

Florence Nightingale: Mystic or Moralist?

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Evelyn Underhill, in her classic work *Practical Mysticism*, makes a significant statement in reference to Florence Nightingale, saying “Perhaps it is worthwhile to remind ourselves that the two women who have left the deepest mark upon the military history of France and England – Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale – both acted under mystical compulsion.”¹ To many, this statement may appear odd, since Nightingale’s name is most often recognized in the area of health sciences as the founder of the nursing profession. Underhill’s statement becomes even more striking when comparing the mystical experiences of Joan of Arc with the scientific methodology used by Florence Nightingale as a social reformer. Questions arise such as “How did Nightingale’s spiritual experience of God lead her into nursing?” and “In what way did her ideal of God’s perfection originate as an important tenet of her religious philosophy, especially in relation to the scientific world of modern Britain?” One cannot begin to entertain Nightingale as a mystic without first examining the events that led her into nursing and a career as a social reformer. Nightingale’s faith in God inspired her throughout life; however, it was her hard work and philosophy of science that provided her with the means of acquiring knowledge in order to suggest improvements regarding social and public health reforms.

In this essay, I propose that Nightingale’s spirituality has much in common with Christian medieval mysticism, but differs drastically in its practical application when she begins to resolve problems encountered in health care and elsewhere. Nightingale viewed God as energizing,

controlling, and directing all activity through the laws of nature. She suggested that as co-workers alongside a perfect God, humanity was capable of attaining a new and moral government. The conclusion I reach is that Nightingale's experience of God resembled one of a modern mystic, someone who combined her beliefs with empirical science for the intent for humanity of joining forces with God in order to accomplish His plan for improving the health and welfare of the underprivileged of society. This was Nightingale's Christian worldview that she hoped would lead to a new moral world.

Early Formational Influences in Nightingale's Faith and Vocation

Florence Nightingale's parents, Frances (*née* Smith) (1788-1880) and William Edward Nightingale (1794-1874) were married in the Church of England by an evangelical clergyman at St. Margaret's, Westminster.² While on an extended honeymoon, Frances gave birth to Parthenope (1819) and then Florence (1820), both of whom were named after the cities of their birth. The family returned to England in 1821 and settled in Lea Hurst, Derbyshire, an estate William Nightingale had inherited from Peter Nightingale, the uncle of his mother Mary (*née* Evans). The terms of his great uncle's will stated that William Nightingale would not only inherit his estate, but also assume the name and arms of Nightingale. Another vital link to the Nightingale family was Frances' father, William Smith (1756-1835), a British politician, dissenter and abolitionist who was a Member of Parliament for Norwich. The Nightingale family name provided Florence and Parthenope access to numerous relatives and friends who became influential in their lives, especially to Florence in her religious formation as a young adult.

Nightingale was a very sensitive and inquisitive young woman who sought meaning and purpose to her life through her religion. Mary Shore Smith, referred to as "Aunt Mai" and the sister of Florence's father, was very helpful to Nightingale during the struggles of her life, often offering her guidance through written correspondence. In 1836, at the age of sixteen, Nightingale had a "religious conversion experience,"³ an epiphany that was followed by a "call to service" from God on 7 February 1837 inspired by reading the work of Jacob Abbott, a Congregational minister and author of *The Corner-Stone; or, A Familiar Illustration of the Principles of Christian Truth* (1830). Edward T. Cook, her biographer, wrote about Nightingale's "call to service" as one of many crises she faced

in her inner life, noted that

God called her to His service on February 7, 1837, at Embley; and there are later notes which still fix that day as the dawn of her true life. But as yet she knew not whither the Spirit was to lead. For three months, indeed, as she notes in another passage of retrospect, she “worked very hard among the poor people under a strong feeling of religion.”⁴

Nightingale’s new-found faith in God was bolstered by her evangelical Aunt Hannah Nicholson and her friend, Mary Clarke, with whom she corresponded regularly, expressing her innermost thoughts about how to comprehend the “unseen” spiritual world with the “seen” physical world. In a letter to Aunt Hannah, according to Cook, Nightingale expressed her devotion to her saying:

“You always seem to rest on the heart of the divine Teacher, and to participate in His mysteries.” “Your letters,” she said on another occasion, “stay by me and warm me when the dreams of life come one after another, clouding and covering the realities of the unseen.”⁵

It is fair to say that Nightingale’s early religious convictions appear evangelical in nature and were undergirded by her spiritual mentors who encouraged their protégée to remain conscious of the realities of the “unseen” world, and “to make the presence of the Unseen a guide through the path of this present world.”⁶ According to David Bebbington, the four marks of evangelical Protestantism are:

conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *Biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.⁷

Nightingale’s religious experiences included a turn towards God, but there is no indication that she followed the traditional pattern so often read about in nineteenth-century religious biographies. According to Elisabeth Jay, religious biography was written according to a certain pattern of events: “the sinner moves away from worldly values, peaks in a personal conversion experience and then towards a practical piety of Christian

values.”⁸ In Nightingale’s experiences of God there was no intense mortification of sin or recognition of Jesus Christ as the “one and only way” to realize God’s presence in the world. Instead, Nightingale recognized the need to portray God as merciful rather than condemning toward humanity.

