

# The mysticism of everyday life

*J. Matthew Ashley*

ONE MIGHT WONDER WHY SPECIAL consideration should be given to the theme of 'mysticism of everyday life'. Christianity declares to the marrow of its trinitarian bones a God intimately present to cosmos and history, a God with us and for us. This being so, how could that union *not* take place 'in the everyday'? Yet this question was the subject of a lively debate in Roman Catholic theology in the first half of the twentieth century, in which some insisted that the highest levels of mystical prayer ('infused contemplation') were reserved only for a few, according to the divine dispensation. Others, like Karl Rahner, argued that even Christians whose vocation was to live in the everyday world of family, work, politics and social interaction can and should expect to attain the highest stage of the mystical itinerary, properly understood.<sup>1</sup> This debate attests to significant shifts in the understanding and evaluation both of 'mysticism' and of 'the everyday', in contrast to the first millennium or so of the history of Christian mysticism, which makes it possible now to speak of a 'mysticism of everyday life'.

Mapping these shifts will not only help us to understand why the mysticism of everyday life had to be justified, but will provide some parameters for evaluating and criticizing some of its more problematic aspects. For while it is clearly an advance that the riches of the Christian mystical tradition are now available to, and practised by, a much wider spectrum of believers, it is also true that the mysticism of everyday life seems particularly vulnerable to the privatization, commodification, and, all too often, trivialization of spirituality that is frequently found in popular literature on the subject. Can we really assert so confidently, for instance, that 'if you want to find a genuine mystic, you are more likely to find one in a boardroom than in a monastery or a cathedral'?<sup>2</sup> What is one to make of statements like the following:

Corporate mystics tend to be allergic to dogma, and often remain at a distance from religion in its more structured forms. Rather, they attempt to live their lives from the universal sources of spirituality that underlie differing beliefs. [For them] it is important for business-people to stay out of theology and potentially divisive beliefs about

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

spirituality, and instead to focus on the unifying benefits of spiritual practice.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps an extreme instance. Yet it cannot be denied that these, and other more muted assertions, are part of a broader mosaic of claims for the 'new' spirituality which asserts that it can be abstracted from, and will even replace, 'religion in its more structured forms'.<sup>4</sup> One cannot escape the impression that here the mystical way has not so much been integrated with everyday life but swallowed up by it. Writing of spirituality in the United States, sociologist Robert Wuthnow expresses this concern when he writes that:

Our spirituality is often little more than a therapeutic device. A relationship to God is a way of making ourselves feel better . . . We pray for comfort but do not expect to be challenged. We have domesticated the sacred by stripping it of authoritative wisdom and by looking to it only to make us happy.<sup>5</sup>

Lest the mysticism of everyday life become a late modern form of 'cheap grace', we need a deeper understanding of its origins, giving due attention to both its novelty *and* its continuity with the Christian mystical tradition.

### *Active and contemplative*

That tradition crystallized as part of the broader labour to inculcate the gospel message in a Hellenistic world. The Christian apologists of late antiquity found it natural to argue that Christianity was 'true philosophy', and that what the philosophers had sought in *theoria* – contemplation of the eternal order, beauty both in the world of experience (physics), and beyond it (metaphysics) – was in fact to be found in the contemplation of the one true God. In so doing they 'invented' the discourse of Christian mysticism. However, at the same time they imported the elitism of the Greek debate concerning the good life. For *theoria* (like its competitor, *praxis*) was, and was willingly conceded to be, a way of life possible only in the structured community of the *polis*. It was, moreover, one that required that freedom from the 'distracting' (to say the least) concerns of everyday life that only wealth and privilege could provide.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the language and theories of Christian mysticism that resulted from weaving together biblical imagery and narratives with the Neoplatonic ontology and ideal of *theoria* were difficult to extend to an involved life in the public sphere

(*praxis*), not to mention the ordinary tasks of reproducing and sustaining life that were not even contenders in the Greek debate.

