

CHRISTIAN MYSTICS

Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages

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INTRODUCTION

A mystic is a person who is deeply aware of the powerful presence of the divine Spirit: someone who seeks, above all, the knowledge and love of God and who experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life. Mystics often perceive the presence of God throughout the world of nature and in all that is alive, leading to a transfiguration of the ordinary all around them. However, the touch of God is most strongly felt deep within their own hearts.

There are many different kinds of mystics in all religions, and we have in recent years become increasingly aware of their existence and heritage. Many people today are drawn to mystics for inspiration and transformation. They offer a message of wholeness and healing, of harmony, peace, and joy—also of immense struggles fought and won. During the twentieth century we have witnessed destructive events not thought possible in earlier times. We have observed the breakdown of old values, the questioning of traditional ways of life, as well as of the teachings of religion. There is much doubt and searching, as well as an immense spiritual hunger, especially among the young. To respond to this need and counteract deep existential anguish, many people look to other religious traditions, especially those from the East, to find meaning, direction and purpose for their lives. Others turn to the sources of their own culture and religion to find answers to their questions, to rediscover the original vision and spirit at the heart of Christianity. For some this is a social gospel or one of liberation; for others it is an inward, mystic call. Yet for many Christian mystics of the past it was a combination of an inner and an outer quest, a journey that led deeply into the divine center of their own souls, but then moved outward again to the concerns of God's created world and those of suffering humanity.

To rediscover the story of the Christian mystics is a great adventure. Their manifold experiences and examples can be truly empowering for our own lives. Mystics traveled along the margins of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the world of the mundane and the world of the spirit, where all things are made whole. Today, at the beginning of a new millennium, we too are finding ourselves at an important threshold of a new, perhaps different and more difficult world, where we can gain much from spiritual nourishment. The Christian mystics speak to us across the centuries, and if we listen, we can learn something about the deepest experiences of their lives, so that we too may glimpse the glory of God and feel the healing touch of the Spirit.

The story of the Christian mystics is one of an all-consuming, passionate love affair between human beings and God. It speaks of deep yearning, of burning desire for the contemplation and presence of the divine beloved. Mystics seek participation in divine life, communion and union with God. This yearning is kindled by the fire of divine love itself, which moves the mystics in their search and leads them, often on arduous journeys, to discover and proclaim the all-encompassing love of God for humankind.

The unending quest for loving union and communion with God runs like a golden thread throughout the Christian centuries. Mystic experience lies at the very depth of

human spiritual consciousness. It is one of great intensity, power and energy matched by nothing else. All other relationships count as nothing when compared with the relationship of the soul to God, the intense consciousness of God's love and presence. Because of this, mystical experience is seen as the heart of all religion, the point of light to which all seekers are drawn.

The vision of God occurs in a "dazzling darkness," brighter than the brightest light. It is a vision of great splendor and empowerment that mystics ceaselessly describe, even when affirming that it is entirely incommunicable. The long line of Christian mystics represents a great company of such seers who want to pass on to us the precious riches bestowed upon them, which truly are at the spiritual heart of the Christian tradition.

Where can we meet these Christian mystics? How can we catch a glimpse of their experience, a taste of what they found? How can we follow in their footsteps and learn to be lovers of the Divine? We can listen to their stories, trace the lineaments of their inner lives through the words they left behind, and discover in their writings an experience of a God both far and near, as much present in the spark of our soul as in the starry heavens and the universe around us.

In the beginning, Christian mysticism was fed by two streams: the Jewish heritage and Greek thought, especially its contemplative ideal taught by ancient philosophers. At its very core is the experience of Jesus himself as a person filled with divine life who taught his followers about God's love for his creatures and promised them the powerful support of the divine Spirit. The Christian Bible, especially the New Testament, records Jesus' teachings, but also the experiences of his earliest disciples. These texts have been an inspiration for Christian mystics through the ages.

Christian mystics have experienced God in countless ways—as the ultimate Godhead or Ground of Being, as God who is Father but also Mother, or as God intimately present in the humanity of Jesus through his life, death and resurrection, in the glory of the cosmic Christ or in the presence and gifts of the Spirit. Christian mystics share certain characteristics, but they are all very different as individuals who lived in different times and places.

