The meaning of Wesley's famous Aldersgate experience is a matter of dispute among scholars. Well-nigh undisputed, however, is the point that much of Wesley's theology was "converted" during the months immediately preceding that epochal evening of May 24, 1738. Under one aspect this conversion was a reevaluation of the phenomena of mysticism. Before Wesley received the Reformers' doctrine of regeneration, as interpreted by the Moravians, he was well-disposed toward the mystics. They were, Wesley said then, "the best explainers of the Gospel of Christ." Thereafter, however, he turned upon mysticism with a vengeance. Wesley's new tone was that of a man who has just discovered that his best friends have been cheating him right and left for years. The mystics have erred in two ways, Wesley charged. They teach justification by works, rather than justification by faith alone; and they encourage solitary religion, whereas "the Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness."

Wesley's antipathy toward mysticism was reinforced by the protracted wrangling within the Fetter Lane Society during the years 1739 and 1740. It is curious that the meeting which precipitated the irremediable breach between Wesley and the "still people" began with a quotation from an appendix added to Dionysius the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*. The quotation reads:

The Scriptures are good, prayer is good, communicating is good, relieving our neighbour is good; but to one who is not born of God, none of these is good, but all very evil. For him to read the Scriptures, or to pray, or to communicate, or to do any outward work, is deadly poison. First, let him be born of God. Till then let him not do any of these things. For if he does, he destroys himself.

Richard Bell, a proponent of "stillness," enthusiastically endorsed these assertions. Wesley, on the other hand, argued that men seeking salvation should use all the means of grace which God has provided for their benefit. Neither side could convince the other; at the end of the "useless debate" Wesley "gave them up to God," and on July 20, 1740 he withdrew from the Fetter Lane Society.

Wesley's sentiments concerning mysticism remained unchanged a
JOHN WESLEY AND FRANCIS ROUS

decade or so later. Evidence for this conclusion may be found in the preface to his "Christian Library." This collection of extracts from works by practical divines began to appear in 1749; it eventually reached a total of fifty volumes. For the convenience and guidance of busy and inexperienced readers, Wesley omitted from the books passages which he judged to be of little use to them. He left out passages he considered controversial, unintelligible and obscure, along with those which were "too mystical." 7

Given these sentiments, it is surprising to find in the sixteenth volume of the "Christian Library," published three years after the series was inaugurated, a little work by the man who has been called the "first genuine Puritan mystic." 8 The book is Academia Coelestis: The Heavenly University: Or, The Highest School, Where alone is that Highest Teaching, The Teaching of the Heart. 9 The man is Francis Rous (1579-1659), member of Parliament, a lay assessor for the Westminster Assembly of Divines, sworn of Cromwell's Council of State and a Commissioner for the Approbation of Public Preachers during the Protectorate. 10

Rous' appearance in the "Christian Library" raises several questions concerning Wesley's relationship to the mystical tradition. If we grant Professor Brauer's contention that Rous is a mystic, it may be asked, Does Wesley's publication of Rous imply that his attitude toward mysticism changed between 1749 and 1752? Does Wesley understand Rous correctly? Perhaps the mystical element in the Heavenly University, if any, escaped Wesley's attention. What values did Wesley find in Rous' book? Why is the University in the "Christian Library" anyway? To these sorts of questions this essay is addressed.

* * * *

According to Francis Rous, the goal of the Christian pilgrimage is the union of the believer with Christ. Every believer will be united to Christ in the heavenly life which is to come; some Christians, however, may experience this union here and now. Using imagery drawn from the Song of Songs, Rous often describes Christ as the Heavenly Bridegroom and the soul of the believer as the bride. The union of the bride and groom is then spoken of as a "spiritual marriage." Sometimes Rous varies his metaphor; he may speak of

9 The first edition of The Heavenly University, in English, was published in 1639. Rous translated his work into Latin, and re-published it in 1655 as a section of a book entitled Interiota Regni Dei. Wesley made his extracts from the third edition, which is in English; T. Sowle printed and sold the book at London in 1702.
the union in terms of the soul's vision of God. In any event, the content of the unitive experience is beyond the power of human speech to describe. However, the experience involves at least two things of note. In it the believer gains new knowledge of God beyond that which reason and written revelation disclose. And there is a mutual exchange of love between Christ and the believer, who is sensible of the blessings which he receives.