According to Nightingale, the reality of the “unseen” meant more to her than belief in an unknowable God and this realization led her to discovering ways of how one might recognize the power of God’s presence in harmony with the knowledge of the world. For example, in Nightingale’s essay, “What Is Christianity,” she replied to Dr. John Sutherland’s evangelical concerns, saying: “the wish *to be on the road* to one will in every human heart, the will to know such truth as is within the reach of humanity, concerning our common Father, our common Ruler, to have, as far as possible, one will with His.”⁹ At the centre of Nightingale’s understanding of the gospel was the proclamation of unity with the Father and the human ability to “penetrate into the spirit, the character, the tendency of that law of God” in order that all of humanity can begin to recognize His goodness and have “one will with Him.”¹⁰

Nightingale’s faith and intellect continued to develop throughout the early years of her life. She became interested in reading and studying the lives of the mystics, especially St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.¹¹ She also often turned to Thomas à Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ* during difficult moments of her life.¹² Nightingale became acquainted with a number of intellectuals in her early years, such as Baron Christian von Bunsen, a learned Prussian diplomat and biblical scholar, Julius Mohl, a German Orientalist, and many others. Nightingale received a strong foundation in pedagogy through her father, William during her early childhood. Nightingale noted:

we used to read Tasso and Ariosto and Alfieri with my father . . . he was a good and always interested Italian scholar, never pedantic, never a tiresome grammarian, but he spoke Italian like an Italian and I took care of the verbs.¹³

Nightingale’s father was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. He was supportive in the education of his daughters during their childhood. According to Cook, Nightingale’s own note-books show that in her teens she had mastered the elements of Latin and Greek. She analysed the Tusculan Disputations. She translated portions of the *Phaedo*, the *Crito*

and the *Apology*. She had studied Roman, German, Italian, and Turkish history. She had analysed Dugald Stewart's *Philosophy of the Human Mind*.¹⁴

Nightingale's interest in education was encouraged by her father; however, his support diminished when she expressed a desire to pursue the study of mathematics and nursing because such tasks were considered unacceptable behaviour to members of her class. In addition to Nightingale's education at home, friends of the family provided her with an opportunity to learn from their expertise in varying academic fields, including Bunsen in biblical scholarship and Mohl who introduced her to the study of comparative religion. In particular, Bunsen's work as a biblical scholar was highly regarded by Nightingale, and she sent him a manuscript of her *Suggestions for Thought*¹⁵ seeking his comments.¹⁶ In Bunsen's *God in History*, he contended that the progress of humanity marched parallel to the conception of God formed within each nation by the highest exponents of its thought.¹⁷ As we shall see, Nightingale also believed that humanity continued to evolve morally as they observed and obeyed God's laws as set in motion in the world.

Nightingale's Pursuit to Fulfilling God's Call

Nightingale travelled abroad to Europe (1837-39), Rome (1847-48), and to Egypt, Greece and Europe (1849-1850), and her final trip to Europe was with family friends, Selina and Charles Bracebridge "who later accompanied her to Scutari in the Crimean War."¹⁸ In Egypt, Nightingale wrestled with what her divine calling would entail. According to Michael Calabria, Nightingale recorded her activities and inner-most angst in a diary begun in January 1850 saying "God 'spoke' to her on several occasions."¹⁹ She also meditated on words of advice given to her from her *madre*, Laure de Ste. Columbe, a Roman Catholic nun whom she met in Rome, along with the counsel of her evangelical friends, Mrs. Hill, an American missionary, and Mary Baldwin, a missionary whom she first met in Athens. Nightingale's newly formed friendships assisted her in discerning God's will for her life, as seen in a letter written to Aunt Mai:

I am here in a missionary's house – a real missionary – not one "according to the use of the United Church of England" – but such as missionaries live in one's imagination – & it is interesting to me to see the "same mind as it was in Christ Jesus," clothed in a different coat, in different parts of the world – my Madre at Rome, whose mind

was dressed in black & white nun's robes even more than her body – & the Evangelical American here, Mrs. Hill, my true missionary, are so alike – & both I see, are always listening for the voice of God, looking for his will.²⁰