One of modernity's decisive features is its impatience with these hierarchical schemes, and an often polemically asserted counter-affirmation that the truly human life, however it be conceived, must be possible within the 'ordinary' pursuits of work and production on the one hand, and marriage and family life on the other.<sup>7</sup> This shift helps to explain the novelty of 'mysticism in the everyday', however much in essence it corresponds to the deepest Christian theological affirmations about God's relationship to the world. Yet, one should not be too quick to dismiss the earlier mystical tradition. Christian theologians and mystics knew that they could not fully identify the highest degree of Christian perfection with *theoria*, not perhaps (as we would feel it today) on egalitarian grounds, but if for no other reason than Jesus' insistence on the equal priority of love of God and love of neighbour in defining the most perfect Christian life. One way to map their labours to nuance this identification is to follow patristic and mediaeval homilies on Martha and Mary, who were the classical biblical types for the active (e.g., 'everyday') and contemplative lives, and who, beginning with Origen, were also correlated with the lives of *praxis* and *theoria*.<sup>8</sup> Even a brief sampling can provide important theological resources both for affirming the possibility of a mysticism of everyday life, and for reining in its worst excesses.

From at least the Cappadocians on, one important point made by interpreters of Luke 10:38–42 was that Martha and Mary do not represent mutually exclusive ideals, but two facets of any full Christian life, integrated in terms of one's relationship to Jesus Christ. In a homily on the two sisters, Augustine of Hippo observes that Martha fed Jesus in the flesh, while Mary was fed by Jesus in the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, Augustine continues, we should continue to feed Christ incarnate in the needy (he cites Mt 25), while Christ, the Word of God feeds us, primarily in the liturgy. The question becomes one of properly interrelating the two ways of life, a question that Augustine answers both eschatologically and ecclesiologically.

First, Augustine adds an eschatological dimension: 'The kind [of life] Martha was leading, that's what we are; the kind Mary was leading, that's what we are hoping for; let us lead this one well, in order to have that one to the full.'<sup>10</sup> Martha's life of service to the needs of others is both fully possible and obligatory for us now because of the command to love. Mary's life of absorption in the Word is *not* fully possible now; it is only inchoately present, particularly, Augustine

suggests, in the liturgy. We can and should *desire* the contemplative life more now, as 'the better part', but we must live in the knowledge (but also the confident hope) that it will be fully achieved only beyond this life. The Christian life now is therefore one that gives priority to the life of loving service, enjoying along the way those brief foretastes of our final goal that are available, however fleetingly, in contemplation.

Second, these insights were expressed in ecclesiological focus in *The city of God*, where Augustine speaks of the 'mixed way' (*vita mixta*).<sup>11</sup> While initially presented alongside the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, the context makes it clear that the *vita mixta* represents the only way the other two are available to us in a church *in statu viae*. It is the *one* way open to Christians under the eschatological conditions of our present state of following Christ.<sup>12</sup> This forecloses any simple choice of one life over the other. The mixed life has a rhythm of loving service of others in everyday life, interspersed by withdrawal from that work to the quiet confines of prayer, where alone those mystical foretastes of our final union with God are available.<sup>13</sup>

### *Mysticism in and of activity*

While Augustine gives us a mysticism that is fleetingly available *in* the context of everyday life, we do not yet have a mysticism *of* everyday life, in which the union with God occurs precisely in and through engagement with the everyday, rather than as its interruption or as its reward in the next life. The latter requires overcoming the 'ocular' metaphors associated with Greek *theoria*, according to which union with God is understood primarily in terms of vision or intellectual indwelling. On those terms, action, even loving action in service of the other, cannot but be an interruption of that vision or indwelling, and the best one can manage is a kind of rhythm between contemplation and action – an alternation of withdrawal from and engagement in the everyday. One can find hints of this reimagining of contemplative union already in Augustine, and more clearly in Gregory the Great, with his assertion that 'love itself is a form of knowledge'.<sup>14</sup> The most dramatic instance, however, occurs in the work of Meister Eckhart, who, in two remarkable homilies on Martha and Mary asserted that *Martha*, and not Mary, is the mature Christian, the one who has reached the goal of the mystical itinerary, as far as this is possible in this life.<sup>15</sup>

