

**Towards an Evangelical Mysticism: A Critical Investigation into the Missional Potential of  
an Evangelical Mystical Spirituality.**

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## Abstract

The western church is experiencing a transition towards post-Christendom, requiring established and emerging models of church to engage in missiological, ecclesial and theological reflection regarding their presence, form, and witness in a changing culture. Rather than developing new strategies and techniques, what is needed is a missional spirituality to enliven current practices and inform new ones. Mysticism offers such a spirituality, one which is expressed through transcendent, personal, and dynamic aspects of life, and is both profoundly contemplative *and* actively engaged in mission and service. However, some within the Evangelical church regard mysticism with suspicion and uncertainty regarding its evangelically theological fidelity. This paper seeks to show the compatibility of mysticism with evangelical theology, regarding mystic spirituality as a necessary and beneficial dimension of evangelical faith and practice. If practiced within the bounds of evangelical theology, mysticism fosters a with-God life, a surrendered spirituality, ecclesial unity, and maintains Jesus at the centre of Christian life, faith, and witness. These components are crucial for effective mission in the post-Christendom western context, and as such, an evangelical mysticism fosters a spirituality necessary for sustaining and informing mission. Furthermore, an evangelical mysticism clarifies ecclesial identity and ontology, enhancing the unity of all expressions of Church and prioritising faithfulness to Jesus over quantifiable missional success. If the shift to post-Christendom and the apparent signs of decline in the Church could be seen through a mystic lens as a collective dark night, there may be gifts and opportunities for this season of mission, but an evangelical mysticism is necessary to discover and engage with them.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this is my original work unless referenced clearly to the contrary. No portion of the work referred to in the dissertation has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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## Introduction

Rahner said that ‘the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all;’<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Underhill similarly has proposed mystics as the pioneers of spirituality.<sup>2</sup> Mysticism, far from being introspective, points to the importance of the interactive experience with God as a means of personal transformation, social action, and vitality to sustain and inform mission. Roxburgh suggests that ‘we cannot ask the questions of what God is up to in our neighbourhood and communities when we think we already know,’<sup>3</sup> implying that effective pioneering mission must be willing to abandon prior conceptions of what might be effective and learn to linger in the unknown in the pursuit of the knowledge of God and his kingdom. As such, mysticism demands a proactive relating to God, a surrendered spirituality, and a relinquishment of control and power for the sake of being empowered and filled by God. This dissertation seeks to show that a mystic spirituality, practised within the bounds of orthodox evangelical theology, will contribute towards revitalising the Church for devotion, transformation, and mission.

The western church is transitioning into post-Christendom, adopting a marginal position, and engaging a changing context requiring missiological reflection. The inherited, established model and recent, emerging models, must be critically examined for their evangelical fidelity alongside their missional effectiveness. Until recently, many churches have relied on methodological, systematic approaches to mission but in recent years there have been explorations into new ways. Yet these shifts and pioneering ventures have often come at the expense of a congruent understanding of ecclesial identity and unity. Pioneering models have provided bold, creative approaches, yet have at times struggled to retain their evangelical roots and are in danger of becoming syncretistic, generating suspicion from the wider body. Furthermore, these new models can fall into similar technique-driven ways of functioning (albeit often more consumer-friendly), but without the evangelical content that the established church retains, producing creative and engaging, but often theologically thin, models of church and mission. The new models have

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<sup>1</sup> Rahner, K. *Concern for the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 149

<sup>2</sup> Underhill, E. *Mysticism: A study in the nature and development of man’s spiritual consciousness* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 4-5

<sup>3</sup> Roxburgh, A. *Missional* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 127

not evidenced reliable missional success, and the inherited, methodological approach is no longer appropriate for the post-Christendom context. As such, a new approach is necessary for mission in the years to come.

The decline of church-going in the post-Christendom west has been met with alarm by many Christians; however, it is in this marginal place, and through a time of change and metaphorical darkness, that new opportunities to mature spiritually and witness effectively may emerge. But an adequate spirituality to inform such a movement is necessary, and mysticism has much to offer here. However, mysticism is hard to define, broad in scope and in danger of incorporating beliefs and approaches to spirituality that stray from evangelical theology. What is necessary, then, is to construct an evangelical mystical spirituality that embraces the contributions of mysticism within the rigorous framework of orthodox evangelical theology, contributing towards an experiential approach to the God and faith that such doctrines uphold.

This dissertation proposes an evangelical mysticism as a necessary and beneficial spirituality to inform ecclesiology and missiology in this changing context. Three writers who have explored an evangelical mysticism as described above, even if not in such terms, are Dallas Willard, Henri Nouwen, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Whilst different in tradition, context, and emphasis, each seeks to express something of the centrality of the experience and responsiveness to God in the life and witness of believers. Willard, who aimed to 'make eternal living concrete,'<sup>4</sup> emphasised spiritual formation, largely through spiritual disciplines; Nouwen appealed for the contemplative life and a spirituality of surrender; and Bonhoeffer highlighted a concrete obedience based on responsiveness to a personal call, and a life lived through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Synthesising these themes, this dissertation seeks to show how an evangelical mystical spirituality can enable believers to experience a with-God life, a spirituality of surrender, ecclesial unity, and to place Jesus at the centre. Each dimension will be shown as evangelically sound, intrinsically mystical, and necessary for informing and vitalising Christian life and witness, fuelling mission in a western post-Christendom context, and enabling the Church to live more faithfully to Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Willard, D. Available at: <https://dwillard.org/> (accessed 2 July 2021)

The contribution of this work lies in the proposition that mysticism is a spirituality that is available to all Christian believers, and rather than weakening their theological certainty, seeks to endorse it, enabling a more comprehensive, experiential approach to faith. Furthermore, the implications of mystical spirituality underline the necessity of ecclesial unity, modelling a liminal posture which embraces both the established and pioneering forms of church and mission, offering a spirituality that upholds ecclesial unity alongside missional effectiveness, a necessary corrective in missional endeavours in the post-Christendom west today.

## Approaches to Mission

### The Established Church

Despite denominational differences in referring to the institutional, or established church, there are some commonalities which demarcate a typical approach to mission. The established church retains much of its Christendom heritage and effects and can be understood in relation to its 'buildings, programming, creeds, rituals, denominational templates and formulas, symbols, clergy and religious professionals.'<sup>5</sup> As such, the emphasis lies on the formal structures and traditions, continuing to express methods and mindsets that were formed in Christendom.

The established church has incorporated mission into its programmes but often the concern is maintenance over mission and, where mission happens, it is often through 'top-down methods,'<sup>6</sup> relying on 'come' rather than 'go' initiatives.<sup>7</sup> The Church Growth Movement (CGM) and the Alpha course are two such examples of such missional approaches. Murray states that 'the Christendom mindset is the "default" position,'<sup>8</sup> which must be challenged as the Church engages with a post-Christendom world and embraces a marginal posture. Relinquishing the vestiges of power and control that enabled the cultural imposition of the Christendom church on the culture will allow the Church today to witness more effectively.

#### i. Strengths

Moynagh suggests that evangelicals adopted a modern approach to mission which 'de-emphasised ecclesiology and championed church multiplication as an expression of evangelism.'<sup>9</sup> Change was planned, leadership sought stability and procedures aimed at achieving goals in a predictable and familiar context. Course-based evangelism flourished with the likes of the Alpha course, which imparts a 'Christian identity' through its standardised propagation of Christian beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Mission techniques such as Alpha

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<sup>5</sup> Ferguson, D and Hirsch, A. *On the Verge* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 32

<sup>6</sup> Murray, S. *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 86

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-3

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 204

<sup>9</sup> Moynagh, M. *Church in life: innovation, mission and ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2017)

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<sup>10</sup> Hunt, S. *The Alpha Enterprise: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 2019), 251

incorporated the wisdom of the social sciences and developments in technology, engaging with modernity and demonstrating an adaptability and a willingness to rethink engagement with the culture. As such, the established church showed an openness towards adapting to cultural preferences to enhance the appeal of their evangelistic endeavours.

Emphasising effective evangelism and the importance of the Great Commission, the CGM responded to the reduced priority of evangelism and ineffectiveness of mission societies in the late twentieth century. Hong cites its contributions as being ‘the increased concern for evangelism, passion for the growth of the Church, practical development of mission strategies, and the popular dissemination of the concept of church growth.’<sup>11</sup> The movement helpfully relocated the responsibility for mission ‘from the “mission field” to the local church’<sup>12</sup> and regarded numerical growth as a primary concern to counteract the waning of evangelism.

## ii. Weaknesses

However, Guinness suggests that the success of the CGM was short lived, and unsustainable in subsequent generations.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on successful methodology created ‘a religion that has no need for God,’<sup>14</sup> producing ‘organizational growth without spiritual reality’<sup>15</sup> and removed personal responsibility for believers to engage missionally apart from the programmes imbibed by the Church. Furthermore, programmes such as Alpha answer their own questions rather than those of the seeker. Such a uniform approach is ignorant of the lack of Christian cultural memory for non-believers in post-Christendom, making the presupposed questions assumptive and not necessarily accurate. Whilst many participants testify to experiencing conversion through the course, evidence suggests that ‘Alpha appeals mostly to those already within the Church,’<sup>16</sup> implying greater success with the de-

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<sup>11</sup> Hong, Young-Gi. ‘Models of the Church Growth Movement.’ *Transformation* 21, no. 2 (April 2004): 101–13, [106]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/026537880402100204>, (accessed 2 April 2021), 103

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>13</sup> Guinness, O. ‘Church Growth – Weaknesses to Watch,’ available at: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/church-growthweaknesses-to-watch/>, (accessed 9 April 2021)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Guinness, O. ‘Church Growth – First Things First,’ available at: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/church-growthfirst-things-first/>, (accessed 9 April 2021)

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, *Alpha Enterprise*, 251

churched or fringe believers than with the un-churched. Furthermore, Alpha was mainly effective within middle-class, educated groups,<sup>17</sup> but much less so amongst minority groups, the less educated, and younger generations with little Christian cultural memory. Relying heavily on course-based approaches that suited the middle class effectively disabled the Church from developing missional strategies that suitably engaged other demographics.

### **iii. Is this still an appropriate form of mission?**

Whilst the CGM and course-based evangelism refocused the Church on mission, and made evangelism a higher priority, the unstable future for the established church makes these missional strategies increasingly inappropriate. Younger generations, the unchurched and the de-churched are often suspicious of authority, organised religion, and uniform approaches. Whilst many recognise the need for change in the institutional dimension of evangelicalism, there are other 'counter-trends' such as the growth in cathedral congregations.<sup>18</sup> But in general, the Church must offer more interpersonal, culturally sensitive modes of engagement, renouncing remaining cultural impositions from Christendom, and learning how to introduce faith into a culture unfamiliar with Christian language and worldview. Whilst the heritage and tradition of the established church is to be valued, its missional approaches are largely inappropriate in the post-Christendom western context.

## **The Emerging Church**

The Emerging Church movement (ECM) began as a response to the arrival of post-Christendom and the decline in church growth, but also as an attempt to challenge the theology and praxis inherited from the established and CGM churches.<sup>19</sup> Whilst the initial focus was on exploring different styles of being church, the implications of postmodern philosophy soon led to the exploration of values and practices that moved theologically away from orthodox evangelicalism due to an apparent welcome of liberalism and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 171

<sup>18</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 255

<sup>19</sup> For a helpful overview see Black, G. *The Theology of Dallas Willard* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 42-56

syncretism to postmodern ideology.<sup>20</sup> However, as Black notes, there has been a separation between the terms 'emergent' and 'emerging' whereby 'emergent' churches are those who question 'key aspects of modern theology and epistemology' and 'emerging' churches are those questioning praxis.<sup>21</sup>

Some authors, such as Driscoll, have distinguished within the ECM the categories *relevants*, *revisionists*, and *reconstructionists*.<sup>22</sup> *Relevants* remain firmly grounded in evangelical theology, yet share the seeker-sensitive, consumer-driven values of the established church. *Revisionists* critique the institution but risk assimilating with postmodern cultural values, generating mistrust from the established church and within the ECM itself. *Reconstructionists* tend to remain theologically evangelical and are critical of former church models, seeking to engage with the culture but not to assimilate, and leaning towards monastic, informal models of church. This essay focusses on the *Reconstructionist* approach in the 'emerging' church movement, referring herein to this category simply as emerging church.

