



Ethics and Mysticism: The Work of Kenneth E. Kirk and Some Other Modern Anglicans¹

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ABSTRACT

Kenneth E. Kirk is regarded as the person who revived moral theology in the Anglican tradition in the early to mid-twentieth century. This article argues that a renewal of interest in mysticism, led especially by W.R. Inge and Evelyn Underhill in the first two decades of the twentieth century, was influential upon Kirk's outlook, especially his association of moral theology with ascetic theology (or mystical theology), and linking of personal holiness with ethics. Kirk made prayer – especially contemplative prayer – and worship primary in the education of the soul, the forging of Christian character and therefore the creation of a moral agent.

KEYWORDS: Beatitudes, ethics, W.R. Inge, Kenneth Kirk, moral theology, mysticism, Evelyn Underhill

In 1918, the last year of World War I, a young priest who had served in France at the Front as a Chaplain from 1915 to 1917 was giving some pastoral lectures to trainee temporary military chaplains in army camps in the north of England. Two years later, when he was a college chaplain and don at Oxford, he published the lectures as a book with the somewhat plodding title *Some Principles of Moral Theology and their Application*. The author was a man named Kenneth Kirk, the person credited with reviving moral theology in Anglicanism.³

1. This article has been developed out of the Cheney Lecture, which I delivered at the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale in October 2016. My thanks to Dean Andrew McGowan for the invitation to give the lecture and for his warm hospitality.

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3. Kirk had already written about the importance of chaplains on the Front and his own experience of being in the Forces in 'When the Priests Come Home', in F.B. Macnutt (ed.), *The Church in the Furnace: Essays by Seventeen Temporary*

As one reviewer of the book put it, 'This is a welcome book; something of the kind has long been needed. ... Moral theology was until recently practically a dead letter for English Churchmen, though we had some capable exponents of the subject in the seventeenth century.'⁴ Kirk later went on to become the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University (1933–37), and finally Bishop of Oxford (1937–54).⁵

In lecturing to temporary army chaplains, preparing them for traumatic pastoral work on the Front in a war that had by 1918 taken more lives than anyone could ever have envisaged, Kirk emphasized ascetic theology, sometimes called mystical theology. This may seem surprising to readers today, but it is at the heart of all that Kirk has to say in this book, and he recognized that this juxtaposition of mysticism and ethics might seem strange, paradoxical even, to his readers. He wrote in the Preface, 'Some surprise may perhaps be occasioned by the amount of space devoted in this book to what is known as ascetic theology – the science, that is to say, of the methods and rules of Christian progress.'⁶ Kirk's interest was in the relationship between the formation of the Christian character and moral agency, or ethics. The backdrop to all that he wrote was, of course, the horror of World War I, and the question of how to be a moral actor in the aftermath of a war that had shattered the Victorian idea of progress, and left many in psychological tatters. He was concerned to prepare priests for ministering in that context.

Kirk addressed, head-on, the seeming paradox of putting ascetical theology together with ethics, and the answer for him was the revival of moral theology in the Anglican tradition, steering a middle course

(*F note continued*)

Church of England Chaplains on Active Service in France and Flanders (London: Macmillan and Co., 1917), pp. 409–28.

4. L.S. Thornton, 'Review of *Some Principles of Moral Theology and their Application*, by Kenneth E. Kirk', *Theology: A Monthly Journal of Historic Christianity* III. 13 (July 1921), p. 50. For a consideration of Kirk's impact as a moral theologian, see David H. Smith, 'The Moral Theology or Casuistic Tradition', *ATR* 94.4. (2012), pp. 595–613 and David H. Smith, 'Kenneth Kirk's *The Vision of God*', in Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

5. On the impact of Kirk's work in moral theology on the Oxford syllabus, see Eric Waldram Kemp, *The Life and Letters of Kenneth Escott Kirk, Bishop of Oxford 1937–1954* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959), pp. 56–58. Eric Kemp, who was Chaplain of Exeter College, Oxford, and then a long-serving Bishop of Chichester, was Kirk's son-in-law.

6. Kenneth E. Kirk, *Some Principles of Moral Theology and their Application* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1920), p. xi.

between the rigidity of natural law on the one hand and the vagueness of excessive individualism on the other, to advocate for a spiritual practice that would turn the person's attention outward. He wanted to address the accusation that Christianity puts personal holiness before the service of God and our neighbor, and he went on responding to that accusation in all of his work.