In Sermon Two, which, tellingly, deals only with Martha, Eckhart tells us that Martha is 'virgin and wife'.<sup>16</sup> That soul is a virgin which 'is free of all alien images'. This is traditional 'Mary' language of detachment from the world in order to be open to God. The soul is a

wife insofar as she brings forth fruit; in her, God is fruitful. Remarkably, Eckhart contends that 'wife', here connoting the active life, is a nobler title for the soul than 'virgin', because it entails fruitfulness.<sup>17</sup> Best of all is the soul that is a virgin who is a wife, who combines the detachment of the virgin with the fruitfulness of the wife:

This virgin who is a wife brings this fruit and this birth about, and every day she produces fruit, a hundred or a thousand times, yes, more than can be counted, giving birth and becoming fruitful from the noblest ground of all – or, to put it better, from that same ground where the Father is bearing his eternal Word, from that ground is she fruitfully bearing with him. For Jesus, the light and the reflection of the Fatherly heart . . . this Jesus is united with her and she with him, and she shines and glows with him as one in the oneness and as a pure bright light in the Fatherly heart.<sup>18</sup>

When a person is rooted in this 'ground', then he or she enjoys a union with God as profound as that union which is the goal of contemplation, of *theoria*: 'here a work done in time is as valuable as any joining of self to God, for *this work joins us as closely as the most sublime thing that can happen to us*, except for seeing God in his pure nature.'<sup>19</sup> Insofar as seeing God in God's nature – if considered possible at all – was generally reserved for the next life, Eckhart's claim is that action, when the fruit of a soul is properly disposed, unites one *as fully* with God as contemplative rapture, represented by Mary. Indeed, on this view Mary is the beginner, since she is so caught up in the joys of ecstatic rapture that she has not yet advanced to the intimate union with God available in a properly grounded active life.<sup>20</sup> Here we have a genuine mysticism in and of everyday activity.

### ***Integration into the divine activity***

Eckhart deployed a complex theological metaphysics to buttress this proposal. For Eckhart, God is characterized by the inner-trinitarian 'boiling' (*bullitio*) of the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father, in the union of the Spirit. This trinitarian life 'boils over' (*ebullitio*) in the eternal act of creation and the historical act of incarnation, so that the event of inner-trinitarian begetting becomes the innermost ground and dynamism of that world with which we deal in everyday life. For Eckhart, this inner-trinitarian event can be recapitulated within the soul that is a virgin and wife, for then the soul 'breaks through' to its ground in God, a ground on which the soul and God are one.<sup>21</sup> Then the person,

(a) is united with the internal-external dynamism of the trinitarian life, which, (b) is mirrored in his or her external 'fruitfulness'.

This form of union is not so much an 'experience' we have, but a mode of being we partake in. As Dietmar Mieth puts it, 'for Eckhart, the "*unio mystica*" of the birth of God consists not in an experience, but rather in the ontological integration of the person into the divine work of salvation, which proceeds from God and returns to God.'<sup>22</sup> Here we have not the intimacy of lovers gazing into one another's eyes, but the intimacy experienced in the common endeavour to bring life into the world and nourish it; not the candle-lit dinner, but changing diapers and worrying about the rent, provide the metaphors for this 'experience' of intimate union.

The tradition already asserted that the lives of Martha and Mary were to be integrated around a christological centre of gravity, although this integration gave priority to Mary's way as the locus for union with God. Eckhart retains the christological focus, but gives priority to Martha, by focusing on the multiply-instantiated birth of God (the Son) and the fruitfulness that attends it. In bearing fruit in the world, the contemplative in action is actualizing the union of the eternal inner-trinitarian generation of the second person of the Trinity with the birth of God in the soul that is virgin/wife. What is underdeveloped (at best) in Eckhart's scheme is the third instantiation of God's relation to the world through the Son: the historical incarnation of the Son in Jesus of Nazareth, which continues historically in the Church through the power of the Spirit. Because it is thus cut loose from its historical moorings, the 'fruitfulness' that characterizes the contemplative in action becomes precariously abstract. It is this abstractness that allows the notion of 'mysticism in everyday life' to be privatized and applied indiscriminately to almost any action that is not overtly immoral. It is necessary to retrieve the *historical* moorings of the trinitarian reflections that make a mysticism of everyday life theologically conceivable. These are to be found in the economy of salvation narrated in Scripture, with its high point in Jesus Christ, and which continues to be narrated in the history of the Church in the world.

