

# THE MINDLESS MYSTICISM OF Madame Guyon

## Countering the Myth of Intermittent Deification and Sinless Perfection

by G. Richard Fisher

In an era of emotionalism, experience mania, sensationalism and mindless Christianity, it is easy to see why the writings of a mystic dead almost 300 years are enjoying a revival in readership.

Put in contemporary terms, the teachings of Madame Guyon, a Roman Catholic mystic who lived during the 17th and 18th centuries, are like an amalgam of the teachings of Shirley MacLaine, Rebecca Brown, Joyce Meyer and Sister Angelica. Nevertheless, some see her life and teachings as an example for Christians to follow.

Moody Press appears to be among that group. It continues to publish her autobiography and says in its Introduction:

"We offer no word of apology for publishing the Autobiography of Madame Guyon, those expressions of devotion to her church, that found vent in her writings. She was a true Catholic when protestantism was in its infancy."<sup>1</sup>

What found vent in the writings of Guyon (Jeanne Marie Bouvier De La Motte, 1648-1717) was

full-blown mysticism. Elgin Moyer writes of her spiritual development, "her life began to be a series of visions, revelations, and spiritual experiences."<sup>2</sup>

Henry Sheldon describes mysticism as "the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God."<sup>3</sup> Thus it is not just inner feelings of praise or gratitude for what God has done, but rather "The complete union of the soul with God..."<sup>4</sup> This mind set confuses Creator and creature, wrongly seeking Christ not in God's Word but in the self. Christian mystics also ignore the importance of Christian fellowship, ordinances and the other means of grace. Mystical experience displaces biblical revelation, becoming the final goal and authority.

The school of mysticism that Guyon adhered to, sometimes called Quietism, was an extreme form of Roman Catholic mysticism that emphasized the cleansing of one's inner life and included the belief that one could see Christ visibly. Before Guyon's day, in the Middle Ages, this took strange forms in erotic

"bride mysticism" with some visionaries believing they were married to Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Guyon and the Quietists went further, into something called essence mysticism. They believed that their being was merged with God's being and the two became one. This unbiblical idea survives today in the New Age and other non-Christian religions.

In her autobiography, Guyon wrote that "divine wisdom is unknown."<sup>6</sup> She made no attempt to speak of God's revelation of Himself in nature and creation (Psalm 19, Romans 1) and the specific revelation of God in Jesus Christ and His Word. She taught that we can know of God by "passing forward into God,"<sup>7</sup> going into a mindless, meditative state where we can get in touch with the Christ within the self, merge with that Christ and be lifted into ecstasy.

### The Making of a Heretic

Guyon's autobiography says she tried to enter a convent as a girl, but was thwarted by her parents.<sup>8</sup> So, at age 15, she en-

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tered an arranged marriage with a 37-year-old man. Despite her husband's wealth, she wrote that the union was unhappy.<sup>9</sup> She stated that her overbearing husband and tyrannical mother-in-law vilified and abused her unrelentingly.<sup>10</sup>

This evidently left Guyon desperate for escape and inward was the only direction she could turn. At 19 she met a priest who told her: "It is, madame, because you seek without what you have within. Accustom yourself to seek God in your heart, and you will there find Him."<sup>11</sup> Guyon wrote of no conversion, only a presupposition that Christ was always in her heart.

Thus she started her incredible lifelong journey within. She responded to the Lord, "Thou wast in my heart, and demanded only a simple turning of my mind inward, to make me perceive Thy presence. ... The kingdom of God is within you."<sup>12</sup>

Guyon is not the only one who has misused Jesus' words from Luke 17:21. While New Agers and other cultists cite this passage to prove their pantheistic view, Jesus used it to communicate a different idea. The Greek word *entos* can be literally translated "in the midst." Jesus was speaking of Himself as being in the midst of those he was speaking to. The Kingdom was among them in the person of Jesus and they were missing it. Verse 22 confirms this as Jesus speaks of days ahead when they would desire to see Him and not be able. His physical presence in their midst would be withdrawn.

A New Testament note in *The Ryrie Study Bible*, confirms this:

"17:21 *the kingdom of God is*

*in your midst.* The necessary elements of the kingdom were there present and needed only to be recognized. It cannot mean "within you," for the kingdom certainly was completely unconnected with the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking (v. 20)."<sup>13</sup>

Guyon, thinking that God had always been in her heart, also believed that the fire would "devour all that was left of self" and that here would be no more "troublesome faults or reluctances,"<sup>14</sup> bringing about a perfect, sinless state of life. While she warned of the dangers of visions, dreams and ecstasies, her only rule for evaluating such experiences was "The Giver alone must be our object and aim."<sup>15</sup> She had little regard for the biblical Christ, settling for what she called Christ "in the center of the soul,"<sup>16</sup> a construct of her own imagination.

