

English Spirituality: A Review Article

By Jerry R. Flora

Gordon Mursell, *English Spirituality*. 2001. 2 vols. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 548, 580 pp. \$39.95 ea.

Imposing. Impressive. Intimidating. Such feelings must be normal when one first approaches Gordon Mursell's history of Christian spirituality in England. In bulk the two blue volumes resemble the black tomes of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. With 1128 pages and more than 6000 fine-print notes, this is a work to be reckoned with. But it is also interesting and inviting. Mursell's clear style and pastoral approach make it a journey worth taking as he surveys almost two millennia of faith. The massive documentation reveals that the author has read widely, deeply, and carefully. This is no quick overview, but a refined, nuanced discussion abounding in detail. From Regent College in Vancouver, veteran teacher and author James Houston writes, "This is the most comprehensive, scholarly, and up-to-date survey ... an essential guide and standard history of the subject" (dust jacket).

Not yet sixty years of age, the Very Reverend Gordon Mursell is Area Bishop of Stafford in the Diocese of Lichfield. Born in Surrey, he initially studied at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome. While there he lived with a family whose genuine faith caused him to begin taking Christianity seriously. Returning to England, he joined the Anglican Church, attended Oxford University's Brasenose College, and trained for ordination. Since then he has been a parish priest, an instructor in pastoral studies and spirituality, and provost and dean of Birmingham Cathedral. For much of the 1990s he was rector of St. Mary's Church, Stafford, where he did most of the research and writing for *English Spirituality*. He is in frequent demand as a speaker and teacher noted for his clarity, enthusiasm, and infectious humor. His interests include music and hill walking -- not to mention his wife Anne, who is a psychiatrist.

Mursell was the editor of an earlier volume, *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West* (Fortress Press 2001). That collaborative effort surveyed the entire Christian spectrum, each chapter written by an expert in its area. Contributors included well-known authors such as Richard Burridge (Jesus and the origins of Christian spirituality), John McGuckin (the early fathers and the Eastern tradition), and Bradley Holt (the twentieth century). Mursell himself contributed the chapter on the Anglican spirit. Lavishly illustrated in color, the book is a visual feast. *English*

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Spirituality, by contrast, is a typical black-on-white production but made attractive by its orderly arrangement, clear writing, outstanding documentation, and error-free printing. With the United States being the child of England, it is both right and important for Americans to familiarize themselves with the contributions of English spirituality to our Christian heritage. This book offers just what is needed. The purpose of this article is to offer a rather full summary of its contents and briefly evaluate it.

Mursell divides his history into eight major chapters as follows:

1. Context and background
2. Anglo-Saxon spirituality
3. Medieval spirituality (1066-1300)
4. Late medieval spirituality (1300-1500)
5. "Spirituality, reformation and revolution" (1500-1700)
6. English spirituality in the 18th century
7. Spirituality and the Victorian age
8. Spirituality in the 20th century

Each chapter begins and ends with Mursell commenting on some piece of art or music, architecture or literature that encapsulates for him the spirituality of that period. Each chapter has its own bibliography and notes, and the volumes are separately indexed.

Until now, the most nearly standard history in this area has probably been Martin Thornton's work of the same title: *English Spirituality* (1963, reissued 1986). That book, acknowledged by Mursell, is a generation old; much briefer (330 pages), and more narrowly focused. Its subtitle discloses the focus: *An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition*. Thornton described his work as "essentially a *pastoral* book, aiming only at the needs of parish priests" (Thornton 1986, 19). In addition to his valuable, helpful treatment we now have the broadly conceived research, original writing, and massive documentation of Bishop Mursell.

Volume I: From Earliest Times to 1700

In **chapter 1, "A Hard and Realistic Devotion,"** Mursell sets out the context and background of English spirituality. He acknowledges that both "spirituality" and "English" are concepts hard to define with precision. (He investigates only English spirituality. Scotland, Wales, and Ireland are not directly considered.) His choice is for an aspectual approach that cuts a broader swathe than Martin Thornton attempted. He moves quickly to delve into the spirituality of the Bible, noting that it is rich and complex because it contains Hebrew, Greek, and Roman cultures in its seedbed. What emerged in the early

centuries from such a background was sure to be variegated. In one valuable, compact paragraph the author describes important aspects of that variety:

The eastern Christian tradition tended to take a more optimistic view of human nature and its capacity to be divinized, transformed into the very life of God; the western tradition, with a more negative view of humanity and a larger emphasis on the consequences of the Fall, emphasized this less, and tended to be more introspective. Furthermore, there existed in both east and west two different kinds of theology: *apophatic* theology held that God, always strictly unknowable, could be approached only through the mystery of love, and that the closer we come to God, the less we have to say about it. *Cataphatic* theology took a more affirmative view of human capacity to apprehend the reality of God. Both these exerted immense influence on the western Christian tradition (1:14).

The specifically Roman form of that tradition may have ended with the death of St. Augustine in A.D. 430, but his influence reigned supreme in Europe for the next thousand years. It was a conflation of Platonism and biblical thought which impacted all of western Christian spirituality. England, so close to Europe, would always be affected by what was happening in church and society across the Channel.

