

THE INFLUENCE OF MYSTICISM ON THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF JOHN WESLEY

by Peter Dobson

I. Introduction

Even a brief study of John Wesley's life will reveal a number of influences that impacted the development of his theology and spiritual understanding. "The sensitive upbringing he received from his mother, the particular selection from the Romanic mystics with which he was familiar, the Puritan tradition as a whole, Henry Scougal, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law, all introduced him to a particular type of spiritual culture."¹ Between the years of 1725 and 1738, Wesley was particularly drawn to the mystic writers. The copious amount of reading undertaken by Wesley in these years not only led him to his evangelical conversion in 1738 but left a lasting imprint on his theological and spiritual doctrines.² Rattenbury says, "if mysticism is essentially the soul's awareness of God, or immediate consciousness of God's presence, then 'more than a touch of mysticism' undergirds the spirituality of the father of Methodism."³

A. Defining Mysticism

Evelyn Underhill states that "Mysticism is the direct intuition or experience of God. A mystic is a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience - one whose religion and life are centred, not merely on an accepted belief practice, but on that which

¹ Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*. (New York: Abingdon Press, n.d. Volume 1), 13.

² This is not to say that Wesley read more in these years than at other times in his life, but during this period (1725-1738) he certainly read a higher percentage of mystical writers.

³ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrine of Charles Wesley's Hymns*. (London: Epworth, 1941), 155.

he regards as first-hand personal knowledge.”⁴ Stated in simpler terms, mysticism is “the search after a direct knowledge of God or spiritual truths by self-surrender.”⁵

Christian mysticism can also be separated into various streams that focus on varying means in order to gain an awareness of God’s presence. Two distinct streams are evident in those who influenced Wesley. Albert Outler says “it was his [Wesley’s] experimentation with the *voluntaristic* mysticism of Kempis, Law and Scupoli, and with the *quietistic* mysticism of the Molinists and Guyon, that drove Wesley to the pitch of futile striving which was such a vivid agony in his early years.”⁶ The voluntaristic mysticism which emphasised asceticism and self-abasement and the quietistic mysticism which employed a stillness and waiting on God were both evident in Wesley’s search for assurance and faith.

II. Mysticism in Wesley’s Search for Assurance

Wesley was greatly influenced by his mother in his spiritual development. She encouraged all her children to read and many of the books she chose had a mystical emphasis. Robert Tuttle describes Susannah’s influence this way:

Devotional reading was an important part of my parents’ discipline. Many of the devotional books being read by serious minded Christians during the first part of this century were written by Roman Catholic Mystics. We were no exception. So, we read these as well. . . The result of this was that the influence of much of my earliest devotional reading, which accelerated my appreciation of asceticism (held in common with both puritan and mystic alike), quickly tapered off into a mystical contemplation that was so subjective that I no longer had sufficient roots to ground me in the evangelical faith.⁷

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*. (London: James Clarke & Co. n.d.), 9-10.

⁵ *Mysticism*, Webster’s Dictionary.

⁶ Albert Outler, *John Wesley*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 83.

⁷ Robert G. Tuttle, *John Wesley: His Life and Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1978), 46. Sections of Tuttle’s biography are written in the first person. While the sentiments here are Wesley’s, the words are in fact Tuttle’s.

Other authors read by Wesley's mother and Wesley himself included Blaise Pascal, Lorenzo Scupoli, Thomas à Kempis, and Henry Scougal. Following his graduation from Oxford in 1724, "he sought to improve his spiritual status by various reforms, devotions, introspection, continual counsel from his virtuous and pious mother, and an extremely self-disciplined life."⁸ After much deliberation and influence from his parents, Wesley decided to enter the ministry. This prompted him to be more serious in his devotion. He read extensively and was strongly attracted to mysticism. He was earnest in his search for assurance and faith.

Wesley found in the mystical writings a hope for assurance. Tuttle comments that Wesley hoped mysticism "would make him invulnerable to fear. His troublesome doubts would vanish. The enemy would lose his hold, and who knows, if the mystical stories were true, death might even become a friend."⁹ Following Wesley's ordination in 1728, he assisted his father at Epworth before returning to Oxford to teach. It was at this time that Wesley was involved with the Holy Club where he met with other like-minded individuals for study and accountability.¹⁰ These men, led by John, searched for inward holiness through obedience to self imposed rules of outward holiness.