The main theme of this article is to show how Kirk, in reviving Anglican moral theology, drew on the fruits of another intellectual and religious revival of the early twentieth century, namely, mysticism, thereby bringing mysticism and ethics into conversation with one another.

The Revival of Mysticism

In the 20 years before Kirk wrote this book reviving moral theology, there had been a revival of interest in mysticism in England. In an atmosphere of questioning traditional authority, increasing disillusionment with the institutional church, and the search for an authentic spirituality, some thinkers came to see mysticism as an answer to their search and their questions. This revival began in 1899 when W.R. Inge gave his Bampton Lectures at Oxford on Christian Mysticism, and published them under that title. Inge was then an Oxford don, but later went on to become Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, a post he held for 23 years, and through which he became a prominent public figure. The publication of his *Christian Mysticism* sparked further interest and increasing numbers of books on the subject were published, most notably Friedrich Von Hugel's *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908) and Evelyn Underhill's important book *Mysticism* in 1911.⁷ These works by Inge, Von Hugel and Underhill were the three major books on mysticism that Kirk included in his bibliography, listed – interestingly – under the subsection 'Ethics and Christian Ethics', which reveals how he thought about the topic. (William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902] was, by contrast, included in the bibliographic section labeled 'Psychology and Religious Psychology'.)

By 1920, the year in which Kirk published *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, the subject of mysticism had become popular – and popularized – in the churches on both sides of the Atlantic, and numerous books, both scholarly and popular, had found a ready

7. On the revival of mysticism in this period, see Jane Shaw, 'Varieties of Mystical Experience in William James and other Moderns', *History of European Ideas* 43.3 (2017), pp. 226–40.

audience. An Episcopal priest, William Philip Downes, Rector of Trinity Church, Bristol, in Connecticut, wrote in an article published that year: 'That there is a widespread interest in mysticism today is attested by many facts. There is the endless outpouring of books on the subject. ... [and] There has been an increasing demand for the reprinting of the works of the classic mystics.'⁸

This strand of the revival of interest in mysticism was Christian and largely held within the boundaries of the institutional church.⁹ It was broadly about an ordered prayer life, and specifically about the stages of prayer directed at the end point of union with God (the mystical state). This revival of Christian mysticism had an impact within the churches in a number of ways. There was the steady stream of books about mysticism pouring off the presses, in varying degrees of popularity and serious scholarship. The 'demand for the reprinting of the works of the classic mystics', as Downes put it, meant that much scholarly energy was put into producing critical editions of spiritual texts from the early church and middle ages, including the discovery of texts that had been unknown or only partially known, such as the *The Book of Margery Kempe*. This was also a period of a great growth in retreats in Anglicanism, for lay and ordained, individuals and parishes.¹⁰ Evelyn Underhill conducted several retreats a year after her decisive move into the Church of England – though she was an exception as a laywoman; most retreat conductors were ordained men. Retreat societies were founded and retreat houses built, such as Pleshey

8. William Philip Downes, 'Mysticism', *The Biblical World* 54 (1920), pp. 619-42 (620).

9. A second strand of this revival included 'an ahistorical, poetic, essential, intuitive, universal, wildly rhapsodic mysticism' as the historian Leigh Eric Schmidt puts it in his *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 53-54. This was mysticism as spontaneous or sporadic religious experience, as described by James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. A third strand of the revival was an incorporation of mysticism from the East, as people looked to Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism for inspiration, and as these religious traditions came to be more widely known in the West.

10. In 1913, the Association for Short Retreats was founded; this became the Association for Promoting Retreats four years later. The Society of Retreat Conductors was formed in 1924. The Jesuit Charles Plater's book, *Retreats for the People: A Sketch of a Great Revival* (London: B. Herder, 1912) was influential in Anglo-Catholic circles. After World War I, as retreats grew in popularity in the Church of England, some suggested that they could play an important part in the rehabilitation of those returning from the Front. For more details on the growth of retreats in the Church of England, see J.H. Tyers, 'Borrowed Silence: A History of the Practice of Retreat in the Church of England', PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 2012.

in Essex, Underhill's favorite. It was also a time for the development of disciplined prayer groups, again for both laity and clergy, such as that led by the Anglican priest Reginald Somerset Ward, known as *The Way or The Road*: this was a group of several hundred people across Britain and farther afield, who committed to leading a disciplined prayer life under the direction of Ward and other priests whom he had trained as spiritual directors.¹¹