The methodology employed to investigate this, says Mursell, must consider not merely private experience, but social and political contexts; not merely power and domination, but intimacy and love. It must maintain the biblical tension “between structure and spontaneity, between priest and prophet, between the institutional and the charismatic“ (1:20). Biblical spirituality sees this life as a journey toward a home which is always ahead, always in the future. That means the spiritual life is an adventure – “the surest mark of its authenticity, and the best possible reason for studying it” (1:21). At numerous points in the two volumes the author will return to this conviction that Christian life and its spirituality is an adventure.

Chapter 2, “The Seafarer: Anglo-Saxon Spirituality,” surveys the greatest extent of time, moving from unknown beginnings into the 11th century. How or when Christianity first came to England no one knows. Tertullian, writing ca. A.D. 208, mentioned Britons who were Christians, and three English bishops attended the Council of Arles in 314. Roman missionaries arrived at Canterbury in southern England in 597 to follow up earlier informal evangelistic

efforts. At roughly the same time Celtic monk-evangelists from Ireland were penetrating western Scotland from Iona and northeastern England from Lindisfarne. But whether the faith in any given place tilted toward Rome or Ireland, it was always dominated by the monasteries.

The monks did much to preserve the culture that preceded them, assimilating it or redirecting it to new ends. For instance, they took the popular Anglo-Saxon virtue of warfare and internalized it as spiritual combat with the Cross its weapon rather than the sword. Along with prayers for protection, asceticism and penance become important. However, as Mursell cautions, "monastic texts, religious art and penitentials tell us a great deal about how lay people were expected to pray, but very little about how they actually did" (1:45). This comment might also apply to many of the following centuries. What is known is that there was emphasis on the communion of saints, and the church was seen as a symbol of the heavenly city.

In the latter part of the chapter, as in every chapter, Mursell offers "individual studies" of persons who exemplify what he has discovered. For the period of Anglo-Saxon spirituality he highlights three: (1) St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (d. 687), the monastic leader who exemplified holiness as then conceived; (2) the Venerable Bede, (d. 735), author of the first history of Christianity in England, whose spirituality called for a lived wisdom; and (3) Alcuin (d. 804), "one of the most attractive figures in the English spiritual tradition" (1:61), who taught for many years in Europe at the court of Charlemagne, who founded the Holy Roman Empire in A.D. 800.

Throughout his two volumes Mursell attempts to credit leading women in the history as well as men. In the present chapter, for example, he singles out St. Leoba (ca. 700-780), a nun from a double monastery in Dorset. "She was a person of formidable intellectual power ... the equal of any Anglo-Saxon holy man.... Indeed in many respects Leoba could be taken as the classic exemplar of Anglo-Saxon monastic spirituality" (1:35). Might she then merit a full "individual study" rather than mere mention in passing?

The influence of Europe continued strong in the 10th-11th centuries, especially in reform movements among the monasteries. What remained as essential in Anglo-Saxon spirituality was "its vigorous eclecticism" which managed to blend "vernacular imagery and patristic sophistication, Irish exuberance and Roman sobriety, hero and holy man, with extraordinary success" (1:66).

With **chapter 3, "St. Godric and the Deer: Medieval Spirituality (1066-1300),"** Mursell's survey enters a period of great transition. Although England had been assaulted in earlier Viking raids, defeat by the Normans at the

battle of Hastings (1066) bound the island more closely to western Europe than to Scandinavia. Reform movements occurring on the Continent had definite bearing on England, and the prevailing motif of the 12th-13th centuries was one of “inexorable and fundamental change” (1:90).

The earlier uncertain, even chaotic times were past, and a new social system was in place. Feudalism’s hierarchical order pervaded every aspect of medieval society. In religion it meant

God was the king’s liege lord, the ruler of the world, the fount of all *ordo*, the ultimate protection against chaos. The angels were his principal vassals, the monks his elite troops, the true Christian his faithful follower doing homage to his heavenly lord (1:91).

Along with this came a revival of classical learning as scholarship moved beyond the monasteries into the newly founded universities. Still, it was the time of “the last and greatest flowering of western Christian monasticism” (1:92). The Benedictine order, dominant for more than 500 years, was now joined by Cistercians (reformed Benedictines) and Carthusians. In addition, houses of canons were springing up – communities of persons who followed a religious rule but lived within a town rather than in an isolated area. One further trend caught on rapidly; namely, hermits or recluses dwelling alone on the edges of society in order to give themselves to prayer, fasting, the pursuit of perfection, and spiritual counsel. Earlier persons who answered this call had exemplified power and inspired fear. Now Godric, typical of the later time, saved the life of a deer and so demonstrated a holiness of beauty, compassion, and reverence more than force or fear. It was indeed a time of change.

In each chapter of *English Spirituality* Mursell sets out a series of themes which he believes are specific to the period under discussion. In the medieval period, for example, discovery of individual selfhood and devotion to the humanity of Christ become prominent. Some might connect these to the slow, certain shift that was occurring among intellectuals away from exclusive dependence on Plato’s eternal realities toward a more ready acceptance of Aristotle’s this-worldly interest. The latter’s devaluing of the feminine did not stop numbers of women from embracing the emerging spirituality. The suffering of Jesus, his noble manhood, and union with him in spiritual marriage emerge as important to devout women. “The celibate woman becomes not only a queen but a mother; and Christ is both lord, lover, and child” (1:102).