In October 1735, Wesley set sail for Georgia as a missionary to the American Indians. While in Georgia, Wesley concentrated on the writings of the mystics.

He subjected himself to severe ascetic discipline. The diaries reveal the relentless pressure of his self-mortification. Sometimes he would hold an inquisition on his soul. All his most intimate motives and emotions were interrogated at the bar of his own remorseless conscience.¹¹

While he continued to search for assurance of salvation, Wesley was losing patience with the mystical way. He says, "In this refined way of trusting to my own works and my own righteousness (so zealously inculcated by the mystic writers), I dragged on heavily, finding no comfort or help therein till the time of my leaving

⁸ Howard F. VanValin, "Mysticism in Wesley." in *The Asbury Seminarian* (Volume XII, Summer 1958), 6.

⁹ Tuttle, 76.

¹⁰ His brother Charles was also a member of this small group.

¹¹ A. Skevington Wood, *A Burning Heart*, (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1978), 48.

England.”¹² Tuttle summarises Wesley’s futile attempts to find assurance during this period of his life.

During the past ten years (1725-1735), this is what he has learned: reason alone could not produce faith; mystic solitude would not produce faith; works of charity (the exterior life) would not produce faith; inner penance (the interior life) would not produce faith. All of these even wrapped in asceticism produced nothing.¹³

III. Identifying the Mystical Influences in John Wesley’s Life

From the time Wesley entered Oxford until his return from America in 1738, he became familiar with many mystical works. Some were more influential than others but all of them left a lasting imprint on his spiritual life.

A. Taylor, à Kempis and Law

In his book, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1765), Wesley mentions Jeremy Taylor, Thomas à Kempis, and William Law as the authors who had made a significant impact upon his early spiritual development. While Wesley did not agree with everything written by these authors, they certainly deepened his sense of inward holiness. Green says,

Wesley was himself incorrect in supposing that à Kempis, Taylor and Law were the only significant writers who influenced his spiritual development at this period. But they more than the many others whom he read were primarily responsible in cultivating his search for personal salvation and personal holiness, which he believed to be a prerequisite before he could bring others to this end.¹⁴

James Gordon summarises their influence this way, “From Jeremy Taylor he learned the importance of purity of intention, Thomas à Kempis taught him that real religion is of the heart, and from William Law he heard the uncompromising call to a wholehearted Christian commitment.”¹⁵

¹² Outler, *John Wesley*, 63.

¹³ Tuttle, 150.

¹⁴ V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 278.

¹⁵ James S. Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality from the Wesleys to John Stott*. (London: SPCK, 1991), 13.

1. Bishop Jeremy Taylor

Wesley says,

In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected; that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced, there was no medium; but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself, that is, in effect, to the devil. Can any serious person doubt of this, or find a medium between serving God and serving the devil?¹⁶

Taylor especially influenced the way that Wesley scheduled the activities of his life. He began keeping a diary after reading Taylor and realised the value of assessing the worth of all one's activities. It was the combination of outward observance and inward intention in Taylor's writings that attracted Wesley.

2. Thomas à Kempis

Wesley says of à Kempis,

In the year 1726, I met with Kempis' *Christian's Pattern*.¹⁷ The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw, that giving even all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this, and go no farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart, to him. I saw, that "simplicity of intention, and purity of affection," one design in all we speak or do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed "the wings of the soul," without which she can never ascend to the mount of God.¹⁸

Although Wesley did have some criticisms of *The Imitation of Christ*, he was clearly moved by it and it was instrumental in his shift

¹⁶ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), Vol. XI, 366.

¹⁷ More commonly known as *The Imitation of Christ*.

