

The Twenty-third

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

The Reverend Canon Dr Jane Shaw

Dean of Divinity, Chaplain and Fellow, New College Oxford
and Canon Theologian, Salisbury Cathedral

at Westminster Abbey

on Thursday 8 May 2008

and

at Keble College, Oxford

on Friday 9 May 2008

THE MYSTICAL TURN:

Religious Experience in the Modern World



Dean Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)

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ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund was endowed by friends of Eric Abbott to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality. The lecture is usually given in early May on consecutive evenings in London and Oxford.

The members of the Committee are: the Dean of King's College London (Chairman); the Dean of Westminster; the Warden of Keble College, Oxford; the Reverend John Robson; and the Reverend Canon Eric James.

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The Dean's Office,
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Tel: 020 7848 2333
Fax: 020 7848 2344
Email: dean@kcl.ac.uk

THE MYSTICAL TURN: *Religious Experience in the Modern World*

I. Introduction

By all accounts, Eric Symes Abbot was an urbane man. But he was also a deeply spiritual one, hence this annual Eric Abbott Lecture on the theme of spirituality, set up by his friends in his memory. All kinds of people came to see him seeking spiritual direction and advice, and he exercised an ‘apostolate of the post’, as he called it, maintained even while he was away on holiday: a vast correspondence with this spiritual network. David Stancliffe, the Bishop of Salisbury, and his wife Sarah, married by Eric Abbott, told me that every year on their wedding anniversary they would without fail receive a postcard from him, marking the occasion. In 1963, Eric Abbott published his last book, a small book for Lent and Holy Week called *The Compassion of God and the Passion of Christ*. In his Foreword to the book, the Bishop of London (Robert Stopford) wrote:

We are privileged this year to have as the author of our Lent book the Dean of Westminster. Dr Abbott is in the line of the great mystical writers. His book is well calculated to deepen our sympathy with our Lord in his passion, and so help us appreciate more fully the eternal love of God.¹

I thank the Trustees of the Eric Symes Abbott trust for the honour and privilege of giving the 2008 lecture, and I hope that the theme of mysticism and religious experience is therefore a fitting one.

Eric Abbott was ordained in 1930 and died in 1983. Looking back, we

I am grateful to David Hollinger, Sarah Ogilvie and Alan Renwick for their very helpful comments on drafts of this lecture, and to Tamson Pietsch and David and Sarah Stancliffe for stimulating conversations on some of its overall themes.

¹ Foreword to Eric Abbott, *The Compassion of God and the Passion of Christ* (London: Geoffrey Bler, 1963)

can see that over the course of his ministry, Abbott witnessed a decline in religious attendance, and the growth of a phenomenon which has – in retrospect – been given various tags, including “believing without belonging” and “a spiritual revolution”², a phenomenon which historians and sociologists have identified as a pattern in post-war Britain. The term I have often used myself to describe this trend is “religion outside religion.” Whatever expression we use, the phenomenon being described is this: people have a range of religious beliefs, they may even engage in spiritual practices, but they don’t necessarily belong to a worshipping community. Institutional religion is regarded with suspicion, and there is a perceived split between spirituality (good) and institutional religion (bad). As the philosopher Charles Taylor has put it in his most recent book, *A Secular Age*, it has been increasingly the case that people have found themselves caught in the cross-pressure between conformity and unbelief, and have sought a third way – what he calls the “nova effect”.³ This shift is sometimes explained as part of the post-war decline in religious belief; others attribute it to the radical changes in culture and politics in the 1960s; others see it as the result of a growth in consumerism and choice; yet others see it as part of a quest for authenticity; yet others as part of a larger phenomenon in which far fewer people belong to any sorts of clubs and societies – to political parties for example – as exemplified in Robert Putnam’s phrase “Bowling Alone”.⁴

This has been largely regarded as a post-1945 trend. My contention is that the phenomenon is an earlier one, its origins to be found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I shall argue in this lecture that

² See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945. Believing without Belonging*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) and Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is giving way to the Spiritual*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* p. 300 (but Part III of the book, passim)

⁴ See, for example, Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain. Understanding Secularisation 1800 – 2000* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001); *Redefining Christian Britain. Post 1945 Perspectives* eds. Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley, Alana Harris, William Whyte and Sarah Williams (London: SCM Press, 2007) Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000)

at the turn of the twentieth century, there was a ‘mystical turn’. This was both specific and general. In specific terms, there was a significant revival of interest in mysticism, which was in part a reaction to the positivist scientific outlook that had been growing in ascendancy in the last decades of the nineteenth century. But by adopting the phrase ‘mystical turn’ I also mean to indicate that there was a more general interest in personal religious experience, a direct apprehension of, or communication with, God. This lecture is largely about Protestantism (though some of the Protestants I talk about were deeply interested in the great Roman Catholic mystics of the Christian tradition), and it is largely about Britain. It ventures into late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious culture from time to time; but I do not discuss the current state of religion in the USA which is remarkably different from Britain, precisely because church membership there has grown, not declined, in the twentieth century.