From the 11th century on, parish clergy gradually replaced monastic clerics as guides for the laity. Preaching and the sacrament of penance came under their jurisdiction, the latter increasingly seen as substitute for pilgrimage

to a holy site. With the growth of the new middle class, a number of lay-led organizations for spirituality arose. This was fueled by the arrival in England of European friars (Dominicans in 1221, Franciscans in 1224) committed to the religious life but free to move about from place to place. “As confessors, educators, and above all as preachers, the friars were able to address themselves to a range of issues which had never much troubled the monks: private property, money, usury, and much else besides” (1:109).

Finally, illness and death were definitely to the fore in medieval English spirituality. Miracles of power tended to recede in reporting, and healing stories took on new prominence. Saints and angels (especially guardian angels) rose in importance as members of God’s feudal court, “putting in a word for lesser mortals” (1:110). And hell, purgatory, and prayers for the dead all increased in size.

Mursell concludes the chapter by offering individual studies of two figures influential in medieval English spirituality. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), sometimes called the second Augustine, differed from his master in contending with doubt and anxiety more than heresy and unbelief. His introspective *Prayers and Meditations* led him to picture Jesus and Paul as those who suffer and give birth – mother figures offering life and hope to the world. And, as is well known, Anselm assumed and incorporated the structures of feudal society in his approach to the atonement.

Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167) was largely responsible for the “astonishing spread of Cistercian influence and spirituality at the time” in England (1:123). His lifelong interest in the inner workings of the human psyche led him to think deeply about reason, friendship, love, and Jesus’ motherhood as well as his Lordship.

Chapter 4, “The Quest for the Suffering Jesus: Late Medieval Spirituality (1300-1500),” is nearly double the length of chapter 3 because so much more material is available. The 14th century in England was one of human unrest, natural disaster, and chaotic despair which historian Barbara Tuchman described in her bestseller *A Distant Mirror* (1978). In 1337 the Hundred Years War with France began. In 1378 a rival papacy was established at Avignon. In 1381 the Peasants’ Revolt broke out, in which city and country dwellers alike rebelled against government attempts to force them back into feudal serfdom. And at mid-century the so-called Black Death jumped from Europe to England, ravaging the island and killing nearly half the population in eighteen months. Today many authorities believe it to be the greatest natural disaster in recorded history, some placing the death toll in Europe and Britain as high as 75 million people.

Impacted by all these outward events, the English church was experiencing a crisis of faith. Rising individualism, fueled by many factors, challenged age-old assumptions in the career of Oxford's John Wyclif (d. 1384) and the resulting Lollard movement. Although much still remains uncertain, Mursell is able to write, "What made Wyclif in particular, and Lollardy in general, so suspect in the eyes of contemporary churchmen was their shared emphasis on the importance and integrity of the individual over against the church" (1:171). While that movement was fostering family spirituality, the monastic orders were stagnating. No outstanding figure of the period was a nun or monk, and the expansion of the Carthusian order was due mainly to their favor among the royal court. Those living as solitaries (hermits, recluses) also grew in number, increasingly consulted as sources of spiritual guidance.

Mursell identifies more diverse themes for the late medieval period than for any comparable time. One of the most important was the practice of penance, which now saw a flood of literature and devotion. More and more churches were built, and cathedrals multiplied their daily services. The dogma of transubstantiation had been officially promulgated in 1215. With Christ now believed to be physically present in the eucharistic bread, a related trend led to enclosing the high altars.

The arduous journey of life required companions and protectors, and their number grew in size and significance. The cult of saints, prayers to guardian angels, the cult of the Virgin, devotion to the name of Jesus, to the Christ child, and -- above all -- to the wounds of Jesus marked the time. The earlier Anglo-Saxon preference for Christ as victor over death, the one who harrows hell, was now replaced by the tortured one vividly and viscerally portrayed. There was great emphasis on the universal reality of human death. Contemplating one's own demise, prayers for the dead, and the establishment of chantries multiplied. (The latter were endowments providing for priests to chant daily masses for the soul(s) of the departed. Sometimes altars or chapels for this purpose were constructed inside large churches.)

With the benefit of hindsight Mursell can detect one final important trend of that time:

Knowledge and love, intellect and emotion, theology and spirituality, began, slowly but surely, to be prised [sic] apart.... Where Anselm had held theology and spirituality together to the advantage of both, late medieval writers allowed them to diverge, so that theology became an arcane scholastic discipline, and spirituality a perilously subjective affair (1:195f.).

It is almost a given that anyone describing English spirituality of the 14th century must treat four specific writers. Bishop Mursell does so, but with an added surprise. As expected, he presents individual studies of Richard Rolle, “the solitary lover”; Walter Hilton, who stressed interior re-formation; the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, who wrote of God in the darkness; and the woman history calls Julian of Norwich, whose *Showings (Revelations of Divine Love)* expound God’s compassion. Mursell’s surprise is that, to this quartet, he adds one more voice: Margery Kempe. After bearing fourteen children, Kempe took a vow of chastity within her marriage, later left her family and spent the remainder of her life in unending pilgrimage. She was noted for her outbursts of loud weeping. Thus some writers have described her as histrionic or even psychotic. But, like Martin Thornton before him, Mursell sees her in a positive light and treats her with empathy, respect, and appreciation. “Margery Kempe,” he writes, “lays bare the cost and implications of seeking God in the midst of the world. And that is precisely her enduring value” (1:237).