In his reflection on the Ignatian tag of 'finding God in all things', which is so closely connected with the mysticism of everyday life, Ignacio Ellacuría puts the issue this way:

It is not so much a matter of finding God in all things, as if God were present in the same form in all things or in the same manner; clearly God is not in the Athenian Parthenon and in Jesus of Nazareth in the

same way, and God is not in domination in the same way as in oppression . . . Consequently, contemplation will not be genuine unless it is realized within that action that is really demanded by the historical following of the historical Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

The point here is that if the type of union proper to the mysticism of everyday life is (to repeat Mieth's words) 'the ontological integration of the person into the divine work of salvation', then one's actions whereby one engages 'the everyday' have in some form or another to be in continuity with the life, person and work of Jesus, a continuity extends through history in the Church through the power of the Spirit. For Ellacuría, as well as for Oscar Romero, such action today has to be the struggle for justice.<sup>24</sup>

This view also retrieves Augustine's insight that the lives of action and contemplation are integrated as a way of life within a community of persons called to continue, and to witness to, God's work of salvation in history. It also entails the eschatological insight that just as this work will remain incomplete until the end of history, there will be a sense of incompleteness and of longing in the contemplative in action who finds in his or her participation in that work the privileged place for 'finding God' in the everyday. Thus, one must expect that besides the 'unifying benefits of spiritual practice' there will also be something like a 'dark night' in a mysticism of everyday life.<sup>25</sup>

### *Criteria for a Christian mysticism of everyday life*

I have argued that the contemporary notion of mysticism of everyday life is the result of a complex evolution in our attitude toward everyday life and of the Christian language and practice of mysticism. It is without doubt a development to be prized, yet it has an ambiguous side. Mysticism in everyday life can run afoul of Marx's critique of a religion that is little more than a numbing opiate. Yet, the tradition itself, in struggling with the relationship between 'Martha' and 'Mary', provides important clues for an authentic mysticism of the everyday that can answer this critique.

First, such a mysticism has to be understood as a form of trinitarian spirituality.<sup>26</sup> It depends on a notion of the *unio mystica* which is a participation in the dynamic trinitarian life, present to us in God's saving work in history. This saving work certainly extends into the salvation of our everyday, and it is in joining ourselves to this work that we 'find God in all things'. Second, in order to overcome the abstractness of Eckhart's trinitarian ontology, it is necessary to remain

firmly rooted in the *history* of God's saving works, as recounted in Scripture and tradition. Thus, a mysticism of everyday life will do well to make use of a full range of techniques such as *lectio divina*, which nurture that rootedness. Third, then, not just any action can serve as the locus for mysticism of the everyday for a particular person. Discernment is necessary. Consequently, a mysticism of everyday life needs classics like Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, which, urging on us a disciplined method of meditation on the life of Christ helps us so to choose in our own lives that they are 'taken under the standard of Christ'. An implication of the second and third points is that, however much one seeks a mysticism *in* the everyday, one should not ignore the old wisdom of alternating 'Mary' and 'Martha', finding time apart for these other spiritual exercises (*lectio divina*, discernment, etc.).

Finally, insofar as the trinitarian work of salvation is continued not by individuals, but by a community united in the power of the Spirit, a mysticism of the everyday cannot be reduced to techniques for harried individuals to reduce stress and increase productivity, but must be understood as a way of commitment to the evangelical work of that community. The mysticism of everyday life, in conclusion, is not a radically new form of mysticism that will do away with the necessity of the historical structures and tradition of the Church, but a revitalization that can and should carry them forward into the future. The mysticism of everyday life retains its unique power and promise today insofar as it remains connected with that work.

**J. Matthew Ashley** is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, and the book review editor for *Spiritus: A Journal in Christian Spirituality*. He is currently writing a book on the interplay between Ignatian spirituality and academic theology in three twentieth-century Jesuit theologians.

#### NOTES

1 For a brief overview, see Bernard McGinn, *The foundations of mysticism: origins to the fifth century*, vol I of *The presence of God: a history of western Christian mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp 278–80, p 287.

