GARY SELBY

THE EVERYDAY MYSTICISM of C. S. LEWIS

SPIRITUALITY FOR DAILY LIFE

InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com

CONTENTS

1

TOUCHED BY GOD'S FINGER

Lewis's Mystic Spirituality

Each fall, I begin my Spiritual Formation course with the same activity. My students, brand-new to the seminary, file into my classroom and take their seats. They are fresh and eager, even the ones who are older and for whom seminary offers the possibility for a second or even a third career. But they are also nervous and uncertain about what lies ahead. I welcome them and immediately pass around a little bag of chocolates, and I ask them to take one and simply set it on their desk in front of them. (I usually repeat this and even tell them explicitly, "Don't eat your chocolate yet! I'll tell you what to do with it in a few minutes.") By this point, I have their attention.

Next, I give them a handout that includes Letter 17 from Lewis's book *Letters to Malcolm*, which I also ask them to set aside for a few minutes. As the class settles down and students gaze longingly at their candy, I introduce myself and go over some preliminary course business, and then we turn to what I call our "chocolate spiritual practice." First, we read Paul's words in Philippians 4:4-7:

> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We walk through the text, noting all the qualities of life Paul describes: A persistent joyfulness. A calm presence around other people, especially those who irritate us or provoke us to anger. A nonanxious disposition regardless of circumstances. A habit of bringing everything in our lives before God in prayer. A continual spirit of gratitude. And finally, that sense of "peace . . . which surpasses all understanding," an inner peace that simply can't be put into words. "Who would not want this?" I ask.

Then I tell my students that in my brief discussion of Paul's text, I left out one sentence: It's that small phrase, "The Lord is near." And that brings me to the point of the whole activity: All these qualities of life—persistent joy, gentleness, a lack of anxiety, gratitude, peace beyond understanding—these are not the goal of the spiritual life but rather the byproducts of that goal, which is union with God.[1] As the Lord's nearness becomes more and more real to us, real not just in our heads as a theological fact but in our consciousness, in our gut, these qualities will show up in our life. And that, I say, is the whole point of spiritual formation. Cultivating our shared awareness of the nearness of the Lord, living more and more into the reality of the Lord's presence—that is what the entire course is all about. As wise teacher Parker Palmer put it, this is the big idea at the center of the room.[2]

And now it's time to eat our chocolate.

"We're going to eat our little piece of chocolate slowly and mindfully," I tell the class. I invite them to close their eyes, soften their face, take a couple of deep breaths to calm and center themselves, and then to take their piece of chocolate and simply roll it around between their fingers to get the feel of its shape and texture and, without opening it, to take

[1]As scholars have noted, Paul's insertion of the indicative "The Lord is near" within this string of imperatives is ambiguous because *near* can refer to spatial nearness, as in "the LORD is near to all who call on him" (Ps 145:18) or temporal nearness ("the day of the LORD is near," Is 13:6). Most agree that it is impossible to determine whether Paul meant one or the other, but note that both may be envisioned, as Hawthorne suggests: "Just possibly Paul deliberately chose this particular word, ἐγγύς, with all its ambiguity precisely to include both ideas of time and space together." See Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Word Books, 1983), 182.

[2]Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of the Teacher's Life* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 118-19.

a whiff. Even through its packaging they can detect the unmistakable aroma. I hear soft murmurs of delight across the room. I invite them to pay close attention to what's going on in their body, especially in their mouth. (I can feel myself salivating even as I write this!) Slowly, I guide them through the process of opening the foil around the chocolate and smelling it again—by this point, the aroma is strong—and then popping it on their tongue and closing their mouth around it (without biting down yet), and then finally eating it, all the while paying close attention to the sensations and textures, tastes and aromas flooding their senses. The whole thing takes about five minutes for something we normally devour in about two seconds. "Wow! That's good chocolate!" I exclaim excitedly. "And isn't God wonderful to have created this, and created us with the capacity to enjoy it?"

While the aroma of chocolate still lingers in the room and the taste is still on their tongue, we turn to Letter 17.

Hedonism . . . and an Arduous Discipline

We start our examination of Letter 17 by noting a statement from the middle of the letter, in which Lewis says, "If this is Hedonism it is also a somewhat arduous discipline."[3] "What is hedonism?" I ask. Most will know that it has to do with orienting one's entire life toward the pursuit of pleasure. And most will assume that that's a bad thing to do—certainly for a Christian! Yet, whatever Lewis is talking about regarding Christian spirituality, he admits that it sounds a lot like hedonism. But then, juxtaposed with the appearance of hedonism, he also says that this approach to Christian life demands "arduous discipline." Whatever kind of spirituality Lewis is advocating here looks a lot like hedonism, but it's also hard work.

From there, we go the opening of the letter, where Lewis describes a time when he and Malcolm were on a walk in a forest talking about Lewis's struggle with "adoring God." As Lewis depicts it, it was a hot day, and they happened to be standing beside a small brook as the moment

[3] *LM*, 90-91.

unfolded. Lewis knew that as part of his prayer life, he ought to glorify God, to praise and adore God. What was tripping him up was the fact that his mind immediately went to *ideas about God:* "I had thought one had to start by summoning up what we believe about the goodness and greatness of God, by thinking about creation and redemption and 'all the blessings of this life.'" Notice that small word *about*. Rather than praising in response to an *experience* of God, Lewis was trying to conjure up some spiritual fervor in response to *ideas about God*, in response to theological propositions, and it just wasn't working. Those propositions are vital, of course. They name God, they help us understand qualities of God, and they give us a framework, what some would call a metanarrative, in which our particular experiences of reality have meaning. But they also interpose themselves between us and the *actual presence of God*. They are ideas about God. They are not God. In response, Malcolm simply puts his hands together, scoops up some of the cold water from the brook, splashes his fevered skin, and asks a question: "Why not begin with this?"[4]