As might be expected of a Puritan author, Rous' mysticism is practical in character. He is writing, not for contemplatives shut up in monastic cells, but for men who are active in the world of affairs. Indeed, Rous insists that the mystic must express the love of God which he has experienced by means of loving service to his neighbors. This emphasis upon building up the saints helps to account for the non-technical and relatively unsystematic character of Rous' work. One does not find in him the specialized vocabulary and the detailed analyses of various mystical states which are often encountered in Roman Catholic manuals on the subject. One does find, however, a map of the way which leads from the mystic's starting point or first conversion to his destination, union with God. Details of the mystic way differ from one to another, but discussions of it are common to mystics of all schools. The path always follows a more or less well-defined series of ascending steps or stages. In the Heavenly University, Rous compares the stages to the institutions through which a student passes during the course of his education; so he speaks of the student's promotion from Grammar School to the University to the Celestial Academy.

In Rous' judgment, mysticism is neither an alternative to nor a substitute for the Christian Gospel. He writes his books on the mystical ascent for men who have already been converted from unbelief to faith. What the scholastics would think of as a mind in which the habitus of faith has been seated, Rous calls "an heavenly Mind," "a Spiritual Eye" or "the Mind of Christ." Carnal reason cannot attain to spiritual truth; therefore God bestows upon his elect new powers and capacities which enable them to grasp this higher and saving knowledge. Parallel to the gift of new knowledge to the understanding runs the gift of new power or "Vertue" to the will and affections. By this latter means, a man is enabled to choose and to act in the light of the heavenly knowledge which he has received.

According to the Heavenly University, the first step on the mystic way is the "Proposal of a Right End." The novice, being convinced that true happiness is to be found, not among earthly things, but among the things above, resolves to seek union with God. This

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11 Francis Rous, Treatises and Meditations Dedicated to the Saints, and to the Excellent throughout the three Nations (London: Printed by Robert White, 1657), 698-700.
12 University, "Preface."
union may not be consummated easily and in a moment. Since
God is pure Goodness, he cannot embrace a soul in which even the
barest tincture of self-will remains. This would be contrary to
nature. Therefore the soul must be thoroughly converted from
things of the flesh to things of the Spirit before God can receive
him. Consequently, when an individual proposes to himself “a right
end,” he is by implication agreeing to undertake those disciplines of
mortification, prayer and obedience to the law which are the means
of mystical conversion.

The second step on the stair is “Denial of Man’s Wit and Wis-
dom.” Here Rous has in mind two different things. On the one
hand, he is thinking of the Reformation doctrine that the natural
man cannot truly understand the meaning of Scripture. Only the
man who has received the gift of faith and whose reading is en-
lightened by the Holy Spirit really grasps the import of the written
Word. But Rous also has in mind a doctrine associated with the
name of Dionysius the Areopagite. As a part of his mystical dis-
cipline the postulant is expected to contemplate the things of God.
Ordinarily an individual evokes a mental image of a person or an
event to serve as the focus of his contemplations. However, we find
the following advice in Dionysius’ Mystical Theology:

I counsel that in the earnest exercise of mystical contemplation thou leave
the senses and the operations of the intellect and all things that the senses
or the intellect can perceive, and all things in this world of nothingness or
that world of being; and that, thine understanding being laid to rest, thou
ascend (so far as thou mayest) towards union with Him whom neither
being nor understanding can contain. For by the unceasing and absolute
renunciation of thyself and all things, thou shalt in pureness cast all things
aside, and be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the Ray of
that Divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.

Rous quotes passages from Ambrose, Thomas à Kempis and Henry
Herp to this effect, the latter of which may be cited by way of
example:

As often (saith this Author) as he shall remember God, so often shall he,
being free and discharg’d from all Creaturely Forms, or Images, be in a
capacity easily to ascend to the Heart of the most High; as the Wick of a
Candle, that is yet smoking, when it is brought to one that is lighted, and
placed under it, the Flame immediately catching the Smoak, cleaves to the
Wick, while yet warm, and inkindles it.

The third stage in Rous’ series is “Conformity to God.” By this
phrase Rous means the individual’s inward and outward conformity
to the law of God. Care should be taken not to think of this work
of obedience in terms of Pharisaic legalism. It is not something dry
and rigid, a burden to be borne. Rather, the law of the Lord is the
delight of the soul. The soul who knows by faith and sight the God

16 University, 92.
17 Quoted from the Mystical Theology
by Underhill, 347.
18 University, 136. Henry Herp or
Harpfius (d. 1478) was a Flemish mys-
tical writer who became abbot of a
Franciscan monastery at Malines (Uni-
versal Pronouncing Dictionary of Bio-
graphy and Mythology, I, 1135).
19 University, 100.
of love revealed in Jesus Christ delights in loving his fellows, thus fulfilling the law.