Emerging church tends to include 'a minimalist and decentralized organizational structure, a willingness to experiment, and a tendency to prefer networks over traditional hierarchies and relationships over programs.'<sup>23</sup> Yet this definition notes primarily the features of its emergence rather than a clarification of the ontology of Church, the lack of which is problematic for the emerging missional expressions due to its vague and subjective handling. It is exactly here that an evangelical mystic spirituality can contribute to building a robust ecclesiology, remaining faithful to inherited tradition and pioneering ventures simultaneously, and encouraging a unitive posture towards the Church.

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<sup>20</sup> Black, *Theology*, 47

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

<sup>22</sup> Driscoll, Mark. 'A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church.' *Criswell Theological Review*, 3/2 (Spring 2006), 87-93, [89-90].

<sup>23</sup> Prebble, Edward. "Missional Church: More a Theological (Re)Discovery, Less a Strategy for Parish Development." *Colloquium* 46, no. 2 (November 2014): 224-41, [234]. Available: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLAn3807804&site=ehost-live>, (accessed 9 June 2021)

## **i. Strengths**

Emerging churches have criticised the institution for its sheer size, suggesting this is ineffective in generating personal relationships and discipleship.<sup>24</sup> Murray states that emerging churches ‘embody the diversity, flexibility and cultural sensitivity post-Christendom churches need,’<sup>25</sup> adapting and contextualising for the sake of mission. These pioneering models have empowered all believers in mission and have engaged with issues such as equality, social justice, and environmentalism,<sup>26</sup> alongside verbal evangelism. Thus, emerging churches have broadened the scope of ‘what is functionally meant by church,’<sup>27</sup> and what is meant by evangelism, critiquing the individualisation and consumerism of previous evangelistic strategies. However, it can be questioned whether postmodern values have infiltrated this recontextualization to a degree whereby evangelical fidelity is compromised.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the desire for authenticity is problematic in its implication of a ‘less authentic’ model found in the established church. It would be more helpful to seek a *faithful* recontextualization, which mystic spirituality is able to facilitate and encourage.

Furthermore, the emerging church moves against the ‘insider/outsider’ culture<sup>29</sup> emphasising the experience of belonging and welcoming those whom the established church may find harder to reach. However, this approach can appear to socialise people into the Church rather than evangelise them into the kingdom. Clarity is needed regarding what seekers are being encouraged to believe and to what they are belonging, requiring a more robust ecclesiology and theology to substantiate their missiology.

## **ii. Weaknesses**

Emerging churches have been accused of syncretism in ‘adapting the Church to such a degree that it is diminished in the process.’<sup>30</sup> McKnight says that ‘the emergent

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<sup>24</sup> Black, *Theology*, 39

<sup>25</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 256

<sup>26</sup> Black, *Theology*, 53-4

<sup>27</sup> Roxburgh, *Missional*, 151

<sup>28</sup> Williams, D. *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), 213-4

<sup>29</sup> Black, *Theology*, 39

<sup>30</sup> Davison, A and Milbank, A. *For the Parish* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 84

conversation is being challenged by traditional Christian groups to articulate its theology,<sup>31</sup> to avoid the dilution of evangelical commitment and to alleviate the mistrust of the established church. Challenging individualistic approaches, Davison and Milbank suggest that for the Church to be 'salvation-shaped' it must accept that salvation is 'church-shaped',<sup>32</sup> but it is what constitutes 'church-shaped' that the emerging church is grappling with. In this process, Murray says that without critical thinking regarding the use of 'liturgical resources, forms of spirituality and approaches to mission,'<sup>33</sup> Christendom influences are continued unknowingly, inhibiting sensitive and effective mission. What is needed to avoid a theologically unfaithful, syncretistic, and evangelistically weak expression of Church is not another programme or initiative, but a theologically rooted pioneering spirituality – one which generates risk-taking pioneering whilst remaining anchored to Christian evangelical faith.

Whilst emerging churches have embraced risk-taking, Murray says that 'few are radical enough in their engagement with culture or ecclesiological creativity.'<sup>34</sup> However, where revisionists have engaged in riskier theological thinking, there have been movements away from core evangelical convictions, adopting pluralist approaches to faith that reflect the culture.<sup>35</sup> This questions the feasibility of ecclesiological creativity without a clear evangelically theological framework, which the emerging church has yet to provide. Emerging churches struggle to depart from the forms of institutionalism and the trappings of Christendom without embracing, as Belcher says, 'postmodernism's "constructivist" epistemology.'<sup>36</sup> A thorough understanding of how to retain evangelical fidelity and how to engage missionally must be woven together with a pioneering spirituality that inhabits such a liminal space.

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<sup>31</sup> Lawton, K. 'Scot McKnight Extended Interview'. *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, (8 July 2005), available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2005/07/08/july-8-2005-scot-mcknight-extended-interview/11762/>, (accessed 16 April 2021)

<sup>32</sup> Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, 49

<sup>33</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 209-10

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 280-281

<sup>35</sup> Black, *Theology*, 47

<sup>36</sup> Belcher, J. *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Illinois: IVP Books, 2009), 82-3

### iii. Is this still an appropriate form of mission?

There is ambiguity over whether emerging churches are missionally effective. Research into Fresh Expressions of Church (fxCs), for example, suggests that over half of fxCs plateau within a few years, fluctuate, or subsequently shrink.<sup>37</sup> Missional communities have found it difficult to multiply themselves,<sup>38</sup> and McKnight questions whether emerging churches are genuinely evangelistic or rather a place of 'disaffected evangelicals getting together to be disaffected.'<sup>39</sup> In desiring to be relevant and engaging, there has been little simultaneous theological anchoring. Interestingly, over three quarters of the fxCs remain within the parish that started them and as such 'are an extension of its mission and life, not a radical departure from it.'<sup>40</sup> Furthermore even for those who have distanced geographically and functionally from the established church, Christendom thinking persists unwittingly amongst pioneers.<sup>41</sup> Thus unsurprisingly, many missionaries are unable to creatively pioneer forms of church which substantially differ from their predecessors.

Finally, emerging churches lack effective methods of discipleship due to their emphasis on being intentionally unstructured, and Breen forecasts their failure for this reason.<sup>42</sup> Community and mission must reflect a spirituality of the *essentia Dei*,<sup>43</sup> a with-God life, to draw down the elements of community and mission in the life of faith. Thus, emerging churches are still appropriate as a form of pioneering and exploration but require a robust spirituality and ecclesiology to sustain and mature their growth.

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<sup>37</sup> Lings, G. 'Encountering the Day of Small Things,' (Sheffield: Church Army, 2017), available at: <https://churcharmy.org/our-work/research/publications/>, (accessed 23 April 2021), 8

<sup>38</sup> Moritz, L. "The Nature and Effectiveness of Missional Communities in the Pacific Northwest," (2016). Available at: <https://thedtl.on.worldcat.org/v2/oclc/966292325>, (accessed 16 April 2021), 141-2

<sup>39</sup> Lawton, Scot McKnight, ' <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2005/07/08/july-8-2005-scot-mcknight-extended-interview/11762/>

<sup>40</sup> Lings, 'Encountering,' 9

<sup>41</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 200

<sup>42</sup> Breen, M. 'Why The Missional Movement Will Fail,' available at: <https://www.vergenetwork.org/2011/09/14/mike-breen-why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/>, (accessed 23 April 2021)

<sup>43</sup> Black, *Theology*, 87

**‘A system of what cannot be systematised.’<sup>44</sup>**

Rahner implies that in terms of theology, ecclesiology, and missiology, what requires systemisation cannot be systematised. How then does mission retain faithfulness to evangelical theology *and* the ability to pioneer in effective ways in a post-Christendom context? The pioneering of the emerging church has made promising starts, but those in the institution tend to view anything without a clear plan for discipleship as unsustainable. Despite both approaches holding to evangelical theology, the variants in emphasis have produced wildly different results, creating a confusing and divisive environment for pioneers to work in. Belcher cites Greer’s suggestion of a system that ‘divides the essentials of orthodoxy from the particularities of differing traditions within the boundaries of orthodoxy.’<sup>45</sup> This dissertation suggests that an evangelical mysticism facilitates such a movement away from unwanted tradition within the boundaries of orthodoxy, providing a missionally effective system of that which cannot be systematised by way of faithful discipleship and union with God for the sake of the world.

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<sup>44</sup> Rahner, cited in Noia, J, ‘Karl Rahner,’ in Ford (ed). *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 132

<sup>45</sup> Belcher, *Deep Church*, 60

## **An overview of Mysticism and its compatibility with Evangelical Theology.**

Egan describes mystics as ‘pioneers of a transformed and fully authentic humanity,’<sup>46</sup> and Hugel agrees that ‘the mystical element of religion is necessary for the Christian religion to remain truly Christian.’<sup>47</sup> Mysticism draws the believer into union with God as a lived reality which embraces mystery and leads to transformation, concretely expressed through loving action in the world. However, the term ‘mysticism’ within evangelical circles can generate suspicion and avoidance amongst many devout Christians. In part, this is due to the emphasis on knowledge and rationality in modern evangelical theology. Also, the popularity of eastern mysticism and New Age religions, whose mysticism embraces pantheism and monism, contributes to the legitimate fear of syncretism and the infiltration of heretical beliefs and practices. This chapter seeks to show how mysticism is compatible with and complementary to orthodox evangelical theology.

Corduan states that ‘The significance of mysticism’s ontology lies in its commitment to something absolute,’<sup>48</sup> and whilst there are claims for shared experiences with an ‘absolute’ across all forms of mysticism, this work is only interested in specifically Christian mysticism, and the definition is narrowed within the confines of Christian evangelical theology. Christian mystical experience is a response to transcendent revelation through the mediation of Jesus and can be interpreted in accordance with its congruency with orthodox Christian theology.

Underhill denotes three dimensions to ‘the full character of spiritual life’<sup>49</sup> as 1. transcendent, 2. personal, and 3. dynamic, all of which must be present for complete spiritual ‘perfection.’<sup>50</sup> This chapter will use these three dimensions to provide a helpful framework for exploring and analysing key themes of Christian mysticism across the three main dimensions of life - relating to God, ourselves, and to others. Furthermore, this framework seeks to amend imbalances attributed to mysticism as being overly transcendent or disconnected from action. As such, mysticism will be discussed regarding its compatibility

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<sup>46</sup> Egan, H. *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), xii

<sup>47</sup> Hugel, cited in Heath, E. *The Mystic Way of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 5

<sup>48</sup> Corduan, W. *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1991), 26

<sup>49</sup> Underhill, E. *Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-Day* (London: Methuen, 1923), 13

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

with evangelical theology, showing the necessity of an evangelical mystic spirituality in church life and mission, especially in the post-Christendom context.

## 1. Transcendent

An evangelical mystic approach to spirituality is profoundly transcendent, emphasising mystery, an experiential approach to God and the posture of surrender.

