

# MYSTICS IN ACTION

## *Twelve Saints for Today*

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Heavenly Minded and Earthly Good: The Mystic as Activist*

When I was a child, some of the saints of our Bible-believing church were described by the expression “they’re so heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good.” These faithful souls were so wrapped up in their piety that they were unable to perform the ordinary tasks of life. Heaven was their destination, and they had little interest in the realities of domestic life and civic responsibility. They saw this-worldly responsibilities as of little importance compared to the promises of eternal life. These neighborhood saints were so heavenly minded they had difficulty balancing a checkbook, getting to work on time, or pumping gas! Civic responsibility was shunned as irrelevant. After all, they believed, if you have enough faith, Jesus will take care of everything!

This same stereotypical description is also invoked to describe mystics. Mysticism is perceived to be in opposition to concern for social justice and civic involvement. Mystics are believed to be persons whose encounters with God lead them away from everyday life, rendering them virtually useless to neighbors in need. According to many observers, things of the earth are of little consequence as these spiritual pilgrims immerse themselves in monastic solitude and introspection, constantly checking the temperature of their inner lives and giving little thought to the winds of change gusting around them. Given this perception, some congregations

struggle to find their focus: Should they be prayerful and contemplative or activist and political?

This perceived dualism of contemplation and activism does not apply to the mystics described in this text. These heavenly minded seekers were also activists whose feet were firmly planted on the ground in their concern for justice, equality, and care for the earth. Their quest for God inspired solidarity with those who suffer injustice and exclusion. These mystics, such as Thomas Merton, who spent much of his adult life in the solitude and silence of a Trappist monastery, realized that despite their apparent distance from the halls of power, they—along with the rest of us—are guilty bystanders who have a responsibility to promote the well-being of the institutions and communities that shape the lives of our human and nonhuman companions. Even in solitude, we cannot escape the deafening realities of war, racial injustice, sexual discrimination, refugees and immigration, and planetary destruction. Doing nothing and turning away from the world makes us complicit in the evils we abhor. Others, such as Mother Teresa, see God's presence in all persons and then plunge into the world of the suffering, providing comfort and dignity to outcasts dying on the street, and simply seeking to do something beautiful for God in every encounter. They recognize that God hears the cries of the poor. Our care for the least of these is our gift to God. Still others, such as Albert Schweitzer, leave the ivory tower and concert hall, motivated by the quest to pursue the dream of Shalom, thus embodying in service to the vulnerable the ministry of Jesus. For these mystical spirits, the God found in silence and solitude is equally present in crusading for workers' rights, comforting the dying, marching for civil rights, and picketing for peace.

To these heavenly minded souls, spiritual transformation emerges from hours spent in prayer and meditation. These often-solitary practices are intended to expand, rather than diminish, our sensitivity to the suffering around us, much of which is caused by institutional decision making and societal values. In the spirit

of Jesus's own spiritual sensitivities, growing in wisdom and stature awakens us to the cries of the poor and the voices of the voiceless. Time in meditation is an inspiration to see traces of God in all things and a catalyst to become God's companions in healing the world.

Mysticism expands our scope of concern. Activist mystics seek to be both heavenly minded and earthly good. They cannot turn away from the world's suffering but must provide a healing balm to ease the pain and prevent future agony. They see their vocation as tearing down the walls that prevent people from experiencing the fullness of divine blessing, transforming both souls and social structures.

While there is no uniformity in mystical experience or spiritual practice, the mystics described in this text understood mysticism as ultimately a relational, loving response to God, whose love for them and the world inspires them to claim their vocation of being God's companions in healing the earth. God's love for us encourages us to become channels of love to the world. These mystics inspire a twenty-first-century vision of spiritual transformation, this-worldly in focus and committed to experiencing God's presence in the maelstrom of political, relational, and economic conflict. This "affirmative mysticism," to coin a phrase from Rufus Jones, takes the world seriously because God takes the world seriously. The traditional doctrines of divine omnipresence and omniscience mean what they say: God is present everywhere and can be experienced in both meditation hall and picket line. They also affirm that God shows up wherever there is suffering. God is not aloof or apathetic. God experiences our world, not in an eternal, unchanging vision, but in the unfolding of history in all its ambiguity, wonder, and pain. The divine pathos, God's full-hearted experience of our lives, as described by Abraham Joshua Heschel, finds its embodiment in the streets of Calcutta, marching against racial injustice in Selma, working for peace in the United Nations, challenging the military-industrial complex at a munitions plant,

protesting for fair wages and workers' rights on a picket line, and working secretly to overthrow dictators. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts, "only a suffering God can help," and God needs our help to ease to the pain of our brothers and sisters in the human and nonhuman world.