In addition to the counsel Nightingale received from her friends, she spent many hours reading scripture, often making notes of her reflections on the blank pages found in her King James Bible. As Lynn McDonald, editor of *Florence Nightingale's Spiritual Journey* points out, Nightingale's biblical annotations “range from vigorous, sometimes sarcastic demythologizing of texts to anguished prayers.”²¹ Nightingale's interpretation of scripture, as McDonald observes, were made over a period of thirty years (1844-75) and demonstrate how her faith and devotion to God continued to develop in relation to her role as a social reformer. Nightingale's religious opinions often conflicted with the beliefs of others, but this did not hinder her from considering the question of how God relates to humanity.

During travels with her friends Selina and Charles Bracebridge, Nightingale had two opportunities in 1850 and 1851 to visit the Kaiserswerth Deaconess Institution in Germany. Pastor Theodor Fliedner, a German Lutheran minister, established the first Protestant institution for deaconesses at Kaiserswerth-am-Rhein aimed at reactivating the ancient practice of women aiding “the lost, the crushed, and the poor.”²² Following the model of the early Christian church's diaconate, Pastor Fliedner incorporated ideas he learned from Elizabeth Fry and the Mennonites, therefore developing a plan whereby young women would learn how to care for orphans and the sick. For this, he needed to create an institute where women could learn the skills required to achieve this goal of caring for the needy of society. He opened the hospital and deaconess training center in Kaiserswerth on 13 October 1836. It was here that Nightingale began to envision the possibilities of initiating the development of nursing, which later became foundational to her mission of training women from a variety of social classes in nursing. Nightingale was slowly beginning to perceive God's design for her life, both in the structure of institutional nursing and in an attempt to challenge traditional views regarding women's roles as nurses.

Nightingale realized the difficulties she would confront from her upper-class peers by allowing women from all social classes to be trained as nurses. According to Calabria, Nightingale “traveled to Paris [in 1853]

where she resided with the Sisters of Charity and other nuns, working in their orphanage and hospital and inspecting other facilities in the city,” which gave Nightingale an astute understanding of how the nuns worked within an organizational structure.²³ However, when considering women whose ethics were less desirable, Nightingale’s frustration became evident in her observation that hospitals became “a school . . . where women of bad character are admitted as nurses, to become worse by their contact with male patients and young surgeons . . . we see the nurses drinking, we see the neglect at night owing to their falling asleep.”²⁴ Despite the challenges of social conflict between nurses, Nightingale persevered in her leadership to bring together women in an attempt to care for the sick and dying.

After Nightingale’s return to England from Egypt she experienced another “call” from God to be what she described as “a saviour.”²⁵ According to E.T. Cook:

Miss Nightingale records May 7, 1852, as the date at which she was conscious of God to be a “savior;” but the thought of devoting herself to be a nurse came much earlier. Mrs. Julia Ward Howe describes how during the visit of herself and her husband to Embley in 1844, Florence had taken Dr. Howe aside and asked him this question: “If I should determine to study nursing, and to devote my life to that profession, do you think it would be a dreadful thing?” Dr. Howe, it will be remembered, was of wide repute as a philanthropist, and Miss Nightingale thought much of his opinion. It was favourable to her wish. “Not a dreadful thing at all,” he replied; “I think it would be a very good thing.”²⁶

The thought of devoting herself to becoming a “saviour” complemented Nightingale’s call as a nurse, especially when comparing the concept of “healing” to a holistic definition of salvation which included the spiritual, mental and physical aspects of a person’s well-being. Nightingale persevered in the conventions of her social class as a way of placating her parents and sister, patiently waiting to take another step closer to fulfilling her call. In April 1853, Nightingale was appointed as superintendent of the Establishment for Gentlewomen during Illness at Upper Harley Street, London, and later began to put together a plan to train nurses for the newly rebuilt King’s College Hospital. The anticipation of her “call” to be a “saviour” was confirmed on 15 October 1854 at which time Sidney Herbert, Secretary of State at War wrote to Nightingale asking her to take

a party of nurses, at the expense of the government, to the hospital of Scutari, Balaclava in Turkey, in order to tend to wounded soldiers in the Crimean War (1854-56).²⁷ In one of the first groups of nurses to travel abroad Nightingale was accompanied by

ten Roman Catholic Sisters (five from Bermondsey and five from Norwood), eight Anglican Sisters (from Miss Sellon's Home at Devonport), six nurses from St. John's House, and fourteen from various English hospitals. It has often been supposed that the nurses who accompanied Miss Nightingale were ladies of gentle birth, but, with a few exceptions, this was not the case. On the eve of their departure, the nurses were addressed by Mr. Herbert in his dining-room. He told them that if any desired to turn back, now was the time of decision, and he impressed upon them that all who went were bound implicitly to obey Miss Nightingale in all things.²⁸