### a) *The necessity of mystery in spirituality*

McColman says that mysticism ‘represents an element of Christianity that transcends human logic or reason,’<sup>51</sup> allowing us a greater experience of God. Davison and Milbank further suggest a need for more apophaticism in Christian thought,<sup>52</sup> asserting that ‘we *can* speak truly of God...but that we cannot *comprehend* him with our speech nor enclose him with our minds.’<sup>53</sup> This approach does not disregard the value of theological certainty, but welcomes a ‘mythos’<sup>54</sup> which broadens religious knowledge, providing a means of making faith believable, as opposed to the fundamentalist denial of all mystery which Davison and Milbank see as the alienating product of an intellectualist approach to religion.<sup>55</sup> However, Christian mysticism does not prize mystery for its own sake, emphasising Christ as the mystery revealed (for example, Colossians 1:26), as opposed to the pagan concept of mystery perpetuated. Rather than denying the necessity of theological certainty, mysticism demands that religion be a ‘practical discipline,’<sup>56</sup> recognising the limitations in our capacity to know God, and welcoming the ‘abiding and eternal incomprehensibility of God’<sup>57</sup> into the Christian experience.

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<sup>51</sup> McColman, C. *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2010), 8

<sup>52</sup> Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, 24

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. An alternative option is the doctrine of analogy (Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, 26)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>57</sup> Craigo-Snell, S. *Silence, Love & Death: Saying Yes to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2008), 204

Much missiological thinking has addressed ecclesiological reconfiguration and cultural analysis; mysticism demands a vitality of faith as the start point. Mysticism positions pioneers to welcome the unknown and wait there for an experience of God, sustaining the creativity and tenacity involved in exploring unknown forms of mission – a vital need in the ‘reimagining’ of mission and church in post-Christendom. McColman suggests that mystics commonly express their faith in liminal spaces, ‘usually between the established church and the society in which it is embedded,’<sup>58</sup> insisting on both the preservation and the renewal of the tradition, enabling themselves to benefit from the wealth of the established church, and discover new ways of discipleship and mission. McColman notes that this posture tends not to cultivate individualistic attitudes to Christianity, but rather one of respect towards the wisdom of the Church,<sup>59</sup> a much-needed relational amendment between pioneers and the established models. As such, embracing mystery may enliven the spiritual practices of the institution and inform the pioneering of the emerging church.

*b) An experiential knowledge of God*

There are legitimate concerns regarding the misguided ‘contemporary quest for “transcendence without dogma,”’ and an ‘unchurched mysticism.’<sup>60</sup> Owen cautions that mystical prayer can lose its ‘orientation to the centrality of Christ’s mediation between us and the Father,’<sup>61</sup> and as such become a psychological experience rather than an encounter with God. Yungen further argues that practical mystics ‘do not have to proselytize people to a dogma, only a practice,’<sup>62</sup> implying that mystic spirituality ‘transcends context.’<sup>63</sup> But as Corduan points out, no mystical experience takes place outside of its particular context.<sup>64</sup> As such, Christian mysticism can remain theologically faithful when mystical experience is subject to scriptural and ecclesial authority. Of greatest importance here is the mediating role of Jesus in the life of believers and their experience of God. Recognisably many

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<sup>58</sup> McColman, *Big Book*, 151-2

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>60</sup> Egan, *Soundings*, xviii-xix

<sup>61</sup> Owen, cited in Keller, T. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 181-2

<sup>62</sup> Yungen, R. *A Time of Departing* (Oregon: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2006), 18

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

<sup>64</sup> Corduan, *Mysticism*, 39

Christian mystics have diminished or lost sight of this foundational truth,<sup>65</sup> for example in eastern Orthodox mysticism where sin is seen as a 'deficiency that is then overcome in the process of becoming like God'<sup>66</sup> as opposed to the sinner being forgiven through Christ's redemptive work on the cross. Jesus' mediating redemptive work is the distinguishing feature of Christian mysticism and a mysticism which is not established on this foundation cannot be incorporated into Christian spirituality and practice.

However, mysticism is still often avoided by evangelicals whom Coe suggests hold a problematically 'word-centered' approach,<sup>67</sup> for fear of replacing the authority of scripture with a heightened view of experience. This is a fair concern, given the tendency of some mystics to elevate experience above Scripture, or interpret Scripture through the lens of their experience.<sup>68</sup> Corduan clarifies that the problem is not the experience, or the truth it may reveal, but whether both truth and experience are subordinate to Scripture.<sup>69</sup> If this is so, mystical experience can positively give 'subjective confirmation of biblical truth.'<sup>70</sup> As such, mysticism does not diminish the value of propositional knowledge, but challenges its emphasis, encouraging an increasingly experiential form of knowing God. Contemplation, the means of experiencing God in mystic spirituality, transforms the knowing of God from being propositional to that of acquaintance,<sup>71</sup> facilitating an encounter with God that is 'suprareasonable but not infrareasonable.'<sup>72</sup> Moving beyond purely propositional knowledge, mysticism seeks the person and presence of God himself.<sup>73</sup> As opposed to emptying the mind, reflecting a Zen approach, Christian mysticism seeks to experience God in a way that 'transcends the cognitive capacities.'<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Christian mysticism moves the seeker towards God, and is an active response to the gracious self-revelation of God, whereas Zen reflects a passive approach of emptying which echoes the quietist stream dismissed in evangelical circles when not coherently integrated in spiritual theology.<sup>75</sup> The

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<sup>65</sup> Corduan, *Mysticism*, 18

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>67</sup> Chan, S, 'Contemplative Prayer in the Evangelical and Pentecostal Traditions: A Comparative Study,' in Coe, J and Stroebel, K (eds). *Embracing Contemplation* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2019), 245

<sup>68</sup> Corduan, *Mysticism*, 111-112

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 121

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Brandt, R. 'Gospel-Centered Contemplation? A Proposal,' in Coe and Stroebel, *Embracing Contemplation*, 189

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 191

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-1

<sup>75</sup> Chan, 'Contemplative Prayer,' 244

use of silent meditation in Christian contemplation, for example, does not promote self-emptying or 'therapeutic euphoria'<sup>76</sup> but positions the believer in openness to an experience with God on God's terms.<sup>77</sup>

### c) *Surrender to God*

Knowing God through experience is the outcome of much mystic spirituality; however, Rahner suggests a paradox in that the goal of Christianity is not knowing God beyond further knowing, but rather to attain a posture of openness 'that steps beyond what the self can grasp or control.'<sup>78</sup> Brandt agrees that 'we have a deeper knowledge of God when we recognise that our capacities cannot fully know him.'<sup>79</sup> Surrender, a letting go of control, and a movement towards 'downward mobility'<sup>80</sup> reflect the mystic movement towards genuine conversion, allowing God's love to replace the need to dominate.<sup>81</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite said that attainment of a unitive experience of God comes only through the 'sincere, spontaneous, and entire surrender of yourself and all things.'<sup>82</sup> This is no passive approach, but an 'interactive'<sup>83</sup> posture, as Willard says, participating with the Holy Spirit in allowing ourselves to be filled by God. Contrasting with philosophical wisdom,<sup>84</sup> cruciform wisdom is concerned with the conformation of the person to Jesus, encouraging 'initially resistant human will to welcome God and God's sacrificial will.'<sup>85</sup> This is achieved mainly using spiritual disciplines which, rather than being a source of self-construction, enable a dependence on and conformity to the power of God. As such, being 'in Christ' involves an 'utter self-abandonment to the God revealed in Jesus Christ,'<sup>86</sup> and, for the mystic, surrender to God is the fundamental approach to transformation and sanctification.

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<sup>76</sup> Coe, J. 'The Controversy Over Contemplation and Contemplative Prayer: A Historical, Theological, and Biblical Resolution,' in Coe and Stroebel, *Embracing Contemplation*, 35

<sup>77</sup> In a similar way, Christian meditation aims to achieve a deeper knowledge of God's through Scripture (see Psalm 119:97) as opposed to alternative meditation practices which encourage the emptying of the mind.

<sup>78</sup> Craigo-Snell, *Silence*, 207

<sup>79</sup> Brandt, 'Gospel-Centered,' 192

<sup>80</sup> Nouwen, H. *The Selfless Way of Christ* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 29

<sup>81</sup> Rohr, R. *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad Pub, 2003), 63

<sup>82</sup> Cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 110

<sup>83</sup> Coe, 'Controversy,' 31

<sup>84</sup> Buschart, D and Eilers, K. *Theology as Retrieval* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 168

<sup>85</sup> Ibid

<sup>86</sup> Corduan, *Mysticism*, 129

There can be an arrogance in the individualism that rejects ecclesial authority and welcomes a 'subjective spiritualism and ahistoricism,'<sup>87</sup> weakening the identity and ecclesial ontology in much evangelical mission today. Instead, the traditions of the Church must be enabled to articulate and strengthen the life of faith with an appropriate authority, subordinate to the priority of Scripture. Scriptural authority thus brings into order the other aspects of church life, including mission, evangelism, and personal vocation, and surrender in Christian mysticism thus extends to the authority of Scripture, alongside the person of Christ. Consumer-driven and seeker-sensitive approaches in the use of business-type models for growth have relegated the fundamental call of faithfulness as secondary, diluting evangelical theology.<sup>88</sup> It is here that a spirituality of surrender to God might retrieve the centrality of faithfulness as the Church's mandate, whilst simultaneously correcting the drive for evangelism at the expense of church unity. Surrender enables a humility between differing factions of the Evangelical church, prioritising unity and fidelity to the gospel, whatever that means in terms of apparent missional achievement. As such, a move towards a truly catholic<sup>89</sup> understanding of the Church is necessary to guard against individualism and heresy, and mysticism's movement away from ego-driven living will contribute to this end.

Such surrender enables a 'deep solidarity'<sup>90</sup> with the powerless in society, departing from the Christendom assumptions of retaining cultural privilege. Such surrender does not produce sterility or guarantee productivity, but instead cultivates a 'fecundity,'<sup>91</sup> a life of fruitfulness whereby the outcomes are not in our control. This chimes with the need in post-Christendom to relinquish the delusion that the Church can control the outcomes of mission,<sup>92</sup> fostering spiritual fecundity that is inherently active and engaged in faithful living, whilst trusting outcomes and productivity to God.

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<sup>87</sup> Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 202

<sup>88</sup> Black, *Theology*, 35-36

<sup>89</sup> Heretofore, 'catholic church' denotes the ecumenical church body, as opposed to the Roman Catholic church.

<sup>90</sup> Nouwen, H. *In the Name of Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1989), 22

<sup>91</sup> Nouwen, H. *Lifesigns* (New York: Doubleday and Co, Inc, 1966), 57

<sup>92</sup> See Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 242

## 2. Personal

Whilst an evangelical mysticism embraces transcendence, it also insists on an intrinsically personal approach to spirituality.

