refute Smart’s view that all mystical experiences are experimentally identical. Certainly no mystical experience can be called distinct-

¹ Quoted (from Revelations vi. 17-18) by Knowles (The English Mystical Tradition, London, 1964, p. 126). Knowles writes of Julian thus: ‘Throughout she is clear that when she speaks in the first person she is speaking nevertheless of all Christian men: Christ’s love, Christ’s death, are all for her, but they are also all for each soul that shall be saved’ (p. 129).
ively 'Christian' unless it is wholly determined by a response to Christian revelation. Unless we are to discard the New Testament we must assert that every such experience must grow out of that union with Christ described by St Paul and St John.¹

Moreover, what is the non-interpreted experience that Smart discerns as an identical core in all forms of mysticism? On p. 86 he writes as follows. 'My thesis, that maybe there is no essential distinction between what Zaehner has called monistic and theistic mysticism, does not at all entail that proponents of neo-Vedantin views of a "perennial philosophy", involving the doctrine of the Absolute Self, are right. The thesis "All introvertive mysticism is, as experience, essentially the same" does not entail any doctrine. Truth of doctrine depends on evidence other than mysticism, and this is true even of the doctrine of the Absolute Self'. As I have already said, I fully agree with Smart that we must use non-mystical criteria to assess the truth-claims implied by divergent accounts of mystical experience. But the question is whether all such experiences are (to use Smart's own word) phenomenologically identical—whether their immediately felt content is the same. Now, if it is the same, in what does its sameness consist? Since Smart rules out all metaphysical interpretation he is obliged to hold that the identical object of the mystical consciousness is totally unspecifiable. But the idea of a totally unspecifiable object is meaningless. Moreover, if the object is identical why do mystics assert as a fact of experience that only one interpretation of it is possible?

If we reject Smart's thesis and still wish to posit a phenomenological identity in mystical experiences we can take only one course. We must say that these experiences admit of only one interpretation and that mystics who interpret them otherwise describe them erroneously. But the persistence of error on so large a scale is incredible. Also it would undermine our confidence in the cognitive status of mysticism as a whole. To insist that if only St John of the Cross had been more careful and less prejudiced he would have said that he was experiencing, not the personal God of Christianity, but the impersonal Absolute of Hindu monism is as sensible and as helpful in encouraging belief in the worth of human testimony as it would be to insist

¹ In fact recent study of all the major Christian mystics shows that their experience is indelibly stamped by Christian faith and practice. Thus David Knowles writes that 'the great army of Christian mystics are unanimous in their assertion that it is through and in Christ that they attain to union with God and a knowledge of divine things' (What is Mysticism? London, 1967, p. 75). More explicitly A. Léonard writes as follows in a penetrating and fully documented essay. 'To describe Christian mystical experience we cannot dissociate the form and the matter, the psychological mode of mystical knowledge and the Christian realities which correspond to it. The two aspects, subjective and objective, of the phenomenon are complementary. There is no such thing as pure mysticism which would be like a structure without content, an intention without an object. God is the subject of mystical knowledge, perceived immediately and experimentally in the historic revelation of Christ, the sacramental life, and the organism of the Church'. (Mystery and Mysticism, Blackfriars Publications, London, 1956, p. 84). For a detailed confirmation of this judgment with reference to St John of the Cross (whom Smart includes in his list of mystics) see Trueman Dicken's The Crucible of Love (London, 1963).
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that whenever anyone claimed to see a cat he would have said, if only he
had been more careful and less prejudiced, that he had seen an elephant.

Why do philosophers postulate an identical core in mystical experiences
(either an undefined core or a defined one) although the postulate runs
directly against the evidence? I suggest a possible reason. Perhaps they
assume that because ‘mystical’ is applied by linguistic convention to a con-
tceptually varied set of data it must indicate an identity of essence—an
experience or belief which is explicit or implicit in all those data and which
constitutes a sufficient criterion for distinguishing them from all non-
mystical data. But this assumption is not self-evident. ‘Mystical’ could be
used to refer to a set of characteristics which, though similar or even identical,
do not constitute an essential difference.