Scholars who have written about the post-1945 emergence of individual or individualistic ‘spirituality’ have not entirely neglected the early twentieth century in trying to explain more recent trends in religion. But they have focused on one figure alone, and have tended to treat him in isolation: William James. In 1902, the American psychologist William James gave his Gifford Lectures on the topic in Edinburgh and published them as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The book has never gone out of print and has been remarkably influential. Quoting James’ famous definition of religious experience, the authors of a recent book on post-1945 religion in Britain claim the significance of James’ work for understanding religion in the second half of the twentieth century precisely because he “discounted institutionalised religion and prioritized a subjectivist assessment of spirituality as ‘the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude’”.⁵ James’ analysis has been appealing to scholars of post-1945 religion because it seems to offer so much insight into our own day. Charles Taylor says of the book, “It is astonishing how little dated it is. Some of the detail may be strange, but you easily think of examples in our world that fit the themes James is developing. You can even find yourself forgetting that these

⁵ Garnett et al, *Redefining Christian Britain* p. 23

lectures were delivered a hundred years ago.”⁶ The anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes that the works seems “almost ultra-contemporaneous, as though it had been written yesterday about New Age and Postmodern excitement.”⁷

Not all assessments have been so benevolent. The corrosive effect that such subjective ‘spirituality’ has been seen to have on institutional religion has been sometimes attributed to James himself. In a recent interview, the Anglican priest, journalist and philosopher, Giles Fraser, was asked this question: “What do you think of those people who say they don’t prescribe to any specific organized religion, but prefer to call themselves spiritual?” Let me quote Fraser’s reply:

That’s bollocks! Spirituality is religion that’s been mugged by capitalism; which is to say that it sort of just reduces everything to choice. ‘Spirituality’ just takes the patina of religion: you know, saying, ‘I like to burn a few joss-sticks’ or ‘I like crosses, they look very nice and alternative’ or ‘I want to live in a church that’s made to look like my comfortable flat.’

Fraser continues:

No, I loathe spirituality, and in fact, historically there never was such a thing. Spirituality is a very twentieth-century phenomenon. ... I think part of it, historically, comes from William James’ 1905 book *Varieties of Religious Experience*. I think it is one of the most dangerous books ever. I hate it because it invented something called ‘religion’. I would say 1905 is when religion was invented. And from this spirituality arose as the aesthetics of religion.⁸

Usually, I agree with just about most of what my colleague and friend

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) p. 3

⁷ Clifford Geertz, “The Pinch of Destiny, Religion as Experience, Meaning, Identity, Power” in *Available Light, Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 168

⁸ eds. Mick Gordon and Chris Wilkinson, *Conversations on Religion* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008) pp. 24 - 25

Giles Fraser says and writes, but in this case I think he's wrong, (and he knows I think he's wrong). My own opinion is that *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a brilliant book, and might well be the book I would choose to take to a desert island. But more importantly, I want to consider the fact that Fraser may be right about the early twentieth century as the starting date for "something called 'religion'" out of which spirituality arose, but wrong about laying the blame at William James' door (if any blame is to be laid, for this might not in the end turn out to be as negative as Fraser suggests). So let's begin with James and then work outwards.

II. Features of William James' analysis

In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James began from the premise that human beings (or many of them) have a religious propensity. The work is, after all, subtitled "A Study in Human Nature". Human beings therefore have this leaning towards religion within their nature. This religious propensity is, for James, personal, and it is "the primordial thing" where the relation between the divine and the human "goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker." The human capacity to apprehend the divine is therefore fundamental. It consists of experiences like this: "As I was speaking, the whole system rose up before me like a vague destiny looming from the Abyss. I never before so clearly felt the Spirit of God in me and around me." And this: "I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the infinite, and there was the rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer." Such personal and individual religious experiences were, for James, "more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism". They were about the apprehension of God rather than clear knowledge.⁹

For James, this original experience would always be secondary to institutional religion, while at the same time necessarily being the foundation of it: "Churches, when once established, live at second-hand

⁹ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature* [1902] (London: Longmans. Green and Co, 1952) pp. 31, 30, 65, 66, 31

upon tradition; but the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case; - so personal religious should still seem to be the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete."¹⁰

It is the individual (or individualistic) element of James's definition of religion that offends or troubles people. What about authority? What about corporate worship? What about orthodoxy? The sacraments? What about social responsibility? Social justice? All of these seem, at first glance, to be jettisoned by James's analysis. In fact, James' belief that the 'original moment' of the Divine presence rather than institutional religion was the 'real thing' was not particularly original within his intellectual context and time. The German historian and theologian, Adolf Harnack, had argued that the New Testament world of early Christianity witnessed this move from 'charisma' to the institutionalization of the churches as they developed; Max Weber developed the notion that religious groups necessarily move from (charismatic) sects to (institutional and respectable) churches. And if we place what James was talking about – personal religion – in the broader sweep of western history, we can see that the Protestant Reformation had emphasised the personal nature of an individual's relationship with God and the authority of that relationship over and above the magisterial authority of Rome. In the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, in Europe Schleiermacher and the Romantics, and in America thinkers like Emerson, had emphasised the importance of *feeling* in the apprehension of God. James was decidedly Protestant and Emersonian in his analysis. Scepticism about institutional religion and a particular interest in 'feeling' and personal religion were not James' invention. So what was distinctive about James' analysis? I will point to three features:

(1) *James' emphasis was on the 'bizarre' or odd or marginal.*

William James was particularly known for his ironic and ambivalent

¹⁰ James, *Varieties* p. 31

attitude to the ‘establishment’ – of which, as a Harvard professor, living amongst the Boston Brahmins, he was a member, but an uncomfortable member. His Pragmatist philosophy was always urging a turn from the settled to the unsettled, from doctrinaire philosophy to ‘the shocks of the ordinary’.¹¹ On top of that, he took the side of the excluded, made a plea for the significance of ‘alien lives’, and as a Harvard professor encouraged African-American scholars such as W. E. B. du Bois to study social problems. We should not be surprised, then, that he championed the personal religious experiences of ordinary people, even if the experiences seem, to some of us at least, ‘bizarre’; indeed, he anticipated criticism of this, making a formidable case in his opening lecture for using the ‘bizarre’ or the ‘marginal’ as a particularly clear lens onto the mainstream. In this sense his analysis was implicitly influenced by anthropology, in which from the story of a small tribe or group, a greater understanding of the wider culture or other cultures is gained; it was also an early precursor of late twentieth-century cultural history, in which the marginal has been taken as a key to understanding the mainstream.