“The Fellowship of St. Antony: Spirituality, Reformation and Revolution (1500-1700),” brings the author to the fifth and largest chapter in his two volumes. This discussion could almost stand alone as a book. The chapter uses 176 pages of text and bibliography, buttressed by a staggering 1483 endnotes (some nearly a page long), to survey these two centuries so crucial for English spirituality. As stated earlier, Mursell wrote the section on Anglicanism in *The Story of Christian Spirituality*, and now he builds on that foundation. Imposing. Impressive. Intimidating. But also interesting and inviting.

Many authors and books have described the English Reformation of the 16th century and the Puritan Commonwealth of the 17th. Mursell does not attempt to repeat those efforts but assumes them. “What was the effect of the Reformation on English spirituality?” he asks. “First, piety became more secular” as the church came under the control of the crown. “Secondly, there was an immense visual and architectural change.” Monasteries were stripped or destroyed. Wall paintings of the suffering Christ were replaced with quotations from scripture. Statues and other accoutrements of medieval worship gave way to pews and pulpits. “Thirdly, there was an important change in the role and significance of the clergy” (1:295). Criticism of erring priests accelerated, chantry priests disappeared, and the confidence of many laypersons increased. The family became a center for piety, and “the ‘godly household’ is a phrase characteristic of much Protestant spirituality” (1:297).

Given the nature of the Reformation, Mursell devotes one section of this chapter to spirituality and the Bible. Translation and dissemination of scripture became major concerns at this time. William Tyndale (d. 1536) played the central role followed by the translators of the King James Version Bible (1611). The Psalms were especially lifted up for use in both public and private worship, many martyrs of the period going to death with Psalms on their lips.

Reformation spirituality took form in England in the vigorous preaching of such figures as Hugh Latimer and the creation of *The Book of Common Prayer* by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. Both men were executed in Queen Mary's brief, bloody attempt to restore Catholicism as the religion of the kingdom (1553-58). Successive editions of the Prayer Book showed varying theological trends, but the final result (1662) was "a manual of lay spirituality" (1:311) as well as "a standard manual for liturgy and a compendium of spiritual guidance" (1:313). Four and one-half centuries later its liturgy continues to unite the Anglican Communion around the world.

Anglican spirituality of the 16th-17th centuries owed much to the patristic tradition as well as scripture. Some of this came through Richard Hooker (d. 1600), whose influence was felt mostly during the long reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Avoiding the extremes of both Catholic and Calvinistic theology, he set out what some have called a middle way (*via media*). Mursell describes Hooker's famed *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* as "a genuinely independent theology ... in which the pastoral and practical are always held together in the search for truth" (1:314f.). The other figure equal in influence was no doubt Lancelot Andrewes (d. 1626), "a scholar of prodigious ability" (1:315), who was influential in the court of James I. There his gifts made him a natural leader among those who produced the new translation of the Bible ordered by the king.

Beginning with Hooker and Andrewes, and continuing through much of the rest of his work, Mursell offers sections on the theology and practice of prayer as set out by the writers being discussed. Hooker's perspective sets the direction for the Anglican spirituality of succeeding centuries.

This is a crucial point: where the reformed tradition seeks to separate the state of sinfulness from the condition of redemption, God's free act of justification in Christ forming the point of separation, Hooker, following the medieval Catholic tradition, seeks to hold both together. For him, it is not that we were once sinners and are now saved: rather it is that we are still both, at the same time. Where holiness in the Protestant tradition is a process of *separation* from the world

into a gathered church, holiness in the tradition of the Church of England is better seen as a process whereby all of our selves is brought into unity with the redeeming Christ, in a church virtually coterminous with society around it (1:321).

Mursell singles out several major emphases in the Anglican spirituality of the 17th century, a time which “proved to be the most fertile and creative period in the Church of England’s history thus far” (1:325). The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* became the lodestar for the Restoration church following Cromwell’s revolution. Women’s personal journals were published, and some even wrote prophetic texts. Bishop Joseph Hall’s *Arte of Divine Meditation* (1606) became especially influential. And the Latitudinarians lifted up a broad, general spirituality influenced by the beauty of creation and the Platonic tradition. Especially notable among their number were Peter Sterry, Sir Thomas Browne, and Thomas Traherne (whose writings impacted C. S. Lewis).

The spirituality of English Catholics in the 16th century centered around four principal figures: Sir Thomas More, lord chancellor to Henry VIII, who was executed in 1535 for refusing to recognize the king as head of the church; John Fisher, chancellor of Cambridge University, executed in the same year; John Colet, dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, who attacked churchly worldliness and clerical misbehavior; and Robert Southwell, tortured over a three-year period before his execution in 1595. On into the 17th century the changing winds of society created periods of intense anti-Catholic feeling. The result was that many leading Catholics spent much of their lives in Europe. It is not surprising, then, that “taken as a whole, English Catholic spirituality in this period is scarcely comparable with the riches of its continental counterparts in Spain and France” (1:355). What seems apparent is a sense of exile with a resulting spirituality of separation and withdrawal into the hoped-for safety of convent or family.