The Spiritual Formation of Character

It was against this religious background, then, that Kirk made the formation of Christian character, or the education of the soul, central to his moral theology; and it was in this intellectual context that he addressed the seeming paradox of relating mysticism (or ascetic theology) to ethics. Personal holiness was important – *and* it was profoundly related to being a moral agent. Kirk felt that that needed to be addressed explicitly in his context: 'It is perhaps not sufficiently emphasized in the Church of England that the Christian life does not spring into being fully equipped and perfect in all details.' He believed, rather, that the test of a person's religion was that 'it should exhibit fresh graces and achievements year by year'.¹² Despite the revival of interest in mysticism, the increase in prayer groups and retreats, and the growing acceptability of Kirk's own High Church brand of Anglicanism with its emphasis on prayer, spiritual direction and confession, he was still skeptical about the Church's capacity to grasp the importance of this spiritual formation.

The conventional English view of the spiritual life – that it is comparatively easy to acquire – is responsible for an almost universal assumption that a sermon once a week, with a casual glance at the Bible from time to time, and a few fragmentary reminiscences of the catechism and early Sunday School teaching, is all that a Soul needs in the way of guidance.¹³

Kirk argued that the soul needs to be educated and shaped. He rooted this in a biblical understanding of the spiritual life as a pilgrimage, a race, a contest, a warfare – 'metaphors all of them which express effort, progress and achievement'. He went on to say that 'The Christian should be one continually going from strength to strength, reaching out to that

11. For more on Ward, see *Reginald Somerset Ward, 1881–1962: His Life and Letters* (ed. and comp. Edmund R. Morgan; London: Mowbray, 1963).

12. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 125.

13. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 134.

which is still before him.¹⁴ In other words, we can train, as we would for a race or a pilgrimage or a contest. Kirk, as his biographer noted, believed that 'The truth of Christianity can only be grasped by living it.'¹⁵

In Kirk's scheme, this training of the Christian character entailed 'the dedication, or purification, or right orientation, of intellect, desire and will'.¹⁶ Intellect, desire and will appear throughout the book as the three parts of the person that need to be in harmony with one another and with the tools of spiritual formation. Three elements combined in this training of the Christian character or education of the soul. The first of these was the doctrine of the threefold mystic way, while the other two were psychology – a rapidly developing new science at this time – and the quest to become Christ-like, as demonstrated in the Scriptures. The first of these elements, the threefold way of purification, illumination and union with God was, said Kirk, drawing on the work of Inge and Underhill, 'the central tenet of mysticism'. In these stages of prayer, he saw 'the transformation of desire, intelligence and will respectively into the image of Christ'. However, for Kirk, these three stages of prayer were simultaneous processes, going on throughout life, with one of them prominent at any given time in a person's spiritual development.¹⁷

He related this mystic progress and its stages to the psychology of his day, especially the work of the American Edwin Starbuck in his *The Psychology of Religion* (1899). In his pioneering work on conversion, based on empirical research, Starbuck demonstrated that the development of Christian character after conversion was the same in both the suddenly converted and those who had a more gradual awakening to faith.¹⁸ This finding substantiated Kirk's scheme of *gradual* character formation. Kirk was also interested in the question of instinct in Starbuck's work and that of a British scholar and proponent of the 'new psychology', William McDougall, likening instinct to 'the fundamental natural endowments of intellect, emotion and will'. Kirk argued, following McDougall in his *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908), that the ultimate ground of all action was instinct, which he defined as 'a primary impulse to action accompanied by a definite emotional tone'.¹⁹ For McDougall the mind

14. Kirk, *Some Principles*, pp. 125-26.

15. Kemp, *The Life and Letters of Kenneth Escott Kirk*, p. 49.

16. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 46.

17. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 50.

18. On Starbuck's work in this area, see Christopher White, 'A Measured Faith: Edwin Starbuck, William James and the Scientific Reform of Religious Experience', *HTR* 101. (July–October 2008), pp. 431-50.

19. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 234.

was not a blank slate but rather the origin of the instincts, 'the most purposive forces for all life'.²⁰ This emphasis on instinct was not uncontentious in the field of psychology at the time,²¹ but it gave justification to Kirk's scheme of moral theology that 'the soul can only be led to virtuous actions by the continued orientation of desire, intellect and will to the service of God'. The instincts all had to be rightly aligned or subordinated to serving God. If one of these factors – desire, intellect or will – is directed to something other than the service of God then 'moral struggle occurs' precisely because instinct is the guide – without a Godward focus guiding it.²²