(2) *James put experience before doctrine or belief.*

James maintained that “our impulsive belief is here always what sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalised philosophy is but its showy translation into formulas.”¹² This is surprising, shocking, to us even today. While James took on the individualistic aspect of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, in making this move he ignores another of its key features – namely, that it was a confessional movement in which right *belief* was primary; you confess what you believe as a mark of belonging. We who are Protestants have all been shaped by this, just as we have been influenced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a movement that introduced the scientific method into examining religious belief: could one logically believe x or y or not? Right *belief* was therefore important, and gained priority over

¹¹ Ross Posnock, “The Influence of William James on American Culture” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James* ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 324

¹² James, *Varieties* p. 73

religious practice.

James knew he was doing something radical in prioritizing ‘lived religion’ over right belief; he wrote to Frances Morse (a long time friend of his sister Alice, who was active in social work in Boston) on 12 April 1900, as he was developing the theme for his Gifford Lectures: “The problem I have set myself is a hard one: ... to defend (against all the prejudices of my ‘class’) ‘experience’ against ‘philosophy’ as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life.”¹³ This raises some serious questions. Is it ‘right belief’ or religious experience that comes first? Does religious practice – prayer in particular – shape theology, or vice versa? We shall return to these.

(3) *James insists on the sheer variety of religious experiences.*

While many critics of the work have honed in on his emphasis on *experience* and its individualistic connotations, I suspect there may be an un-named unease with the notion of *variety*. For what is radical – and new – about James’ work is his illustration of this sheer variety through hundreds of stories: first hand accounts of religious experience – taken from the history of Christianity and from contemporaries – and the method by which he interleaves those accounts with his psychological and philosophical analysis of their significance. For first and foremost, this book is a descriptive survey of human religious propensities. Therein lies its significance. James was naming things as they were at the turn of the century. This was not a prescriptive text; but rather a descriptive and interpretative one. This is one reason why I disagree with Giles Fraser’s account of the impact of William James’ work. Fraser says that he believes James’ book to be “one of the most dangerous books ever. I hate it because it invented something called ‘religion.’” Fraser makes the mistake of assuming that James created the very phenomenon that he was describing. Of course, to some extent,

¹³ Quoted in Richard R. Niebuhr, “William James on Religious Experience” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James* p. 215. Frances Rollins Morse (1850-1928) was the daughter of Samuel Tapley and Harriet Jackson (Lee) Morse. She helped establish Associated Charities of Boston and was associated with the School of Social Work at Simmons College.

every historian, every anthropologist, every sociologist, shapes the phenomena they set out to document – but they are, in the end, documenting lives and experiences that exist. This is what James was doing. In order, then, to see what it was that James was documenting we need to work outwards from James’ analysis, looking at his context.

III. The ‘Heterodox’ Context of James’ Analysis

James was documenting individual cases from a religious landscape in which experience was increasingly prioritised over doctrine; in which the mainline churches had been found desperately wanting. Throughout the nineteenth century, new religious sects, groups and churches had popped up and grown with surprising speed: Mormonism, Christian Science, Theosophy, Spiritualism, Higher Thought, Transcendentalism, and ethical societies. There were new movements that emphasised nature or metaphysics or millennialism, or turned East to Buddhism or Hinduism for inspiration.¹⁴ Many of these groups were eclectic, combining ideas and practices from a wide range of traditions. Many of them were especially attractive to women because, in emphasising experience and spiritual gifts over authority and hierarchy, they gave women a voice and a place. One feature of American religiosity is its capacity for containing endless splinter groups and offshoot religions, giving rise to extraordinary variety and almost infinite choice. But this was not only an American phenomenon. The groups I have mentioned above were all popular to a lesser or greater extent in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and there were home grown varieties too; the considerable interest in or membership of these groups was generally a sign of dissatisfaction with the mainstream churches, and a yearning to find a home for spiritual longings or religious experiences.

I am at the moment writing the history of one such home grown variety: an early twentieth-century millenarian group in Bedford, founded in

¹⁴ See, for example, Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit. A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007)

1919, and at its height in the 1920s and 30s, called The Panacea Society. As I have read the hundreds of letters from people writing into the Society, wishing to join, I have been struck by one recurring theme: their dissatisfaction with institutional religion, but their quest for a spiritual life, even a spiritual home. Take this example, from Ethel Castle, a governess from Norfolk, who was taking the Society’s healing waters, and wrote into the Society on Good Friday 1927:

I find myself in a difficult position and should be glad of advice and help. Today is Good Friday and I have not been to church. I belong to the Church of England and have been baptised and confirmed. Since I have taken the water I find I am getting help spiritually, and it is the sort of help I don’t get by attending church. Now the question is am I right in trusting to the water only? I hope I am, as though I have to go to church as a duty – I love much of the service – I don’t get the help spiritually. The second thing is this. I have a complete horror of death and the Crucifixion – and of anything that makes me think of it. For years I was completely unable to understand the necessity of so cruel a suffering and death as that suffered by our lord – I do understand now, but still I should like not to have to think about it. Is that wrong?¹⁵

Helen Morris from Whitstable, who joined the Society in 1922, had been looking for a spiritual home for years, as a result of her religious visions. In December 1909, she had had a vision of Christ on the Cross being crucified – “huge drops of blood were dropping and splashing on to the dear body, from the crown of cruel sharp thorns upon his head and the face had a look as though it were suffering great pain. Never shall I forget the dreadful sight; it was so real, the body looked a ghastly colour.” Soon after that, she had the experience of being taken up into the heavens, and “during the upward journey I was filled with wonder”. When she finally seemed to be stopping, “up, up high in the air, the next thing remembered was entering a beautiful temple, small, very small, but the arches over the altar were inlaid with the most wonderful mosaic work – inlaid in silver, gold, pearl, turquoise & the colouring was