In his discussion of the 16th-17th centuries our Anglican author gives the most space to Puritan spirituality. The label is a slippery one, sliding over a variety of persons and groups within and outside the established church. Dissatisfaction with the established hierarchical church characterized those who were called Dissenters, Separatists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Independents, Congregationalists, Quakers, and various kinds of Radicals. Until the late 1620s, “episcopal Calvinism was the dominant orthodoxy in the Church of England” (1:356). Most Puritans were Calvinists of some kind, and many were very learned. Mursell moves through the discussion by highlighting major theological *loci* such as the God of Puritan spirituality, the work of the Holy

Spirit, conversion (conversion narratives were especially popular), assurance and faith, the godly life, the theology and practice of prayer, and the practice of spiritual direction. He cites many writers but especially the thinking of two Puritan leaders: John Owen, “perhaps the greatest theologian of the Cromwellian period” (1:359), and the irenic Richard Baxter (d. 1691, the same year as George Fox, founder of the Quakers).

Many Puritans saw the Reformation as a second Pentecost, so highlighting the Spirit’s activity was at the heart of their spirituality. (Such emphasis, however, was rare in Anglican or Catholic spirituality.) The process of sanctification -- total transformation of the entire person and ultimately of society -- was at the core of their belief and behavior. Implied in such an approach were spiritual disciplines (fasting in particular), boldness in witness and in prayer (the frankness of a child with a parent), and an eschatology which held that the humble would be exalted in a heaven that is warmly sociable. Thus, corporate worship filled with praise and celebration of the sacraments/ordinances (especially the Lord’s Supper) was vital as a foretaste of the future.

In this period the separatist group called Friends or Quakers emerged with their belief in the inner light that is Christ. “But the central ingredient of Quaker spirituality, as with that of Puritanism in general, was the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and the consequent stress on the primacy of spiritual experience over any kind of reason-centred, externally-constructed, faith” (1:382). This led them to silence and interiority, but also to action in the world, for which they have become justly known. “In this respect the Quakers stand in the classic Christian tradition of contemplative prophets” (1:385).

Mursell concludes this large, detailed chapter with individual studies of one Catholic, one Puritan, and three Anglicans. Thomas More died, as was said, rather than compromise his convictions. His approach to prayer is the only one our author highlights from the 16th century. From the 17th century John Bunyan is famous for his allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which is to Come*. Mursell contends, however, that scholars of spirituality have unjustly ignored the Bedford tinker. “What Bunyan did was to turn the somber perspectives of covenant theology and justification by faith into a thrilling adventure” (1:411) – the believer’s lifelong pilgrimage in response to God. Anglican preacher-poet John Donne received acclaim during his lifetime, but George Herbert’s came after his brief life. The former’s melancholy was consumed with how to be saved, while the latter was asking how should a saved person live? And flourishing in mid-century was Jeremy Taylor (d. 1667), best known as the author of (*The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living and Holy Dying*). “Taylor’s work is the quintessence of Anglican piety, and every word of his vast

oeuvre is charged with his passionate longing to renew the church he loved” (1:450).

This chapter, as mentioned, is so long and so detailed that it could almost stand alone as a book. But there is more to come.

Volume 2: From 1700 to the Present Day

The latter half of Mursell’s survey is neatly periodized as the 18th century, the Victorian age, and the 20th century. As before, each chapter offers historical context, then discusses Anglican, Catholic, and other Christian spiritualities of England – in that order. For many readers, the discussion at this point may seem more familiar, but Mursell’s presentation continues to have a rich texture that surpasses other surveys.

Chapter 1, “Enthusiasts and Philosophers,” begins with a discussion of 18th century England’s social and intellectual context. This was the time when Britain became a world power with large holdings in far-flung colonies and a slave trade to support farming and industry in them. It was a century when urban society grew rapidly and human knowledge increased exponentially. It was the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason -- a time when science and faith, revealed truth and observed truth, collided. Emotional “enthusiasm” and rational “philosophy” were seen to be at odds. Historian Edward Gibbon (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) mounted a special challenge when he preferred the emperor Julian the Apostate over the Christian monks of the 4th century.

Anglican piety of the 18th century can often seem calm, composed, and ordered. A common view was that reasoned understanding of the physical world leads to the inference of a creator, which is supplemented by what scripture and tradition reveal. The Evangelical revival movement arose as a response and reaction to this ordered calmness. Leaders such as George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, William Cowper, and John Newton called for passionate faith and compassionate social action. Mursell illustrates their idea of the working of grace by analyzing Newton’s great hymn “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken, Zion, City of Our God.”

English Catholic spirituality of the time was somewhat similar except that there was no corresponding church renewal. “What is striking is a gradual movement away from a firmly world-denying, monastic pattern of piety towards one more concerned to equip Catholics for life in this world” (2:33). Lay spirituality came to the fore, especially in manuals on meditation and in such works as Alban Butler’s *Lives of the Saints* (1756-59).