Dorothee Soelle affirms that "We are all mystics," and I believe she is right.<sup>1</sup> Such pronouncements may seem unrealistic, given our preoccupations with the complexities of work and domestic life, the dramas of our own little worlds, and the anxiety-provoking machinations of political leaders. Yet, moving within our daily tasks and civic responsibilities, divine wisdom can be experienced, if we pause long enough to notice it.

The divine call may come as a result of preparation through spiritual practices. It may also come unexpectedly as it came to Isaiah at the Jerusalem Temple (Isa 6:1–8) or in a professional and spiritual crisis as it came to Martin Luther King Jr. in the kitchen of his home. In claiming our relationship with God as the center of our lives, new energies of self-awareness and new possibilities for social transformation emerge. We may even discover that our day-to-day callings of work, parenting, and family life, as well as our social and interpersonal involvements, can be our platform, as Mother Teresa (now Saint Teresa) of Calcutta counsels, for doing "something beautiful for God."

In describing the relationship between mysticism and social concern, African American spiritual guide Howard Thurman notes the holistic character of our encounters with God:

For our purposes, then, mysticism is defined as the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own soul. . . . Such a response is total,

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1. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 9.

effecting the inner quality of the [mystic's] life and its outward expression as its manifestation.<sup>2</sup>

Our inner life must be embodied in our interpersonal relations and political involvements. Jesus goes to the wilderness to discern his vocation, face the temptations of spiritual power, and then returns to the world as God's messenger of Shalom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's encounters with the living God in scripture and sacrament compel him to confront the diabolical machinations of his nation's leaders. Our encounters with God inspire us to personal and social transformation and sensitize us to institutionally based impediments to experiencing the Reality that has become central to our lives. As Thurman notes, the mystic commits him- or herself to "the removal of all that prevents God from coming to himself in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action."<sup>3</sup> Although the mystic may be personally oriented toward prayer and meditation, the encounter with God is a process of immersion, not escape, widening the heart to experience the suffering of persons who are poor, marginalized, ostracized, and oppressed. "Social action, therefore, is an expression of resistance against whatever tends to, or separates one from, the experience of God, who is the very ground of his being."<sup>4</sup>

We are in desperate need of mystics for our time. We need this-worldly mystics whose spiritual practices interface with the 24/7 "breaking news" cycle, the immediacy of tragedies across the globe, the bloviation of polarizing politicians, the tragedy of school shootings, the rise in hate crimes and incivility, and the reality of climate change. Mystic visions are catalysts for experiencing God in all things and then awakening all things to God's compassion-

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2. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and Social Action: Lawrence Lectures and Discussions with Dr. Howard Thurman* (London: International Association for Religious Freedom, 2014), Kindle location, 177–79.

3. *Ibid.*, Kindle location, 244–45.

4. *Ibid.*, Kindle location, 235–36.

ate and healing presence, letting their inner light become a force for social enlightenment.

There are many ways to describe the mystic's journey. In her classic on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill portrays the journey to God as a process involving awakening, purgation, illumination, the dark night, and union. Theologian and spiritual guide Matthew Fox speaks of spiritual experience in terms of the four ways of mystical adventure: the way of wonder (*via positiva*), the way of suffering and simplicity (*via negativa*), the way of creativity and agency (*via creativa*), and the way of transformation (*via transformativa*). Beginning with the original wholeness of creation and human life, Fox sees the mystic path as profoundly relational and transformational in its integration of personal growth and social responsibility. The transpersonal nature of mystical experiences finds its fulfillment in facing the challenges of daily life, political involvement, and care for the planet. While Underhill represents a more traditional description of the mystic's path, she too recognizes that mysticism is profoundly practical. Our awakening to God leads to drawing away from the temptations of the world to better experience God's light in our daily lives and then to moving through the darkness of our own lives and the world to a union with God and all things. Underhill recognizes that love is at the heart of mysticism, and that our love of God must be joined with our love for the world. Heaven is our destination, but the pathway to heaven is found right here on earth in seeing Christ in yourself and in all others.