"And it worked," Lewis exclaims. "Apparently you have never guessed how much." Lewis admits that that cold water on his face was a minor blessing compared to the grand theological idea expressed in church's liturgy, "the means of grace and the hope of glory." He's right, of course—at least technically. What is a little water on the face compared to this grand theological proposition? But then, in a stroke of rhetorical genius, Lewis reverses the value hierarchy. He describes the moment so richly and artfully that the scene beside the brook comes alive with beauty. He evokes great longing within us as we imagine "that cushiony moss, that coldness and sound and dancing light." Set against that beauty, the theological idea seems pretty boring. And that's his point. Not that the theological idea is unimportant. It just doesn't reach us in quite the same way the actual experience of nature does. Unlike the theological idea, which distances us from the reality by "talking *about* it," the sound, sight, aroma, perhaps even the taste of the scene—these are all

[4] *LM*, 88.

directly present: "So far as they were concerned, sight had replaced faith. They [the pleasurable sensations of touch, sound, and light] were not the hope of glory; they were an exposition of the glory itself."[5]

Perhaps realizing how easily we fall back on abstract concepts rather than the direct experience, he reminds Malcolm that he had not pointed Lewis to the "idea" of Nature, or to the "beauties of Nature" as a concept, but rather to the sensations themselves.[6] What Lewis is hinting at here is the possibility that a particular kind of Christian discipline has the potential to take us beyond the *idea* of God into a *direct experience* of God. Although that experience clearly involves cognitive understanding, it comes to us most immediately in physical sensation and thus takes us more directly into a sense of God's presence than mere ideas can. As he will emphasize throughout the letter, the experience can be rich and joyful, but it is also hard work. Here at the start, Lewis identifies one reason why, and that is our constant tendency to intellectualize our experience. When we do that, we remove ourselves from the pleasure of the experience itself and close ourselves off from the direct encounter with God's glory.[7]

An Exposition of the Glory

As he unfolds this possibility for adoring God through something as simple as a splash of cold water on a hot day, Lewis makes this astounding statement: "Pleasures are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility."[8] This is the fifth time in just over three paragraphs that

[5]*LM*, 88-89.

[6]*LM*, 89. This passion for translating an ineffable term such as *glory* into sensuous experience may reflect a particularly strong influence of Dante, whose poetry Lewis described as possessing an "almost sensuous intensity about things not sensuous" (cited in Jason Baxter, *The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind* [IVP Academic, 2022], 91). As Baxter puts it, "Dante's poetry gets *more* concrete, more sensible, more tangible, with every step closer to God."

[7]Lewis emphasizes this phenomenon repeatedly in *Surprised by Joy*, recounting how he would turn from the pure sensation of Joy, that sense of being overcome with the bittersweet ache of desire in the presence of beauty, to observing himself feeling Joy, at which moment the feeling would suddenly cease. He came to understand that dynamic when he read about the theory of contemplation and enjoyment in philosopher Samuel Alexander's book *Space, Time, and Deity*, and that understanding played a central role in his final conversion. See Gary S. Selby, *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality: C. S. Lewis and Incarnational Faith* (IVP Academic, 2019), 54-58, for a detailed explanation.

[8]*LM*, 89.

Lewis has used the word *glory*—that isn't an accident—and now he comes out and declares his point: When we experience pleasure, especially pleasure that comes to us through the beauty of nature, we are experiencing firsthand, through our senses, the glory of God.

This word *glory*, an important word to Lewis, runs deep in Scripture and in Christian theology. Its root meaning in the Old Testament had to do with weight or mass.[9] Glory has about it the quality of heaviness, the sense of gravitas. As it comes to be used in both the Old Testament and New Testament, however, that gravitas typically takes the form of the brightness or splendor that accompanies God's appearance. Not surprisingly, then, as Lewis unfolds his explanation, he gives us a host of metaphors that cluster around the idea of light, words such as *shaft*, *strike*, *flash*, *beam*, and so on. He wants to be clear that these pleasures truly are manifestations of God's luminosity.

Perhaps the reason Lewis is so careful with his language is that we don't usually think of glory in this way. The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* explains that although God is invisible, God's glory as it appears in Scripture typically "manifests itself in theophanies, usually associated with storms, fire, and earthquake (see Hab. 3.1-19; Ps. 18.7-15)."[10] As we will see in chapter two, when the nation of Israel meets God at Mount Sinai, the "glory of the LORD" settles on the top of the mountain and appears to the people "like a devouring fire" (Ex 24:17). Later in Exodus, when Moses returns from talking with God, the glow of his face is so bright that it frightens the Israelites, so he takes to wearing a veil to hide the dazzling splendor that remains from his encounters with God's glory (Ex 34:29-35). In the New Testament, when the angel appears to the shepherds out in the fields to announce the birth of the Messiah, the text says that the "glory of the Lord *shone* around them," and, as the old King James Version puts it, "they were sore afraid" (Lk 2:9). At the transfiguration,

[9]See Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, "Glory," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 197-98.

[10]Leopold Sabourin, "Glory of God," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 254.

Matthew says, Jesus' "face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light" (Mt 17:2)—in Mark's account, whiter than anyone "on earth could bleach them" (Mk 9:3). In that moment, Moses and Elijah suddenly appear beside Jesus, Luke adds, "in glory" (Lk 9:31). The glory of God is the overwhelmingly blinding brightness of God's presence.