### Absorption or Hypnosis?

Guyon's description of absorption into God<sup>17</sup> sounds a lot like self-hypnosis. She claimed to lose self-will, becoming reclusive and believing she had been absorbed into God's being.<sup>18</sup> She wrote of things like death of the senses and the death of understanding, equating union with Christ with some kind of mystical, inner-death experience.<sup>19</sup>

When Guyon did refer to Scripture, she distorted it to teach something about an inner, meditative state. Guyon's problem was that she was absorbing the writings and teachings of the mystics of that day. One such mystic was Jesuit Francois Fenelon (1651-1715). At the request of the Pope, Fenelon burned his writings to stay in favor with Rome. Guyon would face prison over hers. Other mystics known to Guyon were Jacob

Boehme (1575-1624), Francis de Sales (1567-1622), and Charles Molinos (1640-1697). Catholic legalism was being countered, not with biblical balance, as in the Reformation, but with unrestrained extremism and subjectivism.

Through all this, Guyon writes that her marriage continued to be a struggle of coping with domestic miseries by retreating into self and "God"<sup>20</sup> and experiencing euphoric states. She went through nearly seven years of mental depression and emotional instability with constant thoughts of hell and damnation.<sup>21</sup> Experiences and mystical highs did not give her any kind of lasting comfort. These were probably more of an escape than anything else. She told of dreams that sound like bizarre nightmares but which she considered revelations of hidden truth, which she interpreted through imagination and speculation.<sup>22</sup> Her husband died after 12 years of marriage,<sup>23</sup> leaving her free to pursue her ideas more fully.

In the 1680s, she encountered the New Catholics, a quasi-monastic group under the tutelage of Father LaCombe, and gave them all her money.<sup>24</sup> LaCombe, an imitator of the hermit Anselm, had a great influence on Guyon.

Guyon wrote that she ate and slept little after joining the New Catholics.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this weakened state contributed to her loss of emotional control and a belief that she was in direct contact with Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> Scientists today understand much about the chemical effects on the brain from sleep deprivation.

Jay Adams alerts us to the physical and mental problems associated with sleep loss, among which can be perceptual difficulties and hallucinations. He connects sleep loss with the bizarre

manifestations reported in the Middle Ages:

“If in the ascetic life early morning prayer was combined with late-night vigils, there is little wonder that many early mystics saw what they thought were visions and heard what they supposed were revelations from God. Since they held a strong belief in present direct revelation and miracles, it is not surprising that the perceptual disturbances resulting from sleep loss that brought about hallucinations often took the form of (or were interpreted as) revelations. A study of the practices of the ascetics forces one to conclude that it was probably sin against their bodies, rather than holiness derived from ascetic practices, that was at the bottom of the mysticism so often associated with hermits, monastics, and others.”<sup>27</sup>

Guyon expressed her creed this way:

“Perfect poverty, by the total privation of everything that was mine, both inwardly and outwardly. Perfect obedience to the will of the Lord, submission to the church.”<sup>28</sup>

What Guyon found while under La Combe were altered states of consciousness. She perfected her self-hypnosis and moved into extremes that can only be described as a delusion of self-deification:

“So was my soul lost in God, who communicated to it His qualities, having drawn it out of all that it had of its own. ... Oh, happy poverty, happy loss, happy nothingness, which gives no less than God Himself in His own immensity, no more circumscribed to the limited manner of the creature but always drawing it

out of that, to plunge it wholly into His own divine essence.”<sup>29</sup>

This is like adding a member to the Trinity. We may share God’s blessing and even reflect some of His communicable attributes like mercy, love and holiness but it is lunacy to say we can be plunged into the divine essence. God is wholly other and will always remain ontologically different from the creature. We share His blessings but not His essence.

There is only one unique eternal and perfect God and man is not like Him (Isaiah 40-46). Fusion, as it is called, is a gross error whether it is the fusion of Norman Grubb (the Christological type), the polytheistic fusion of the Word-Faith type (little gods), or the monotheistic and intermittent type of Guyon and the medieval mystics.

While we can be one in purpose with God, we cannot be one in being or essence.<sup>30</sup>

Some might counter that the Greek Orthodox Church has taught the doctrine of deification or theosis. From Athanasius to Maximus was it not said that “God became man that man may become God”? On the surface it sounds like deification, but some misunderstand.