The third element for Kirk was at the heart of the Christian life: attentively following Christ. Christian character was formed, above all else, by 'acts of attention concentrated by our Lord'. As Kirk put it, 'The disciple is not merely one who thinks about Christ, but one who knows him.'²³ The Christian life was not so much one of following rules as following Christ. Again, Kirk had a system; this one was based on four stages which he believed could be deduced from the writings of Paul: (1) the person engages in practices that are in the imitation of Christ; (2) others see Christ in that person; (3) the person's will is identified with the will of Christ; (4) the person is now 'I-in-Christ'. He regarded this scheme 'as much deeper than either that of the mystic or that of the psychologist'.²⁴

Nevertheless, regular habits of prayer were at the heart of these 'acts of attention concentrated on the Lord' and Kirk sketched out a three-fold way of prayer that corresponded to the three-fold mystic way: meditation or mental prayer; prayer of aspiration or the affections; prayer of contemplation or of quiet. In just the way that the stages of the threefold mystic way did not necessarily follow one after the other, these forms of prayer were to be practised concurrently rather than

20. Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 61.

21. William Clebsch and Charles Jeekie critiqued Kirk's use of McDougall, stating: 'Kirk had hardly published his recommendations before university psychology began to reject McDougall's system.' See William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jeekie, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 1984), p. 78. In fact, the reception of McDougall was rather more complex, though it is true that he and his work fell out of favour with other psychologists for a variety of reasons. For a nuanced discussion of McDougall, his work and its reception, see Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, ch. 2.

22. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 238.

23. Kirk, *Some Principles*, pp. 131, 132.

24. Kirk, *Some Principles*, pp. 127-29.

sequentially, and all forms of prayer found their full consummation in the Eucharist. The priests for whom Kirk was writing were also exhorted to attend retreats, engage in fasting and almsgiving – which included ‘all forms of effort on behalf of others’ – and forgiveness.²⁵ They were also to encourage their parishioners and all those under their pastoral care to undertake these spiritual practices. Kirk felt that spiritual direction was lacking in the English church, and not enough clergy were experts in the art of spiritual direction – which he regarded as the special duty of the clergy, though he did not think they had a monopoly on it.

Kirk’s moral theology is very much a system, full of sub-schemes and sub-systems. (He loved systems, which made him an efficient and successful administrator both as an Oxford don and, later, as a diocesan bishop.²⁶) Underlying it is the strong influence of Thomas Aquinas and his *Summa Theologica*, as well as the seventeenth-century divines, especially Jeremy Taylor, yet this is a moral theology that has been forged for the English church of his day. In that sense it was in tune with some forms of Anglo-Catholicism that had recently emerged; while some Victorian Anglo-Catholics tended to borrow from Rome, using post-Tridentine rites and rituals, a new generation of High Churchmen at the turn of the century sought to bring English traditions front and center, especially Percy Dearmer and Walter Frere in their advocacy of ‘English Use’.²⁷ Kirk did not run in their circles – and he was a generation younger – but his new presentation of moral theology to ‘guide the theory and practice of the Church of England’ was a postwar

25. Kirk, *Some Principles*, pp. 154, 165, 168.

26. The correspondence of Kenneth Kirk held in the Bodleian Library, spanning the period 1922 (the year he became Fellow and Chaplain of Trinity College, Oxford) to 1933 (the year he became Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford), indicates his attention to detail, capacity for administration, sense of responsibility, and the conscientious way in which he approached everything. The letters cover his work as a college tutor, the university business in which he was involved as an active member of the Faculty of Theology, his role as Controller of Lodging Houses in the university (an appointment he held from 1921 to 1933), the many requests he received to speak and preach, his work as a member of the Cuddesdon College Council and various school governing bodies, his reviews for the *Church Times*, and the appointment of priests to his college’s livings. See Bodleian, LHD/Misc/3 and 4.

27. On Percy Dearmer and English Use, see Donald Gray, *Percy Dearmer: A Parson’s Pilgrimage* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000), ch. 3; on Walter Frere and English Use, see John Davies, ‘The Spirituality of Walter Frere’, and Peter Allan, ‘Like an Elephant Waltzing’, in Benjamin Gordon-Taylor and Nicholas Stebbing (eds.), *Walter Frere: Scholar, Monk, Bishop* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011).

attempt to train a new generation of high church priests for the distinctive English context in which he and they were serving, not least because he felt that 'The Church of England affords her clergy singularly little expert guidance in this matter of the direction of souls'.²⁸