### a) *Union with God*

McColman says that 'mysticism is the art of union with God...the experiential core of spirituality,'<sup>93</sup> as opposed to the derivations from spirituality which constitute much organised religion. Union with God means participating 'here and now in that real and eternal life'<sup>94</sup> and the Christian mystic seeks, not an 'experience of ultimacy,'<sup>95</sup> but an experience of God. The danger of pantheism alienates some Christians from this notion of union with God, and legitimately so, given its implication in some Christian mystic writings and its centrality in eastern mysticism. Furthermore, the danger of panentheism is also of note. Merton, for example, suggests that 'separate identities disappear in the All Who is God,'<sup>96</sup> a reflection of the Platonist notion of the soul becoming divinised in union with God<sup>97</sup> which the Patristic Fathers rejected. Whilst God sustains all things, he is not the substance of all things,<sup>98</sup> and Christian mysticism retains the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, whereby the ontological difference between the soul and God provides the 'dominant theological corrective to Origenic spirituality.'<sup>99</sup> Thus union with God welcomes the mystic into deeper intimacy with God without in any way *becoming* God. This also negates the idea of a Christ-consciousness where all have divinity, which would make Christ's atoning sacrifice and the need of salvation through grace alone, meaningless. Egan asserts that the union Jesus spoke of was in terms of "'abiding" ... not in the language of fusing with or dissolving in God.'<sup>100</sup> Mystics have claimed a 'fusion of the Beloved and the lover,'<sup>101</sup> which maintains the problem for evangelical theology, but Pauline language is clarifying in

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<sup>93</sup> McColman, *Big Book*, 26

<sup>94</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 534

<sup>95</sup> Louth, A. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 190

<sup>96</sup> Merton, cited in Yungen, *Departing*, 89

<sup>97</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 192

<sup>98</sup> Yungen, *Departing*, 30

<sup>99</sup> Coe, 'Controversy,' 27

<sup>100</sup> Egan, *Soundings*, 6

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, xx

referring to the notion of 'Christ in me' and 'I in Christ,'<sup>102</sup> pointing to an intimate union with God through Christ. The evangelical distinction to make here is that Paul is a 'reactive mystic,'<sup>103</sup> whose union is a response to God's initiative and prevenient grace, as opposed to being the result of purgative works or an achievement of human power. Might it be possible to retain ontological difference whilst accepting that the experience of contemplation produces something of oneness?

One way of making sense of the mystics' experience of union despite ontological difference is through the neurotheological idea of a 'soteriology of attachment,'<sup>104</sup> promoted by Willard and developed by Wilder. Wilder suggests that a mutual-mind state, a verifiable experience between human brains, can be extended to the relationship with God. Thinking *with* God rather than just about him, produces an attachment to God that is profoundly transformative,<sup>105</sup> verified and interpreted by concurrently thinking *about* God to clarify and discern how God is allowing himself to be experienced. In a mutual mind state, 'we cannot consciously be sure which are our thoughts and feelings and which come from the beloved other.'<sup>106</sup> Both participants retain their distinct identity, but the experience of loving attachment to God and thinking *with* God may produce the experience of union that the mystics often attest to. Wilder upholds the importance of thinking about God as a start point for attachment to God but insists that Christian life is expressed and grows through loving attachment to God.<sup>107</sup> Such a suggestion maintains ontological clarity and theological orthodoxy, whilst making sense of the mystical experience of union, moving towards a Christianity that is more 'relational in orientation.'<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, this emphasis on attachment is compatible with a theology of divine attachment, acknowledging God's self-revelation to us on our level whilst maintaining a transcendent otherness, rather than our manipulating of God into our sphere and sharing an equality of role in the encounter. Union

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<sup>102</sup> Corduan, *Mysticism*, 127

<sup>103</sup> Deissmann, cited in Corduan, *Mysticism*, 127

<sup>104</sup> Wilder, J, and Willard, D. *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church That Transforms* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2020), 68

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49

<sup>108</sup> Coe, 'Controversy,' 34-35

with God thus enables evangelical beliefs to be habitually experienced, producing deep spiritual transformation through the presence of attachment love with God.

*b) Personal transformation*

This notion of union, or a 'with-God life',<sup>109</sup> leads to profound character change. An attachment to God through contemplative practices enables believers to live and think *with* God, developing Christ-like character to the degree of spontaneous love for enemies,<sup>110</sup> which is a profoundly missional posture for an increasingly marginalised Church. Rather than disciplines being a methodology for self-improvement, they position the soul to surrender to God's power, 'allowing oneself to be influenced by the Holy Spirit',<sup>111</sup> and receptively participate in transformative work. While transformation can be demarcated in stages of progression, Nouwen cautions against this in a society which is achievement-driven.<sup>112</sup> Instead, movement towards holiness and love through participation with the Holy Spirit, enabled by spiritual disciplines, is a more helpful approach.

Whilst much transformation focuses on the will (which has limited power and is slow to be transformed<sup>113</sup>), mysticism suggests that transformation is consequential of the believer forming a loving attachment, or union, with God. Scripture never portrays mystical experience as the goal of Christian living, despite the emphasis on a unitive experience in the writings of many Christian mystics and, as Egan notes, 'love – not mysticism – is the essence of Christian perfection.'<sup>114</sup> Heath agrees saying, 'the greatest "proof" of mysticism is its fruit: love of God *and neighbour*.'<sup>115</sup> As such, mysticism has apostolic purpose,<sup>116</sup> and Underhill similarly suggests that mystics illuminate paths to freedom, reality, and peace in God,<sup>117</sup> expressed in concrete, finite reality. Reflecting themes of surrender, mysticism produces a transformed life that is engaged sacrificially in the world, a 'Eucharistic life'<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Wilder, *Renovated*, 34

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>111</sup> Coe, 'Controversy,' 31

<sup>112</sup> Nouwen, H. *Reaching Out* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), xviii

<sup>113</sup> Wilder, *Renovated*, 71

<sup>114</sup> Egan, *Soundings*, xxi

<sup>115</sup> Heath, *Mystic Way*, 9

<sup>116</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 196

<sup>117</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 536

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*

that is implicitly evangelistic. Beyond pioneering techniques or activist work, mysticism requires action to be rooted in contemplation, placing emphasis on personal transformation in a way that saves contemplation from introspection, and action from becoming shallow and spiritually anaemic. Underhill notes that spirit-led mission will require a participation in difficult environments with inevitable pain;<sup>119</sup> authentic union with God not only equips missionaries but is the key to sustaining them.

### 3. Dynamic

Evangelical mystic spirituality is not only transcendent and personal, but must be dynamic, engaging concretely in communal life and the needs of the world.

#### a) *Action grounded in contemplation*

Mystic spirituality, far from being introspective and self-serving, is the necessary means of inserting 'eternal values into the time-world'<sup>120</sup> and Underhill says that 'it is only out of the heart of his own experience that man really helps his neighbour.'<sup>121</sup> Nouwen agrees, suggesting that contemplation is an essential task of leaders today<sup>122</sup> and that honest exposure of a leader's own contemplative journey, and an ability to make sense of inner spiritual issues, will be necessary in reaching a culture which is both obsessed with and confused by the inner life.<sup>123</sup> Given the cultural appetite for personal therapy, there is a need for spiritual guides who can engage the hunger for spirituality and personal growth and connect this to Christian faith. As such, evangelical mystics are equipped with a spirituality suitable for such a task.

Underhill notes that believers are summoned to live out kingdom values, but this is dependent on those very values being known first-hand,<sup>124</sup> warning of spiritual

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<sup>119</sup> Underhill, *Life of the Spirit*, 284-5

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 289

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 269

<sup>122</sup> Nouwen, H. *The Wounded Healer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2014), 41

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>124</sup> Underhill, *Life of the Spirit*, 268

impoverishment if the Christian life becomes ‘a purely social interpretation of religion.’<sup>125</sup> This can be seen in some contemporary approaches to mission which have sought to remedy issues of social injustice and be a ‘chaplain to the state’<sup>126</sup> at the expense of evangelical freedom and faithfulness to the Church’s missional priority. Measurements of success must not be based on the acceptance of Christian activities by the state or society, but the degree to which the Church is faithful to orthodox theological values, whether that produces numerical growth or not. Underhill agrees, saying that the mystic way will make ‘perpetual demands on our loyalty, trust, and self-sacrifice,’<sup>127</sup> requiring that the reception and donation of ‘Reality’ must be held in balance to avoid ‘impotence and unreality.’<sup>128</sup> Thus Christian mysticism does not reduce activism but grounds it in contemplation. Conversely, Christian mysticism also refuses an Augustinian mysticism which is simultaneously God-affirming and world-denying;<sup>129</sup> Christian mystics are engaged in the world around them without succumbing to the expectations they are met with. Thus, contemplation is necessary in enabling believers to engage with society and offer acts of service whilst remaining rooted in Christian faith.

b) *A change of worldview*

Mystic spirituality forms a way of engaging with the world beyond a technique or strategy. In contemplation, God’s ‘view of things becomes more important to you, than your own,’<sup>130</sup> reflecting the reality of God and his transforming presence in daily life. McColman suggests a dynamism to mysticism,<sup>131</sup> denoting a spirituality that Louth says is concerned with participation.<sup>132</sup> Consequently, missional leadership must not aim to instil intellectual solutions or new ideas into others, but must return to the ‘centre,’ aiming to ‘evoke from

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid

<sup>126</sup> Stone, B. *Evangelism after Christendom: the theology and practice of Christian witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 48

<sup>127</sup> Underhill, E. *Practical Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1943), 69

<sup>128</sup> Underhill, E, and Kepler, T. *The Evelyn Underhill Reader* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 69

<sup>129</sup> Corduan, *Mysticism*, 104

<sup>130</sup> Keating cited in Wilhoit, J. ‘Contemplative and Centering Prayer,’ in Coe and Strobel, *Embracing Contemplation*,’ 236

<sup>131</sup> McColman, *Big Book*, 39

<sup>132</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 193

them the profound human impulse to imitation.’<sup>133</sup> Where Underhill appeals, not for the ‘dissemination of suitable doctrines, but to the living burning influence of an ardent soul,’<sup>134</sup> Wilder agrees, suggesting that genuine change requires loving attachment with Jesus *and* with other believers.<sup>135</sup> This challenges the notion of lone-ranger pioneers who work separately from the wider Church body; mystics must minister from their experience of God, instilling vitality into other Christians as a means of equipping the body, but also cultivating a mutual-minded community who practice radical love collectively.<sup>136</sup> Underhill affirms this, saying that mission and development in the spiritual life ‘is most often by way of discipleship and the corporate life, not by the intensive culture of purely solitary effort.’<sup>137</sup> Such an ontological requirement removes transactional notions of partnership, including the notion of ‘resource churches,’ and recognises the fundamental, inherent value of being one spiritual body. Furthermore, Underhill suggests that attending to the ‘centre’ where the life and love of the Spirit is found enables issues of denomination to be resolved<sup>138</sup> - a much needed corrective for the suspicion and envy between established and emerging expressions of Church. For evangelicals in both expressions, the invitation to the centre means adopting a more ‘catholic vision and a more comprehensive theological framework’<sup>139</sup> which incorporates the ‘radically biblical mysticism’<sup>140</sup> that Keller appeals for.

### **Mysticism and Evangelicalism – a realistic possibility.**

Whilst evangelicals may be suspicious of mysticism due to areas of seemingly erroneous or unclear theology, Trueman appeals for an embracing of the ‘ambition’ of the mystics with ‘appropriate theology.’<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, Keller insists that whilst Protestants may be

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<sup>133</sup> Underhill, *Life of the Spirit*, 272-3

<sup>134</sup> Ibid

<sup>135</sup> Wilder, *Renovated*, 49

<sup>136</sup> Missio Alliance, ‘David Fitch on Individualism & Mission,’ (14 Feb 2014), available at: <https://www.missioalliance.org/david-fitch-on-individualism-mission/>, (accessed 28 May 2021)

<sup>137</sup> Underhill, *Life of the Spirit*, 284-5

<sup>138</sup> Ibid

<sup>139</sup> Chan, ‘Contemplative Prayer,’ 257-8

<sup>140</sup> Keller, *Prayer*, 179

<sup>141</sup> Trueman, C. ‘Why Should Thoughtful Evangelicals Read the Medieval Mystics?’, available at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/why-should-thoughtful-evangelicals-read-the-medieval-mystics/>, (accessed 27 May 2021)

‘hesitant about spiritual experience,’<sup>142</sup> their theology is robust enough to embrace it, as has been shown in the discussion above. Marrying mysticism with evangelical theology does not dampen the fire of mystic experience but clarifies its evangelical compatibility. Given the contemporary taste for eastern spirituality and ‘spiritual consumerism,’<sup>143</sup> such a refining is necessary for evangelicals to embrace mysticism and contemplative practices. Furthermore, the distinctly missional fruit of authentic Christian mysticism is radical love for neighbour and God and so, rather than refraining from action, mysticism demands participative service.<sup>144</sup>

Furthermore, the love that unites believers to Christ is ecclesial, and thus mysticism is ‘inseparable from the mystery of the church.’<sup>145</sup> Whilst evangelicalism helpfully promotes personal responsibility for discipleship and mission, some evangelicals lack an ontological understanding of the Church, freeing themselves and their churches from the formative aspects of Christian tradition to their detriment. Perhaps an evangelical mysticism that is scriptural, ecclesial, and missional might assist in the pursuit of the Church’s collective identity as well as informing and sustaining its missional opportunities, in the post-Christendom western context.