¹⁸ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 367.

toward a faith based in the heart as well as the mind. In a letter to his mother, Wesley said that “as a result of reading à Kempis, I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God’s law extended to all our thoughts as well as our words and actions.”¹⁹

3. William Law

Of William Law, Wesley says,

Mr. Law’s *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* were put into my hands. These convinced me, more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian; and I determined, through his grace (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of), to be all devoted to God, to give him all my soul, my body, and my substance. Will any considerate man say that this is carrying matters too far? or that anything less is due to him who has given himself for us, than to give him ourselves, all we hence, and all we are?²⁰

This extract reveals the great influence that Law had on Wesley’s spiritual development. VanValin notes that “In 1727 Wesley contacted a book that was to change his thinking and bear influence upon him for the rest of his life. Upon reading William Law’s *Treatise of Christian Perfection*, he was ‘seized with an idea that never after let him go’.”²¹

In 1732, Wesley travelled to Putney to visit Law. For many years Wesley was greatly influenced by him and it was through Law that Wesley was introduced to other mystical writers. “The *Serious Call* played its part in confirming the habits of personal discipline and of pious exclusion which marked the life of Wesley at Oxford from 1729 to 1735 and strengthened his mystical leaning until the Moravian example gave to Wesley’s religious life an essentially practical tendency.”²²

Wesley’s personal acquaintance with William Law, which developed into a student/mentor relationship, moved to uncharitable criticism as Law became more heavily influenced by Jacob Boehme. Wesley wrote many letters challenging Law’s drift toward dualism

¹⁹ Wesley, Quoted by Green, 80.

²⁰ Wesley, *Works*, Vol XI, 366-367.

²¹ VanValin, 7.

²² Howard Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 14.

and exclusive trust in the mystics, but it seems that they went unanswered. An example of one of those letters is as follows:

O that your latter works may be more and greater than your first! Surely they would, if you could ever be persuaded to study, instead of the writings of Tauler and Behmen, those of St. Paul, James, Peter, and John. To spew out of your mouth and out of your heart that vain philosophy, and speak neither higher nor lower things, neither more nor less, than the oracles of God; to renounce, despise, abhor all the high-flown bombast, all the unintelligible jargon of the Mystics, and come back to the plain religion of the Bible, "We love him, because he first loved us."²³

B. Other Mystical Authors

Apart from Taylor, à Kempis, and Law, many other mystical writers from the fourth through to the eighteenth century influenced Wesley.

1. Macarius and Ephraem

Macarius "the Egyptian" was a fourth century monk.²⁴ "In 1721, an English edition of the *Homilies* of Macarius was published and quickly came into Wesley's hands. From then on, both before and after Aldersgate in 1738, Wesley apparently returned periodically to Macarius."²⁵ Wesley published an abridgment of a number of Macarius' Homilies in his *Christian Library*.

Ephraem Syrus lived in the middle of the fourth century and wrote *A Serious Exhortation to Repentance and Sorrow for Sin, and a Strict and Mortified Life*. Ephraem and Macarius influenced Wesley's concept of perfection as a dynamic process rather than a static state.

2. Count Gaston Jean Baptiste De Renty

The Life of De Renty, which was also released as *The True Christian*, is a "significant and effective example of Romanic

²³ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. IX, 587 (Letter dated January 6, 1756).

²⁴ Not Egyptian but a Syrian disciple of Gregory of Nyssa.

²⁵ Howard Snyder, "John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian." in *Asbury Theological Journal*. (Vol. 45: 2 Fall 1990), 55.

mysticism.”²⁶ Wesley began reading it in May 1736, he read it constantly while in Georgia, and it stayed with him his whole life. “De Renty was an individual witness, just as the Hernhutters had been a corporate one, to the fact that primitive Christianity could be realised in the present.”²⁷

3. Madame Guyon

Guyon was one writer Wesley kept close contact with throughout his life. He recommended her to his sister later in life, although he did warn of her quietistic tendencies. “Wesley was deeply moved by the life of Madame Guyon and her books, and even after his conversion and repudiation of mysticism, he wrote favourably of her.”²⁸

4. Lorenzo Scupoli

Scupoli wrote two books that influenced Wesley: *Spiritual Combat* and *Pugna Spiritualis*. These were favourites of both Wesley and his mother. Scupoli spoke of the call to Christian perfection, which is known to derive solely from God.

5. Gregory Lopez

Wesley read the biography of Gregory Lopez, a Spanish mystic who lived as a hermit in Mexico. Wesley was attracted to his knowledge of Scripture and his open intercourse with God.

6. Henry Scougal

One of the books recommended by his mother was that of Henry Scougal called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677). It was also a regular on the reading list of those in the Holy Club.