The Society of Friends (Quakers) were among those who dissented from both Anglican and Catholic approaches. Plainness, simplicity, and a quietist strain came to mark their faith but did not prevent their social work for the common good. Two of the most outstanding Dissenters were Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Philip Doddridge (d. 1751) -- neither of them a Quaker. Simultaneously, "A preoccupation with taste, with seeking to separate the 'tasteful' from the everyday, was characteristic of England in the eighteenth century -- and not only of its courtly elite" (2:48). This leads Mursell to offer a section on spirituality and beauty as seen in such creative individuals as artist William Blake and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They represent an antidote to the extremes of both rationalism and religiosity.

Mursell's "individual studies" of volume 1 are now titled "case studies," and his choices and titles describe the richness of what he finds. Each encapsulates a tradition in 18th century English spirituality. (1) "Isaac Watts and the Independent tradition" considers the father of English hymnody with special attention to "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." (2) William Law (the ascetic tradition) is best known for *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728), which influenced the young John Wesley. Law contended that "there is only one kind of Christianity and Christian perfection: not a 'higher' kind for cloistered or expert Christians and a 'lower' kind for the rest" (2:78).

(3) The Wesley brothers (the Methodist tradition) receive high praise from our Anglican author. He describes John as "a man of superlatives" (2:86) who "longs to communicate a religion that will be *attractive*; and he cannot see the point of one that has little or no effect on people's lives" (2:95). Leaning toward the theological East, Charles "goes further than almost any Protestant writer in using the language of merging to denote our union with God in Christ" (2:100). But his hymns are his real contribution, and Mursell gives special attention to "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." Although he sees weaknesses in the Wesleys, the bishop concludes his case study with this encomium:

No one went further in trying to hold together head and heart,
'philosophy' and 'enthusiasm,' in a single convincing
synthesis at the very time when powerful forces were prising
[sic] them apart: no one came nearer to succeeding (2:103).

(4) Mursell offers Samuel Johnson (d. 1784) as a case study of those in the literary tradition. While often thought of as the father of the English dictionary, Johnson was also a devout, prayerful Christian. (5) Women writers emerged in the 18th century as a larger, more cohesive group than at any earlier period. All of them called for a practical spirituality which would begin in the

home and transform people's lives. Outstanding among them was Hannah More, a nationally prominent figure associated with the Clapham Sect and author of *Practical Piety* (1811).

Chapter 2, "Kinship and Sympathy," surveys the 19th century, the Victorian age, "an era of expansion and renewal within all the main branches of English Christianity" (2:176). With Catholics receiving full political rights and slavery abolished in the Empire before Queen Victoria came to the throne, England could enjoy a time of unprecedented expansiveness during her long reign (1837-1901). It was also a period of great changes in science (Darwin's *Origin of Species*, 1859), commerce (the Industrial Revolution in full swing), political power (conflicts within the Empire and with Napoleon's France), and secularization (liberalism in society and church).

Much English spirituality of the time was fueled by a German import, the Romantic Movement. This fostered "a life rooted in enduring but invisible values such as love and beauty and justice, but without necessarily embracing the teachings of any given religion" (2:177). Literary figures such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote of human dignity, individual potential, and love expressed in compassion. They also gloried in fantasy, play, and kinship with nature.

The Church of England responded to this in several ways. Beginning in 1833, the Oxford Movement tried to renew the national church by leading it in a more Roman Catholic direction. They relied on extensive use of the early church fathers and a high sacramentalism. Prayer in this vision calls for more than petition – it must be adoration, delight in God's presence, the integrating focus for the Christian community. Their achievement was mixed. While the Anglican Church came to a new appreciation of its Catholic heritage, parts of the movement have been criticized for being too churchy.

Where the Oxford Movement sought guidance from the past, Liberalism preferred the present. Thus adherence to current learning, the universal Fatherhood of God, an evolutionary view of the divine Kingdom, and a call to follow Jesus in sacrifice were values that thinkers such as Frederic Maurice (d. 1872) and Charles Kingsley (d. 1875) upheld.

Local parishes responded to these challenges in individual ways. From his research Mursell comments, "Beneath the surface, the mainstream Church of England in the Victorian and Edwardian eras may have had more vitality than it has often been given credit for" (2:217). This can be seen in parish support for education, social action, evangelism, and missions. Some bishops worked for the spiritual enrichment of their diocesan clergy. There was a large trend toward

constructing new church buildings and (even more) restoring old ones. Many of these began to be used for daily prayers to the exclusion of everything else.

The Evangelical approach to English spirituality flourished in the Victorian age. Early in the century Charles Simeon (d. 1836) of Cambridge was one of the most prominent Evangelicals within the Anglican Church. His attempt to hold together Calvinist and Arminian theology, along with his pastoral influence on students and clergy, proved to be especially significant. American evangelists D. L. Moody and Ira Sankey visited England in 1873, and thereafter the most prominent figure was Baptist pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon (d. 1892). “What is fascinating and important about Spurgeon is that he was a Calvinist through and through” (2:224). Always the preacher, he presented his theology in a way that was attractive and powerful. “His spirituality is confident, full of joy; but it is marked by a recognition of the breaking process that inevitably precedes that” (2:229). Although some of his views were exclusivist, Mursell finds Spurgeon to be “at once heartwarming and adventurous, but above all *attractive*” (2:231).