2 Gay Hendricks and Kate Ludeman, *The corporate mystic: a guidebook for visionaries with their feet on the ground* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), p xvii.

3 *Ibid.*, p 9.



4 For an example, see Dairmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming spirituality: a new spiritual framework for today's world* (New York: Crossroad-Herder, 1998).

5 Robert Wuthnow, *God and mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p 5f. See also John Coleman's sobering review of Wade Clark Roof's *Spiritual marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*, in *Spiritus* 1/1 (Spring 2001), pp 109–112.

6 For an overview of these debates on the highest way of life, see Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and practice: history of a concept from Aristotle to Marx* (New York: University Press of America, 1967), pp 3–57.

7 Charles Taylor calls this decisive feature of our modern world-view 'the affirmation of everyday life'. See *Sources of the self: the making of modern identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp 211–303. He locates it in the Protestant Reformation, with its well-known critique of religious life and clericalism. It is already present, however, at least incipiently, in the High Middle Ages.

8 For fuller accounts, see Dietmar Mieth, *Die einheit von vita activa und vita contemplativa in den deutschen predigten und traktaten Meister Eckharts und bei Johannes Tauler* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1969) and Giles Constable, 'The interpretation of Martha and Mary', in *Three studies in medieval religious and social thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp 1–141.

9 Augustine: Sermon 103.1, in *The works of Saint Augustine: a translation for the 21st century* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1990–), vol III, part 5, 76f. Cf. Sermon 104.3, in *Works*, p 82.

10 Sermon 104.4, in *Works*, p 83f. Augustine's emphasis on a communal context of mystical 'experience' (in the liturgy) provides an important corrective to the modern tendency to privatize it.

11 Bk. XIX.19, in *The city of God*, Marcus Dods (trans), with an introduction by Thomas Merton (Modern Library, 1950), 697f.

12 See Mieth's discussion, *Einheit*, pp 93–5.

13 Subsequently, Gregory the Great dealt more fully with this rhythm, so much so that Bernard McGinn names him the 'doctor of the mixed life', *The growth of mysticism*, vol. II of *The presence of God: a history of western Christian mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p 79.

14 See McGinn, *The growth of mysticism*, p 58.

15 See Sermon 2, in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (trans and introd), *Meister Eckhart: the essential sermons, commentaries, treatises and defenses* (New York: Paulist, 1981), pp 177–181; and Sermon 86, in Bernard McGinn (ed), *Meister Eckhart: teacher and preacher* (New York: Paulist, 1986), pp 338–45.

16 Sermon 2, *Meister Eckhart: the essential sermons*, p 177. There is compelling evidence that Eckhart was influenced by the work of Beguine mystics, themselves powerful advocates of a mysticism available not only in everyday life, but to women! See Amy Hollywood, *The soul as virgin wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

17 *Ibid.*, p 178.

18 *Ibid.*, p 179.

19 Sermon 86, *Meister Eckhart: preacher and teacher*, 341f. Emphasis added.

20 *Ibid.*, p 339.

21 For a discussion of these ideas that also argues persuasively for the importance of explicitly theological issues in Eckhart's mystical vision, see Bernard McGinn, 'The God beyond God: theology and mysticism in the thought of Meister Eckhart', *Journal of Religion* 61 (1981), pp 1–19. On Eckhart's trinitarian theology in particular (and the notions of *bullitio* and *ebullitio*) see pp 12–15.

22 Mieth, *Einheit*, p 215 (translation mine).

23 In Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, *Fe y justicia* (Bilbao: Desclées, 1999), p 210, my translation.

24 For more on this, see my essay, 'Contemplation in prophetic action: Oscar Romero's challenge to spirituality in North America', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 8/2 (Spring/Summer, 2000), pp 6–13.

25 In conscious reference to John of the Cross, Gustavo Gutiérrez calls it 'the dark night of injustice'. See Matthew J. O'Connell (trans) with a foreword by Henri Nouwen, *We drink from our own wells: the spiritual journey of a people* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1984), pp 83–89, pp 129–31.

26 See Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Michael Downey, 'Trinitarian spirituality', in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Christian spirituality* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp 968–82.