Kirk's moral theology also strikes the reader as, at times, very busy. It seems to depend a great deal on the actions of the moral agent. Where, in the end, is the stillness? Where, indeed, is grace? It is when – in discussing the education of the soul – Kirk returns to contemplative prayer and the mystical tradition that he corrects himself on this; as he writes, 'contemplation corrects, as it were, the emphasis of the other forms of prayer. *They* manifest themselves in human effort; *this* recurs to the fundamental truth of religion that we can do nothing of ourselves, that all comes from Him.' And he draws on psychology to make his spiritual point that it is in letting go that we may finally have something:

Starbuck, whose principles of religious education are singularly in accord with those of ascetic theologians, tells of 'a certain music teacher who says to her pupils, after the thing to be done has been clearly pointed out and unsuccessfully attempted, "Stop trying and it will do itself."'

This principle of spiritual surrender is, in the end, of 'great importance'.²⁹

The Place of Worship in Spiritual Formation

Kirk went on to write a number of other books, the most influential of which was *The Vision of God* (1931), a deeply learned book, initially written and delivered as the Bampton Lectures in Oxford in 1928 (nearly 30 years after Inge had delivered his Bampton on Christian Mysticism). It had a considerable impact at the time. An anonymous reviewer in the *Journal of Theological Studies* in October 1931 wrote that 'The book is already widely known. One meets it in general conversation, and it is oftenest described as beautiful.'³⁰ It is a book that many read in seminary 50 years ago, but is little read now. In this book, Kirk took a verse from the Beatitudes, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' and argued that 'the development of Christian thought

28. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. vii.

29. Kirk, *Some Principles*, pp. 164, 173; he quotes from Edwin Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (London: Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1911) p. 117.

30. Anon., 'Review of *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (The Bampton Lectures for 1928) by Kenneth E. Kirk', *JTS* 33.129 (October 1931), p. 55.

and teaching about conduct is inseparably bound up with the history of these words – the sixth of the Beatitudes as recorded by St. Matthew'.³¹ Kirk proposed that this vision of God is the goal or purpose of the Christian life, and, consequently, the determinant of Christian conduct. Christianity therefore has a double vision: to call human beings to that vision of God, and to call them to the pursuit of that vision. In that sense, the history of this beatitude is the history of Christian ethics itself, says Kirk. *The Vision of God* reiterates his argument that moral theology and ascetic theology are inseparable, and also develops it significantly.

Kirk posited that worship is the vehicle to the vision of God and it is prior to ethics, for it is the key to the unselfishness of all morally serious persons. Unselfishness does not happen primarily through the valiant attempts of the self to be unselfish, but rather through the acknowledgment of something more valuable than the self. 'The only achievement man has the right to hope for is that of greater Christian saintliness – greater zeal for service – coming from this direction of the heart and mind to God.'³² This was a logical development of his emphasis, in *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, on 'acts of concentration focused on the Lord' as the basis of developing Christian character.

Kirk's method was to look at how this idea of the vision of God as the goal of the Christian life had been interpreted both in writing and practice in the Hebrew Bible and other writers up to the New Testament, and then in the New Testament and the sweep of Christian history. Kirk did not only look at the interpretations but also at what he deemed the *failures* of the tradition to live into this possibility. The monastics, for example, were seeking this vision of God through their renunciation and asceticism, but they could, too often, focus their attention on their own experience. By contrast, during the period of the sixteenth-century Reformations and in their aftermath, both the Roman Catholics and Protestants fell prey to institutionalism, which hampered or corrupted the quest with ecclesiological rule-making. Kirk was, as in his earlier work, attempting to balance the role of the individual and the role of the institution; the place of love with the importance of discipline. This led him to a long survey of Christian history in these terms. For some readers, like the anonymous reviewer cited above, this meant that the grand story was almost from the start 'clogged by grim, disappointing and difficult interruptions'. Only towards the end of the book does the detail disappear and the reviewer concludes: 'The argument is validated

31. Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966 [1931; 2nd edn, 1932]), p. 1.