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<sup>142</sup> Keller, *Prayer*, 183

<sup>143</sup> Egan, *Soundings*, xv

<sup>144</sup> See Underhill, *Mysticism*, 210

<sup>145</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 194

## An Evangelical Mysticism as a Missional Spirituality

As a deeply transformative way of life based on an experiential knowledge of God, expressed in transcendent, personal, and dynamic dimensions, mysticism can be incorporated into and complement evangelical theology. Furthermore, mysticism makes spirituality a non-optional component of authentic evangelical faith,<sup>146</sup> binding ecclesiology and spirituality inseparably.<sup>147</sup> This chapter will explore four key contributions of a specifically mystical evangelical spirituality (a with-God life, spirituality of surrender, ecclesial unity, and Jesus at the centre). These contributions do not dictate a system or imperative practice but offer means of revitalising faith and witness in helpful ways for mission in the post-Christendom western context, offering all believers the opportunity to adopt a more mystical spirituality as part of their faith practice.<sup>148</sup> To aid this discussion, three writers, Henri Nouwen, Dallas Willard, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who have contributed towards the construction of mystical emphases in evangelical theology, will be used to converse with and develop these four themes.

Willard and Bonhoeffer speak from their Protestant evangelical perspective and although Catholic, Nouwen's teaching is compatible with evangelical theology. Each author combines mysticism and evangelicalism in a way that exemplifies the argument of this essay so far, evidencing the potential of an evangelical mysticism for the good of the Church and in informing mission. Sources for these writers are largely their own works, with contributions from key commentators on their distinct theological contributions. Having introduced each dialogue partner, it will be shown how mystical evangelical theology generates 1. a with-God life, 2. a spirituality of surrender, 3. ecclesial unity, and 4. reinstating Jesus at the centre. The contributions of the three dialogue partners to these themes will be explored, and reflections made regarding how such a spirituality might inform pioneering mission. A summary of each writer will now be given.

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<sup>146</sup> Rolheiser, R. *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 35-6

<sup>147</sup> See 'Mysticism and Evangelicalism – a realistic possibility,' p30

<sup>148</sup> McColman, *Big Book*, 253

## Henri Nouwen

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was a Dutch Catholic priest and professor of psychology, spirituality, pastoral care and theology. His writings remained rooted in but also ‘transcended the particularities of the Roman Catholic tradition,’<sup>149</sup> communicating a Christocentric, Trinitarian, ‘profoundly Christian’<sup>150</sup> spirituality, that appealed to Protestants and fed the hunger for a spirituality beyond the cerebral emphasis in church life. Nouwen appreciated the centrality of Jesus for evangelicals yet noted that they had ‘a great need for a mystical dimension to their lives so they could be more free in living and not driven;’<sup>151</sup> he recommended the mystic emphasis of communion with Christ as a corrective against the success-driven culture, developed comprehensively in his writings on leadership<sup>152</sup> and downward mobility in the spiritual life.<sup>153</sup> His work has been critiqued for a reliance on ‘rhapsodic or rhetorical phrases whose precise meaning is hard to pin down’<sup>154</sup> and for largely omitting a theology of transcendence, emphasising instead ‘a deep theology of suffering and God’s participation in it with us.’<sup>155</sup> However Nouwen’s work aims to generate a transformative experience as opposed to a transfer of information, and the seeming absence of a theology of transcendence reflects his emphasis in addressing the universal yet deeply personal issues of humanity and spirituality. It is precisely because of this that his work has nourished those who seek a more comprehensive spirituality.

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian, a key founding member of the Confessing church who resisted the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer’s

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<sup>149</sup> Ford, M. *Lonely Mystic* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2018), 24

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>151</sup> Boers, Arthur. “What Henri Nouwen Found at Daybreak: Experiments in Spiritual Living in a Secular World.” *Christianity Today* 38, no. 11 (October 3, 1994), 28–31, [29]. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000884592&site=ehost-live>, (accessed 4 June 2021)

<sup>152</sup> For example, ‘In the Name of Jesus’

<sup>153</sup> For example, ‘The Selfless Way of Christ’

<sup>154</sup> Mursell, Gordon. “Book Review: Henri Nouwen.” *Theology* 101 (801), (1998), 233–34, [233]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X98101000337>, (accessed 4 June 2021)

<sup>155</sup> Starke, J. ‘What I Learned from a Pastor’s Letters,’ available at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/love-henri/>, (accessed 4 June 2021)

work challenged a 'Christ-less Christianity,' emphasising the real, obedient following of Jesus (or a cruciform discipleship) as essential to what it means to be a Christian. His emphasis on Christ as mediator shaped his understanding of mission and community, as did his emphasis on 'practical responsibility not abstract duty'<sup>156</sup> for Christian living. Whilst King says that Bonhoeffer was 'uneasy and suspicious of mysticism,'<sup>157</sup> his work evidences a compatibility with the evangelically sound mysticism we have described thus far (an emphasis on reality, transformation, surrender, and a change of worldview). Indeed, Rohr terms Bonhoeffer a mystic in his recognition of the movement 'beyond the scaffolding of religion to the underlying and deeper Christian experience itself.'<sup>158</sup> In similarity to Willard, Bonhoeffer insisted on uniting justification with sanctification under the banner of discipleship, and as such both present a challenge to evangelical Christianity which has emphasised conversion at the expense of developing a robust and effective engagement with sanctification beyond course-based approaches.

### **Dallas Willard**

Dallas Willard (1935-2013) was a professor and scholar whose work addressed themes of theology, spirituality, and spiritual formation. He sought to 'make eternal living concrete' emphasising the spiritual disciplines as important ways of cultivating transformed disciples.<sup>159</sup> The schema of the '*essentia Dei*' underpins Willard's work, defined as the prioritized 'consistent pursuit of discovering the nature or essence (*essentia*) of God.'<sup>160</sup> As such, Willard's work reflects many of the themes of mystic spirituality, emphasising a personal encounter with God, personal transformation, and a discipleship which has concrete outcomes in terms of neighbour-love. Willard's work has been critiqued for being overly intellectual, producing spiritual formation patterns that are linear and complex,<sup>161</sup> but his strategy for formation was necessarily complex in challenging the oversimplification

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<sup>156</sup> King, P. *Explorers in the Dark Night*, 24-33, available at: [2-2King.pdf \(thomasmertonsociety.org\)](https://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/2-2King.pdf), (accessed 18 June 2021)

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>158</sup> Rohr, R. 'Religionless Christianity,' (24 May 2015), available at: <https://cac.org/religionless-christianity-2015-05-24/>, (accessed 11 June 2021)

<sup>159</sup> Willard, available at: <https://dwillard.org/>

<sup>160</sup> Black, *Theology*, 87

<sup>161</sup> Green, C. 'The (Im)possibilities of Willardian Theology: A Review of Gary Black's The Theology of Dallas Willard,' (15 September 2014), available at: <https://theotherjournal.com/2014/09/15/the-impossibilities-of-willardian-theology-a-review-of-gary-blacks-the-theology-of-dallas-willard/>, (accessed 11 June 2021)

and consumerist appetite of the western church. Furthermore, the concept of *essentia Dei* has been critiqued as being insubstantially argued for in subsequent work within the Willard corpus, and whilst Willard may not address this term specifically, its essence clearly threads throughout his writings. In similarity to Nouwen, his work not only aims to inform minds, but to guide and inspire hearts and souls, nurturing a holistic spirituality in a predominantly cerebral Christian context.

#### **a) A with-God life**

A with-God life is one whereby the believer begins eternal life at salvation, not after death.<sup>162</sup> It is a life deeply intertwined with and a part of God's life,<sup>163</sup> whereby knowing God is not primarily cognitive but 'a matter of interactive relationship.'<sup>164</sup> Underhill describes this as 'healing the disharmony between the actual and the real,'<sup>165</sup> and Heath says that 'the immediate presence of God and the drawing of God toward union are lived, fundamental realities.'<sup>166</sup> As such, the with-God life cultivates the lived experience of doctrinal truths about unity with God (for example, John 14: 17, 20), generating a habitual, practical union. The means of developing a with-God life are largely the spiritual disciplines such as silence, solitude, and prayer which, rather than leaning towards self-construction, are ways of experiencing Willard's *essentia Dei*.<sup>167</sup> Reflecting a core tenet of mystic spirituality, the with-God life is one whereby knowing God moves beyond belief to an experiential first-hand knowledge, and thus life is 'based on a conscious communion with God.'<sup>168</sup> Willard suggests that the lack of teaching regarding the available Kingdom of God has led to 'an increasingly inconsequential evangelical church,'<sup>169</sup> because 'there is no gospel for human life and Christian discipleship, just one for death and social action.'<sup>170</sup> Emphasising a vision for a with-God life would enable believers to reconnect faith with life, empowering them to follow Jesus and witness effectively with a gospel that informs and vitalises moment-by-

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<sup>162</sup> Wilder, *Renovated*, 110

<sup>163</sup> Willard, *Renovated*, 98

<sup>164</sup> Ibid

<sup>165</sup> Underhill and Kepler, *Reader*, 40

<sup>166</sup> Heath, *Mystic Way*, 9

<sup>167</sup> Black, *Theology*, 87

<sup>168</sup> Ford, *Lonely Mystic*, xviii

<sup>169</sup> Black, *Theology*, 184

<sup>170</sup> Willard, D. *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 58

moment life with God. This would have a re-centring effect for all expressions of the Evangelical church.<sup>171</sup>

Nouwen also emphasises the with-God life in his writings, saying that ‘the future of Christianity in the West depends on our ability to live mystically, that is, in touch with that core reality which is at the center of events,’<sup>172</sup> and that without this, Christianity becomes ‘something like “behaving decently,” a series of rights and wrongs.’<sup>173</sup> Willard agrees, critiquing much evangelicalism for its neglect of spirituality and its collusion with ‘modernity’s resistance to the metaphysical or the supernatural.’<sup>174</sup> Instead he suggests that ‘all theology and ecclesiology...should be acid tested for how it articulates, reveals, and exalts a vision of God’s loving character,’<sup>175</sup> reflecting the mystic priority of God’s love. As opposed to withdrawal, Nouwen claims that life with God leads to creative involvement in the world, dependent not on ‘ecstasies and visions’ but on the strength derived from union with God.<sup>176</sup> He suggests that life with God in the middle of a broken world creates ‘a glimpse of eternity, a glimpse of the true life,’<sup>177</sup> and directly links personal experience with God and Christian witness.<sup>178</sup>

Willard’s view of spirituality sees the whole physical world ‘inextricably full of or energised by a non-physical, spiritual power,’<sup>179</sup> however, this is not a movement towards a version of pantheism or panentheism,<sup>180</sup> but reflects his understanding of the dually transcendent and personal nature of God’s effusing love for his world. At seeming risk to evangelical fidelity, Willard suggests that ‘if there is truth outside Christian knowledge, God is the sort of person who would desire one to have it, regardless of the implications that might come about in orthodox Christian faith.’<sup>181</sup> But rather than an openness to alternative means of truth, it is precisely his fidelity to evangelical theology and knowledge of who God is, that allows Willard to engage with other truth claims, modelling a method of pioneering which enables

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<sup>171</sup> Black, *Theology*, 188

<sup>172</sup> Ford, *Lonely Mystic*, xix

<sup>173</sup> Ibid

<sup>174</sup> Black, *Theology*, 90

<sup>175</sup> Ibid

<sup>176</sup> Ford, *Lonely Mystic*, 30

<sup>177</sup> Nouwen, cited in Ford, *Lonely Mystic*, 137

<sup>178</sup> Nouwen, *Selfless Way*, 15

<sup>179</sup> Black, *Theology*, 93

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 95

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 97

genuine engagement with the unfamiliar without losing one's theological footing. As such, Willard welcomes both the pursuit of, and the mystery in, the knowledge of God as necessary aspects of the with-God life, reflecting a mystical evangelical perspective.