²⁶ Schmidt, 213.

²⁷ Schmidt, 216.

²⁸ Van Valin, 7.

7. Other Mystical Influences

Wesley read many other works by the mystics and these also influenced his life and thought.²⁹

IV. The Moravian Pietists and Wesley's Conversion

On the ship to Georgia, Wesley was introduced to a group of Moravians and immediately recognised in them an assurance of faith. "While William Law's mysticism could instruct in the spiritual self-discipline through which a person could find God, it did little to foster an expectancy of the divine initiative. Moravian piety was a discerning of the pattern of God's initiative toward the believer."³⁰ It was the Moravian synthesis of mystical piety and reformed theology that appealed to Wesley's greatest weakness and fulfilled his greatest need.³¹

One of the Moravian pastors in Savannah was August Spangenberg. He exhibited this combination of mystical piety and the theology of the continental reformers. Wesley spent time with Spangenberg and the Moravians while in Georgia, but it was not until he returned to England that he would find the assurance he had been searching for and the witness of the Spirit that the Moravians stressed.

John Wesley, during the years of 1725-1737, had led a futile search for an assurance of salvation that mystical asceticism could not produce. Tuttle summarises Wesley's search to this point:

In achieving his final goal, the Deists were little help. Reason alone (though important) would not lead to an assurance of faith. His High Church tradition was little help. The means of grace alone (though important) would not lead to an assurance of faith.

²⁹ Some of these works included Francois Fenelon (*Discourse on Simplicity*), *The Life of Thomas Halyburton*, James Garden's *Comparative Theology*, Molinos, *The Life of Tauler*, Theologica Germanica, *The Whole Duty of Man*, Antionette Bourignon (*Light of the World and Treatise on Solid Virtue*), Fleury, A. H. Francke, (*Nicodemus*), Francois De Sales (*Introduction to the Devout Life*), Nathaniel Spinckes (*Collections of Meditations and Devotions*), Peter Heylin (*Devotional Tracts*), Spurstow (*Meditations*), Richard Lucas (*Enquiry*), John Scott (*The Christian Life*), and Rodriguez' *On Humility*.

³⁰ David Lowes Watson, "Methodist Spirituality." in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*. Frank Senn, ed (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 220.

³¹ Tuttle speaks at length regarding the blend of mystical piety and reformed theology in the Moravians.

Even the Puritans were little help. Although they spoke of evangelical faith, Wesley was so predisposed to their asceticism that he could not hear it, and asceticism alone (though important) would not lead to an assurance of faith. Solitude was little help, for time apart with God (though important), being the result of faith but not the cause, would not lead to an assurance of faith. Finally the mystics were little help. Internal works-righteousness alone (though important) would not lead to an assurance of faith.³²

When Wesley returned to England, through the help of Peter Bohler, he found assurance through faith in Christ.

The unique mixture of theological notions thus far accumulated was now to be smelted and forged into an integral and dynamic theology in which Eastern notions of *synelthesis* (dynamic interaction between God's will and man's) were fused with the classical Protestant *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*, and with the Moravian stress upon inner feeling.³³

Wesley maintained contact with the Moravians and visited their communities in Herrnhut, Germany. But it was only a short time before Wesley broke with them over the issue of Quietism.

V. Wesley's Withdrawal from Mysticism

Some would say that Wesley broke with Mysticism while in Georgia. In a letter to his brother Samuel on November 23, 1736, he says, "I think the rock on which I had the nearest made ship wreck of the faith, was, the writings of the Mystics; under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace."³⁴ But there is evidence from his journals that he continued to read from the mystical writers.

Whenever this break with mysticism took place, there is no doubt that Wesley felt betrayed by the mystics and he therefore distanced himself from mystical thought. Commenting on this, Wakefield says,

³² Tuttle, 218.

³³ Outler, 14.

³⁴ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XII, 41.