32. Kirk, *Vision of God*, p. 445.

by bringing the mystic intuitive presupposition of God, the living, one, all comprehending God, into common life.³³

Kirk, in placing worship before ethics, might have been accused of neglecting 'common life' by his peers. His study was, in part, addressed to the Christian ethicists of his day who wanted to deal with more concrete facts; who were not convinced that the vision of God was the true goal to set before the Christian. Was that not too self-centered, too uninspiring or too unrealizable? Kirk was, perhaps, more individualistic than systemic in his approach than contemporaries such as the Niebuhr brothers, but his answer to such hypothetical questions was a bold claim that service or ethics that is not rooted in something that takes us beyond ourselves – for him, worship – will inevitably be egotistic and self-righteous. 'The danger of "service" as an ideal, is that it fosters the spirit of patronage: the glory of worship is to elicit the spirit of humility.' He made a distinction between 'the service of patronage' and the 'service of humility'. The 'service of patronage' was 'the expert coming to the help of the inefficient'; it was 'Ladies Bountiful' (remember his times); it was a situation where gratitude only convicts the 'helper' of his or her own importance, and leads to self-esteem.³⁴ Kirk emphasized character formation and spiritual self-discipline through worship and prayer – that is, through activity that points us beyond ourselves, to God and others. This takes us away from an individualistic piety. For Kirk, seeking the vision of God was not selfishness, but the way to overcome selfishness. The knot of egotism could only be untied by the discovery of something more important than oneself.

These ideas were echoed by William Temple in some addresses which he gave when he was Archbishop of York to students in the University Church in Oxford in 1931 (the same year that Kirk's *The Vision of God* was published, having been delivered in the University Church in Oxford in 1928). Stating that the fundamental business of life is always worship, Temple went on to say that if our worship is truly worship of God, and 'not some indulgence of our own spiritual emotion' then 'you will be full of kindness for everybody as you go out from such worship. It is only as the world gets hold of you again that it begins to fail, and you have to come again and kindle the fire of your worship until it lasts undying.' He goes on to nuance this, making worship primary, as Kirk did:

People are always thinking that conduct is supremely important, and that because prayer helps it, therefore prayer is good. That is true as far as it goes; still truer is it to say that worship is of supreme importance and

33. Anon., 'Review of *The Vision of God*', pp. 56, 57.

34. Kirk, *Vision of God*, pp. 449, 447.

conduct tests it. Conduct tests how much of yourself was in the worship you gave to God. You get most help from religion when you have stopped thinking about your needs, even for spiritual strength, and think about God. Gaze and gaze on him.³⁵

There were similarities in the approaches of Kirk and Temple: both wished to tie worship to ethical action; both were battling the individualism of their time (even if Kirk was more interested in individual holiness as a way to strengthen the body of the Church). But Kirk's perspective was distinctive for its emphasis on Christian mysticism as the area where this understanding of worship as the quest to 'see' God has been most clearly articulated. While Kirk did not offer a thorough survey of what he meant by worship, there was no doubt that prayer was at the heart of it, and contemplative prayer was central. Petitionary prayer was problematic for its attempts to influence God; true prayer was that attentiveness to God, by which God's will – not our will – can be learnt. God is the initiator in worship; the human being's task is to be ready.

This quest for the vision of God is at the heart of the mystic way. The Sermon on the Mount was the first New Testament text cited by Inge as indicative of a mystical system to be found in Scripture: 'The vision of God is promised in the Sermon on the Mount, and promised only to those who are pure in heart.'³⁶ Kirk believed that it was Christian mystics, above all other Christian schools of thought, who understood that disinterestedness – of the sort needed to ensure that worship of God *could* take us to that place of ultimate service and pure love – was possible for human beings and 'indeed is the essential condition which alone gives any action eternal worth'.³⁷

Mysticism, Religious Experience and Ethics

However, evoking mysticism implicitly raised another question: what is the role of religious experience in the ethical life? What does it mean to 'see God'? What authority might such an experience have? To speak of mysticism, and especially to use a phrase like 'the vision of God' is to conjure up the idea of religious experience, and, for many people,

35. William Temple, *Christian Faith and Life: Being Eight Addresses Delivered in the University Church at Oxford, February 8th–15th 1931* (London: Mowbray, 1931), p. 19.

36. W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London: Methuen and Co. 1899), p. 44. Though for Inge, the Gospel of John was 'the charter of Christian Mysticism'.

37. Kirk, *Vision of God*, p. 453.

it is a focus on the quest for such experience that threatens to take us away from ethics.

In *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, Kirk noted that the revival of mysticism had emerged from a new emphasis on personal religious experience, which had in turn emerged as a response to the intellectual challenges to the Christian faith in his day – the other response being a defence of traditional orthodoxy. Many others accounted for the revival of mysticism in the same way, not least W.R. Inge, as he wrote in *Christian Mysticism*: ‘We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that both the old seats of authority, the infallible Church and the infallible book, are fiercely assailed, and that our faith needs reinforcements.’ Inge’s answer was that ‘The “impregnable rock” is neither an institution nor a book, but a life or experience.’³⁸ Kirk was less comfortable with *experience* as the seat of authority, and, in his earlier work *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, had written that neither authoritarianism nor mysticism were satisfactory guides, for, he felt, they both undermined the role of reason.