Where, traditionally, the sacraments are seen as the place of union with Christ,<sup>182</sup> both Nouwen and Willard stress the importance of the spiritual disciplines to this end. Nouwen says that 'spiritual discipline is about claiming our connected relationship with God and with one another – and living out of it.'<sup>183</sup> He highlights the need for solitude and prayer to lead us 'from false certainties to true uncertainties, from an easy support system to a risky surrender'<sup>184</sup> which is a necessary movement for spiritual maturity and missional pioneering, cultivating an increased dependence on God, a listening posture, and a willingness to let go of control. Willard agrees suggesting that the with-God life requires a 'progressive construction of a Christocentric view of oneself that is both accurate and beneficial,'<sup>185</sup> moving away from the self-worship and sensuality that corrupts ministry and maturity so easily. Nouwen also calls for the discipline of silence as a means of maintaining the focus on God, rather than on our words and effort,<sup>186</sup> welcoming something of mystery alongside what we can articulate about God and the life of faith. This is a challenge to the intellectual emphasis of western faith, one which liberates evangelicals from anxiously mastering the faith, to allowing God to lead. Furthermore, as Nouwen suggests, silence allows us to assess whether the words we use retain anything that can be called 'sacred'<sup>187</sup> – a more pertinent issue than whether non-believers understand the secularisation of our language for the sake of being seeker-friendly.

Such disciplines may not correlate directly with successful projects and measurable outcomes, but Nouwen claims that they are the 'true test of our vocation,'<sup>188</sup> forming in us a humility that enables love without competition. Davison and Milbank agree, saying that 'the messenger becomes the message; we receive the gift of being gifts ourselves.'<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, 31

<sup>183</sup> Ford, *Lonely Mystic*, xix

<sup>184</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching*, 95

<sup>185</sup> Black, *Theology*, 113

<sup>186</sup> Nouwen, H. *The Way of the Heart* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), 58

<sup>187</sup> Nouwen, H. *Life of the Beloved* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 83

<sup>188</sup> Nouwen, *Selfless Way*, 83

<sup>189</sup> Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, 30

Furthermore, the life of prayer and the ability to navigate and articulate the spiritual life, leading people into unfamiliar spiritual spaces,<sup>190</sup> is what Nouwen sees as 'the basis for a spiritual leadership of the future.'<sup>191</sup> Reflecting a distinctly mystic approach, Christian leadership must not simply instigate new ideas and strategies, but must confront seekers with what is real, including the fragile nature of the human and spiritual condition in need of hope and salvation.

## Summary

The with-God life is distinctly evangelical in its emphasis on the personal relationship with God as central to the life of faith. Such a 'habitual union'<sup>192</sup> reflects Jesus' command to 'abide in me' (John 15:4), and it is the fact that this union is with God (as opposed to the universe or an unknown energy) that makes this emphasis evangelically sound. In essence, the with-God life is the lived experience of held beliefs, shifting towards an experiential knowing as opposed to mainly a cerebral one. The with-God life is also distinctly mystical, emphasising a union dependent on a regular, ongoing experience of God's presence amid life. Holding the transcendent and personal aspects of the spiritual life together, such a habitual union encourages the pursuit of the knowledge of God whilst remaining open to the otherness of who He is. The with-God life is essential in maintaining the vitality, nurturing the maturity, and sustaining the ministry of the Christian believer.<sup>193</sup> Finally, the with-God life is the necessary corrective for an evangelicalism which leans heavily towards cerebralism (and activism, as previously discussed);<sup>194</sup> if pioneering mission is going to remain vitalised and rooted in faith, contemplation is the necessary anchoring.

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<sup>190</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 45

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>192</sup> Kieckhefer, R. 'Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God,' *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3/4, (1978), 203-255, [203]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1509616>, (accessed 25 June 2021)

<sup>193</sup> See 'Personal Transformation,' p27

<sup>194</sup> See 'Action Grounded in Contemplation,' p28

## b) A Spirituality of Surrender

Willard suggests that 'total surrender to God enables you to have a different presence in the world, one that is redemptive in far-reaching ways,'<sup>195</sup> allowing others to see the with-God life concretely. Surrender can be understood as cruciform wisdom, aiming to 'encourage initially resistant human will to welcome God and God's sacrificial will.'<sup>196</sup> Moser and McFall agree, suggesting that cruciform wisdom aims at transformation 'in relation to divine power, as represented in the death and resurrection of Jesus.'<sup>197</sup> Surrender is not an abstractly spiritual exercise, but is 'intertwined with earthly, physical realities,'<sup>198</sup> and extends to ministry, insisting that it is possible 'if God's rule is acknowledged and trusted, to serve without power.'<sup>199</sup> Reflected not only in Jesus' person and ministry, but furthermore in Paul's writings, faith in God effectively means surrender, and as such becoming 'in Christ,' or engaging in the with-God life, means 'letting Christ take over.'<sup>200</sup>

Bonhoeffer understands surrender as 'an essential part of the specifically Christian life.'<sup>201</sup> Surrender demands self-denial and a dying to self, which Bonhoeffer defines as being 'aware only of Christ and no more of self'<sup>202</sup> as opposed to 'isolated acts of mortification or asceticism.'<sup>203</sup> This is a corrective to the asceticism practised in some forms of Christian mysticism which leans towards a works-based means of union with God or embraces a world or body-denying view of spirituality. Bonhoeffer does also look to 'typical bodily discipline and asceticism'<sup>204</sup> but only as a means of cultivating this surrendered life, recognising the meeting place of physicality and spirituality in cruciformity. Willard agrees that spiritual formation is dependent on this 'foundation of death to self and cannot proceed except insofar as that foundation is being firmly laid and sustained,'<sup>205</sup> calling for the practice of spiritual disciplines in the cultivation of surrender. He suggests that surrender is the measurement of emotional and spiritual maturity,<sup>206</sup> and consequently, as

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<sup>195</sup> Willard, *Renovated*, 133

<sup>196</sup> Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*, 168

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 170

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 172

<sup>199</sup> Hauerwas, S. *A Community of Character* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 48

<sup>200</sup> Corduan, *Mysticism*, 129

<sup>201</sup> Bonhoeffer, D. translated by Fuller, R. *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 43

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 116

<sup>205</sup> Black, *Theology*, 112

<sup>206</sup> Willard, *Renovated*, 61

Nouwen suggests, offers 'a powerfully countercultural statement,'<sup>207</sup> setting Christian discipleship in stark contrast to 'the values of the Empire.'<sup>208</sup> Surrender as a key tenet of Christian discipleship remains a radically countercultural posture, and an increasingly necessary one in post-Christendom where the Church is moving towards a marginal, minority status with less power than it once had. Furthermore, surrender enables a way of witnessing in a culture that is nervous of abuses of religious power and submission to authorities. Surrender and the embrace of downward mobility redefines discipleship in bold terms, providing a corrective to a watered-down evangelicalism and 'cheap grace,'<sup>209</sup> and reasserting faithfulness to Christ as the mark of success above other measures of growth or quantifiable outcomes.

Surrender is not towards an empty void, to the self, or to an ideology, but to Jesus.<sup>210</sup> Nouwen describes this as a 'refusal to identify God with any concept, theory, document or event,'<sup>211</sup> which he says safeguards against sectarianism or obsessiveness and maintains genuine openness to God and others. This challenges notions of missional leadership and Christian ministry which contain Christianised efforts to assert power and control, instead cultivating a self-emptying, humble approach. Whilst this approach may not produce measurable outcomes or a growth strategy, it liberates pioneers to refuse identification with anything other than the person of Jesus Christ. Might this produce a more listening, humble, risk-taking approach than one which is enjoined to targets and outcomes?

The movement away from power and control is a major theme in Nouwen's writings, whereby he insists on downward mobility in the spiritual life and resistance to the temptations to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful,<sup>212</sup> grounded in the account of Jesus' temptations in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11). These three temptations are of absolute relevance for missionaries today, in both established and pioneering models. Without a powerless posture in ministry, Nouwen suggests that manipulation, power games, violence, and destruction in some form, are inevitable results.<sup>213</sup> Calling for spiritual disciplines to

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<sup>207</sup> Nouwen, *Selfless Way*, 7

<sup>208</sup> Ibid

<sup>209</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 3

<sup>210</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching*, 76

<sup>211</sup> Ibid

<sup>212</sup> Nouwen, *Selfless Way*, 47-66

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 64

enable such a downward mobility, Nouwen acknowledges that the movement towards surrender concurrently means a movement towards the unknown and suffering,<sup>214</sup> reflective of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the necessary requirements of genuine Christian discipleship. But it also is a movement towards reality – the reality of truth in the person of Jesus, and the reality of the life of Christian discipleship – allowing the believer to embrace a certain irrelevance within society and therefore 'enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there.'<sup>215</sup>

Surrender is a vital movement required in the spirituality of Christians today, enabling solidarity with the suffering world, faithfulness to a crucified Christ, and freedom to engage in mission without succumbing to temptations to appease neediness. The consequences of such a shift may be radical – to value what is hidden, to embrace and train for suffering, to refuse to succumb to cultural temptations for power, to relinquish the need to control the future or other people. This requires an unlearning of growth strategies and challenges the individualistic agenda that has infiltrated the Church, whereby personal rights and fulfilment have refuted the radical call for self-denial found in the Christian gospel.

## Summary

Radical surrender to Jesus is a profoundly evangelical spiritual posture; however, this notion is often slow to move from a philosophical understanding towards a cruciform application. Surrender is also a foundational mystical practice, both necessary for and a product of the with-God life. Surrender to Jesus fosters a humble, listening approach to mission, enabling pioneers to take risks and work creatively without being driven by personal needs or temptation for power. In relinquishing ideals of spectacularism, power and relevance to maintain faithfulness to Christ<sup>216</sup> and allegiance to evangelical faith, a witnessing presence can be maintained despite how redundant that may make the Church seem. And whilst there may be initial resentment to embracing powerlessness, it is a necessary movement towards fruitfulness in an age of missional uncertainty.