The reader will have noticed that Rous apparently reversed the first two of the traditional stages on the mystic's way toward God. The traditional stages are purgation, illumination and union. Rous' "Denial of Man's Wit and Wisdom" answers to illumination and his "Conformity to God" corresponds to purgation. One can understand this reversal in a book in which the metaphor of promotion from school to school is used for the stages on the mystical path. The student must learn what is good before he can act well. No doubt the Greek idea that men always act in the light of their conceptions of what is good also enters into Rous' thinking. Nevertheless this reversal of stages is of limited significance. In actual practice, purification of the heart and a growing knowledge of God by means of contemplation go hand in hand.20

Rous' fourth and last step is "Conversing with God, and diligent Coming to his School."21 Here Rous is thinking of the soul's experiences of union with God. He speaks particularly of the new knowledge which the believer thereby receives; "sometimes in a Minute" the soul is given intimations of Truth which could not be attained by many years of diligent labor.22 What the mystic may expect is described by Rous in the following terms:

He who is Light shall shine into thy Soul; and by this Light, the Face of thy Soul shall shine as the Face of Moses on the Mount. In his Light thou shalt see Light: And by this Light shalt thou see that which all the Natural Light in the World cannot shew thee. God who commanded Light to shine out of Darkness, will give thee the Light of the Knowledge of the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ.23

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John Wesley was well aware of the fact that the Heavenly University contains elements of mysticism. This point is illustrated by his treatment of Rous' footnotes. Appended to each chapter in Rous' book are extensive "annotations" in support of his arguments. The majority of these annotations are composed of quotations from mystical writers. In editing Rous' work Wesley struck out practically all of these mystical quotations, while leaving intact the greater part of the remaining footnotes. So we find eliminated quotations from Dionysius' Divine Names and his Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, and from Aquinas' commentary on the Divine Names.24 Quotations from works by the following authors are also omitted: Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jean Gerson, Richard of St. Victor, Jerome Savonarola and Thomas à Kempis.25

21 University, 109.
22 Ibid., 122.
23 Ibid.
24 University, 19-20, 39, 73-74 (Dionysius); 41-42 (Aquinas); Christian Library, XVI, 231, 239, 255, 240.
25 University, 124-5 (Augustine); 43 (Bernard); 41 (Gerson); 75, 107 (Richard of St. Victor); 76-77 (Savonarola); 38, 75-78, 127-28, 135-36 (Kempis); Christian Library, XVI, 275; 240 (Bernard and Gerson); 255, 268, 258, 239, 255, 276, 279.
The text of the *Heavenly University*, as over against the footnotes, is reprinted by Wesley with remarkably few changes. He does excise a few of the more obviously mystical phrases. In the following example Wesley omits the italicized words.

In him [Christ] we have Blessings of the highest Nature, and more immediately flowing into us from the Creator: Remission of Sins, Peace with God, Communion with God, Conformity to God, a Spiritual Sonship, an Inheritance of the Spirit, an Earnest of an Eternal Inheritance, a Joy Unspeakable and Glorious, a Power of Godliness, the Hidden Manna, Foretastes of Blessedness, the Kisses of Christ Jesus.26

Nevertheless, perhaps ninety nine per cent of the text of the *Heavenly University*, a text which is replete with mysticism, appears in the “Christian Library.”

Wesley’s apparent approval of many mystical conceptions suggests that his definition of “mysticism” is a highly personal and peculiar one. To Wesley, it would seem, a “mystic” is a man who meets the following conditions:

(a) He is a solitary. Perhaps Wesley’s reading in Macarius the Egyptian influenced his thinking here. Macarius takes wife, kinsmen, country, particular places, clothes, glory, wealth and possessions to be so many links in the chains which bind the Christian to sin and the Devil.27

(b) A mystic is a Pelagian. He is one who expects to be accepted by God on the basis of his “virtuous habits and tempers.”28

(c) A mystic is a man who teaches that sanctification, or the inward renovation of the soul, goes before justification, the delivery of the soul from the guilt and punishment of sin.

(d) A mystic is a “quietist,” in the sense that he depreciates the means of grace, such as the Bible, the sacraments and common prayer. The use of the means was the major point of contention between Wesley and the proponents of “stillness,” such as Philip Henry Molther and Richard Bell.29

Many Christians who are usually reputed to be “mystics” do not fit into these categories. Certainly Francis Rous does not. Rous was a fairly consistent Calvinist who insisted upon *sola gratia* and encouraged his readers to use the means of grace and to take seriously their social responsibilities. Wesley failed to recognize a good deal of what is commonly called “mysticism” because he operated with such a limited concept of the term. Or to put the matter in another

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26 *University*, 25; *Christian Library*, XVI, 233. Wesley omits references to the state of trance (*University*, 82; *Christian Library*, XVI, 258); “the naughting of the soul” (Evelyn Underhill’s phrase) (*University*, 95; *Christian Library*, XVI, 263); the annihilation of intellect (*University*, 96; *Christian Library*, VXI, 263); passivity (*University*, 97; *Christian Library*, XVI, 264); and the Heavenly Bridegroom’s bed of love (*University*, 104; *Christian Library*, XVI, 266).