In the despondency of the Georgian crisis he came to think that their teaching undermined faith, works and reason equally, and condemned the soul to a lone struggle through the dark wilderness of solitary, introspective religion, with no means of grace to be guide posts and no pilgrim song of assurance to speed the way.³⁵

Wesley himself spoke of this period before his conversion:

These considerations insensibly stole upon me as I grew acquainted with the mystic writers, whose noble descriptions of union with God and internal religion made everything else appear mean, flat, and insipid. But in truth they made good works appear so too; yea, and faith itself, and what not? They gave me an entire new view of religion, like any I had before. But alas! it was nothing like that religion which Christ and his apostles loved and taught. . . I had no heart, no vigour, no zeal in obeying, continually doubting whether I was right or wrong, and never out of perplexities and entanglements.³⁶

This move to separate himself from mysticism is clearly seen in Wesley's preface to his *Hymns and Poems*.

Some verses, it may be observed, in the following Collection, were wrote upon the scheme of the Mystic Divines. And these, it is owned, we had once in great veneration, as the best explainers of the gospel of Christ. But we are now convinced, that we therein greatly erred, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God.³⁷

In speaking of some of Charles' hymns John comments that:

...some still savour of that poisonous mysticism, with which we were both not a little tainted before we went to America. This gave a gloomy cast, first to his mind, and then to many of his verses: This made him frequently describe religion as a

³⁵ Gordon S. Wakefield, *Methodist Devotion: The Spiritual Life in the Methodist Tradition*. (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 33.

³⁶ VanValin, 10.

³⁷ Wesley, *Works*, Vol 14, 435.

melancholy thing: This so often sounded in his ears, "To the desert;" and strongly persuaded in favour of solitude.³⁸

VI. Wesley's Break from the Moravians

Wesley, who had great admiration for the Moravians, began to become wary of a Quietist influence among their number. Wakefield notes, "Ironically, the Moravians, who had pointed him to justification by faith alone, and thereby to the English Reformers and away from the Behmenist syncretism of William Law, proved to be the most dangerously mystical of all in their quietist disavowal of the sacraments."³⁹

Wesley comments on the quietist influences that began to develop in the Moravians.

The errors which had crept in among the Moravians in London at that time, were a refined species of Antinomianism, and mystic notions of ceasing from ordinances and waiting for faith in stillness; and these errors were afterwards carried by them into many of the Methodist societies in Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and other places.⁴⁰

Philip Molther was identified by Wesley as one who was influencing the society at Fetter Lane towards quietism. On July 20, 1740, Wesley read a paper in disagreement with Molther and quietism. He and about eighteen others left the Fetter Lane society and began meeting in a foundry. This marked the beginning of the Methodist societies and reinforced Wesley's separation from the excesses of mysticism.

In writing to his brother, Charles, John gave reasons why he could not continue with the Moravians.

Because their general scheme is mystical, not scriptural; refined in every point above what is written; immeasurably beyond the plain Gospel. Because there is darkness and closeness in all their behaviour, and guile in almost all their words. Because they not only do not practice, but utterly despise and decry, self-denial and the daily cross. Because they conform to the world, in

³⁸ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. IV, 487.

³⁹ Wakefield, 33.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. V, 22-23.

wearing gold and gay or costly apparel. Because they are by no means zealous of good works, or at least only to their own people: For these reasons (chiefly) I will rather, God being my helper, stand quite alone than join with them: I mean till I have full assurance, that they are better acquainted with 'the truth as it is in Jesus.'⁴¹

In a letter to the Moravians in Herrnhut, Germany, Wesley said,

You receive not the ancient, but the modern Mystics, as the best interpreters of Scripture. And in conformity to these, you mix much of man's wisdom with the wisdom of God. You greatly refine the plain religion taught by the letter of Holy Writ, and philosophise on almost every part of it, to accommodate it to the Mystic theory.⁴²

VII. Wesley's Conclusions Concerning Mysticism

Though Wesley broke with mysticism on or around the time of his conversion, he still read from them throughout his life and included many of their works in his *Christian Library* which he recommended to his lay preachers.⁴³ Certainly Wesley chose his reading material more carefully and was known to edit large portions of text in his own abridgments of many of these books.

A. What Wesley Rejected in Mysticism

1. A Gradual Conversion

Largely due to his own experience, Wesley recognised that God could work in a person's heart in an instant. And "although Wesley recognised the need for gradual growth before and after sanctification, his insistence on an experience wrought in an instant remained a point of contention between himself and the mystics."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 1, 345.