The larger Nonconforming tradition, of which Evangelicalism was one part, tended to find its greatest appeal among the lower middle classes and skilled artisans. As the century progressed, however, Dissent became more respectable. The Primitive Methodists, Salvation Army, and Irvingites (forerunners of present-day Pentecostalism) fall here. Perhaps more than any other Nonconformists, Unitarians sought to hold together insights from scientific rationalism and Evangelical experience.

Roman Catholic spirituality in 19th-century England contained three strands. There were traditional Catholics who declined to participate in Anglican worship. There was a flood of Irish immigrants who brought with them their own piety. And there were notable converts from Anglicanism, among them poet Frederick William Faber (“Faith of Our Fathers,” “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”), Henry Edward Manning, Archbishop of Westminster, and the sensitive, stormy, Irish-born Jesuit George Tyrell (d. 1909). More appreciated today than in his own time, Tyrell especially lifted up God’s love, beauty, and attractiveness; kinship and sympathy with nature; public worship; and interior piety. For English Catholics in general, devotion to the Virgin Mary and the Blessed Sacrament, the practice of penance, and the life of prayer continued to be vital. Finally, English spirituality in the Victorian era saw an extension of religious orders. New ones were founded, old ones were renewed, and their numbers increased among both Catholics and Anglicans.

The author concludes this chapter with an intriguing series of case studies. (1) John Henry Newman, whose life spanned nearly the entire 19th

century, was the most famous convert from Anglicanism to Catholicism. Of all the writers considered in the book, Mursell believes him to be the most difficult to evaluate. He concludes,

Newman's is a wholly uncompromising, radically supernatural spirituality, intensely compassionate to people's spiritual needs and the salvation of their souls, entirely uninterested in their physical needs.... There is little interest in the world of nature in Newman, little concern for social justice or the affairs of the world. This may be the fault of his context rather than of his personality; but it unquestionably limits his appeal (2:278f.).

(2) Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins lived only half as long as Newman, but his verse is widely appreciated. He wrote of "inscape" (God's design and form of things) and "stress/instress" (how the divine design works out in human practice). Two themes recur often in his poems: exile and death. The first was Hopkins's own spiritual experience, and the second preoccupied him as well as many Victorians. Sex was little discussed, but death was spoken of often.

(3) Dora Greenwell, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens were all writers, but the first is little known. Mursell chooses her because she was a Catholic laywoman, a biographer and poet who had read widely, and a person sympathetic to a variety of Christian spiritualities. Eliot and Dickens were famous novelists, but neither was conventionally religious. Their spiritualities must be teased out of their fiction. "Sympathy, not religious observance, is what counts" in their writings (2:300).

"Losing Our Absolute" is the striking title of Mursell's chapter on the 20th century. Scarred by two world wars and impacted by exponential changes in society, Anglican, Catholic, and free churches in England all declined in numbers. "There was," however, "an enormous market for 'spirituality', understood as a search for meaning with reference to enduring but invisible realities such as wholeness, compassion, justice, and self-fulfilment" (2:361). All these values bear witness to "an unprecedented development: 'spirituality' and 'religion' were beginning to be prised [sic] apart" (2:361). The organization of this final chapter, therefore, is somewhat different from the preceding ones.

The Church of England in the 20th century produced writers "of amazing diversity and vitality" (2:361). Mursell casts his net widely, finding value in the work of authors such as William Temple (especially), John Stott, John V. Taylor, Gabriel Hebert, John A. T. Robinson, W. H. Vanstone, G. A.

Studdert-Kennedy, and John Macquarrie. One of their significant achievements was to emphasize the corporate nature of Christian spirituality without sacrificing individual experience. Another was their recognition that prayer is human response to divine love. Its basic nature, therefore, is that of relationship. It is communion more than petition.

For the Catholic Church the 20th century's greatest event was Vatican Council II (1962-65), but Mursell chooses to dwell mostly on the thought of writers prior to the Council. Baron Friedrich von Hugel (d. 1925), a naturalized English citizen, was "a walking ecumenical movement" (2:379), best known for his *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (1908). Dom John Chapman (d. 1933) was famous for his letters of spiritual direction, "an attractive English version of the French Catholic tradition exemplified by St. Vincent de Paul and Jean-Pierre de Caussade" (2:385). For Gerald Vann (d. 1963), spirituality is *pietas*, duty to God. It includes love, gratitude, obedience, prayer, and action. Compassion (God-like pity) is "the defining Christian quality because it is at the furthest possible remove from a me-centred perspective" (2:389). Donald Nicholl (d. 1997), like von Hugel a layman, wrote of holiness as something practical, relational, unhurried, integrating, and never individual. Mursell's entire discussion here is good, but one can still wish for more on the Catholic Church of England in light of Vatican II.

Free Church spirituality declined in the 20th century if numbers are the measure, but it also showed "a vigour and vitality that belied the statisticians' report" (2:393). Again Mursell casts his net widely, this time catching up writers such as P. T. Forsyth (especially), John Oman, W. R. Maltby, William Sangster, R. Newton Flew, Leslie Weatherhead, H. H. Farmer, Olive Wyon, and Gordon Wakefield. Together they represent a willingness from the perspective of historic Dissent to engage contemporary challenges, not hide from them. For these leaders the way forward is the way through, and they expounded that with a sense of adventure and passion.