28 *Poetical Works*, I, xix.

way, Wesley did not realize the extent of his indebtedness to the mystical tradition. His theological conversion was not a "Copernican revolution"; after 1738 he retained and used many of the ideas which he had learned from the mystics before he began his conversations with the Moravians.30 It is along these lines, perhaps, that we can account for Wesley's commendation to his readers, not only of Francis Rous, but also of Pierre Poiret, Antoinette Bourignan, Thomas à Kempis and John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist.31

No doubt Wesley was drawn to the Heavenly University because he found in the book many ideas which paralleled his own. In conclusion some of these similarities between the thought of Francis Rous and of John Wesley may be listed.

(a) Both Rous and Wesley are resolute opponents of antinomianism. That is to say, they are on guard against any understanding of justification by grace through faith alone which excuses the Christian from striving after inward holiness and conformity to the example set by Christ. It is in this regard that Rous and Wesley speak of Christianity as a "social religion."

(b) Rous and Wesley emphasize the believer's growth in grace. The believer's knowledge of divine things and the quality of his obedience may improve year by year, if he stirs up the grace which is within him. The Christian who uses the degree of grace which God has bestowed upon him may confidently expect to receive additional grace in the future.32

(c) Christianity is a teleological religion, Rous and Wesley say. The Christian life may be viewed as a journey or pilgrimage toward an end or goal.

(d) The goal of the Christian life, so far as the state of the soul is concerned, is perfection. Although Rous speaks of the soul's inward conformity to the will of God and holds out the possibility of union with Him here and now, he declines to speak of perfection in this life; for him perfection characterizes the soul in the life to come.33 Wesley, on the other hand, is prepared to speak of a degree of perfection which may be received in this life, although the plentitude of perfection is yet to be. This position depends upon Wesley's particular definition of sin. On earth the perfect commit no outward sin; that is, they do not violate a known commandment of God. Christian perfection in this life does not imply, however, "an exemption either from ignorance, or mistake, or [physical] infirmities, or temptations." 34

(e) Rous and Wesley contrast a merely notionul knowledge of

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30 That Wesley was reasonably familiar with mysticism is indicated by his personal reading lists for the years 1723-34 (V. H. H. Green, The Young Mr. Wesley [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961], Appendix I).
31 W. R. Inge includes Smith among the "finer examples of the Christian mystic" (Christian Mysticism [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899], 300).
32 University, 142-43.
33 University, 96, 98.
God and the “experimental knowledge” which comes by means of living faith and vision. Rous says that there is a knowledge of the grace and love of God which “cannot be delivered over by the greatest Doctor on Earth, in Picture and Representation. Therefore the High and Heavenly Teacher (by the Psalmist) first calls on us to taste, and after to see, even to get that Sight and Knowledge which is gotten only by tasting.”

(f) The language which Wesley employs to describe the psychology of faith is similar to that used by Rous. According to Wesley, faith is a “perceptive faculty.” It is a “sense,” the eye, ear and palate of the soul, which receives perceptions from the spiritual world. Wesley uses several terms drawn from the language of sensation to describe the act of faith. To believe is to hear, to taste and to feel the things of God. His favorite term for the act of faith, however, is vision. This sort of language had been used earlier by Rous, and by many other persons as well. So Rous speaks of the spiritual eye and the new ear which God gives to his elect.

(g) Both Rous and Wesley are dissatisfied with the majority of the Church’s ministers. They protest against Mammon-worship on the part of avaricious place-seekers. In their minds, however, the major problem is the clergy’s ignorance of experimental divinity. Rous spent a great deal of his time in public service striving to build up a godly ministry. In his private capacity Wesley worked toward the same goal. Indeed, the “Christian Library” in which Rous’ work appears was intended primarily for the edification of Methodist preachers. They were the men, Wesley believed, whom God had raised up to supply the defects of the established clergy.

It is hoped that the relationship between John Wesley and the mystical tradition will receive more attention in the future than it has in the past. H. B. Workman raised the question nearly sixty years ago in his article on “The Place of Methodism in the Christian Church.” It has not been vigorously pursued. Perhaps these remarks on Francis Rous will suggest the need for research in this area, in order that the thought of John Wesley and the Evangelical Revival may be better understood.

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35 University, 31-32.
38 University, 8, 21, 104.
39 Brauer, 250. I suspect that Rous wrote the Heavenly University with students preparing for the ministry in mind.