From this perspective, where *glory* designates the dazzling presence of the Lord, we see how striking it was for Lewis to describe his encounter that day on his walk not simply as the idea of glory or even the hope of glory. It wasn't as if this pleasurable moment made him think *about* God's glory or hope for a time when he would see that brightness in person. Rather, it was "an exposition of the glory itself," and not just any glory but "*the* glory," the very glory of God, directly manifested to his senses in the present through something as simple as cold water splashed on his burning face. Lest we miss the full import of his argument, he says that in that encounter, "sight had replaced faith."[11] His statement recalls the language of the New Testament's well-known declarations about faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*" (Heb 11:1). In other words, faith stands between us and the things we hope for, mediating our relationship to what we cannot see, almost as if the conviction we hold is a stand-in for the real thing. And for the most part, that is the nature of the Christian life, for, as Paul puts it, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7). But in this moment, Lewis experienced the reversal of that equation. He had glimpsed the reality itself.

But notice—he glimpsed this glory in what we would call ordinary things: a bit of moss, a rippling creek, a cool breeze, some cold water splashed on his face. Indeed, Lewis's account stresses their ordinariness. What made them extraordinary in this moment was not that God suddenly chose to make a unique appearance in these things. Rather, as we will see in our exploration of the theological foundations of this spirituality, Lewis believed the glory was already there; it had always been there, waiting to be received. God had always been present. When I do

[11] *LM*, 89.

the mindful chocolate activity, I point out that I didn't go buy extra-special chocolates just for this class. They are the same chocolates we've eaten hundreds of times. What made them so exquisite this time? The answer is simple: We were paying attention. So also for Lewis on that walk in the Forest of Dean, these simple, mundane pleasures became a theophany, an appearance of God. Why? Because, under Malcolm's guidance, he paid careful, theologically formed attention to them. He received them and savored them as tastes of God's glory.

The Pleasure of Glory

Lewis has made a stunning claim, that in the simple act of splashing his face on a hot day, standing there surrounded by natural beauty, he had directly encountered the glory of God. In the next breath, he makes the equally astounding statement, what he calls the "secret doctrine," that *all* human pleasures are glimpses of God's presence, "shafts of the glory" as it strikes our senses. In the simplest of pleasures, we encounter the same quality of God that rested on Mount Sinai in fire and that made Moses' face glow with such luminescence that he had to wear a veil to keep from frightening the Israelites. Lewis then offers this brief elaboration: "As it impinges on our will or our understanding, we give it different names—goodness or truth or the like. But its flash upon our senses and mood is pleasure."[12]

This almost seems like an aside, a throwaway line. But in truth Lewis is doing something radical here. He is connecting mundane human pleasures to the long-held doctrine about the nature of God known as the *transcendentals*, considered to be the trinity of fundamental qualities or divine perfections intertwined in God's nature. This tradition grew out of the efforts of Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages, drawing on pre-Christian philosophy, to articulate the core properties of God's very being, those qualities through which the glory of God flows out into the world. Although the list has varied slightly through the centuries,

[12] *LM*, 89.

certainly by the twentieth century the standard conception included these three: truth, goodness, and beauty.[13] God is ultimate reality, and so God is fundamentally what is true or real. God is ultimate goodness. All righteousness and justice flow from God's nature. God is ultimate beauty. All that is beautiful flows from the very being of God.[14] As bearers of God's image, we humans possess the capacity for reason and we quest for knowledge, for the discovery of the true. We possess will, which gives rise to our capacity for morality, for justice and virtue. And we experience beauty. We get caught up in the beautiful.

Lewis knew this tradition well, so it shouldn't surprise us to find that it shows up in his theological writings.[15] When our reasoning minds explore the glory of God imparted through the cosmos, we call it truth. When that glory touches our wills and we feel an impulse toward justice, we call it goodness. But when the glory strikes our *senses*, we call it . . . and here we expect Lewis to cite the traditional formula by naming beauty. But instead, he calls it *pleasure*.[16]

Why did he substitute pleasure for beauty? Clearly, Lewis is not reducing beauty to mere pleasure.[17] Rather, Lewis wants to make a crucial observation about how we encounter the glory of God most directly,

---

[13]Coolman states that although the triad of truth, goodness, and beauty represents the more popular version of the transcendentals, "'unity, goodness, and truth' is the original formula." Boyd Taylor Coolman, "A Cord of Three Strands Is Not Easily Broken: The Transcendental Brocade of Unity, Truth, and Goodness in the Early Franciscan Intellectual Tradition," *Nova et Vetera* 16 (2018): 563.

[14]See J. B. Lotz, "Transcendentals," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Gale Research, 2003), 14:149-53. On Lewis and the transcendentals, see Jerry L. Walls, "Introduction: Jack of the Philosophical Trade," in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett et al. (IVP Academic, 2008), 13-22.

[15]Walls notes that the doctrine of the transcendentals was not only "the heart of the classic philosophical enterprise . . . into which Lewis was initiated in his Oxford philosophical training" but also "of crucial significance in the Christian vision of reality he came to embrace" ("Jack of the Philosophical Trade," 17).

[16]*LM*, 89. Lewis may be drawing on the famous definition of beauty given by Saint Thomas Aquinas, that "beautiful things are those which please when seen." Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica* I, q. 5, a. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benzinger Brothers, 1947), www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html.