"One of the most distinctive features of English spirituality in the twentieth century is the growth of the Pentecostal movement – effectively the only branch of Christianity to exhibit sustained growth in the country during this period" (2:405, underscore added). This world-challenging spirituality moved from the U.S. to England in the 1960s. It glories in God's victory over all opposing powers. Worship and praise, healing and deliverance are anticipations of the eschatological kingdom. "It is a defiant, celebratory form of spirituality" (2:407), having much in common with Black experience. For the latter, social context is indispensable in producing a spirituality expressed in

social action. Music is central to worship, prayer is spontaneous and free, visions and dreams can empower believers, and hope stubbornly challenges evil and suffering.

Finally, many monastic communities in England declined during the 20th century, as did the churches which founded them. Franciscans and Carmelites, however, found new ways to incarnate the monastic vision in an increasingly urban culture. At the same time the retreat movement grew significantly alongside “an astonishing diversity of experiments in community life; and even if many of these were short-lived, they often exerted a profound influence well beyond their walls” (2:409).

For a time in which most of England’s church membership and worship attendance drastically declined, Mursell offers case studies unified around the theme of recovery. He chooses to highlight the recovery of mysticism in Evelyn Underhill, “the most important scholar of mysticism in the early twentieth century” (2:414). The enthusiasm of journalist and apologist G. K. Chesterton (d. 1938) recovered for many the sense of wonder. C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams (both influenced by Chesterton), together with novelist-playwright Dorothy Sayers, labored in the recovery of tradition. All were writers carefully informed about the centuries prior to their own. The Nonconformist scholar Olive Wyon (d. 1966) was “one of the most impressive contributors to the nascent spirituality of ecumenism in England” (2:447). She illustrates the recovery of unity. The recovery of theology welded to spirituality can be seen in the work of Austin Farrer (d. 1968). This friend and confidant of C. S. Lewis receives exceptionally high praise from our author. Finally, professor, bishop, and archbishop (York 1956-61, Canterbury 1961-74), A. M. Ramsey studied and wrote about glory, especially as it emerges from suffering. His was a mind that was “pithy, precise but profoundly spiritual” (2:461).

This final chapter concludes with two sections unique to it: (1) “In order to do justice to the increasingly pluralist nature of English society in the twentieth century” (2:466), Mursell offers brief thematic treatments of Christian spirituality and social justice, feminism, war, the arts, psychology, and the secular quest. (2) He also includes a glossary of forty-two writers whose work he discusses in the chapter but whose biographical details he reserves for this appendix.

Evaluating Mursell’s large gift to the reading public is not an easy task. No summary – even a long one – can do justice to the rich texture of this work. He has produced a survey that is historically comprehensive, theologically informed, pastorally sensitive, widely appreciative, and scholarly to the core. He intends his extraordinary endnotes to be an extension of the

discussion. They offer commentary and reading suggestions while highlighting agreements and disagreements found in the sources. (He even points out differences between first and final editions of some books.)

Given the nature of the subject and the sources available, it is almost certain that such a work must major on spiritual literature. How to assess the non-literary aspects of spirituality is an even larger task, which Mursell noted at the outset. We can welcome his emphasis on qualities in the literature such as wholeness, attractiveness, and adventure. As a history of English spiritual literature, this is likely to be the definitive work for a long time to come.

This review article has already offered a few comments by way of evaluation. Bishop Mursell has given us so much that it seems ungrateful to ask for anything more. But if we may ask, it might take the following lines. Will he follow up with a comparable survey of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish spirituality? The latter in particular has been studied often, but too often romanticized. Besides, many Americans confuse the historic parts of Great Britain (or consider them together), so we in the former colonies need still further help.

It is often said that the modern missions movement began (so far as England and the U.S. are concerned) with William Carey in 1792. Some have described the 1800s as the greatest century of missionary advance. More on this might enhance the last two chapters, especially in light of 19th century mission societies and the leading role women played in some of them. While Mursell is careful to include women throughout the book, the only real mention of "overseas evangelism" comes in a short discussion of the author's great-great-grandfather, a Baptist pastor (2:238f.). What kind of spirituality produced the missionary movement, and how did missions impact the spirituality of congregations and individuals?

Finally, with the technology available today for printing, one has to wonder if the publishers could have included a few pictures. Each chapter begins and closes by considering some item of literature, a building's architecture, a work of art, or piece of music. Understanding would be improved if readers could actually see what is being described. And if the author's friendly smile can be seen on the Internet, why can't it appear on the dust jackets of the two volumes?

All this is to say that here is a treasure of scholarship attractively presented. It is easy to concur with James Houston's assessment: "Mursell has succeeded brilliantly in writing the most exhaustive study available" (dust jacket). *English Spirituality* should be on the shelves of all large libraries. It should be read by all Anglophiles. And it should be consulted by all students doing research in this field of study. We have much for which to thank the

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bishop, and we have good reason to anticipate even more from his mind in the future.