Nightingale was breaking new ground in her model of leadership for nursing when war presented new challenges and opportunities for women to prove their worth in providing assistance to surgeons in the operating rooms and in the practical necessities of life such as hygiene, nutrition and the planning required to improve the poor conditions of the hospital where they were stationed.

Nightingale's experiences of God, her travels, her reflections written in *Suggestions*, and her natural inquisitiveness to learn combined to give her the confidence she needed to pursue God's "call" in taking care of the sick and the poor. As superintendent during the Crimean War, Nightingale faced numerous challenges: obstruction from doctors in the surgical room, the trial of managing nurses due to differing moral values, as well as the discouraging death rate of soldiers in the war hospitals. It was only after the war that Nightingale read the data reported by the army and realized that 16,000 soldiers died not as a result of battle, but due to poor hygiene resulting from the inadequate disposal of sewage, disease and mismanagement by hospital administrators. On her return to England, Nightingale's new-found mission was to convince government officials of the need for health reforms during war efforts. Nightingale's time was primarily taken up with the need to reform nursing; however, she never lost sight of her ideal for a new religion in the hope that those outside the sacred sphere of the church would come to a practical knowledge of God's work and ways.

Nightingale's Practical Approach to Mysticism

Evelyn Underhill, in her book *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, identifies two distinctively different mystical experiences: natural and religious mystical experiences. Natural mystical experiences are, for example, experiences of the “deeper self” or the experiences of oneness with nature. Underhill argues that the experiences typical of “natural mysticism” are quite different from those of religious mysticism. Natural mystical experiences are not considered to be religious experiences because they are not linked to a particular religious tradition, although they are spiritual experiences that can have a profound effect on the individual. Also known as naïve realism, there is a shifting of the world that takes place and the mystic bases her perceptions on science and materialism, placing reality within the consciousness of the individual mind. Underhill describes this concept as “transcending yet including the innumerable fragmentary worlds of individual conception.”²⁹

What appears uncertain is whether Nightingale's experience of God can be classified as either “natural” or “religious” mysticism, especially in light of Underhill's inference that Nightingale was a religious mystic similar to Joan of Arc. In order to answer the question of whether Nightingale was a traditional or modern mystic, one must further investigate her beliefs in respect to God. In Nightingale's experiences we find that she begins with an acknowledgement of God as the source of her beliefs. According to Michael Calabria, Nightingale's spirituality can be described as that of a religious medieval mystic – one that ultimately leads to union with God. Calabria states:

at the heart of Nightingale's spiritual creed was a belief in an omnipotent spirit of righteousness [God] whose very thoughts were manifest as immutable laws. By means of these laws, humanity rises from the imperfect to the perfect and thus becomes an incarnation of the Divine.³⁰

Nightingale was aware of the confessional creeds professed by both Protestants and Catholics; however, she was not satisfied until she found a more logical basis for the feelings of her heart. Therefore, Nightingale was driven toward a reconstruction of her religious creed as noted in her diary written during the year 1853. On a page placed opposite January for “Memoranda from 1852” is the following entry:

The last day of the old year. I am so glad this year is over. Nevertheless it has not been wasted, I trust. I have remodelled my whole religious belief from beginning to end. I have learnt to know God. I have recast my social belief; have them both written for use, when my hour is come.³¹

Nightingale's diary entry refers to the manuscripts called respectively "Religion" and "Novel" in a letter written in 1852. The manuscripts were read by one or two friends and remained for some years in Nightingale's possession. In 1858 and 1859 she revisited the manuscripts when she was friends with Arthur Hugh Clough, an English poet, who was married to her cousin four years earlier. According to Cook, Clough was "doubtless one of the causes which led to an active resumption of her theological speculations."³² Thus, Nightingale departed from the central tenet of the Christian tradition in that she does not acknowledge a divine Christ as the mediator between God and humanity. Instead, she declared it was possible for humans to become a vessel of God's divine will through the pursuit of righteousness found through God's laws.