Essential identity can be discovered in four ways. All are invalid. I have
already dealt with the first and second. Distinguishing between experience
and interpretation one can assert either that there is an identity of non-
interpreted experience or that the experience inherently requires one (for
example a monistic) interpretation. Thirdly, it is possible to take an a-typical
statement as typical (for example, a pantheistic sentence from Eckhart as
typical of Christian mysticism). Fourthly, it is possible to distort a phrase
or sentence by taking it out of context (for example, by divorcing Hilton’s
remarks on the ecstatic union attainable in the third degree of contemplation
from its context in distinctively Christian belief, worship, prayer and moral
effort).\(^1\) The second of these ways is frequently strengthened by the third
and fourth ways.\(^2\)

My three questions are as follows:

1. Is it possible to define ‘mysticism’? If my preceding analysis is correct
we cannot do so in words that will both cover all the spiritual experiences
to which the word conventionally refers, and be sufficiently precise to dif-
ferrate mystical from non-mystical states. Let us take the following definition
given by David Knowles. Mysticism, he says, is ‘an incommunicable and
inexpressible knowledge and love of God or of religious truth received in
the spirit without precedent effort or reasoning’.\(^3\) But (as of course Knowles
would admit) this definition would not apply to ‘nature mysticism’ or to a
monist’s awareness of his (supposed) identity with the Absolute. Also (as
Knowles himself shows so well) it would not apply to Christian mysticism—

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\(^1\) Mystics themselves have been sensitive to the possibility of such distortion. Thus the author of
the Cloud of Unknowing begins by saying that his book is meant only for ‘a perfect follower of Christ
not only in active living, but in the sovereign point of contemplative living’. He ends by insisting
that the book must be read as a whole; ‘for if a man saw one part and not another, peradventure he
should lightly be led into error’ (ed. by Evelyn Underhill, London, 1956, pp. 39 and 265).

\(^2\) It is surprising how often writers on religious (and in particular mystical) experience pay no
attention to cognate studies—especially to philosophical discussions of the general relation between
experience (e.g. sense-experience) and interpretation, and to the increasing prominence that both
Biblical and literary scholars give to ‘contextual’ analysis.

\(^3\) What is Mysticism? (p. 13).
to Hilton's third degree of contemplation—unless one added that this knowledge is an unmerited, supernatural, unique gift of the Spirit. And this addition would exclude all non-Christian forms of mysticism.

Objections can also be brought against the two definitions offered by F. C. Happold in his *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. He first quotes the following definition given by Evelyn Underhill in her *Practical Mysticism*: 'Mysticism is the art of union with Reality'. Admittedly 'Reality' is vague enough to include the objects of panenhenic, monistic, and theistic mysticism. Yet it need not indicate any of these objects. In any case it would not define the object of theistic mysticism unless it were qualified by 'transcendent' and 'personal'—qualifications which would exclude panenhenic and monistic experiences. Again, even Christians who are 'reformed by faith alone' are united to God through membership of the Church and reception of the sacraments; it is the mode of union that constitutes the differentia of those who are 'reformed by experience'. The next definition given by Happold is even less satisfactory. Mysticism (he quotes from Seth) is 'the endeavour of the human mind to grasp the Divine essence or the ultimate reality of things and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the highest'. From the Christian standpoint it is enough to observe that no believer can have a vision of God's essence in this life, but that all believers enjoy communion with him.

The non-distinctiveness of Evelyn Underhill's definition emerges clearly from her larger work, *Mysticism*. Having defined mysticism on p. 72 as 'the science of union with the absolute', she writes thus on p. 73:

'As genius in any of the arts is—humanly speaking—the final term of a power of which each individual possesses the rudiments, so mysticism may be looked upon as the final term, the active expression, of a power latent in the whole race: the power, that is to say, of so perceiving transcendent reality. Few people pass through life without knowing what it is to be at least touched by this mystical feeling. He who falls in love with a woman and perceives—as the lover really does perceive—that the categorical term "girl" veils a wondrous and unspeakable reality, he who, falling in love with nature, sees the landscape "touched with light divine", he who falls in love with the Holy, or as we say "undergoes conversion": all these have truly known for an instant something of the secret of the world.'

Clearly there are points of contact between the experiences that Underhill here mentions and the unio mystica. All rest on a special spiritual insight; all involve some kind of spiritual communion or participation; all are accompanied by a sense of wonder. But none of them can be called 'mystical' even in terms of Underhill's own definition. We cannot even say that the experiences contain any inherent nisus towards mysticism. The crucial cases are the third and fourth. The whole religion of the Hebrews rested on love for the Holy; but (as the Old Testament shows) it remained non-mystical.

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2 I shall quote from the Methuen edition of 1960.
throughout its long history. Also Christians of the ‘twice-born’ type (especially evangelical Protestants) have often been strongly anti-mystical.

Underhill supports her view by adducing mystical teaching on the ‘ground’ or ‘apex’ of the soul which, through God’s indwelling, contains the potentiality of union with him. A mystic is one in whom this potentiality is fully realised. ‘Now in persons of mystical genius the qualities which the stress of normal life tends to keep below the threshold of consciousness are of enormous strength. In these natural explorers of Eternity the “transcendental faculty”, the “eye of the soul”, is not merely present in the embryo, but is highly developed; and is combined with great emotional and volitional power’ (p. 57).