[17]As David Bentley Hart puts it, beauty's nature is not "exhausted by a phenomenology of pleasure." In other words, although the beautiful is pleasurable, there is much more to beauty than mere pleasure. See Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Eerdmans, 2003), 17.

most viscerally—before we have words to say or concepts that name it. That glory comes to us first through our senses, in the form of pleasure. Philosopher Peter Kreeft echoes Lewis's understanding when he talks about the ways we might "prioritize" the transcendentals. One way is logically, asking which of the three would *logically* come first. From this perspective, truth is the starting point, since it has to do with the reality of God's being and therefore defines what is good and what is beautiful. But when we think of the transcendentals *psychologically*, encountered as human beings who are enfleshed and who possess senses, emotions, and rationality, the order is reversed. Kreeft writes, "As we know Being through first sensing appearances, so we are attracted to goodness first by its beauty; we are attracted to truth by its goodness, and we are attracted to Being by its truth."[18]

Of course, the connection between beauty and God's glory seems obvious when that glory shines forth in the dramatic theophanies in Scripture, as when John the Seer is ushered into the throne room of God in Revelation 4, or in the extraordinary mystical experiences of the saints, as when Teresa is overcome by the "sheer beauty and sweetness of the Beloved's presence."[19] Far more startling is Lewis's assertion—he calls it the "secret doctrine"—that we meet this same glory shining from the very being of God in such mundane experiences as watching the light play on the ripples of the creek or the feeling cool water on our face on a hot day. Even more, think about what this might tell us about the nature of God, if these simple gifts that bring such exquisite pleasure truly represent the touch of God's hand.[20] In response to the question, "How do we encounter the glory of God most directly, most immediately, most viscerally?" Lewis gives this answer: When we experience pleasure.

---

[18]Peter Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness and Beauty," in Baggett et al., *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher*, 25.
[19]Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (Riverhead Books, 2004), 234.
[20]*LM*, 89-90.

This Also Is Thou

Lewis knows he has opened a can of worms by connecting pleasure to the glory of God, so he preemptively acknowledges the existence of what we might call "bad" or "unlawful pleasures," but then he points out that this is shorthand for "pleasures snatched by unlawful acts," that is, pleasures taken at a time or to a degree that is inappropriate or, as Augustine would put it, in a way that is "disordered."[21] The pleasure itself is still a "beam from the glory," and the fact that it has been stolen makes it even worse: It is a sacrilege, the abuse of a holy thing.[22]

With this caveat out of the way, Lewis comes to what we might call the payoff of his entire argument. He suggests the alluring possibility that through a constant practice of worshipful attentiveness to the countless simple pleasures that come to us every day—what he calls "adoration in infinitesimals"—we could open ourselves to a constant sense of God's nearness, a persistent consciousness of dwelling in the glow of divine glory. He illustrates that possibility using the analogies of hearing a bird, reading words on a page, and listening to "the wind."[23] We say we "hear a bird," but what is actually happening is that we hear a sound and go through a rather complex process of decoding in order to identify its source. Because we've had so much practice, it seems to happen instantly, spontaneously. Similarly, when we see words, we're actually decoding marks on a page, but years of practice make them appear simply as words. We do the same when we hear a roar and say, "I hear the wind."

This leads Lewis to suggest that we might similarly develop the capacity to "read pleasures" by carefully attending to them and making the connection to the goodness of God. He speaks of "receiving" the pleasure and "recognizing its divine source" as a single event, just as hearing the sound and recognizing birdsong are a single event.[24] This

[21]Although this theme runs through Augustine, scholars typically cite his definition of virtue in *City of God* as "rightly ordered love." See Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. William Babcock (New City, 2013), 15.22.
[22]*LM*, 89.
[23]*LM*, 91, 89.
[24]*LM*, 89.

might sound like a merely intellectual process, something cerebral, as if the key move were putting the label on the experience. But that would be a misunderstanding of his whole point. Although he assumes we have the theological knowledge to know that the source of the pleasure is God, his focus is on the sensation of pleasure itself.

Lest we mistake his point, he immediately takes us to a sensory experience, almost bypassing the explicit thinking process altogether: "This heavenly fruit is instantly redolent of the orchard where it grew. This sweet air whispers of the country from whence it blows. It is a message. We know we are being touched by a finger of that right hand at which there are pleasures for evermore."[25] Notice that the first sense he mentions is smell: The fruit takes us, without our even thinking about it, to its source, and we find ourselves for just a moment in the orchard. Our ability to smell is the sense that most easily bypasses the thinking process, as all of us have experienced at one time or another.[26] I have a friend who lives in a farmhouse, and when I step into his kitchen, I am instantly in my grandmother's kitchen as a small child. I might not have thought about her in years, but in that moment, I'm there. I'm not thinking *about* my grandmother's house; I'm not really even picturing her kitchen, although it's easy to do so in this moment. It's more like an intuition. I just feel that sense of being there. Certain smells can take me to my first college dorm, or to my high school gym, or to the house I grew up in. Again, these are precognitive or prereflective moments. I'm just *there*.

What Lewis is suggesting here is that we might have a similar experience with pleasures transporting us into the presence of God—or better, transporting us into a visceral awareness of the God who is already and always present. Citing Psalm 16:11, Lewis again calls on the language of sensory experience to capture the knowing that this practice

[25] *LM*, 90.

[26] Studies have shown, for example, that infants identify their mother soon after birth primarily from their odor and that married adults were able to pick out the T-shirt belonging to their spouse from among dozens on the basis of smell alone. As Classen, Howes, and Synnott conclude, "Even when not consciously considered, smells register." Constance Classen et al., *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (Routledge, 1994), 3.

might offer us. Given all he's said so far, clearly this is not a knowing that consists merely in holding factual or conceptual knowledge in our heads. It is an experiential knowing, a knowing in our gut, in our bones.