Nightingale explained mysticism not just as an individual salvation experience transforming one into a new creation of God or "as an event in place or in time," but rather as a dynamic relationship to God the Father and the Spirit of the Son as "our inspiration and the motive of our action."³³ Her approach to knowing God began with an attempt "to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal."³⁴ Nightingale acknowledged a gradual process of union with God similar to William Inge's description of *scala perfectionis* which was divided into three stages: the *purgative* or ascetic stage, the *illuminative* or *contemplative* stage, and the third, *unitive* stage, in which God may be beheld "face to face."³⁵

The second stage, commonly known as "contemplation" in the Western tradition, refers to the experience of one's leading to union with God in some way. The experience of union varies, but it is first and foremost always associated with a reuniting with Divine *love*. The underlying theme here is that God, the perfect goodness, is known or experienced at least as much by the heart as by the intellect since, in the words of 1 John 4:16: "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him."³⁶ Some approaches to classical mysticism would consider the first two phases as preparatory to the third, explicitly mystical experience, but others state that these three phases overlap and intertwine. Nightingale acknowledged Western medieval mysticism, but preferred

factual “knowledge” in her experience of God described as “real mystical religion,” saying:

that in all our actions, all our words, all our thoughts, the food, the life in which we are to have our being, upon which we are to live, is to be the indwelling presence of God, the union with God, that is, with the Spirit of Goodness, Wisdom and Supreme Power in performing every act of our lives, from the highest prayer to the most everyday need, such as cleaning out a drain.³⁷

Nightingale’s spiritual awakening began with a call from God that included a realization of opening to a sacred dimension of reality; however, she strongly believed it was only upon active conformity to God’s will that a person could come into union with the divine. What Nightingale adamantly opposed was the passivity of the medieval mystic’s withdrawal from the world into a life of prayer. Her reasoning was that Christians should not retreat from the world, but rather combine faith in God along with research and policy in order to solve the social evils of life. Nightingale believed that the medieval mystics spent too much time in contemplative prayer within the seclusion of a monastery, instead of using their physical energy to perform simple acts.³⁸ In a note on the “Religious and Secular” Nightingale explained the problem of how the church divided the sacred from the secular spheres of their mission endeavours. She argued that God worked in both arenas of human endeavour as one divine sphere of His activity fulfilling His purposes. Nightingale used everyday examples, such as the labourer’s job of “cleaning out a drain” and that of the church laity “electing a bishop” as both justifiable acts of importance in the sight of God. She explained how the mystical state could be made real in our work, stating “it is the art of building; it is raising and selling and buying food, fuel and clothing; it is everything which contributes to making our bodies, which are ‘the temples of God.’”³⁹ What was most important to Nightingale was God’s connectedness to humanity experienced in daily life rather than someone passively awaiting an ecstatic experience of God through the reception of visions caused by what she described as the mystical practice of “long fastings” and “long watchings.”⁴⁰

Nightingale understood the person of Jesus Christ as “the greatest mystic yet the most active reformer that ever lived.”⁴¹ The essence of true mysticism was to be found in the words of Christ, “And my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him”

(John 14:23). In Nightingale's opinion, there was a realization of "God being everything to us," inspiring humanity in all their life actions.⁴² God was an "Ideal" in that He is present in our world through a practical way of living with ideas and not in an objective sense of manmade ideas of God. "God dwells within," and so, in Nightingale's opinion, humanity will realize union with God by comprehending the natural laws of God in life and taking action as moral agents in the betterment of society. In this way, God's perfect will would ultimately lead humanity as a whole to the realization of perfection and happiness in the world overall.

A Moral View of "Perfection"

Nightingale was neither a theist nor an atheist, but someone who enjoyed writing about "the laws of a moral world, especially as exemplifying, if possible, the character of a perfect God, in bringing [humanity] to perfection through them in eternity."⁴³ Her understanding of God's perfect nature in relationship to creation is explained in her *Suggestions for Thought*:

"Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Yet will man never be God, but one with God; and when he suffers, he will yet have joy in feeling "Thy will be done." This is not pantheism, which asserts that man will be merged in God and lose his individuality. "The spirit returns to God who gave it" is pantheism. And this cannot be true in the sense that it ceases to have a separate existence.⁴⁴

Union with God was described by Nightingale as the "kingdom of heaven within," which emphasized the uniqueness of the individual in the "here and now" and "in eternity" as a spirit-filled "subject" in relationship to God as "subject." Similar to Martin Buber's philosophy of "I-Thou,"⁴⁵ Nightingale placed an emphasis upon a relational Spirit present in creation. Nightingale believed in God's immanence, yet confronted the pantheist ideal of mystics who speculated that the human soul/spirit was being absorbed into God's Spirit of Oneness.⁴⁶ She suggested instead that humans were intended by God to be individual personalities in a cooperative relationship of being "one with Him . . . not prostrate before Him."⁴⁷ The individual "self" was considered by Nightingale to be an elevated partner with God in achieving good in the world. Rather than focusing on a sovereign transcendent God – as traditional orthodox theology had been prone to do – Nightingale and others sought to show God as active prior

to the creation of the world through a belief in law.