My own approach to mysticism affirms the wisdom of both Underhill and Fox. I believe everyday people can have mystical experiences and discern God at the center of their lives and that mystics can be both heavenly minded and earthly good. Mystics can be contemplatives, living lives of prayer and meditation, whose spiritual practices and encounters with God inspire them to become agents of social transformation. Their experiences of divine intimacy enable them to see signs of God's presence everywhere, even in the most unexpected places. Wherever God is hid-

den, God needs to be unearthed and this often means tearing down the walls of injustice to let God's light shine through.

The mystic in each one of us is unique, just as our personal experiences, vocations, and social location are unique. As I ponder earth-affirming mysticism for our time, I see the mystic adventure as involving the interplay of awakening, affirming, simplifying, expanding, and transforming.

- *Awakening.* Earth-loving mystics awaken to God's grandeur, illuminating all creation. They discover that God's light enlightens every person. All things reveal the presence of God. To expand on Jacob's dream at Beth-el, the house of God, "God was in this place and now I know it." This place is not only where I am, but also in places of sorrow and pain, where God's beloved children are forgotten, marginalized, mistreated, and abused, often by those in power.
- *Affirming.* This world in all its tragic beauty matters. God loves the world and following God involves world-affirmation. God loves our cells as well as our souls. God nurtures our spiritual hungers and also wants us to feed the physically hungry. While heaven is our destination, the pathway to heaven begins here in the complexities of politics and personal life. Christ is incarnate right where we are, in the pain of Roman occupation of Bethlehem felt by Jesus's parents and in the hopelessness of ghetto streets and Appalachian hollows felt by parents today. Divine omnipresence challenges us to pay attention and listen to the joys and sorrows of the world as an inspiration to release the holiness imprisoned and disguised by unjust social structures.
- *Simplifying.* Traditionally identified with the path of purification, simplicity of life prunes away all the clutter that stands between us and God. According to Jesus, God is the vine, and we are the branches. God trims all the dead branches so that God's spiritual energy will flow in and through us to the world. Mystics live simply so that God and not things becomes the source of



their joy and fulfillment. Simplicity of life joins us with those who lack life's basics, and by our simplicity we become good stewards of our economies and ecologies.

- *Expanding.* Luke 2:52 describes Jesus as "increasing in wisdom and stature, and in divine and human favor." Spiritual growth involves expanding our hearts so that our well-being and the well-being of others become joined. Loving our neighbor as ourselves, we see our neighbor's joy as contributing to our own fulfillment. Spiritual stature involves jettisoning the prison of rugged individualism to embrace world loyalty. In the body of Christ, our joys and sorrows are one. We cannot experience the bliss of God's presence while others experience the misery of poverty and oppression.
- *Transforming.* God calls us to become new creations, not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). God calls us beyond unjust social structures to imagine a world in which all persons have the opportunity for abundant life. Mystics see each moment as a healing moment, in their recognition that although the world is healed one person at a time, we must also shape our society so that our institutions promote wholeness and spiritual growth. While mystics often experience personal equanimity amid the storms of life, they also feel a divine restlessness, grounded in their experience of God's aim at Shalom. Head, heart, and hands are joined in the soup kitchen, hospice, polling place, and picket line.

Mystics never stand still, because God never stands still. God moves providentially and provocatively through history, overturning, with Jesus, the tables of injustice and luring us toward God's peaceable realm. The beyond we seek is within this very moment in all its complexity and conflict. God is in this place, and heaven is where we are, waiting for us to open the door of paradise so that all creation may enjoy the bounty of God. There is a mystic

in you that urges you to bring the transcendence of heaven to the complexity and conflict of this good earth.

In the chapters ahead, I invite you to integrate contemplation and action as you read stories of mysticism in action, explore the theological and spiritual foundations of world-affirming mysticism, and discover spiritual practices to awaken your own sense of God's presence in your personal, social, and political involvement. My goal is to invite you on a journey of contemplative activism, grounded in the experiences of twelve mystics, each with their own story, told from the perspective of and for the benefit of twenty-first-century persons. I invite you to allow each mystic to speak personally to you as I share in my interpretation of these mystics—what they mean to me, how I understand them as a twenty-first-century North American, and how they inspire my own spiritual practices. It is my prayer that they will awaken the mystic and social activist in you so that in your time and place you will do something beautiful for God and our world.