



“The Heart’s Antique Urge to Believe without Belonging.”

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Sixties pick-and-mix personal spirituality has its roots in the revival of mysticism at the start of the 20th century. It is now a commonplace that people are into spirituality but not institutional religion; that they believe but do not belong. People often have a range of religious beliefs, they may even engage in spiritual practices, but they do not necessarily belong to a worshipping community. Institutional religion is regarded with suspicion; it is seen as less authentic than personal experience or a general sense of the transcendent. This shift towards a more personal religious sensibility is usually identified as a postwar or even post- 1960s phenomenon, but we can date it much earlier. At the beginning of the 20th century there was a turn towards the mystical, heralding a new interest in personal religious experience.

It was W. R. Inge who gave the initial push to a revival of interest in mysticism in his Bampton Lectures, delivered at Oxford in 1899 and published as *Christian Mysticism*. Inge was then an obscure Oxford don, but he would later become a famous Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral and a frequent commentator on religious and ethical issues.

Inge wrote that: ‘Mysticism has its origin in that which is the raw material of all religion, and perhaps all of philosophy and art as well, namely, that dim consciousness of the beyond, which is part of our nature as human beings’.

While attempts to introduce mystical theology into the Church of England earlier in the 19th century had fallen flat, the intellectual and religious debates of Inge’s day created a more welcoming environment. As the authority of Scripture was questioned, and a reactionary biblical fundamentalism emerged, many people began to look for a middle way and a foundation for their faith. Inge’s answer was mysticism. He saw in mysticism the possibility of unity across differences, and the capacity to bypass the inflammatory opposition between liberalism and fundamentalism.

The idea caught on. The Austrian Roman Catholic layman Baron von Hugel, who was living in London, published *The Mystical Element of Religion* in 1909, and in that same year, the American Quaker Rufus Jones wrote *Studies in Mystical Religion*. By 1913, a decade and a half after his own influential book had come out, Inge was writing in *The Times Literary Supplement*: ‘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 Ñ which means the religion of direct experience.’ He went on: ‘Books on mysticism are now pouring from the press, and some of them are sold by the thousand.’

The most famous of all these books, which certainly sold by the thousand, was Evelyn Underhill’s

Mysticism, published in 1911, never out of print and celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. What made Underhill's book so popular was her capacity to show that mysticism was about the heart as much as the head. For Underhill, influenced by so many of the medieval mystics, the mystic follows a path to 'conscious union with a living Absolute'. Drawing on past writers on prayer and spirituality, Underhill mapped out the mystic way for the ordinary reader. For Underhill, mysticism was practical, a spiritual activity.

For Underhill at this stage in her life, when she still did not belong to any church, the mystic way was still largely an individual endeavour. Her emphasis was on private prayer, meditation, personal asceticism and good works. Later, Underhill became a prominent Anglican, and one of the great retreat leaders of her day. She came to see that she had neglected corporate worship and her last big book, *Worship*, summed up her views on this. But she always retained an ear and empathy for those who felt they had no spiritual home.

The Harvard psychologist William James also emphasised the individual nature of religion in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902 and based on his Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh. The book has been criticised for its turn towards an individualistic spirituality. But James was simply documenting what he observed. He regarded a propensity towards religion to be a fundamental part of human nature; the capacity to apprehend the divine central to our experience as human beings. He catalogued case after case, both contemporary and historical, suggesting that this original religious impulse was always the foundation of institutional religion while, ironically, necessarily being secondary to it.

Mysticism did not simply give a boost to the Christian Churches. It also fused with many other movements of the day: vegetarianism, a new interest in Buddhism, meditation, Modernist art and a desire for communal life. The Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky wrote a manifesto on the spiritual in art. The tortured writer Katherine Mansfield found her 'salvation' in George Gurdjieff's unusual community in France, which was based on music, dance and the 'development of consciousness'. Adela Curtis, influenced by meditation practices as well as the revival in mysticism, set up not one but two religious communities in which the women made their own robes, grew their own food, meditated seven times a day and pioneered compost heaps.

Whether in promoting self-sufficiency, tapping into a spiritual longing that had no home, or seeking a middle way between scepticism and fundamentalism, the revival of mysticism in the early 20th century was an entirely modern phenomenon that prefigured so many of the trends of our own day.