Nightingale's view of God included a relationship to the material world, but how did her theology of God compare to a Western Christian definition of perfection as described above? In Debra Jensen's article, "Florence Nightingale's Mystical Vision and Social Action," she states that Nightingale's mysticism is similar to an incarnational theology of Eastern "divinization" rather than a western model of mysticism.⁴⁸ Jensen describes the Western interior relationship to God as an extant form of "self-transcendence" in which the mystic seeks union to the divine. She explains Nightingale's objection to a Kantian "dualism,"⁴⁹ "in saying that we create God after our own image" and, therefore, humanity cannot produce knowledge of a transcendent being. The problem, stated Nightingale, was in the way people projected their own image of God onto God, rather than through their ability to use "our own faculties, moral and intellectual and perceptive."⁵⁰ Nightingale explained God's character as appearing visible to humanity, as shown through the achievement of their work on his behalf. She states, "is it [work] not to be the incarnation of our religion, of our knowledge of God's work and ways, and our religion the ideal of our work?"⁵¹ God's qualitative character was at work in the world and could be realized by the person who was willing to discern His will in the laws of nature. In this respect, Nightingale departed from a mystical articulation of God falling more within a practical moralistic view of God.

In response to the question of evil and suffering, Nightingale objected to the Kantian moral imperative of "man's propensity to evil,"⁵² which only created a difficulty in explaining how "good" and "evil" exist in God's creation. In contrast to Kant's moral foundation of rational faith, Nightingale placed "evil" within God's creation as a natural force to be reckoned with in life as one used their "free will" to choose between "good" and "evil" without dependence upon supernatural aid as a first resource. Only when individuals chose "good" in their own power would they evolve to becoming more like the image of a perfect God. Nightingale wrestled with questions, such as, "What is God's freedom?" and "What is the freedom that we must attain to be like Him?" answering herself by saying, "It embraces in itself the whole problem of human life, of the . . . end of man, of free will and Providence, of the existence of evil and – if God is Perfect – of perfection, and salvation, prayer and the relation between God and man."⁵³ Nightingale's view of the world began with the human decision to aspire after the perfections of God seeking liberation to become like God who alone is free. Her view of humanity included their

ability to pursue “truth” which was “necessary to [our] becoming like God.”⁵⁴ It was our duty to obey God’s laws, to rule in harmony with creation, and to use science as an ideal of God’s perfect nature allowing his salvation to lead us to perfection in the world.

Throughout Nightingale’s life there was an emphasis upon human action taking place within this present lifetime with the hope of continuing one’s activities in a future eternal realm. Her thinking confronted modern humanity with the challenge of facing problems rather than using escapism as a way of dismissing the future into the divine hands of a merciful God. Nightingale’s “way to perfection” may, in Jensen’s opinion, reflect an Eastern practice of “divinization;” nevertheless, in her “Notes on Devotional Authors” Nightingale often quoted Western mystics, such as Thomas à Kempis and Teresa of Avila, who sought a self-transcendent union with God. If, as Jensen states, “she divorces mystical experience from any connection to organized religion, to place it within the individual,” then that form of mysticism may include “reason” as its beginning point, a stance more reflective of a Western mysticism.⁵⁵ The aversion to religiosity typically expressed within the tradition of mysticism was a similar trait shown in Nightingale’s hesitation to include the possibility of reform in the institutional Church. Instead her ideal of a new religion dwelt upon the individual responsibility to reform society and carry out God’s plan towards a new morality for humanity.