All Christian theists (except Barthians) will admit (even if they do not wish to use the terms ‘ground’ and ‘apex’) that every human soul, being made in God’s image, has a natural capacity for knowing him. But the following points must be noted. First, this capacity is not (to say the least) directly realised in the purely natural experiences that Underhill describes. In fact I do not think there is the slightest need to have recourse to it in order to account for them. Secondly (as I have already observed) even when it is realised in an explicitly religious form the latter need not be, or have any tendency towards, mysticism. Lastly, in Christian mysticism the activation of the capacity is due solely to a special operation of supernatural grace. It would be a caricature of Hilton and St John of the Cross to describe them as ‘natural explorers of Eternity’.

The only definitive and etymologically valid usage of ‘mystic’ is in fact a peculiarly Christian one, as Louis Bouyer shows in the Blackfriars symposium from which I have already quoted. In pagan Greek literature ἡ μυστικὰ are the secret rites (such as those of Eleusis) which initiates must not divulge. The words were then applied to those truths of Christian revelation that are perceptible only by the supernatural gift of faith. Thus the allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament and the Eucharist were called ‘mystical’. The first person to use the adjective for a special, experimental, knowledge of God was Origen. By such knowledge he meant the contemplation of God through a ‘profound understanding of the Scriptures’ (p. 133). Even the pseudo-Areopagite uses ‘mystical’ in specifically Christian senses. ‘A text of capital importance in his Mystical Theology reveals this to us. Note that it is based on an exegetical tradition concerning Moses to which Origen’s Homilies on the Exodus and St Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Moses are the principal witnesses. He tells us, substantially, that one enters “a truly mystical cloud of unknowing” when one attains to the sole Object of the

1 The shorter O.E.D.’s definition of mystic contains religious and non-religious meanings between which it is hard to detect even a minimal ‘family-resemblance’. It runs thus: ‘Spiritually allegorical; occult, esoteric; of hidden meaning, mysterious and awe-inspiring; one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding’.
Gospel. This sole object, present but veiled, both in the Christian liturgy and beneath the letter of the Scriptures, is precisely what the Fathers, after St Paul, call τὸ μυστήριον, that is, as Denis explains, still in the same context, "the God who dwells in an inaccessible light", and allows us to reach him mysteriously through Jesus Christ' (pp. 134–5). As a final proof that the Christian usage of 'mystical' owes nothing to Neo-Platonism, Bouyer notes that the adjective never occurs in the *Enneads*.

Doubtless 'mystical' will continue to be used in the wide and various senses stated in the definitions I have quoted. But if we continue to use it thus let us at any rate exorcise the ghost of an 'essence' that we can define or to which we can, non-conceptually, point.

2. Next, and more particularly, I wish to query the widespread use of the term 'immediacy' with reference to mystical experiences. Perhaps the word is applicable without qualification to panenhenic and monistic states; but it is not thus applicable to Christian ones. Admittedly Christian mystics who have reached the ultimate point of the unitive way know God with a unique intimacy; but their knowledge is always mediated by those divinely given signs (those 'mysteries', in the patristic sense of the word) that are available to all Christians—by the Scriptures, the sacraments, and (above all) the humanity of Christ. Hence Hilton writes as follows (with reference to those who have arrived at the summit of contemplation). 'We do not see God as he is, but under the forms of works and words, per speculum etiam in aenigmate: in a glass and under a symbol, as the Apostle says. God is infinite power, wisdom and goodness, righteousness, truth, holiness, and mercy. But what God is in himself none may see or know, but he may be seen in his works by the light of grace' (p. 244).

3. How, within Christianity, is the mystical experience of God related to non-mystical experiences of him? The complementary answers that Hilton gives are those given throughout the classical tradition of Christian mysticism. On the one hand he affirms that the third degree of contemplation is rarely achieved and is qualitatively distinct from the preceding degrees in the ways I have shown in my summary. On the other hand he offers several indications that the third degree is (if I may so put it) the supernaturally natural outcome of the preceding degrees. Thus he affirms that all stages of the Christian life are phases of contemplation; he says that an affective knowledge of God is possible in the second degree which 'is commonly attained by simple, unlearned, folk'; and he invites all believers who are 'reformed in faith' to desire a 'reformation of feeling'.

These complementary statements confirm the principle that I have tried to establish and that is endorsed by all the authorities on Christian mysticism. Although mystical contemplation is a unique, supernatural, and rarely granted gift it is nothing other than a deepened awareness of the incarnate Word who is confessed and worshipped by all true Christians.