Finally, the term Lewis uses for the culmination of these rich possibilities is *theophany*. Each moment of beauty, he says, each small pleasure is a "tiny theophany."[27] We noted earlier how Lewis takes the word *glory*—a word with biblical connotations of God's presence manifested in thunder, lightning, earthquakes, fire and smoke, and the like—and connects that word to the pleasurable splash of cold water on the face. He concludes the main part of his argument by doing the same with the word *theophany*. The word comes from two terms, meaning "God" and "to show forth" or "to reveal," and it is used to describe those times in Scripture when the very presence of God is revealed to humans, when they came "into contact with God," as J. T. Burtchaell quips, "and survived the experience."[28] These appearances take a variety of forms, as when God appears to Hagar in the wilderness, speaks to Abraham, or appears to Moses in the burning bush. But we typically associate theophanies with more dramatic displays, especially with those times when the glory of God is revealed and we feel the earth shake, we see fire descend on the holy mountain, and our eyes and nostrils burn with smoke from the presence of God. That tradition of theophany and glory helps us appreciate the dramatic nature of what Lewis is claiming here—that these small pleasures do not just remind us of God or even point beyond themselves to God. Rather, Lewis is advancing the theological conviction that God is truly present even in these mundane pleasures. They are theophanies, perhaps tiny in comparison with those dramatic moments in Scripture when God blazes forth from mountaintop, but no less genuine encounters with God's glory. When we are attentive to them, we have the possibility not just of knowing that God is present everywhere but *feeling* that presence with us always. And here we come to the threshold of mysticism.

---

[27]*LM*, 90.

[28]J. T. Burtchaell, "Theophany," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 13:929.

Contours of Mystical Spirituality

In this short chapter from *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis reflects the essence of mystical experience without ever using the word *mysticism*. To appreciate that connection, we turn to a brief introduction to Christian mysticism, and here we find from the outset a rich variety of understanding and experience. For Origen, a fourth-century theologian who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, mysticism had do with uncovering deeper, hidden truths of Scripture.[29] In his treatment of the Song of Songs—a perennial favorite among mystical interpreters—Origen invites readers to meditate on the text's love scenes in a way that will lead beyond mere "natural things" to "doctrines and mysteries, and . . . the contemplation of the Godhead by a genuine and spiritual love."[30]

We also have the erotic mysticism of Mechthild of Magdeburg, who lived in thirteenth-century Germany as part of a free-spirited, quasi-monastic movement of laywomen known as the Beguines.[31] Mechthild describes the soul's ecstatic union with God "now as hunger, now as thirst, now as pain to be assuaged or a fever to be cooled, and of course as sexual yearning."[32] At one point in her account of her spiritual awakening, she depicts herself as a bride who "loses herself" in her bridegroom's "intense embraces" on "the bed of love."[33]

In between these we might place the remarkable figure of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a polymath abbess who lived in Germany and was known not only as a mystic but also as a philosopher, preacher, writer

[29]Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (Modern Library, 2006), 12.

[30]Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan A. Greer, Classics of Christian Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1979), 234.

[31]On the Beguines, see Fiona Bowie, ed., *Beguine Spirituality: Mystical Writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Hadewijch of Brabant*, trans. Oliver Davies (Crossroad, 1989); Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics* (HarperCollins, 1993), 48-49; Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (Shambhala, 1997), 102-16.

[32]Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 54.

[33]Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin, Classics of Christian Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1998), 49-50. As several scholars have pointed out, this joining of the sensual and spiritual is a particular contribution of women mystics. See especially Emily Hunter McGowin, "Eroticism and Pain in Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light,*" *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 607-22.

and poet, physician, and composer.[34] Although she clearly experienced dramatic visions, she stressed the miraculous understanding of Scripture they gave her, to which she applied her considerable talents to write exquisite hymns and antiphons that invited worshipers, especially the women in her convent, into rapturous encounters with God through the Scriptures as they were set within the monastic community's liturgies.[35]

Closer to Lewis's own heart, finally, we have poet and Anglican priest George Herbert (1593–1633), whose poetry captured ecstatic moments of union with God as well as the intense longing to experience that union always. His poem "The Temper (I)" opens with these words:

> How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rhymes
>
> Gladly engrave thy love in steel,
>
> If what my soul doth feel sometimes,
>
> My soul might ever feel!
>
> Although there were some forty heav'ns, or more,
>
> Sometimes I peer above them all.[36]

In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves in 1929, while Lewis was still a nonbeliever, he hinted at his own rapture in reading Herbert's poetry and years later would say that Herbert "helped to bring me back to the Faith."[37] Not surprisingly, of all those Christian writers who haunted him when he was an atheist, he found Herbert "the most alarming of all."[38]

---

[34]For an introduction to the life of Hildegard, see Barbara J. Newman, "Introduction," in *Scivias*, by Hildegard of Bingen, trans. Mother Columna Hart and Jane Bishop (Paulist Press, 1990), 9-54; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women: Three Medieval Mystics* (Fortress, 2002); and Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 1998).

[35]She describes the vision on which she based her best-known book, titled in Latin *Scito vias Domini* ("Know the Ways of the Lord"), referred to popularly as the *Scivias*, in this way: "Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch" (Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 59). On her use of the vision, see Newman, "Introduction," 17.

[36]George Herbert, "Temper (I)," in *The Country Parson, The Temple*, ed. John W. Wall Jr., Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1981), 170.

[37]*Collected Letters*, 1:830; 3:106.

[38]*SJ*, 214.