A Vision for a New Moral World

The foundation of Nightingale’s religious thought rested upon the work of a perfect God whose perfection is a “Perfect Spirit of Love” who was bringing his human creatures to achieve a finite perfection and experience an everlasting happiness; as a consequence, it was important to let every ideal be tested by the realities of life. In Nightingale’s unpublished essay, “Christian Fellowship/God’s Fellowship” she stated how the “realities of life” should be looked at comprehensively “in relation to all being and all successions of being” in order to “see as God sees which is the ideal, which is the truth.”⁵⁶ If we analyze this statement, we are able to ascertain that Nightingale’s goal in life was to actively pursue the ideal of God’s perfection while comprehending/meditating on life itself. As Youngusband states, “for this experience of the fundamental realities of existence gained in meditation is life itself – not merely the means to it, as is that part of life concerned with . . . ordinary social

amenities. It is of the very essence of life.”⁵⁷ Nightingale would agree with this view including the use of social science as a means of comprehending God’s will and acting upon the facts discovered in her research into war statistics. Nightingale began her acknowledgment of God approaching the real world, studying it, and without false anticipations sought factual scientific evidence to support her understanding of God. She used the empirical methodology of induction set forth by Francis Bacon as a platform for her reasoning; additionally, she drew from the work of L.A.J. Quetelet who inspired her to incorporate the collection of statistics in her research of facts as a “law” that “brings us continually back to God instead of carrying us away.”⁵⁸ In other words, Nightingale placed God as the sovereign power who rules over laws – much like the law of gravitation or Quetelet’s statistical findings – in order to explain the laws of human behaviour.

What Nightingale hoped to achieve through the use of her own moral views was to promote a way forward to actualizing God’s moral government in the world. Nightingale used terminology such as the “collective nation” and the “brotherhood” of humanity in her writings, which could be easily interpreted as an ideal for moral life together in community with one another. The importance of communal relationships was based on the concept of “brotherhood” – a cardinal principle Nightingale indirectly made reference to in her discussion of Poor Law relief.⁵⁹ She spoke of how important the human emotion of “feeling” was in relation to charity, and that without pursuing further knowledge of a particular situation, it was next to impossible to bring about transformation for those in despair. In Nightingale’s opinion, “individual feeling and influence is the best invention hitherto found for bringing the man (or woman or child) to his work, and work to the man.”⁶⁰ In other words, a community effort to understand the plight of those who are unemployed can only result in a proactive solution that helps them find jobs.

Nightingale’s faith and her use of social sciences combined to provide her with a solid basis to evaluate the social evils British society faced in the nineteenth century. She believed that her new approach to religion in a modern society was just as capable of working as any other scientific or philosophical presupposition being promoted during that time, since her view point was based on the universal absolute of natural law and a uniform set of principles. Her set of principles were that God is love, God is just and God is happy; she believed that these qualitative attributes of God would end up flooding the whole moral world and encourage

people to uphold Christian ethical values. What ultimately stood out as “truthful” to Nightingale was the testimony of her own work, a corpus that most likely exceeded her own youthful ambitions. Perhaps Nightingale’s religious philosophy is one example of how faith and modern science can discover commonalities between these two realities.

Conclusion

Florence Nightingale was not a typical medieval mystic, but someone who lived with a passion to carry out the “calling” of God given to her as a service to humanity in health care and as a social reformer. Her faith was undergirded by the discovery of God’s reality in the problems of life. My purpose in this paper was to discover whether Nightingale was a mystic or a moralist. What I have found is that Nightingale was a modern mystic who was interested in religious medieval mystics; but rather than adhere to their typical lifestyle of withdrawal from the world, she preferred to use her faith and the knowledge of empirical science as a foundation of God’s concrete interaction with the world. As Nightingale’s religious ideas developed, so did her understanding of the social sciences. Her goal was to educate the British public to her new religious ideal of God in the pursuit of human “perfection” in order to promote the progressive moral improvement of human society.

Nightingale was a free thinker who proposed a new religion for a modern era of thinkers using the moral precept of a “Perfect” God in order to give humanity hope despite the overwhelming presence of poverty, injustice, and the devastation of war in society. Religious faith in God’s salvation of humanity was no longer considered the “one way” through divine revelation of God, but now became an evolutionary confidence or revolutionary belief in an eventual this-worldly utopia whose realization could be expedited by the application of human reason to nature and society. Without slipping into the prevailing dominance of secularization that existed during the modern era, Nightingale heralded the coming scientific civilization as a movement towards social reform coincident with the message of Christianity. There was a confidence in human progress toward goodness akin to a biblical faith in humanity’s spiritual evolution and future consummation. For Nightingale, religious faith was in God’s perfect plan for humanity attaining moral progress in response to the laws of nature set in motion from the beginning of time.