¹⁵ Ethel Castles’ correspondence, Panacea Society Archives, Bedford.

lovely. There were three long marble steps the whole width of the building, and on looking round expected to see someone there, but finding myself quite alone, knelt down & prayed, saying Peace, perfect peace. After which I was suddenly back in my body.” The whole experience took five to six minutes, and was timed by her husband, who testified that she was lying on her bed the whole time. In 1910, while sitting in a hotel room in Finland, she had a vision of an angel in “light so strong that it was difficult to look at long” surrounded by myriads of angels. She wrote, “The peace and joy which this vision brought to me is beyond description.”¹⁶ She sought a spiritual home, for many years reading works in Higher Thought and other American-based metaphysical religions. After joining the Panacea Society in 1922, all was not easy because her husband had by then become an enthusiastic spiritualist and tried to force her to attend séances, against her will. What the case of Helen Morris reveals is that those who had what they believed were religious experiences often did not know what to do with them or how to make sense of them.

Gertrude Hill, a vicar’s wife and founder member of the Panacea Society in 1919, wrote an eloquent defence of the unconventional spiritual quest in the Society’s magazine:

The world has many seekers and searchers after God. Most of these are looking for a comfortable and assured place in which to rest, until death sweeps them safely into some harbour, around which their imagination plays with entire satisfaction; but there are others, whose aim is to find God and his Truth at all costs, apart from personal comfort. The orthodox religious world persecutes the searchers, for it cannot understand the condition of mind which hinders others from settling down into comfortable niches that average religion provides. Nor can the orthodox mind understand the searcher’s frequent change of opinion, as he drifts (as the world calls it) from Church to Chapel, from High Church to Low Church, or vice versa, or even finds a temporary resting-place in Christian Science, New Thought, Spiritualism Theosophy, etc etc. Much less can the

orthodox mind understand that a person whose religious history is so unorthodox, is often a pioneer, whose frequent changes of religious opinion arise, not from an inconsistency of character, but from sensitiveness to Divine leading.”¹⁷

This spiritual quest cast its net wide. In the visual arts, the notion of ‘the spiritual’ as a direct interaction with God was gaining ground. The manifesto of the Russian artist, Kandinsky, on the spiritual in art, was translated into English in 1914 (as *The Art of Spiritual harmony*). Writing against both the atheists and the materialist scientists, (and out of his own Theosophist and Russian Orthodox background), Kandinsky argued for a spiritual revolution in art, in which the use of colour and form would enable the visual arts to access the inner, spiritual reality of the viewer – what Kandinsky happily called the soul. Analogies were made with music, which was beyond language, directly touching the soul. Art was the means to revealing new spiritual possibilities.

IV. The ‘Orthodox’ Context of James’ Analysis

There was another, more orthodox, aspect to all of this, with which James’ work dovetailed. There was a revival of interest in Christian mysticism on both sides of the Atlantic. Looking back onto the 1890s, from the perspective of 1913, the Christian Socialist British journalist and writers, Jackson Holbrook, identified that decade as the one in which the beginning of the revival of mysticism occurred, when people were interested in “the development of a Transcendental view of social life.”¹⁸ In 1889, W. R. Inge, then a Fellow of Hertford College, Oxford (later to be Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral) gave the Bampton Lectures in Oxford on Christian Mysticism. Inge’s Bampton heralded a revival of interest in mysticism and the broader subject of religious experience.¹⁹

¹⁷ *The Panacea* Volume 1, Number 5, p. 105.

¹⁸ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties. A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, Ltd, 1913) p. 29

¹⁹ As a reviewer put it – in the very first volume of the *Journal of Theological Studies* - “Until the other day the English reader who wished for a general account of Christian mysticism in his own language had to be content with Vaughan’s *Hours of the Mystics*’

¹⁶ Helen Morris’s correspondence, Panacea Society archives, Bedford.

There followed in quick succession several works that subsequently became ‘classic’ texts on mysticism and religious experience: James’ Gifford Lectures followed hot on the heels of Inge’s work, in 1902; the English country parson, A.R. Whateley, published *The Inner Light* in 1908; the aristocratic German Roman Catholic and layman living in London, Baron F. Von Hugel, produced *The Mystical Element in Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and her Friends* (1909); and the writer Evelyn Underhill wrote a book that was to become a classic: *Mysticism* (1911). On the other side of the Atlantic, Rufus Jones, an American Quaker scholar, published *Studies in Mystical Religion* in 1909, and the Methodist scholar John Wright Baukham produced *Mysticism and Modern Life* in 1915. In 1909, a decade after Inge’s Bamptons, a reviewer in the *Edinburgh Review* could say that the apprehensions that Robert Vaughan had felt, in publishing his book, *Hours with the Mystics*, several decades before, in 1856, “that English common sense would pronounce the experiences of mystics generally to be too ‘foolish’ to be worth recording” no longer needed to be felt, for “during the last ten years there has been a continuous stream of English books about mysticism ... and sympathy with this side of religion appears to grow steadily.”²⁰ Inge himself, reviewing Underhill’s book *The Mystic Way*, in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1913, wrote “To those who can observe the signs of the time and the deeper currents of contemporary thought nothing appears more significant than the rapid increase of interest in mysticism – which means the religion of direct personal experience. ... Books on mysticism are now pouring from the press, and some of them are sold by the thousand.”²¹

Why was there a revival of interest in mysticism? To what were these writers responding at the turn of the twentieth century? And what problems were they identifying that we have still not worked out? I

[Robert Alfred Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics* (London, 1856).] Review by P. Mordaunt Barnard, *JTS*, 1 (1899) p. 461

²⁰ Review Article, “The Mystical Element in Religion” in *Edinburgh Review* (July 1909) p. 34

²¹ W R Inge, “The Mystical Revival” in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 March 1913, p. 117.

want to discuss two here.