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<sup>214</sup> Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, 116

<sup>215</sup> Nouwen, *Name of Jesus*, 22

<sup>216</sup> Nouwen, *Selfless Way*, 47-66

### c) Ecclesial unity

Guder states that 'To be authentically evangelical...our ecclesiology must be missional,'<sup>217</sup> however it must also be unitive. McNeal suggests that the congregational worldview sees the Church as an 'it,' inevitably following an institutional path, as opposed to the New Testament's understanding of the Church as a 'who,'<sup>218</sup> whose form and vitality is connected to Christ. Buschart and Eilers say that contemporary evangelical Protestant spirituality 'lacks a robustly ecclesial character,'<sup>219</sup> and Williams suggests that the marginalisation of an ecclesial unitive priority has coincided for many churches with the emphasis on growth, renewal, and mission.<sup>220</sup> But mission cannot supersede ecclesial unity, both within nuclear churches and across the wider Church body; the contemporary attitude towards mission that encourages solo pioneers and independent expressions of new churches, has done so at the cost of retaining unity and shared identity with the catholic Church. Furthermore, Willard asserts that the lack of 'intentional and faithful commitment' in 'living as part of the body of Christ' denotes a 'void within modern ecclesiology.'<sup>221</sup> This ecclesial void risks generating sectarianism, a loss of identity, syncretism, the loss of spiritual heritage, and an anaemic, self-selected form of spirituality. Ironically, many pioneering forms of church have welcomed ancient spiritual practices, reflecting a subconscious desire for connection with Christian heritage and a deep spirituality, whilst simultaneously rejecting the contemporary traditions practised in established church models. Nouwen cautions against this, suggesting the need to make these practices 'subservient to the self-understanding of the Christian community as a people fashioned by God,'<sup>222</sup> insisting against autonomy and self-construction despite how helpful such techniques seem to be.

In an increasingly fragmented and divided Church and culture, the need for unity as a means of witness is pressing. Despite differences in tradition and doctrine, if unity were a fundamental and missional priority, visions and goals would give way to the necessity of

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<sup>217</sup> Guder, D. *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 74

<sup>218</sup> McNeal, R. *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 4

<sup>219</sup> Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*, 160

<sup>220</sup> Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 204

<sup>221</sup> Black, *Theology*, 135

<sup>222</sup> Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, 122

forming 'attachment love'<sup>223</sup> within the Church and with God, shaping any vision or goal to reflect God's priorities. Furthermore, this mystic emphasis on attachment love cultivates the ability to see others as 'my people,' enabling believers to love others 'as they love themselves' (Mark 12:31) in a way that maintains genuine unity despite difference. As such, unity is achieved through a 'hesed' love that transforms our understanding of who constitutes 'the enemy.'<sup>224</sup> Thus union with God cultivates the ability to be genuinely united with other believers, through the transformation of seeing potential enemies as being ontologically joined as 'one of us.' Discipleship of this sort also enables genuine love of those who oppose Christianity, offering opportunities not to control, oppress or retaliate, but to love those who are against us, regardless of results. In a post-Christendom culture where the Church is likely to see an increase in 'enemies,' this unity within the Church and an ability to genuinely love others is a vital missional requirement.

Bonhoeffer also recognises the necessity of spiritual love for the purpose of loving enemies and for cultivating genuine fellowship.<sup>225</sup> His attention to the mediation of Christ reflects the necessity of God's love in discipleship, and insists that 'because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them.'<sup>226</sup> Such mediation guards against attempts to 'to regulate, coerce, and dominate,'<sup>227</sup> challenging the power dynamics that cripple community and ensuring that conversion is genuinely effected by the Holy Spirit as opposed to the manipulation of another person.<sup>228</sup> This is a strong critique of the smotheringly intimate approach that can become dangerous to pioneering groups,<sup>229</sup> whose emphasis on 'being community' has verged on 'human absorption.'<sup>230</sup> Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's understanding of community requires reality based on Christ's word; as such, community cannot be constructed in regards to cultural or personal preferences, or through disgruntlement and disillusion regarding the established church. Bonhoeffer disallows the

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<sup>223</sup> Wilder, *Renovated*, 175

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

<sup>225</sup> Bonhoeffer, D, translated by Doberstein, J. *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 21

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21

<sup>229</sup> Shellnutt, K. 'Acts 29 CEO Removed Amid 'Accusations of Abusive Leadership,' (7 Feb 2020). Available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/february/acts-29-ceo-steve-timmis-removed-spiritual-abuse-tch.html>, (accessed 2 July 2021)

<sup>230</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 20-21

authority of the leader to construct community apart from the word of Christ, maintaining other believers' freedom to be Christ's and not a construct of human idealism.

Furthermore, this applies not only to Christian community but also to mission. Bonhoeffer says that 'every attempt to impose the gospel by force, to run after people and proselytize them, to use our own resources to arrange the salvation of other people, is both futile and dangerous.'<sup>231</sup> Not only does this tend to alienate unbelievers further, it also resembles a 'victorious ideology'<sup>232</sup> that is antithetical to the gospel of servanthood and inappropriate for the post-Christendom west which is sensitive to abuses of power and persuasion.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of Church is a 'church for others,' which Bosch critiques as being partly a product of the 'typical liberal-humanist bourgeois climate'<sup>233</sup> in which Bonhoeffer was immersed. Instead, Bosch suggests the need to be 'church with others,'<sup>234</sup> a subtle but distinct difference which retains the necessity of Christ's mediating work as the foundation for ecclesial unity, but further nuances the nature of relationships within the Church, reflecting more the notion of hospitality found in Nouwen's writings.

Nouwen reflects Bonhoeffer's views on the necessity of Church resisting the control or use of people for its own goals, as a Christian distinctive in a society replete with loneliness and fear of abuses. To this extent, the established church has often colluded with culture, offering acceptance and love to the degree that newcomers conform to social behaviours and doctrinal creeds. Nouwen suggests that hospitality on our terms 'leads easily to exploitation, making hospitality into a business;'<sup>235</sup> this is the antithesis of genuine love and welcome, as described by Bonhoeffer and Nouwen, and whilst it does not guarantee 'results,' this way of hospitality remains faithful to the means of mission specified by Jesus, that disciples will be known by their love for one another (John 13: 35). The emerging church has colluded with culture differently, in welcoming all and offering love without confronting newcomers with the gospel, 'hiding ourselves behind neutrality,'<sup>236</sup> and failing to maintain the boundaries of evangelical faith in a way that provokes others to explore faith themselves. This may be a response to the aggressive and manipulating approaches

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<sup>231</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 129-30

<sup>232</sup> Ibid

<sup>233</sup> Bosch, D. *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 384

<sup>234</sup> Ibid

<sup>235</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 70

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.,71

experienced through some forms of established church,<sup>237</sup> but in disavowing any concrete form of evangelism, the Church loses its witness and a key aspect of its evangelical identity. Nouwen suggests that 'receptivity and confrontation are the two inseparable sides of Christian witness,'<sup>238</sup> and both must be regained and practised well to become genuinely missional as well as retaining ecclesial unity and identity. Hospitality allows people to exist without controlling each other, receiving the stranger as a gift, rather than a won victory, and is a paradigm through which all Christian community can be lived. This approach involves risk and the unknown, benefitting from a mystic approach to undergird such an endeavour. The 'poverty of mind'<sup>239</sup> required in true hospitality allows for the unknown aspects of life and faith without rushing to persuade or inform, which is a necessary approach in the post-Christendom western context where the personal journey is of importance and there is a suspicion of manipulation behind persuasive arguments.

## Summary

Ecclesial unity is a necessary corrective in contemporary evangelical approaches to mission. True ecclesial unity underpins an ontological understanding of Church that does not bind pioneers to inherited practices but does enable the maintenance of evangelical identity and belonging across varying expressions. Ecclesial unity is a genuine aspect of mysticism as it demands that the with-God life must be expressed and outworked in a with-others life. The spirituality of hospitality embraces mystery and a willingness to not be in control in the way relationships are developed and seeks a surrendered posture towards the principal work of God in the forming and ordering of communal life.

Ecclesial unity is a critical need for post-Christendom western mission. The likelihood of the pioneering expressions being sustained long term will be influenced, not simply by the financial or practical resourcing from the established church, but by the ability to embrace a liminal position, both truly belonging to the evangelical body and truly pioneering in creative

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<sup>237</sup> Kercheville, B. 'Manipulative and Mechanical Approaches to Evangelism,' (29 November 2014). Available at: <https://focusmagazine.org/manipulative-mechanical-approaches-to-evangelism.php>, (accessed 2 July 2021)

<sup>238</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 72

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

mission. Concepts such as 'resource church' or 'networking' must be superseded with a vision for belonging to the catholic Church which strengthens and sustains pioneering models beyond practical or circumstantial means.

#### **d) Jesus at the centre**

Murray suggests that the future of the western church in post-Christendom may depend on 'recovering the centrality of Jesus.'<sup>240</sup> He cautions that Jesus can no longer represent 'order and stability' or be reduced to 'dogmatic statements in simplistic evangelical courses or perpetuate the overemphasis on his divinity at the expense of his humanity.'<sup>241</sup> Instead, he suggests a more relational approach to engaging with Jesus and the gospel, emphasising discipleship and following Jesus rather than only worshipping him, and allowing an experiential knowledge of the gospels to 'stir our imagination and train our reflexes.'<sup>242</sup> Echoing many themes already discussed, centring Jesus within evangelical faith and mission might not only reorder evangelical priorities and revive the vitality within Evangelical churches, but also produce a whole-brained, whole-life discipleship reflective of following Jesus with every dimension of our humanity, as opposed to purely cerebrally.

A major theme in Willard's work is the challenging of 'evangelical sin management' through systems focussed on either 'doing good' or 'believing good.'<sup>243</sup> Both approaches effectively allow other motives to dominate their theology, demonstrating 'ignorance of and/or apathy for the original message of Jesus;'<sup>244</sup> Willard suggests that alongside this, there is a 'uniform assumption that mandatory conformity to Jesus' teaching is optional and no longer essential to the evangelical articulation of Christian life,'<sup>245</sup> amounting to an 'empty allegiance.'<sup>246</sup> Instead, Willard calls for the regaining of confidence in the person and life of Jesus, following Jesus in an obedient discipleship relationship as the meaning of conversion, rather than simply a momentary decision based on the belief of correct doctrines. Such a shift underscores a relational gospel and repurposes traditional evangelical devotional practices

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<sup>240</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 317

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 316

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 311

<sup>243</sup> Black, *Theology*, 149

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 181

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 145

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

for nurturing discipleship as opposed to simply managing sin. Black suggests that in doing this, evangelicals are enabled to rediscover their heritage, separating dysfunctional modern evangelicalism from the 'quintessential goodness'<sup>247</sup> of Jesus. Furthermore, the litmus test of genuine Christian faith becomes the existence of transformed character and the presence of *agape* love in the life of the believer, demonstrative of an interactive knowledge of and relationship with the person of Jesus. Modern evangelicalism has either overemphasised correct beliefs and doctrines, or the conversion of the many without any expectation of discipleship and obedience (which Bonhoeffer would describe as cheap grace<sup>248</sup>).

Conversely, Willard's emphasis on following Jesus in a transformative, discipleship relationship restores the vitality and reality of life with God and provides the 'primal motivating source'<sup>249</sup> for maturity into Christlikeness. Furthermore, in a society that is largely suspicious and tired of institutional Christianity, Jesus still gains interest;<sup>250</sup> as the movement into post-Christendom continues, recentring evangelical mission and faith around Jesus as opposed to the ethics and agendas that have been deemed to proceed from him, may help in resisting amalgamating Jesus into denominational preference or personal agendas,<sup>251</sup> allowing a fresh hearing of the challenging, liberating, life-giving gospel.