The Greek Orthodox Church did not teach deification in the absolute and strict sense. They so explained and nuanced the doctrine that it is clear that they believed Christians are partakers of Christ and would be something like Him but not share His essence or divine nature. Deification occurred at the incarnation and our becoming like God by the indwelling Holy Spirit is potential and progressive for the believer.

Secondly, this “partaking,” in the Greek Orthodox view, is es-

chatological, in the future. At the Resurrection believers will dwell in an immortal, deathless, glorified body like that of Christ. Their transformation will be complete and full glory will be attained. They will be more like God than ever but not God in any absolute sense. The Greek Orthodox view is a far cry from the heretical views of deification.<sup>31</sup>

Some may even try to stretch and twist 2 Peter 1:4 (“partakers of the divine nature”) into some kind of deification scheme but it just won’t work. The Greek word “partaker” (*koinonia*) means a partner or one having something in common with another. Partners do not become one another or become absorbed into each other. Two distinct persons are needed to have a partnership and identities are not confused.

Whatever partnership we have in God and Christ does not make us one with the Godhead. A baby in the womb shares its mother’s life but they remain separate and distinct.

*The New Geneva Study Bible* affirms:

“Believers are not absorbed into deity, nor do they become divine. Rather, they have received the Holy Spirit and are sons of God (John 1:12; Rom. 8:9-21). As such they are being conformed to the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29) and the image of God in them is being renewed in true righteousness.”<sup>32</sup>

Interspersed into Guyon’s emotional highs were freakish lows where she would see horrible faces in blueish light and for a time experienced poltergeistic activity.<sup>33</sup> If this was not scrambled brain chemistry from sleep loss it was occultic.

Some of Guyon’s other strange



beliefs include:

- That we should claim healing and not undermine it by praying for the will of God. This is so unbelievable since she was so sickly all of her life, probably epileptic as well.<sup>34</sup>

- That she and La Combe could communicate for hours without words in some kind of strange telepathy. She asserted they could read each others hearts.<sup>35</sup>

- That she had insight into the minds and hearts of others. Many insisted she guessed incorrectly. For this practice of “mind reading” — which was really an over-active imagination — she was constantly rebuked for pride.<sup>36</sup>

- That her trance states, which left her unable to speak for days, were good and godly.<sup>37</sup>

- That she had written under the direct inspiration of God, often not even being aware of what she was writing. She claimed to have found within herself, “latent treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> She was so bold to say that her writings were spirit-dictated.<sup>39</sup> Guyon was usurping the position of Jesus Christ “in whom are hidden the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 3:3).

Evelyn Underhill, herself a promoter of mysticism and myths, refers to Guyon as a “medium” exhibiting clairvoyance, prophecy, telepathy, and automatic writing in bewildering profusion.<sup>40</sup>

### A Setback

There was a great turn of events when La Combe, in self-preservation, began systematically burning the writings of the mystics.<sup>41</sup> The Church leadership and laity were becoming more vocally opposed to the mystics and their errors. As a result Guyon was constantly on the

move relocating with regularity and “wandering as a vagabond.”<sup>42</sup> A strange bond continued to exist between Guyon and La Combe and he constantly intervened on her behalf in spite of his disagreement with her views.

In 1688, Guyon came up against her worst nightmare in the person of a Father La Mothe, who brought her in on heresy charges and suggested an immoral connection between the lady and La Combe.<sup>43</sup> La Combe was imprisoned and Guyon was banished to a locked chamber in a convent.<sup>44</sup>

After seven months, Guyon was released. She joined the mystic Archbishop Fenelon. With few exceptions, Fenelon accepted and affirmed all of Guyon’s experiences and ideas.<sup>45</sup> This added fuel to her fire and would propel her into a radicalism that led to 10 years’ imprisonment. The sufferings created a martyr’s complex and the “persecution” proved in her mind to show the rightness of her cause.

After release from prison, Guyon lived reclusively and quietly for seven years. She died in 1717 at age 70.

### Other Dangers

*Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity* reminds us of the other errors of mysticism:

“In seventeenth-century France the Quietists, Monsieur de Molinos, Madame Guyon and Archbishop Fénelon, condemned human effort. They believed that, to attain perfection, man must be passive. He must abandon himself to God to the extent that he does not even care for his own salvation. This state can be reached in prayer. When it is truly achieved, sin is impossible. Temptation

may come, and even compel the Quietist to perform actions which would be sinful in others. But because he no longer has a will of his own, the actions are not sin.”<sup>46</sup>

God has given us the Scriptures because He wants us to use our minds. We are to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts and minds (Matthew 22:37). Mysticism is a dead end and cannot be supported by Scripture. Meditation of the true biblical kind is not mindless and self-centered but focused on God, His works and His ways (Psalm 1, Joshua 1:8). The Hebrew word translated meditation means to muse or to roll ideas around in the mind. Submitting our will to God and His Word in grateful and practical obedience is the key to healthy sanctification. The Bible teaches us to be still and silent before God, but not passive and mindless.

*Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* affirms:

“It may be doubted whether there is any direct biblical support for mysticism as distinct from the mystical interpretation of biblical data. ... apart from its obvious extravagances it may be doubted whether it is a genuine form of biblical and evangelical Christianity.”<sup>47</sup>

Guyon’s mystical mindlessness, her intermittent deification and perfectionistic ideas need to be exposed and rejected. We need to call on “Christian” publishers to stop the spread of heresy. It is curious that Moody Press is responsible for Guyon’s autobiography while also publishing Arthur Johnson’s *Faith Misguided*, which exposed the dangers of mysticism. It is also curious that Moody has let Johnson’s book go out of print while for

decades has continued to print Guyon's volume. Even if publishers would want to issue books like this for historical purposes, there should be loud disclaimers in the Preface for the sake of the untaught and the novice.

Guyon's beliefs do not even come close to biblical Christianity. What she proposes is sheer essence mysticism and Catholicism mutated into even more horrible errors. That man could become like God was one of the first lies held out by Satan to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). That Moody Press would continue to propagate this lie is beyond comprehension.

### Endnotes:

1. Madam Guyon, *Madame Guyon An Autobiography*. Chicago: Moody Press, no date, pg. 6.
2. Elgin S. Moyer, *Who Was Who In Church History*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1962, pg. 182.
3. Henry Sheldon, *Pantheistic Dilemmas*. New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1920, pg. 224.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 220

5. See further, *Mysticism An Evangelical Option?* by Winfried Corduan, pp. 34-35 and *Dictionary of Christianity in America* by Daniel G. Reid, Coordinating Editor, pg. 968.
6. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 14.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 37.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-54.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64, 89-99.
11. *Ibid.*, pg. 72.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
13. *The Ryrie Study Bible*, study note on Luke 17:21, pg. 1580.
14. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 73.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 76.
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 77.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 80.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-88.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-147.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-159.
22. *Ibid.*, pg. 201.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 162.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 219-224.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 231.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 232.
27. Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973, pg. 386.
28. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 234.
29. *Ibid.*, pg. 239.

30. See further, "Ye Are Gods? Orthodox and Heretical Views on the Deification Of Man," by Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Christian Research Journal*, Winter/Spring 1987.
31. See further, *The Love of Power or the Power Of Love*, by Tom Smail, Andrew Walker and Nigel Wright, pp. 88-89 and Corduan, op.cit., pp. 98-102.
32. *The New Geneva Study Bible*, study note on 2 Peter 1:4, pg. 1980.
33. *Guyon*, op. cit., pp. 243-244.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284, 289.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 286-287.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 299-301.
37. *Ibid.*, pg. 281.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 324.
40. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*. New York: Image Books-Doubleday, 1990, pg. 295.
41. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 310.
42. *Ibid.*, pg. 336.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 353-357.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 357, 364.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 371.
46. *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985, pg. 498.
47. Everett F. Harrison, Editor-in-chief, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987, pp. 367-368.



### Hannah Whitall Smith

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out to be unflattering, exposes a Hannah Whitall Smith who was as flawed as anyone. Henry's interesting and readable book makes Hannah Whitall Smith's life a secret no longer.

Henry became interested in Smith and her writings after suffering a "partial breakdown" after serving as a pastor in a Presbyterian church. She compiled her account of Smith's life with the help of surviving family members, diaries, letters and personal papers. Her material contained a large amount of primary sources.

Henry says early in her book's

Introduction that Smith's life was far from perfect:

"The truth is that this writer of the best-selling Christian classic *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* had some agonizing experiences with members of her family and went through periods of great discouragement, doubt and even despair" (pg. xiv).

According to Henry's biography, Hannah Whitall Smith was born (1832), reared and married (1851) in Germantown, Pa. She struggled with spiritual doubt and confusion during the early years of her marriage. A confirmed mystic, Smith experienced what she called "openings," a term she

used for her inner "revelations," many of which were unorthodox.

While on vacation in Atlantic City, N.J., in 1858, Smith reported that a "healing, comforting peace warmed her whole being" while she read her Bible (Henry, pg. 32). Giving attention to Romans 5, she said she came to a saving knowledge of Christ and an experience of salvation by grace. After resigning from the Quaker assembly in order to be baptized by immersion, she came under intense persecution from her family (Henry pp. 34-39).

She and her husband Robert then joined the Plymouth Brethren. Hannah Smith began to doubt the concept of hell and