⁴² Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 1, 371.

⁴³ The *Christian Library* is a collection of books and literature recommended by Wesley for the Methodists.

⁴⁴ Tuttle, 341.

2. Quietism

Quietism is the opposite extreme of salvation by works and Wesley rejected both. Mercer says, "Wesley was opposed to the quietists insistence that one must wait passively for salvation."⁴⁵ Wesley recognised that good works, the sacraments and the spiritual disciplines were all means of grace and should be encouraged in those who are seeking salvation.

3. Dark Night of the Soul

The five stages of mysticism are awakening, purgation, illumination, the dark night of the soul, and union with God. Wesley sought to follow this mystical path to union with God, but struggled with the dark night of the soul. "According to Wesley, sin alone occasions what the mystic refers to as darkness."⁴⁶ As a consequence, Wesley swapped the fourth stage of mysticism (the dark night of the soul) with justification by faith.

4. Private Religion

While Wesley appreciated much of the mystics, he stood against their tendency to privatise the revelation of God. Wesley "was convinced that the social implications of holy living were inescapable. Thus he opposed mysticism and solitary religion, arguing that Holy solitaires, or, as we would say solitary saints, is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers."⁴⁷

The Methodist system grew out of Wesley's keen awareness of the social nature of Christian experience – the balance of the individual and the community.

As early as 1729 a 'serious man' whom Wesley sought out told him, "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." This was the basis of his reservations about mysticism.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Jerry L. Mercer, "Toward a Wesleyan Understanding of Christian Experience." In *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. (Spring 1985), Notes 87.

⁴⁶ Tuttle, 340.

⁴⁷ Snyder, 88.

⁴⁸ Quoted by Snyder, 148.

5. Morbidity and Extreme Asceticism

Wesley disagreed with the mystical premise that we should not enjoy the pleasures of life. Wesley was critical of à Kempis and Taylor when he first read them in 1725 because of their pessimistic and negative view of human happiness. Rack comments that “There was a kind of robust common sense touched with the optimism of the Enlightenment which had already led Wesley in 1725 to balk at the morbid misery of Taylor and à Kempis in favour of the theme of ‘holiness and happiness’.”⁴⁹

B. What Wesley Adopted from Mysticism

It may appear that Wesley rejected mysticism completely for at one stage he said, “I believe the Mystic writers to be one great Anti-Christ,” but later he retraced the statement saying it was far too strong.⁵⁰ “Wesley’s anti-mysticism did not wholly persist and for the last thirty years of his long life it seems as though there was little of his past that he would repudiate.”⁵¹ Wakefield probably exaggerates here, however once the initial controversy had abated and he was able to see the crisis of his own conversion in a new light, Wesley softened some of his criticisms of mysticism.

1. Spiritual Disciplines

Wesley maintained a strong commitment to the spiritual disciplines throughout his life and instructed the Methodists to do likewise. “His acceptance of divine initiative as the dynamic of his spirituality did not negate the importance of the spiritual disciplines as its form.”⁵²

2. Personal Models of Piety

Wesley continued to read selected mystical writings throughout his life. He especially saw value in biographies that represented personal models of piety. Rack says, “It is worth noting that the Catholic and even the mystical literature and biographies continued to attract Wesley, not least Madame Guyon with her picture of a

⁴⁹ Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*. (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 401.

⁵⁰ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, 468.

⁵¹ Wakefield, 23.

⁵² Watson, 222.

‘short and easy method’ which in a sense resembled the short cut to salvation offered by evangelical conversion, here applied to perfection as well.⁵³

3. Self-Denial and Consecration

Wesley’s focus on Christian perfection meant that he maintained a belief in the mystical concepts of self-denial and consecration. “The meditative writers he chose to edit or translate for his followers are distinguished by their ascetic bent; he championed their spirit of self-denial and consecration as instruction or necessary preparation for the active spiritual life and witness.”⁵⁴

VIII. Conclusion

Certainly mysticism played a pivotal role in John Wesley’s early spiritual development and though he rejected the mystical approach to salvation following his own conversion, he was probably more influenced by mystical thought and doctrine than he was aware.

⁵³ Rack, 401.

⁵⁴ David Lyle Jeffrey, ed. *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 30.