Willard makes clear that regaining the importance of Jesus being a teacher and master will radically transform discipleship,<sup>252</sup> and as such this is a critical aspect of recentring Jesus in evangelical theology. As Barry suggests, limiting Jesus to being only Lord maintains a 'superhuman' distance making his call to follow his example difficult to hear and take seriously;<sup>253</sup> instead, Willard says that Jesus as teacher concerns not simply 'the transmission of information' but the willingness and intention in applying his teachings into daily life.<sup>254</sup> Bonhoeffer agrees, suggesting that if obedience to Jesus is eliminated, faith is not real and 'we drift into an unevangelical interpretation of the Bible.'<sup>255</sup> Calling truth and

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<sup>247</sup> Black, *Theology*, 173

<sup>248</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 9-10

<sup>249</sup> Black, *Theology*, 127

<sup>250</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 316

<sup>251</sup> For example, see Schupp, D. 'Whose Agenda Are We Pursuing?,' available at:

<https://lifespringnc.com/2019/12/05/whose-agenda-are-we-pursuing/>, (accessed 9 July 2021)

<sup>252</sup> Black, *Theology*, 129

<sup>253</sup> Barry, cited in Moon, G, Moreland, J and Porter, S. (eds) *Until Christ is Formed in You* (Texas: ACU Press, 2018), 194-5

<sup>254</sup> Black, *Theology*, 130

<sup>255</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 39

doctrine 'disembodied entities,'<sup>256</sup> Bonhoeffer appeals for a 'literal, bodily following,'<sup>257</sup> producing a real, visible life of faith in Christ. Such an embodied discipleship is grounded in the with-God life, expressed through ecclesial unity and surrender, and produces transformation of the whole human person; this recognises the role of the body within Christian faith and discipleship, which Willard asserts is a missing component from current dominant views of salvation and deliverance.<sup>258</sup>

Recognising the impossibility of any disembodied experience of life or God, Willard appeals for the importance of the body in spiritual formation.<sup>259</sup> But transformation is not the product of successful ascetic practices, as some errant forms of mysticism might purport; ascetic practices merely posture the soul to be the recipient of grace, dependent on God's transformative work in the surrendered soul. As such, this aspect of mysticism and spiritual formation is participatory,<sup>260</sup> 'rooted in the practice of the presence of Jesus.'<sup>261</sup> Not only does mysticism facilitate a mutual-mind state that enables a unitive experience with God, but this loving attachment enables a degree of transformation in the fast-track system in the brain, producing transformation at the level of Christlike reactions and responses, far beyond training the will or ability to make godly decisions.<sup>262</sup> Such a Jesus-centred, interpersonal approach to discipleship requires individual and corporate practices, underlining again the importance of the broader Church in facilitating not only mission, but transformative discipleship which, for an evangelical mysticism, is the evidence of faithfulness to Jesus.

## Summary

Restoring Jesus to the centre salvages the vital components of evangelical theology from the individualistic trappings it has been lumbered with, liberating Jesus from the agenda of believers who emphasise right beliefs or right actions over right relationship with God. Jesus

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 185

<sup>256</sup> Ibid

<sup>257</sup> Ibid

<sup>258</sup> Willard, *Until Christ*, 35

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>260</sup> Heath, *Mystic Way*, 6

<sup>261</sup> Willard, *Renovated*, 15

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 43

as teacher encourages the mystic towards an embodied discipleship and creates the necessary meeting place whereby mysticism can be simultaneously transcendent, personal, and active. Furthermore, Jesus Christ becomes present 'not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming centre of one's life.'<sup>263</sup> Reinstating the significance and centrality of Jesus as teacher, and one with whom a relationship is vital, reorders the competing love of service for Jesus against the love of Jesus himself. An evangelical mysticism binds the dichotomy of action and contemplation, reflecting a more integrated approach. Following Jesus, his person and example, provides the model for such an integration that is necessary for effective and holistic mission today.

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<sup>263</sup> Egan, *Soundings*, xix

## Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to show how an evangelical mystical spirituality might equip both the established church and pioneering models for mission in the western post-Christendom context. Not only is mysticism compatible with evangelicalism but complements and reinforces evangelical theological values. Furthermore, the contributions of Bonhoeffer, Willard and Nouwen indicate the riches of Protestant mysticism, and encourage further investigation into the contribution of Protestant mystics alongside those within Roman Catholicism.<sup>264</sup>

Heath encourages a mystic view of post-Christendom itself, viewing the decline in church attendance and the loss of desire and dryness in religious practice as a sign of an impending collective dark night in the life of the Church.<sup>265</sup> She suggests that this movement might lead to a marginalisation of the Church in relation to society enabling it to recover its evangelical witness and dependence on God's love.<sup>266</sup> As such, mysticism and the wisdom of the mystics offer a helpful paradigm through which to view the post-Christendom shift, and a framework within which to engage in church and mission.

An evangelical mysticism has been shown to foster a spirituality necessary for mission today. Cultivating a with-God life prioritises personal transformation, emphasising the use of spiritual disciplines to produce an experiential, robust relationship with, and dependence on, God. Such an approach sees missional success in terms of faithfulness to God rather than by numerical measurements and equips missionaries to lead seekers into unfamiliar spiritual spaces alongside providing doctrinal truths. The with-God life grounds and sustains activism and breathes life into the cerebralism that has been so prominent in evangelicalism in recent decades.

A spirituality of surrender embraces the marginalisation that post-Christendom will bring to the Church, enabling missionaries to let go of the false self and embrace a cruciform discipleship. Surrender encourages missionaries to let go of control and the attachment to outward success and embrace fecundity rather than activity as a missional approach.

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<sup>264</sup> See Schwanda cited in Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*, 161-2

<sup>265</sup> Heath, *Mystic Way*, 17-21

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*

Furthermore, a powerless Church witnesses to a servant Saviour in a way that might draw seekers who are legitimately suspicious of power abuses and hierarchical institutions.

Within evangelicalism and throughout the wider Church body, ecclesial unity is needed. The splintering effect of individualised approaches to church and mission, whilst generating much missional creativity, has been the simultaneous splintering of a robust ecclesial identity. An evangelical mysticism fosters a liminality enabling pioneers to maintain an ontological identity as the Church, whilst fully engaged in missional pioneering. Ecclesial unity recognises the necessity of other believers in effective witness, producing a more robust attachment to God and others in a way that enables genuine personal transformation, and a togetherness that far supersedes a 'resource church' approach to unity.

Furthermore, an evangelical mysticism restores Jesus as central to discipleship and mission. Recognising Jesus as teacher, as well as Lord and Saviour, cultivates an engagement in whole-life discipleship, as opposed to focussing purely on atonement for sin or social activism. Such a participatory approach equips missionaries for the task of personal evangelism that moves beyond disseminating the right information, to living lives of radical love. This approach also safeguards Jesus from becoming relativised into a social ethic,<sup>267</sup> but instead subjugates ethics to the life and teachings of Jesus,<sup>268</sup> enabling Jesus's life and teaching to take precedent over cultural sensitivities, social needs, and personal preferences.

Such a spirituality offers some realistic possibilities for impacting the Church in mission in the years to come.

- i. Mysticism connects pioneers to the established church and Christian heritage but does not bind them to it.

As implied in the first chapter, both the established and the emerging churches struggle to move beyond technique-based approaches, even if these are highly relational. There is a need to move beyond reconfiguration of practice to a rediscovery of theological convictions,

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<sup>267</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 408

<sup>268</sup> Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 42

in defining and developing pioneering mission.<sup>269</sup> Brueggemann suggests that modern handling of the gospel 'reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, revises quality into quantity, and takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes.'<sup>270</sup> Whilst both the established and emerging churches reflect some of these features, a concurrent issue is that evangelical pioneers reflect a methodological liberalism which rejects tradition and history in the search for a more dynamic model. This is problematic when it comes to retaining evangelical theology amid pioneering practice and remaining faithful in unity with the wider Church,<sup>271</sup> reflecting an immaturity in their expectations to survive long-term apart from the unity of the body. Feiss recognises the mutually nourishing relationship between a mystic's experience and the liturgy that informs their faith,<sup>272</sup> reflecting the liminal position that mystics embrace between the established church and the world. As such, mysticism holds the potential of a way forward, nurturing a distinctly missional spirituality whilst receiving the gift of the established church. Furthermore, mysticism offers a way of restoring the vitality that inspired liturgical and sacramental practices in the first place, reclaiming and repurposing the dynamism of tradition through the contribution of mystery and transcendence.

- ii. Evangelical mysticism equips pioneers to adapt to the changing status of the Church, giving them the spirituality to sustain and inform their ministry, moving beyond technique and strategy.

Murray says that the post-Christendom shift to marginality requires a relinquishing of control and a willingness to do 'nothing rather than acting in ways that contravene our values,'<sup>273</sup> emphasising that the Church's primary vocation 'is to be Christian rather than effective.'<sup>274</sup> But this requires a theology that emphasises mystery, cruciformity, transformation and union with God, of which current evangelicalism offers limited

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<sup>269</sup> Belcher, *Deep Church*, 37

<sup>270</sup> Brueggemann, W. *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 1

<sup>271</sup> Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 204

<sup>272</sup> Feiss, H. 'Rethinking the Mystical: Thoughts from the Spiritual Sub-Basement,' *Word & World*, 7/2 (1987), 141-148, [144]

<sup>273</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 242

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 244

resources. Mystic spirituality reorders vocational priorities, enabling missional thinking which is at ease with the unknown and willing to consider wholesale change, as opposed to still aiming at outcomes, despite how relational and organic they may seem.

A fundamental shift required in pioneering is the redefining of success in terms of faithfulness to Jesus as opposed to quantifiable outcomes. Mysticism produces vibrant disciples whose goal of love does not disregard, but reorders the priority of numerical growth, and who will be satisfied and fruitful even in a season of apparent decline. Whilst Christian mystics consistently affirm the active life and have been themselves deeply invested in ministerial work, their emphasis on union with God and surrender to him is a necessary corrective in the current achievement-driven, results-based environment. Even the practice of reading and meditating on the lives of the mystics draws our attention 'behind the argument to the arguer,'<sup>275</sup> enabling us to engage not only with what they did and said, but who they were and how they loved.

- iii. Evangelical mysticism embraces the interest in spirituality within the bounds of orthodox evangelical theology.

The emerging church has welcomed the cultural interest in spirituality and developed communal and worship practices that reflect this curiosity. However, it has been uncritical and theologically liberal with its endorsement and use of spiritual practices unfamiliar to the evangelical majority. Murray agrees, cautioning that Christendom assumptions and practices of pagan origin can be unknowingly imbibed without critical thinking regarding the use of ancient spiritual practices.<sup>276</sup> An evangelical mysticism makes spirituality a non-negotiable aspect of evangelical faith and offers a space for spiritual seekers to engage in a more experiential approach to finding faith than has been offered previously. Furthermore, the evangelical fence posts which help articulate and weigh the experience of mysticism enable seekers to participate in a generously experiential knowledge of God without losing their theological way.

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<sup>275</sup> Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 36

<sup>276</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 259

### **Practical implications for the future**

If mission in post-Christendom is going to take seriously the offerings of an evangelical mysticism, there must be an openness to whole-brained, whole-life discipleship. Recognising the role of the body, the imagination, senses, feelings, and behaviours in an integrative spirituality will necessitate spiritual practices and an understanding of evangelism that embraces right-brained ways of engagement, alongside the left-brain approaches that have been chiefly used and taught in recent decades.<sup>277</sup> Mysticism offers much in this regard and can be enthusiastically embraced within a robust evangelical framework.<sup>278</sup>

Additionally, training for ordained and lay missionaries must incorporate education in the theology and practice of spirituality, inclusive of mysticism. Feiss questions whether good theology can be done apart from devoted personal and corporate spiritual practices,<sup>279</sup> yet much theological training maintains a distinction here. Authentic pioneers will be those who can navigate the inner life and unknown spiritual spaces, leading seekers to a real encounter with the living God. Furthermore, immersing leaders in mystic and spiritual writings might help them avoid 'reinventing the spiritual wheel'<sup>280</sup> or succumbing to the current trends and cultural obsessions, but instead equip them to know God and venture into the unknown, spiritually and missionally, and there hear the invitation to mission for today.

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<sup>277</sup> Wilder, *Renovated*, 73

<sup>278</sup> For example, see Wilder, *Renovated*, 34-48

<sup>279</sup> Feiss, *Rethinking the Mystical*, 146

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*

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