(1) Mysticism as a response to modernity

Writers in the early twentieth century were obsessed with ‘the modern situation’ and with themselves as ‘modern’. And modernity was regarded as a challenge to faith, for good or ill. In the liberal Anglican volume, *Foundations*, published in 1912, Neville Talbot (fellow and chaplain at Balliol College, Oxford) described his generation as follows:

This generation in Great Britain is modern in the sense that it is not Victorian. Its members were born whilst Queen Victoria was still alive, but they never knew – they were not themselves moulded by – the times before the ‘sixties’. They were not born, as their parents were, into the atmosphere of pre-‘critical’ and pre-Darwinian religion. Their education did not begin with the statement ‘Creation of the world, 4004,’ nor are their minds governed by the assumptions it implies.

In fact, the change from genuinely Victorian times to to-day is a change from the reliance upon, to the criticism of assumptions.²²

The American Quaker scholar, Rufus Jones, in an article of 1915 attributed the revival of interest in mysticism to “the present-day collapse of the tradition elements in religion” which “has had by far the greatest influence in shifting to *the inner way* the direction of man’s quest for God” (my italics). This meant: (1) “Science has sternly shaken men awake from their childish dreams of a God above the sky or back of special creations”; (2) “exact historical methods have shattered the old conceptions of ... divine interference” in the course of history and (3) “have robbed us of our easy faith in infallible sources of knowledge about God and the world and the life hereafter”; and (4) “by an irresistible maturing of mind the world has outgrown the theory of the church which made it an infallible guarantor of truth concerning eternal

²² N. S. Talbot, “The Modern Situation” in B. H. Streeter et al, *Foundations. A Statement of Christian Belief in Modern Thought: by Seven Oxford Men* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1912) p.4.

realities and the dread issues of life to come.”²³

By the turn of the century, the prevalence of Darwinism and rise of positivist science was prompting intellectuals of all sorts to seek another way. As David Hollinger has demonstrated, in his earlier work (such as *The Will to Believe*) William James had sought to separate religion from science, and adjudicate its claims differently. In *Varieties*, even though he writes primarily of privately-experienced religion, he wishes to take it out of the private sphere, and hold it up to public scrutiny; to allow it to hold its own against the science of the day (and much of his first lecture is dedicated to explaining why religious experience cannot be dismissed by medical science as mere pathology or mental illness).²⁴ It is no surprise that William James was a founder member of the American Society for Psychical Research in 1885 (three years after the British Society was founded), dedicated to investigating remarkable and as yet unexplained phenomena, that might be psychic or paranormal, on purely scientific grounds, and using only trained investigators.²⁵

But scientifically evaluating the apparently irrational was not the only means by which intellectuals were arriving at an interest in mysticism. Some (including those who might consider themselves atheists) were finding it to be the most eloquent outcome of their explorations in maths or philosophy – not least the Idealists. Mystery, rather than materialism, appeared to be the ultimate solution to many besetting intellectual problems, and philosophers and scientists alike began to argue that science could prove that the universe was not material, over and against a view of science that had prevailed up to end of nineteenth century, that had made life seem purely mechanical and deterministic.²⁶

²³ Rufus Jones, “Mysticism in Present-Day Religion”, *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume VIII, Number 2, April 1915 p. 156

²⁴ David Hollinger, “‘Damned for God’s Glory’: William James and the Scientific Vindication of Protestant Culture” in *William James and a Science of Religions* ed. Wayne Proudfoot ((NY: Columbia University Press, 2004) pp. 9 – 30.

²⁵ Deborah Blum, *Ghost Hunters. The Victorians and the Hunt for Proof of Life after Death* (London: Arrow Books, 2007).

²⁶ See the forthcoming work of Tamson Pietsch on this point.

Ralph Inge approached the intellectual problem of modernism within the Church from the mystic angle. He wished to carve out – mediate, if you like – a path between the hardening lines of fundamentalism and the more sceptical end of modernism. He remained interested and invested in modernist developments: he was for many years Chair of the Modern Churchmen’s Union, the flagship Anglican society for modernist theology. He saw in mysticism an intellectual solution to the intellectual movements that were challenging traditional beliefs, as he stated in the Preface to his *Bampton*. Inge’s intellectual and spiritual concerns were tightly bound together. As the faith of his youth was intellectually unpicked, he came to perceive that union with God in prayer – “an attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal”²⁷ as he put it in his *Bampton* – was the path forward. His starting point was the third-century philosopher Plotinus in particular, and the neo-Platonists generally;²⁸ this enabled him to hold a belief in absolute reality in the face of the intellectual challenge to belief in any ultimate truth. The ‘intelligible world’ (the sphere of mind) was the real world, spiritual reality the true sphere, the spiritual ‘journey’ which enabled the enlightenment of the soul and ultimately the triumph of reason. This meant that there was no conflict between mysticism and reason.

Although Inge largely disagreed with William James’ work, especially its psychological component and James’ emphasis on the unusual, what they shared was the sense that the raw material of religion was the spiritual or mystical impulse: that human beings had a propensity for religion, and they apprehended it in the mystery of God. As Inge put it, “Mysticism has its origins in that which is the raw material of all religion ... namely, that dim consciousness of the *beyond*, which is part of our nature as human beings.” He defined mysticism as “the attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal.” Mysticism’s function, for Inge, was “a revival of spirituality in the midst of formalism or

²⁷ W. R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* p. 3 (London, 1899)

²⁸ in whom there was a revival of interest, as illustrated by the work of Edward Caird

unbelief,” an “active principle, the spirit of reformations and revivals.”²⁹ This is not so very far from James’ analysis.

