
The Mystical Experience of Everyday Living

With **Sophronia Scott**



*"Here is an unspeakable secret: Paradise is all
around us and we do not understand."*

— Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a
Guilty Bystander*

Conference 1: Definitions and Identities

What is mysticism and who are mystics?

Mysticism: *cognitio Dei experimentalis*. The knowledge of God through and from experience. This means the experience of one's life, not knowledge obtained from books, instruction, tradition, or doctrines.

"Belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender." —The New Oxford American Dictionary

Perceiving God in Unmediated Ways But...



1. "Mystics have very rarely separated themselves from existing historical religions...they understood the meaning of these religions more deeply. They did not deny revelation but appropriated it differently."

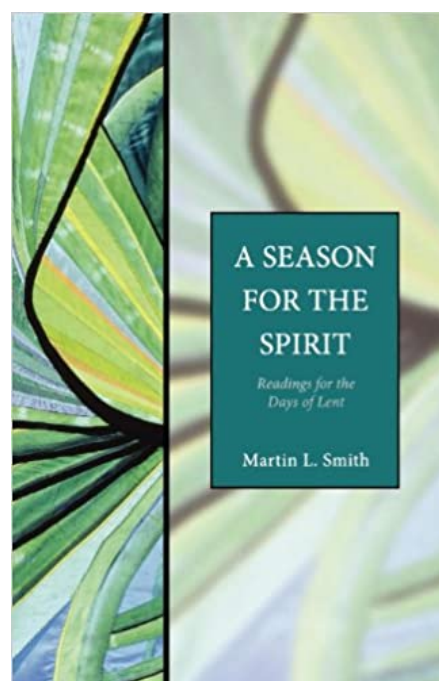
2. "...conflict was part and parcel of the case: confrontation has to come between too much love for God and the institution that is concerned with regularity and order. "

Imagination: "Our habit of leaving childhood behind us as quickly as possible thoroughly uproots such childhood experiences for people of our culture. We then label those experiences as craziness or silliness and then hide or trivialize them in terms of our "nothing but..." formulae. Such experiences are explained away as an overactive imagination, indigestion, overexcitement, and the like. By banishing them from our children, we destroy them within ourselves at the same moment." —*The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* by Dorothee Soelle.

“Mysticism is a women’s matter, albeit not exclusively, but predominantly so in Christianity. It was the opponents of mystical thought who saw this most clearly; when they could not ignore great mystical thinkers, they liked to stress how “masculine” those thinkers had been!” —D. Soelle

To Be in Relationship

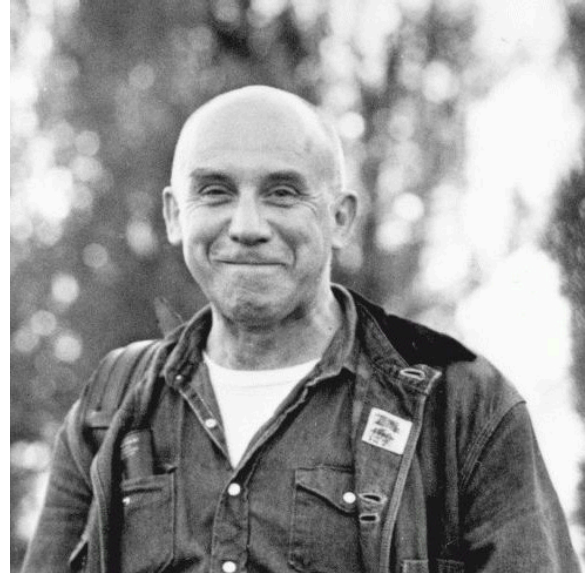
“Perhaps if we prayed about being in love with God our relationship with the Holy One might begin to shed its formality and stiffness and we could begin to enter into the experience of the intimacy God has already established with us in Christ. If the woman or man of desire within us had more opportunity to speak the language of desire and adoration and self-yielding we would find ourselves able to break through our projections of God as taskmaster to discover God as Absolute Beauty. We would discover that the power God has over us is the power to attract us with the utter beauty of Holiness. Because few people around us seem willing to tell us of the beauty of God, the tenderness of God, the desire of God for us, we have to learn of these things ourselves by taking risks in our praying. Almost the only help we can get is from the mystics of the church, who discovered long ago that the truth at the heart of all truth is that God is in love with us, and that every single human being is made by God to be a great lover.” —*A Season for the Spirit: Readings for the Days of Lent* by Martin L. Smith



Conference 2: Where Do We Encounter God?

In Nature

Resonant with Merton's love of the predawn hours after the Night Vigils monastic office in which he found the silent darkness to be the ground of his creative energies, he found the absence of sound as the locus of an often unrequited desire for communication with God. In particular, he sought the possibility of experiencing, unhindered, the Divine in logos/ language/ poesis, noting in a journal entry in May, 1965: I am out of bed at two-fifteen in the morning, when the night is darkest and most silent. ... I find myself in the primordial lostness of night, solitude, forest, peace, a mind awake in the dark ... The psalms grow up silently by themselves without effort like plants ... The plants hold themselves up on stems that have a single consistency, that of mercy, or rather, great mercy. Magna misericordia. In the formlessness of night and silence a word then pronounces itself: Mercy." —The Mystical Ecology of Thomas Merton's Poetics by Lynn R. Szabo



In Physicality



In the film "Chariots of Fire" Eric Liddell is being reprimanded by his sister for neglecting his responsibilities before God as he devotes his focus toward competitive running. Liddell responds, "I believe that God made me for a purpose. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure."