Although these examples highlight the rich variety we find in Christian mysticism, they also share a common focus on what was called the *unio mystica* or "mystical union," a direct, unmediated consciousness of God's presence "that transforms the mystic's mind and whole way of life."[39] Evelyn Underhill, one of the twentieth century's most prominent writers about mystical spirituality, whose work Lewis knew well, describes it as "awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine Reality," typically "accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation."[40] Most describe that experience as a sudden melting away of one's sense of separateness.[41] Bernard of Clairvaux speaks of being "inebriated with divine love," such that "the mind may forget itself."[42] Others draw on images of physical embodiment to capture the bliss of this union.[43] Sixteenth-century mystic Frances de Sales, whom Lewis quotes multiple times, uses the image of a nursing infant that "throws itself into . . . [its mother's] arms, gathering and folding its little body into the bosom of this beloved breast. And see how the mother . . . receives it, clasps it tight to her breast, and kisses its mouth with hers."[44]

But especially, mystic writers ranging from Origen to Mechthild drew on erotic language and sexual imagery to capture their union with God, inspired by the Song of Songs and Paul's image of the church as Christ's bride in Ephesians 5. Bernard describes the deepest levels of contemplating Scripture in terms of entering "the bedroom of the

[39]Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* (Crossroad, 1998), 26.

[40]Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1911), 157, https://ccel.org/ccel/underhill/mysticism/mysticism.

[41]Mystics often struggled with the tension between a sense of losing oneself and recognizing the "otherness" of God. See Bernard McGinn, "Unio Mystica/Mystical Union," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 200-210.

[42]Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* 10, in McGinn, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 435.

[43]This emphasis on embodied mysticism may have arisen in reaction to the highly rationalistic and cerebral theological discourse we find in the rise of scholasticism. See Fiona Somerset, "Emotion," in Hollywood and Beckman, *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 296.

[44]Francis de Sales, *The Treatise on the Love of God* 1.1, in McGinn, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 465.

King."[45] John of the Cross speaks of his mystical encounter as a "night that joined lover with Beloved."[46] Perhaps most famous is Teresa of Ávila's account of the "caressing of love so sweet . . . between the soul and God."[47] Although scholars debate how literally to take this language, what is clear is that these mystics sought to describe something so exquisitely pleasurable that for many, a loving sexual union provided the closest approximation.

Beyond this core focus on the *unio mystica*, scholars have also identified several common threads running through accounts of mystical experience. First, the mystical encounter is nondiscursive in the sense that, as a direct experience, it is not mediated by language or thought. It is more like a state of feeling than a concept you hold in your head. Think about your own experiences of bliss, which come as you are looking out on a tree-covered hillside in the fall, sitting around a table eating with dear friends, or holding a baby. In those moments, we're not thinking *about* anything; we're simply *there*, immersed in bliss. To try and capture it in words would be to step out of the moment and lose that sense of presence. In a passage we will explore in greater detail in chapter three, Lewis highlights this feature of mysticism at the end of his book *Perelandra*, where the character Ransom goes from hearing an explanation of the cosmos to being directly swept up in the Great Dance. This also appears in *The Screwtape Letters* when the "patient" is caught up in what Screwtape calls the "asphyxiating cloud" of God's presence.[48]

Second, the mystical encounter is often described as ineffable or, as Paul puts it, "inexpressible" (2 Cor 12:4 NIV). No words will do it justice. As she writes about the experience of union with God, which marks the

[45]Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 23, in McGinn, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 31.

[46]John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. Mirabai Starr (Riverhead Books, 2002), 23-25. On John of the Cross's poem as a recasting of the Song of Songs to describe his soul's union with God, see Mark S. Burrows, "Abandonment and Abundance in John of the Cross's Spiritual Canticle: The Poet as the Writer of New Scripture," in *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality*, ed. Timothy H. Robinson (Brill, 2021), 275-93.

[47]Teresa of Ávila, *Life* 29.10-14, in McGinn, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 358-59.

[48]*Perelandra*, 251-53; *SL*, 66.

fifth dwelling of the interior castle, Teresa exclaims, "How could I ever describe the treasures and delights to be found inside the fifth dwelling? There is no way of knowing how to talk about such things, and so I almost think it would be better to remain silent. The mind cannot grasp them."[49]

Third, although mystical encounters are beyond description, they also impart unshakable knowledge. Psychologist William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* Lewis calls "a capital book," stresses this "noetic" quality, his term for the implicit or intuitive knowing that these experiences convey.[50] For all their ineffability, he concludes, mystical experiences disclose "depths of truths unplumbed by the discursive intellect." Although they can be inarticulate, they carry "a curious sense of authority."[51] As Teresa puts it, "The soul has no doubt whatsoever that God was in her and she was in God. This truth remains with her forever."[52]

If we were to stop at this point, we might conclude that mysticism is an internal, subjective experience, a vague feeling of transcendence. But this could not be further from the truth. Christian mysticism is unfailingly rooted in the church and in the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. Early monks ruminated on Scripture, often a single verse or phrase, to "focus the monk's attention on the simple awareness of God," and traditional meditation was "always tied specifically to a text."[53] Even for a radical figure such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, ecstatic visions were grounded in the liturgies, those artfully arranged prayers and litanies drawn from Scripture recited and sung, which

[49]Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 117. Downing finds an analogy in our encounters with taste and color, which are direct, sensory experiences that are maddeningly difficult to describe. David C. Downing, *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C. S. Lewis* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 19.

[50]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902* (Longmans, Green, 1917), 380, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/621/pg621-images.html. The quote from Lewis is from Lewis's journal, cited in Jack L. Knowles, "That 'Such a Genius Should Be a Beastly American': C.S. Lewis as Critic of American Literature," *Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center* 23 (2006): 40.