Clearly the split between fundamentalists and – for want of a better term – ‘modernists’ still remains, and many would say that this split, as represented in how we read scripture, is at the heart of the controversies that dog the Anglican Communion at present. An attractive way through this is to say that God is, ultimately, mystery. The revival of interest in our own day of ‘negative theology’ – that the way to speak of God is to speak in a contingent fashion, of what God is not because we cannot know what God is – is perhaps a symptom of this. Thus mysticism becomes a basis for unity. Inge maintained that “the spirit of Mysticism ... aims at realising unity and solidarity everywhere.”³⁰

But Inge – the Establishment man who nevertheless had an ambivalent attitude to institutional religion – understood that his solution raised other problems; and he departed from William James here. The question was (and remains): what and whose mysticism was authoritative? As the authority of scripture and the church were questioned, so (personal) experience began to carry greater weight, but how far can the ‘inner light’ supersede those external authorities which had for so long sustained religious belief? Inge’s turn to mysticism was a response to the problems thrown up by modernism precisely because it bypassed church politics and intellectual debates. It could therefore be perceived as outside institutional religion – but, as Inge knew, that cut both ways.

(2) *The Quest for Authenticity*

Charles Taylor has written of the quest for authenticity in our own era, and a group of mainly Oxford-based historians writing about religion in

²⁹ Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 1899) p. 5

³⁰ Inge, *Christian Mysticism* p. 11. Others were making the same argument that mysticism was the basis of unity. Another Oxford scholar, Charles Bigg, made the same argument: in 1899, he preached five Lent addresses in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford – published as *Unity in Diversity* – in which he attempted to use the concept of a ‘mystic spirit’ as a unifying notion in the face of the fragmentations caused by ‘the crisis in the Church,’ as the newspapers of the time put it.

post-1945 Britain have found this to be a useful way of talking about the apparent split between DIY spirituality and traditional religion.³¹

Others have borrowed the term, most recently the Roman Catholic abbot, Christopher Jamison, in an article in *The Tablet*, who says: “Nowadays a religion is not judged authentic by theologians and high priests assessing if it is historically genuine; it is judged authentic by ordinary people’s sense of its innate credibility”.³² My argument here is that the quest for authenticity has older roots, and we have seen it already in the examples of Ethel Castle, Helen Morris and Gertrude Hill, the members of the Panacea Society whose religious experiences I related.

Evelyn Underhill provides another way into this question. Looking back to the first half of the twentieth century, we regard Underhill as a well-established and influential Anglican laywoman. But she was for many years just the kind of case study that William James would have found attractive: someone who has a raw interest in religion, someone who has religious experiences and yet searches for the context in which to express them and make sense of them, and for many years goes without an institutional home for their religious propensities.

Evelyn Underhill therefore provides us with a way into the broader culture to which the revival of interest in mysticism spoke. Underhill’s most famous and influential book was her 1911 volume, *Mysticism*, reprinted in numerous editions. Underhill took mysticism out of the realm of the purely intellectual (which is where Inge had largely kept it): “in mysticism that love of truth which we saw as the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere, and takes on the assured aspect of a personal passion.” For Underhill, influenced by so many of the medieval mystics, the mystic follows a path to “conscious union with a living Absolute”. Mysticism was practical; it was a spiritual *activity*; and it was about Love – love of the Absolute. The mystic way enabled the human soul to enter consciously into the

³¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Garnett et al, *Redefining Christian Britain*, passim

³² Christopher Jamison, “Food for the Soul”, *The Tablet* 26 April 2008, p. 15

presence of God. In the second half of the volume, Underhill mapped out this mystic way, with example after example of past mystics, defining it as an awakening of consciousness: “the ever-changing, ever-growing human spirit emerging from the cave of illusion, [and] enter into consciousness of the transcendental world.”³³

The mystic way is largely an *individual* endeavour, as Underhill presents it in her early work: the emphasis was on prayer, meditation and personal asceticism. And this should not surprise us for she was not a member of any church at the time she wrote *Mysticism* or its shorter successors, *The Mystic Way* (1913) and *Practical Mysticism* (1914). She had planned on joining the Roman Catholic Church, but she waited a year before being received, and during that time the Modernist storm broke in the Roman Catholic church: a group of priests, including George Tyrell in England, were excommunicated by the Pope for their critical biblical and theological scholarship. As she wrote to a friend in 1911, the year when *Mysticism* was published, “being myself ‘Modernist’ on many points, I can’t quite get in without suppressions and evasions to which I can’t quite bring myself. But I can’t accept Anglicanism instead: it seems an integrally different thing. So here I am, going to Mass and so on of course, but entirely deprived of sacraments.”³⁴ Ten years later, she finally became an Anglican, and ultimately a very influential laywoman, the person most responsible for the twentieth-century boom in taking retreats, and she acted as spiritual director to many. Indeed, the trajectory of Underhill’s own spiritual life is that she gradually became more and more committed to a corporate spirituality, and the last big book she wrote was *Worship*, published in 1936. Here the transformative power of the sacraments – and ritual and ceremonial generally – in spiritual development is emphasised. She also became keenly aware – not least under the spiritual direction of Baron

³³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* [1911] (London: Methuen and Co., 1919) [8th edition] pp. 28, 86, 531.

³⁴ Letter to Mrs Meyrick Heath, 14 May, 1911, in *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* ed. Charles Williams (London: Longmans, Greene and Co, [1943], 5th edition December 1945) p. 126

Von Hugel – that worship was not enough, and working with the poor became a vital part of her own spiritual life, recommended in turn to her spiritual directees. And in the 1930s, she was keenly pacifistic.