Endnotes

1. Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1943), x.
2. Lynn McDonald, *Florence Nightingale at First Hand* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 8.
3. Lynn McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Suggestions for Thought*, vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*, 16 vols. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), xii.
4. E.T. Cook, *The Life of Florence Nightingale*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), I: 15.
5. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 47.
6. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 50.
7. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-3.
8. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 60.
9. McDonald, ed., *Suggestions for Thought*, 260.
10. McDonald, ed., *Suggestions for Thought*, 260.
11. Nightingale's study of the medieval mystics and their devotional sayings continued in 1872-73 when she translated select mystical writings from French into English in a work entitled, *Notes from Devotional Authors of the Middle Ages, Collected, Chosen and Freely Translated by Florence Nightingale*. The notes were refused publication by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the translations were destroyed leaving only the notes behind. See Gérard Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, volume 11 of *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*, 16 vols. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003), 11.
12. Nightingale read Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* just a day before leaving for the Crimean War copying out a prayer written by Mme Elisabeth, sister of Louis XVI in French, which she dated 20 October 1854. The prayer gave Nightingale assurance that all things happen according to God's will from "all eternity." See Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 82-83.
13. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 12.

14. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 13.
15. *What began as a sixty-eight page manuscript entitled Suggestions for Thought to Searchers after Religious Truth*, expanded to an 829 page, three volume work printed privately by Nightingale in 1860.
16. McDonald, ed., *Suggestions for Thought*, 33.
17. Augustus J. Cuthbert, *The Life and Letters of Frances Baroness Bunsen* (New York: Routledge, 1879), 20.
18. McDonald, *Florence Nightingale at First Hand*, 6.
19. Michael Calabria, *Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece: Her Diary and Visions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 5.
20. Calabria, *Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece*, 57.
21. Lynn McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Spiritual Journey: Biblical Annotations, Sermons, and Journal Notes*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*, 16 vols. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2002), 93.
22. "A Background of the Deaconess Community," The Deaconess Community of the ELCA, available at <http://www.archive.elca.org/deaconess/Images/DEA4.swf> (accessed 19 June 2011).
23. Calabria, *Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece*, 148.
24. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 442.
25. Barbara M. Dossey, "Florence Nightingale: A Nineteenth-Century Mystic," *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 16, no. 2 (1998): 133.
26. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 43.
27. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 152-53.
28. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 159.
29. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1961), 11.
30. Calabria, *Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece*, 8.
31. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 467.
32. Cook, *Florence Nightingale*, I: 467.
33. Gérard Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 19.

34. William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 7th ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 5.
35. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 9-10.
36. Kenneth Barker, gen. ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985).
37. Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 19.
38. Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 19.
39. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology: Essays, Letters, and Journal Notes*, volume 3 of *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*, 16 vols. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2002), 241.
40. Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 22.
41. Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 19.
42. Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 19.
43. Vallée, ed., *Florence Nightingale on Mysticism and Eastern Religions*, 501.
44. McDonald, ed., *Suggestions for Thought*, 121.
45. Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a leading religious existentialist and author of *I and Thou* which made an important distinction between the I-it relationship people have with objects and the dialogical relationship that can occur between persons. Buber argued that the I-thou relationship can be used as an analogy of how God, the ultimate Thou, can be known by humanity. See C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 18.
46. Nightingale was careful in her wording in order to make it clear she did not agree with the mystic portrayal of God uniting humanity with Himself to the point where the individual "self" dissipates into the essence of God. What is left is the contemplative "inner life" rather than an expression of both the "inner" and "outer life" in practical works. She would agree with Inge's observation of the mystical life in that "we must be conscious of ourselves in [God, and conscious of ourselves in ourselves. For eternal life consists in the knowledge of God, and there can be no knowledge without self-consciousness." See Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 170-71.
47. McDonald, ed., *Suggestions for Thought*, 288.
48. Debra Jensen, "Florence Nightingale's Mystical Vision and Social Action," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 19, no. 1(1998): 72.

49. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) synthesized the insights of both rationalism and empiricism. Kant viewed natural theology as a failure saying that theoretical knowledge of God is impossible and therefore recognizing that within the limits of reason we must exercise a rational, moral faith. See Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion*, 65.
50. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology*, 82.
51. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology*, 82.
52. Kant began with the presupposition that "man is corrupt in the very ground of his maxims" and that through divine cooperation can overcome the "radical corruption of the will." Kant's moral imperative suggests that "despite the fall, the injunction that we *ought* to become better men resounds unabatedly in our souls; hence this must be within our power . . . even though we thereby only render ourselves susceptible of higher and for us inscrutable assistance." See James C. Livingstone, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 65.
53. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology*, 50.
54. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology*, 51.
55. Jensen, "Florence Nightingale's Mystical Vision," 70.
56. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology*, 130.
57. Francis Younghusband, *Modern Mystics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 305.
58. McDonald, ed., *Suggestions for Thought*, 167.
59. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology*, 161.
60. McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale's Theology*, 161.