[51]James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 380-81.

[52]Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 122.

[53]Douglas Burton-Christie, "Early Monasticism," in Hollywood and Beckman, *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 52; Thomas H. Bestul, "Meditato/Meditation," in Hollywood and Beckman, *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 157-58.

"filled their daily lives."[54] These saints knew their Bible well, and their mystical experiences represented direct encounters with truths contained in the Bible. Furthermore, they were never imagined as merely private experiences of spiritual ecstasy, offered for one's personal enjoyment. Rather, they grew out of and folded back into the community and the community's mission to the world. As Douglas Burton-Christie stresses, they were rooted "in common life."[55]

These dramatic, visionary experiences seem far removed from that splash of cold water on the face that day in the Forest of Dean, but as Lewis unfolds the meaning of that experience and the practice he learned from it, he echoes hallmarks of the tradition. We see this in the careful and deliberate ways he points to the possibility for moving beyond *ideas about God* into a direct apprehension of the very presence of God, from the *idea* of glory or even the *hope* of glory to "an exposition of the glory itself." Although not as obvious, we also see him struggling to articulate what the encounter is like, which hints at the ineffable nature of mystical experience. He uses abundant metaphors clustered around the idea of light, offers illustrations drawn from human processes of decoding sounds and words, and at one point even asks the question, "How shall I put it?"[56] Although we must resort to words to describe this glorious experience as best we can, words cannot do it justice.

Further, we see Lewis tapping into mystical spirituality's noetic character when he says that these encounters give us a "knowledge" of God that goes deeper than holding certain propositions in one's head: "At best, our faith and reason will tell us that . . . [God] is adorable, but we shall not have found Him so, not have 'tasted and seen.' Any patch of sunlight in a wood will show you something about the sun which you

[54]Amy Hollywood, "Song, Experience, and Book in Benedictine Monasticism," in Hollywood and Beckman, *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 77.

[55]Burton-Christie, "Early Monasticism," 40. Civil rights leader Howard Thurman particularly emphasized how mystical experience led to his work as a social activist. See Thurman, "Excerpt from 'Mysticism and Social Change' (1930)," in *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Beacon, 1998), 109.

[56]*LM*, 89.

could never get from reading books on astronomy." This may be what he means when he speaks of how "we *know* that we are being touched" by God's finger. Most of all, he suggests the possibility that even in these mundane encounters, we might glimpse the *unio mystica*, the deep, settled sense of God's loving presence all around us and in us, not simply as a fact grasped in our thinking but as a reality in our experience. To receive each tiny pleasure with the sense, perhaps unspoken, that "this also is Thou."[57] This pronoun suggests intimacy, a personal and relational basking in God's nearness.

At the same time, like the mystics, he grounds his understanding in Scripture and Christian theology, so the sensation of splashing his face with cold water on a hot day is not merely a diffuse, subjective feeling that is there for a moment and then passes away. Rather, his deep knowledge of Scripture provides the broader story, the structure of meaning, in which this momentary pleasure makes sense—that it is *God's* finger that has touched him. We also see this feature of mysticism in the number of allusions Lewis makes to Scripture and theology, for example, to Psalm 16:11, where David marvels that at God's "right hand are pleasures."

Clearly Lewis, like the mystics, is steeped in Scripture and theology as he explores these rich possibilities for our life in God. As he will quip, "one wants the books."[58]

Finally, like the mystics we have noted above, Lewis understands the central role of practice in this mystical spirituality, practice that is personal and yet also deeply rooted in the communal life of the church. As he depicts it in *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis comes to know this wisdom about prayer as adoration only through his association with fellow believers, a relationship of mutual discipleship that he shares with Malcolm and his wife, Betty. Although he seems to pit the direct experience of the glory (the cold water splashed on his face) against the creeds and the liturgy—"what we believe about the goodness and greatness of God, . . .

[57] *LM*, 91, 90.
[58] *LM*, 91.

about creation and redemption and 'all the blessings of this life'"—it would be more accurate to say that they are inextricably bound together.[59] His sensory experience made the doctrines contained in the creeds and the liturgy come to life, and the creeds and the liturgy were what made the sensory experience meaningful. He could not have known those doctrines had he not been participating week in and week out in the communal life of the church. This vital connection to the community of faith is something Lewis will emphasize repeatedly in his writings, and it is also a hallmark of Christian mysticism.

But Lewis will also emphasize the role of personal practice, the "somewhat arduous discipline" demanded of those who pursue this mystical spirituality.[60] That discipline consists in the painstaking process of being attentive to simple beauties and pleasures and turning to God in the prayer that says, "How wonderful you are, Lord." Only through constant practice can we come to the place where pleasures become instant theophanies, just as our ability to identify a sound or decode words instantaneously, almost spontaneously, has come from repeated practice over time. Indeed, it is the constant practice of noticing and adoring that trains our minds to receive pleasures as theophanies in the skill of "reading pleasures." Although Lewis clearly believed that God can and does break in unexpectedly within human experience (he was, after all, "surprised by joy"), he also held that living with a deep, settled sense of God's presence had less to do with sudden epiphanies and more to do with careful attentiveness to the God who is already there among us. Through the diligent practice of adoration in our daily encounters with beauty and pleasure, Lewis believed we could live into the kind of direct, visceral sense of God's nearness in our ordinary lives—a constant union with God—which the mystics glimpsed in their often brief flashes of God's presence. Indeed, perhaps what we see in the mystics is a foretaste of what God longs for each of us to know.

---

[59]*LM*, 88.
[60]*LM*, 90-91.