Nevertheless, it would be rash to contrast the positions of Inge and Kirk too sharply. Kirk, like Inge, placed authority in the relationship between the individual and God, not on external rules or the institution or a sacred book. Kirk understood the fallibility of reason – but in some ways caricatured mysticism as rejecting reason as ‘not in essence a gift of God at all’.³⁹ Inge’s form of mysticism was a highly rational one, rooted in neo-Platonism, especially the work of Plotinus. And Inge was, along with some other writers of the period on mysticism, somewhat skittish on the phenomena that are often regarded as ‘religious experience’. He was certainly fastidious about what he counted as mysticism, was generally uninterested in the larger category of religious experience, and entirely opposed to including within the category of mysticism signs, wonders, other supernatural phenomena, ecstasies and visions, all of which he largely associated (negatively) with Roman Catholicism; some of this dismissal was surely gendered – he had little time for Teresa of Avila.

Kirk had already stated, in his earlier work *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, that ‘Mystic states are valid only for the mystic. They provide no fragment of a reason why their authority should be accepted by any but himself; nor indeed is it clear what truths, if any, their authority guarantees even to him.’⁴⁰ Here he was drawing directly on William

38. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, pp. 329–30.

39. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 97.

40. Kirk, *Some Principles*, p. 97.

James's line of reasoning in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). James argued that such experiences are utterly authoritative for their subjects, as face-to-face presentations of what seems immediately to exist. But no authority emanates from them to others who stand outside them, and what comes from them must be sifted and tested. In other words, people might live by the experiences they have, but the truths proffered by those experiences are fallible.

However, because Kirk put the vision of God at the heart of his ethical enterprise, he could not ignore religious experience. As he put it, "To "see God" implies something which we constantly and yet vaguely speak of as "religious experience."" He was not opposed to 'religious experience' but he maintained that the experience was not the point; rather it is the *insight we gain* from the experience that must shape us: "To look towards God, and from that "look" to acquire insight into both the follies of ones heart and the needs of ones neighbours ... this is something very remote from the quest for religious experience for its own sake.' It was not only the insight gained but the *attitude* that was important, a point he had made in his earlier work. It was about 'the direction of the heart and mind to God'. It is the emphasis on the 'attitudes rather than the experiences of worship. What matters ... is that we should look towards God, rather than that we should here and now receive the vision.' Nevertheless, 'that there is such a vision, and that it is attainable, theology no less than experience affirms'.⁴¹

Kirk believed that we all have that *attitude* of worship within us – 'it is an actual endowment' – even if it is not realized.⁴² Inge, in a small book on personal devotion, which he wrote in 1924, reminded his readers that this 'attitude' within us is described throughout the Christian mystical tradition as a thirst:

Recollect; think; pray; do not always be in such a hurry. You know well, when you do stop to think seriously, that you are not satisfied. There is something wanting. You have been thirsty, without knowing it. Well that thirst is the craving that God has put into you, because He wishes to satisfy it Himself.

He suspected that such an attitude was 'old fashioned' when he was writing in the early 1920s, but he believed that is 'what we most need to hear, now as always'.⁴³

41. Kirk, *Vision of God*, pp. 2, 445, 464.

42. Kirk, *Vision of God*, p. 445.

43. W.R. Inge, *Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1924), p. 39.

Just as worship is an attitude in us, so Kirk suggested that 'religious experience' was something that we all have, just about all the time, if we were but trained to realize it. This appears as a rather off-the-cuff comment in an otherwise dense book; but perhaps it was Kirk's way of 'normalizing' such experience so that attention would not be focused on it.

Far from being rare, the mystical experience is at once the commonest and the greatest of human accidents. There is not one of us to whom it does not come daily. It is only custom or carelessness that prevents our realizing how divine it is in essence; only timidity which checks us from proclaiming that we too at such moments have seen God, even as if in a glass darkly; only folly which blinds us to the fact that these moments of vision are our surest safeguard and our best resource in every temptation, sorrow or selfishness.⁴⁴

The question was: what would one do with that fleeting religious experience? How to 'catch' it and train it, to realize its insights for our becoming moral actors in the world? How might it become our best resource in every temptation, sorrow or selfishness? In other words, what was the value of religious experience, if any?