But if we go back to the first decade of the twentieth century, and the awakening of Underhill’s own religious consciousness, we see she was, in her thirties and early forties, a seeker. Her spiritual awakening occurred when she was 30 in 1904-5, and yet she did not formally join any church for another seventeen years – and during that period, she wrote several successful books, the readers of which wrote to her for spiritual direction. Underhill’s first ‘spiritual’ allegiance, after that awakening, was made to the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, an occult society to which the poet W. B. Yeats belonged, and a product of the mid nineteenth-century interest in alchemy and magic amongst the educated. Members studied astrology, alchemy, divination, the Kabbala and Tarot, and participated in rituals and ceremonial according to their different grade in the Order. She came to know about the Order through two friends, the writers Arthur Machen and Arthur Waite, editor of the *Horlick’s Magazine* in which Underhill published some short stories, and her novels and poetry from these years were on the themes of beauty and magic. The boundaries between hermeticism – the goal of which is “to contemplate and experience the underlying laws or essence of the universe in order to bring a spiritually reintegrating and regenerating power to the human soul” or “spiritual refinement and transformation of the soul in its ascent to God” – and Christian mysticism were regarded by many as fluid, and Underhill, Machen and Waite all became increasingly interested in the latter. Indeed, Waite has been described by one of his biographers as “a non-denominational mystic, seeking to propagate what he termed the ‘secret tradition’ – a knowledge, preserved down the ages, of the way by which man can be spiritually regenerated and attain divine Union, or ‘realization in God.’”³⁵ Underhill left the Order of the Golden Dawn and came to

³⁵ R. A. Gilbert, ‘Waite, Arthur Edward (1857–1942)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53860>] For details of this period in Underhill’s life, see Michael Stoeber, “Evelyn Underhill on

explore her desire for holiness and union with the divine solely through a Christian perspective. (Not surprisingly, perhaps, she wrote a chapter on mysticism and magic in *Mysticism*, sorting out the boundaries between the two for herself and others.)

As Underhill came to be clearly Christian in her mysticism, and yet still did not belong to a church, she wrote a book for seekers like herself – whom, we have seen, were a feature of the times – in 1914: *Practical Mysticism*. Written on the cusp of World War I, when there was still a sense that a new age was dawning for religion, the book was directed towards the ordinary person, and attempted to show them that mysticism was not an esoteric pastime for the few but within the grasp of all. “It is to a practical mysticism that the practical man is here invited: to a training of his latent faculties, a bracing and brightening of his languid consciousness, an emancipation from the fetters of appearance, a turning of his attention to new levels of the world.” How would this happen? – “through an educative process; a drill.” If he could learn how to practise the law or be good at business, so he could learn the mystic way. Nevertheless, she wrote, “This new undertaking will involve the development and training of a layer of your consciousness which has lain fallow in the past; the acquirement of a method you have never used before. ... The education of the mystical self lies in self-simplification.” There were five stages to this educative process. The first two were:

1. Recollection (finding the inner stillness in which the essential self exists).
2. Purifying of the senses. Being awake to the glory of creation.

These would lead to an encounter with Reality at three levels:

3. With the natural world.
4. With the eternal world (the natural world is not ultimate but is

Magic, Sacrament, and Spiritual Transformation”, *Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, Volume 13, November 2003. On Underhill’s spiritual development, see Nadia Delictata, “Evelyn Underhill’s Quest for the Holy: A Lifetime Journey of Personal Transformation”, *Anglican Theological Review* (Volume 44, number 4) pp. 519 – 536. On the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, including Underhill’s involvement in it, see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment. British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), especially pp. 47 – 49.

formed by something other to itself).

5. With what the religious mystic God or the philosopher calls the Absolute, and at this stage the ‘drill’ ceases and all one can do is surrender, give up control, let go to be transformed by this encounter.

Looking back we can see that Underhill’s perspective is bound by her class – she talks of her reader’s usual “treasures” being the Stock Exchange, the House of Commons, the salon, the drawing rooms of Mayfair, or the reviews that “really count”³⁶ – and by her own lack of attachment to a worshipping community at the time. Nowhere in the book does she mention churchgoing. The emphasis is on an individual’s cultivation of the holy life as a private enterprise. Nevertheless, she perceived a need and addressed it.

She later regarded the book as “incomplete” because of its inattention to churchgoing, and to a student who wrote to her admiring the book in 1923, after she had joined the Church of England, she wrote that “a moderate, regular sharing, in the degree suited to each, in institutional practice will always in the end enrich, calm, de-individualize our inner life.”³⁷ To another of her correspondents she wrote that she was “apt to be disagreeable on the Church question. I stood out against it myself for so long and have been so thoroughly convinced of my own error that I do not want other people to waste time in the same way ... I do not mean that perpetual churchgoing and sermons are necessary, but some participation in the common religious life and sacramental practice.”³⁸ Despite this, she did not – and nor do I think we can - regard her seventeen years of writing and the spiritual direction of others, before she joined a church herself, to be wasted ones. The books from these years were deeply influential; the letters to her many correspondents full

³⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism. A Little Book for Normal People* (London: J M Dent & Sons Lrd, 1914) pp. 11, 28, 43

³⁷ Underhill, *Letters* p. 152

³⁸ Quoted in Margaret Cropper, *The Life of Evelyn Underhill* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003) p. 70

of spiritual and emotional insight. They were formed outside any institutional religion, though increasingly with recourse to Christianity's rich resources. So what the example of Underhill underlines is that we cannot make too sharp a division between 'orthodox' and 'heterodox', 'inside' and 'outside'. Our earlier example of Gertrude Hill made a similar point: she was a vicar's wife who performed all the duties required of her in an early twentieth-century parish, but she found her spiritual nourishment in a deeply heterodox millenarian society. Ethel Castle went to church every Sunday but thought the crucifixion of Jesus grotesque, and likewise found spiritual authenticity in the Panacea Society. While Underhill in her 30s and 40s (before joining the Church of England) may epitomise believing without belonging, Hill and Castle illustrate the reverse: 'belonging without believing', a trend that continues but is largely unnoticed today – precisely because those people are often in church – but one which we need to take seriously.