“A Christian paradigm shift had taken place especially in Britain. The British ideal of Muscular Christianity, developed in the mid-19th century, transformed the body from a site of holy suffering to one of virtuous physicality. The model sought to appeal to men, to rebalance the perceived female majority among the devout and the perceived femininity of modern piety (and of Jesus, for some). It celebrated the healthy, active male body as the vehicle for vigorous morality, spirituality, and service to others.



This cultural ideal spread far and wide because of its allied Scriptural and progressive sources. It combined St. Paul’s message in I Cor. 19-20, that marked the body as “the temple of the Holy Spirit” and exhorted readers to “glorify God in your body, and in your spirit,” with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s prescription, in his didactic novel on child education (*Emile*, 1762), to develop moral character through physical education. Muscular Christianity also contributed to the turn-of-the-century British cult of the chivalrous, devout Christian knight.

Physical education and competitive sports built the vigorous moral citizen and Christian so it became a key element in educational programs into our time.” —Friday Reflection: Eric Liddell I—From Pious Traitor to Wartime Saint by Suzanne Glover Lindsay, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church (Philadelphia) blog, February 5, 2021

In Suffering

“I Desire to Suffer, Lord, because Thou didst Suffer”— Teresa of Avila

How very pleasing to God is the willing desire to suffer for Him: “Very pleasing to Me, dearest daughter, is the willing desire to bear every pain and fatigue, even unto death, for the salvation of souls, for the more the soul endures, the more she shows that she loves Me; loving Me she comes to know more of My truth,



and the more she knows, the more pain and intolerable grief she feels at the offenses committed against Me.” —Jesus to St. Catherine of Siena

***But what kind of suffering are we talking about? And does God show up in the way these mystics thought?

***What about when God heals?

In Community?



Is it possible to experience mysticism in a group?

“We believe that direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder is a wellspring for a life of faith. Life and the universe are replete with mystery beyond thought or expectation. Encountering it raises our spiritual awareness, inspires us to have spiritual practices, and opens us to the forces that create and uphold life...Our

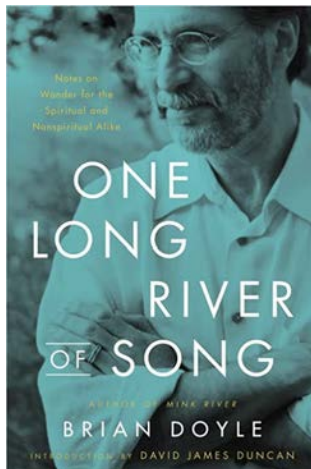
Purpose: To create a community of Unitarian Universalists who share an interest in mysticism, in order to gain the rewards of mutual stimulation and support.” Website of UU Mystics in Community

Conference 3: Your Experience, Your Story

“God”

by Brian Doyle

By purest chance I was out in our street when the kindergarten
Bus mumbled past going slow and I looked up just as all seven
Kids on my side of the bus looked at me and I grinned and they
Lit up and all this crap about God being dead and where is God
And who owns God and who hears God better than whom is the
Most egregiously stupid crap imaginable because if you want to
See God and have God see you and have this mutual perception
Be completely untrammelled by blather and greed and comment,
Go stand in the street as the kindergarten bus murmurs past. I’m
Not kidding and this is not a metaphor. I am completely serious.
Everyone babbles about God but I saw God this morning just as
The bus slowed down for the stop at Maple Street. God was six
Girls and one boy with a bright green and purple stegosaurus hat.
Of course God would wear a brilliantly colored tall dinosaur hat!
If you were the Imagination that dreamed up everything that ever
Was in this blistering perfect terrible world, wouldn’t you wear a
Hat celebrating some of the wildest most amazing developments?



Speaker Biography

Sophronia Scott is a novelist, essayist, and leading contemplative thinker whose work has received a 2020 Artist Fellowship Grant from the Connecticut Office of the Arts. Her book *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton* won the 2021 Thomas Merton “Louie” Award from the International Thomas Merton Society. She holds a BA in English from Harvard and an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Sophronia began her career as an award-winning magazine journalist for *Time*, where she co-authored the groundbreaking cover story “Twentysomething,” the first study identifying the demographic group known as Generation X, and *People*. When her first novel, *All I Need to Get By*, was published by St. Martin’s Press in 2004 Sophronia was nominated for best new author at the African American Literary Awards and hailed by Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as “potentially one of the best writers of her generation.”

Her latest book is *Wild, Beautiful, and Free*, a historical novel set during the Civil War. Sophronia’s other books include *Unforgivable Love*, *Love’s Long Line*, *Doing Business By the Book*, and *This Child of Faith: Raising a Spiritual Child in a Secular World*, co-written with her son



Tain. Her essays, short stories, and articles have appeared in numerous publications including *Yankee Magazine*, *The Christian Century*, *North American Review*, *NewYorkTimes.com*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Her essays “Hope On Any Given Day,” “The Legs On Which I Move,” and “Why I Didn’t Go to the Firehouse” are listed among the Notables in the *Best American Essays* series. Sophronia has taught at Regis University’s Mile High MFA and Bay Path University’s MFA in Creative Nonfiction.

Each September she leads an annual writers retreat, *The Write of Your Life*, in Italy’s Veneto region. Sophronia is currently the founding director of Alma College’s Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing, a low-residency graduate program based in Alma, Michigan. Sophronia lives in Sandy Hook, Connecticut.