Kirk pointed out, in his historical survey, those mystics whose experience of God exemplified the relationship between prayer and moral action. Bernard of Clairvaux was one such whom Kirk regarded as having experienced the power of contemplation to inspire action and renew ideals. As Kirk puts it, passage after passage from Bernard's sermons on the Canticles describe 'the psychological effect of that experience which purifies the soul, and fits and inspires it for the service of men's needs, spiritual and temporal alike'. Thus, he wrote, 'Bernard is second to none of the great mystics in these descriptions; he recognizes to the full the emotional qualities with which the vision may be adorned. But his test of its validity is always a moral one.'⁴⁵

Evelyn Underhill especially emphasized that a prayer life must have fruits. She reminded her spiritual directees of this over and over again, and in her large book *Mysticism*, she pointed to what came from the final stage of that prayer life - the unitive stage. She notes: 'the great public ministry of Catherine of Siena, which ranged from the tending of the plague-stricken to the reforming of the Papacy' and emphasizes that a prayer life does not result merely in personal works: 'the great unitive mystics are each of them founders of spiritual families, centres wherefrom radiates new transcendental life'. In that sense they are like the

44. Kirk, *Vision of God*, pp. 193-94.

45. Kirk, *Vision of God*, p. 352.

great 'creative seers and artists' who 'are the parents, not merely of their own immediate works, but also of whole schools of art; whole groups of persons who acquire or inherit their vision of beauty or truth'. Teresa of Avila found her order corrupt and went on to found a new convent and reform her order; her vitality was infectious; and 'in the end, nearly every city in Spain has within it Teresa's spiritual children'. Underhill emphasizes the point that 'the unitive state is, in essence, a fulfillment of love'.⁴⁶

Many Christian mystics understood something more, however: that the *religious experience itself* might be the motivation for going out and doing good; or, indeed, that moral behavior is a principle of verification to judge a claimed experience as genuinely from God.⁴⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, in a passage quoted by Kirk, that he knew that God was present in his contemplation because 'As soon as He comes to me He quickens my sleeping soul, rouses and softens and goads my heart, which was sunk in torpor, hard as stone, stricken with disease ... By the revived activity of my heart, I know His presence; ... In amendment of life I see His goodness and kindness. In the renewal and recreation of my mind, of my inner man, I glimpse, in some slight degree, the excellence of the divine beauty.'⁴⁸ Teresa of Avila – herself cautious in recommending ecstatic experiences, despite or perhaps because of having them herself – advised her nuns that if the fruits of forgiveness and pardon of injury do not happen after the soul has had such an experience, then the experience did not come from God.⁴⁹ Teresa's near contemporary, John of the Cross, suggested that to have a vision of God and then act immorally is impossible. The love and compassion of God is central to this: once encountered, it cannot be ignored. Jan Van Ruysbroeck, a Dutch medieval mystic, wrote: 'Pure love frees a man from himself and his acts'. Such pure love is the 'impulse and agency towards active righteousness and virtue, for love cannot be idle'.⁵⁰

This is what Kirk was trying to get at: the overcoming of self to something bigger, that pushes us to express the love of that 'something

46. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) (London: Methuen and Co., 8th edn, 1919), pp. 522, 516-17.

47. Steven T. Katz, 'Mysticism and Ethics in Western Ethical Traditions', *RelS* 28.3 (September 1992), p. 415

48. Quoted in Kirk, *Vision of God*, p. 353.

49. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, in *Complete Works, Volume II* (trans. E. Allison Peers; New York and London: Sheed and Ward, 1946), section 36.7.

50. Jan Van Ruysbroeck, *Flowers of a Mystic Garden* (trans. Ernest Hello; London: John M. Watkins, 1912), p. 89.

bigger' – the love of God. Despite this, the juxtaposition of mysticism and ethics is often regarded as a paradox. For many, mysticism is defined as a 'private' or even privatized matter. For earlier periods, 'private' might be defined as the cloister; for the modern period, we might turn to that famous definition of religion as highly individualistic from William James as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine'.⁵¹

Kirk's work was significant not only for the revival of moral theology in Anglicanism but also for the ways in which he drew on the mystical tradition and insisted on the place of prayer and worship – especially contemplative prayer – in forging the Christian character and thereby creating a moral agent. His command of the Christian tradition was undoubtedly extensive, and yet the backdrop to his work was surely the revival of interest in mysticism, and the scholarship it engendered, in the two decades before he started work on his moral theology project. What Kirk did, with such distinction, was to put mysticism and ethics in fruitful conversation with one another.

51. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902) (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 31.