V. Concluding Remarks

The turn of the twentieth century was accompanied by a 'mystical turn' that raised a question we have still not resolved: what about the direct insistence of the divine voice which happily bypasses institutional religion? What of the religious experiences (or claims to them) that people have outside religion, or at least unshaped by the 'reasonable' mainstream of institutional religion? Let me make some concluding remarks.

In largely ignoring people's religious experiences – their propensity for the spiritual, often experienced in an individualist way – the churches have missed the boat. Is mysticism, or religious experience more generally, something that can happen quite outside of a disciplined prayer practice (the mystic way) or institutional affiliation? What is the place of visions, and dreams – the pyrotechnics of 'spirituality' rather than the drudge of churchiness? Is there a distinction to be made between 'sporadic' and 'methodical' mysticism? I am inspired by James' categories here, to make sense of religious experiences inside and outside the framework of institutional religion. Undoubtedly there

are other reasons for the rift between 'the spiritual' and 'the churches' but the churches' own blind spot about this is a factor.

What Underhill's case raises for our own day is how we teach a new generation the *practice* of Christianity. How do we enable people to make sense of the raw material of religion of which Inge spoke, to shape *within* our inherited religious tradition – which tells the story of the human drama of creation and redemption – their individual religious experiences? How can they 'plug in' to that great congo chain of disciples that has gone before us and will go ahead of us, to use David Stancliffe's expression?³⁹ I am struck by the fact that there are lots of Christian courses – most famously Alpha – teaching people what to *believe*, but far fewer teaching them what to *do*. You can find it in Buddhism – you can go to any Buddhist centre and learn how to sit (how to meditate) – but it's not so easy to find in the Churches. How do we pray? How do we teach that to others? How do the churches enable people to take the glimpses of the divine that they have in the course of their ordinary daily life and shape it into discipleship?

What I am really asking here is: How do the churches start *where people are*? As my friend and Oxford colleague Vincent Strudwick says, it's no good taking people from where they aren't to where they don't want to be. If the church is not feeding people spiritually, but people are having what they believe to be religious experiences – in James' and Inge's and Underhill's day, and in our own day – then how do we get the two to match up? My own view is that the churches should not so much 'rail' against 'spirituality' as harness it. One of the reasons that cathedrals and choral foundations are so successful these days is because they do precisely this. We have come a long way from the moribund state of the cathedrals, when Inge read a book in his stall at St Paul's, when he was Dean, because he found the liturgy so boring. Indeed, Eric Abbott was largely responsible for making Westminster Abbey an open and vibrant place in the mid-century: his "vision of the abbey was of a

³⁹ David Stancliffe, *God's Pattern. Shaping our Worship, Ministry, Life* (London: SPCK, 2003)

great church in which all questioning men and women, irrespective of faith and race, would ‘see Jesus’”.⁴⁰ Cathedrals and similar foundations give people the opportunity to experience the divine in this ‘ineffable’ or ‘mystical’ sense, essentially through aesthetics – through music, through liturgy – but also by being a space in which people can be anonymous and can explore their religious impulses and longings privately for as long as they need to do so. The trick is to be there for those people when they want to take the next step of becoming a disciple, of belonging to the body. And the reverse side of the coin is that there are many people in our midst who don’t believe what they “ought” to believe, but need and want to be there for a whole host of reasons, not least a desire for connectedness with other human beings. They ‘belong without believing’ and they are significant parts of our worshipping communities. For James, the experience comes before the belief; the experience is the raw material of our engagement with the divine. By prioritising religious practice and experience over right belief, it is possible for people to feel invited in who might otherwise feel alienated.

But let’s look, too, at the more dangerous side of religious experience. In assuming the insignificance or impossibility of religious experience, society as well as the churches, synagogues, mosques and temples, ignored the possibility of appeals to direct contact with the divine as justification for much more sinister events. This has now caught up with us. The “because God told me so” argument has been used by a wide range of people to explain their actions, in ways that have taken society by surprise in the last few years, from the Christian George W. Bush justifying war in Iraq to Islamic suicide bombers around the world. William James wrote of mystical experiences, that we can take people’s claims seriously but it does not mean we have to believe they are true or right. We may acknowledge that they are real to the person who believes they have experienced them, and in doing so, we recognise the serious consequences and results that such claims can have, for good and ill.

Those who have identified this ‘return to religion’ (or the fact that religion never went away) most compellingly and most fiercely are the writers known as the “new Atheists”, Richard Dawkins et al, who have used these sorts of extreme examples – especially religiously motivated suicide bombers – to damn all religion. Once again, the churches have been found on the back foot, reacting to critique rather than leading the debate. The mystical turn of the early twentieth century was in part a reaction against a rather sterile version of the Darwinian view of the world. Remarkably, a hundred years later, those of us who are religious find ourselves reacting once again to the new Darwinians. This leads superficially (and in the new atheists’ terms) to a split between belief and unbelief, religion and atheism. It should not. It should not separate the religious from all atheists or agnostics or those who believe and practise ‘religion’ unconventionally – yes, those whom we might call ‘spiritual’. Indeed, if the mystical turn of a hundred years ago has anything to teach us it is that the universe is ultimately unknowable in purely cognitive terms, and that should draw us closer together.

⁴⁰ Sydney Evans, ‘Abbott, Eric Symes (1906–1983)’, rev., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30741>]