Conclusion: Something Outside Time and Place

In this chapter we have explored how, in Letter 17 of *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis takes us into the possibility of encountering God's presence in much the same way as those saints in the mystical tradition did—but without ever using the word *mystical*. He knows he is moving into risky territory, and so as we continue to read, we find warnings hidden deftly within the genre of a personal letter. He poses the hypothetical possibility of sharing this insight with the world, which of course he is doing in this book—"if I were preaching it in public"—and then admitting that were he to do so, he would have to "pack it in ice, enclose it in barbed-wire reservations, and stick up warning notices in every direction." He also reminds us that "the simplest act of mere obedience is worship of a far more important sort" than what he has described here. He acknowledges that God is not only the "Glad Creator" but also the "Tragic Redeemer"—indeed, the "Tragic Creator"—and that the Christian life is in so many ways a "*via crucis*," a way of the cross, a vale of tears.[61]

Yet for all that, he challenges us to ask what we believe will have the final word: death or resurrection? And if resurrection and redemption and the making of "all things new" (Rev 21:5) is where God is taking all things, how can we catch a glimpse of that hope here and now, even as we walk our own *via dolorosa*, our way of suffering? One rich possibility is opening ourselves to the glory of God as it strikes our senses, being carefully attentive to experiences of pleasure and beauty. He hints at what that might be like, connecting that experience to many of the hallmarks of the mystical tradition and even giving us a practice that might move us toward encountering God in this way.

But in addition to all this, Lewis does three further things that will be of crucial importance for what follows. First, he connects—or better, he reconnects (for it was always there)—the encounter with God and the longing for God to our sensory experience of beauty in a way that

[61] *LM*, 91-92.

reflects what some have called a "sacramental imagination."[62] Rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation, this was "one of the most central theological ideas of Middle Ages," holding that "all creation is in some sense a reflection of the Creator" and consequently that God is present in all creation.[63] As Kallistos Ware poignantly states, "For Lewis, the world was both solid and transparent. It was solid: he valued the 'is-ness' of material things," but he valued the material world "because of its transparency, because of the way in which the material world brings us to an apprehension of God."[64] Even before he came to faith, Lewis sensed that beauty was pointing him to "Something . . . outside of time & place," that it was the "call of the spirit in that something to the spirit in us."[65] As a Christian, although he participated in the church's sacramental life through the rites of baptism and Eucharist, Lewis saw the world through this broader sacramental lens, which held that God's glory saturates all creation.[66] In *Letters to Malcolm*, that sacramentalism comes together with the doctrine of the transcendentals, so that now God's glory is uniquely manifest to our senses when we encounter the pleasures of beauty, especially beauty in nature. In these encounters we are touched by the finger of God, and we are filled with the longing to go more deeply into God's glory.

---

[62]This broader sacramental imagination, Hilkert says, holds that "all reality is structured symbolically—signs of grace are to be found everywhere if one has 'eyes to see.'" Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (Continuum, 1998), 32. Lewis makes a similar point in his *Allegory of Love*, where he offers this rationale for "sacramentalism or symbolism": "If our passions, being immaterial, can be copied by material inventions, then it is possible that our material world in its turn is the copy of an invisible world." C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Clarendon, 1936), 45.

[63]Chris R. Armstrong, *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians: Finding Authentic Faith in a Forgotten Age, with C. S. Lewis* (Brazos, 2016), 144.

[64]Kallistos Ware, "Sacramentalism in C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams," in *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, ed. Roger White et al. (Oxford University Press, 2015), 53.

[65]*Collected Letters*, 1:369.

[66]Lewis's expansive sacramentalism actually created some confusion for him early in his Christian life. As he wrote in a letter to his brother, Warnie, in 1932, the problem was not the materialistic sensibility but rather its opposite: "I see (or think I see) so well a sense in which *all* wine is the blood of God—or all *matter*, even, the body of God, that I stumble at the apparently *special* sense in which this is claimed for the Host when consecrated." *Collected Letters*, 2:369.

Second, Lewis does all this in a way that makes these mystical encounters with the presence of God available not only to a few select saints but to all of us, for the world is full of beauty. He reminds us that we are furnished every day with pleasures that, if received as gifts from the hand of the Glad Creator, can bring us closer to God. As he puts it—invoking the metaphor of light yet once more—these could give us "bearings on the Bright Blur." He describes his own aspiration in these words: "If I could always be what I aim at being, no pleasure would be too ordinary or too usual for such reception; from the first taste of the air when I look out of the window—one's whole cheek becomes a sort of palate—down to one's soft slippers at bedtime."[67] Although we might not be granted the opportunity to pull back the curtain on God's throne that was given to those special saints we call the mystics, we have each of us known the simple, mundane pleasure of the breeze on our cheeks or our soft slippers at bedtime. Lewis's gift to us is the possibility that these could in their own way provide us with a similar experience of the joyful presence of God. In them we might find a mysticism for the rest of us.

Finally, Lewis connects the mystical receiving of mundane pleasure and beauties, what he calls "tiny theophanies," to the biblical tradition of theophany, as if the splash of cold water on the face bears some resemblance to those dramatic moments when God appeared to Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John the Seer, or in the story of the exodus, when God descended on Mount Sinai in thunder, lightning, earthquake, and dense smoke. To that connection we turn in chapter two.

[67] *LM*, 91. As I will emphasize in chap. 6, Lewis's reference to God as the "Bright Blur," here and elsewhere in *Letters to Malcolm*, reflects his debt to what he called "negative theology" and what theologians also refer to as the "apophatic tradition." See C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/the-everyday-mysticism-of-c-s-lewis