Many mystics are men, but an extraordinary number of Christian mystics are women. Mystics have been members of religious orders, priests and laypeople, ascetics and monastics, and people—married or single—in ordinary life. There are passive mystics—those who reject the world and withdraw from it—and active ones, who are led back into the world and become immersed in a round of activities, profoundly transformed by a new spirit. The great company of Christian mystics truly reflects the iridescent diversity that is humanity. The immense potential of their greatness, as also some of the limits of their vision, resonates in all of us.

Christian mystics have existed ever since the beginning of Christianity and new ones continue to appear. They possess the power to transform themselves and the world around them by following a "way," a teaching about the ascent of the soul to God, about loving union with God expressed through compassionate and self-forgetting love for others that can inspire us to do likewise. Over the centuries, the experience of the mystics has grown into a body of teachings that early Christian writers called mystical theology. The word *mysticism* is modern but describes for us what the ancients understood by this "mystical theology": the communication of an extraordinary experience of great

transformative potential for individuals as well as the Church and the world.

The story of the Christian mystics vividly communicates the inspiring heritage of a great mystery: the experience of an all-consuming love for both God and the world. It is an experience of a profound spiritual integration that holds the promise of joy and passion, ecstasy, and suffering overcome, a spiritual wholeness and completion that reaches its goal in God. The following pages describe the background and central themes of Christian mysticism, and unfold the story of the most influential mystics of the early Church. The early Christian mystics laid the foundations for the large number of mystics in medieval Europe (Germany, France, Italy, England, and the Low Countries). But the history of Christian mystics did not come to an end with the Reformation; on the contrary, in the early modern period a whole new group of mystics appeared, both in the Catholic churches of Spain and France, and also among several Protestant groups. Yet another rich seam of the Christian mystical tradition is represented by the Eastern Orthodox mystics who lived in the different countries of eastern Europe. Far from being a tradition of the past alone, the examples of Christian mystics can be found today right across the different Christian churches around the world. It is the aim of this book to open a window on this rich heritage of Christian mystical experience, which speaks so strongly across time and place to our own need and circumstance. I hope that readers will enjoy the new vision they discover through their reading as much as I did through writing this story and that they will feel strengthened and renewed by it.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The formative period of Christian mysticism lies in the first five centuries of our era. Christian experience, doctrine and mystical theology developed then, side by side, based on the life and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Christian Scriptures. The early Christians understood his message as the revelation of God the Father on earth, in his son, Jesus, and of his dwelling within us through the Holy Spirit. They wanted to know and to see God, and sought perfection in following the way of Jesus.

Jesus and his earliest disciples were Jewish, and the fellowship of the early Christians was deeply shaped by their Jewish heritage, not least the world of the Hebrew Bible. But Christian experience moved into a new direction by proclaiming that God had come to earth, taken flesh and lived as a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. As John's Gospel says about the Word who was God and was with God: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." This affirmation soon developed into what is called the doctrine of the Incarnation, and it is this, more than anything else, that marks Christianity and Christian mysticism as distinctive and different from that of other religions.

Christianity is a deeply mystical religion—although some dispute this because they think of it mostly in institutional terms. At its heart is Jesus' own experience expressed as "I and the Father are one," the message of utter divine unity. But Jesus also stands for the revelation of the fullness of God's love poured out over all of humankind in the sending of his Son and of his Spirit. Soon the early Christian theologians formulated the implications of these utterances in the doctrine of the Trinity, of one God in three persons—Father, Son and Spirit. Much of Christian mysticism revolves around the experiential realization, embedded in prayer, ritual, ascetic practices and contemplation, of what such a trinitarian and incarnate God was like, of how human beings could know God and of how they could be at their most intimate with him.

The Biblical Background

A wealth of scriptural passages have inspired Jewish and Christian mystics alike. Through an allegorical reading of Scripture, the mystical significance of particular texts was heightened so that biblical images and teachings nourished Christian mystics through the ages. In the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament, the book of Genesis includes the important teaching that the human being is created in the image of God. A fundamental insight for Christian mystical theology, this teaching expresses a vital truth about the relationship between God and his creatures, and also about the nature of the soul. Other important images from the Old Testament are Jacob's vision of a ladder reaching down from heaven to earth, providing a connection between both realms; Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush on Mount Sinai; Isaiah's awesome

Temple vision of the Lord in glory; and the most fertile source of all, the Song of

Songs, with its erotic and sexual imagery, which was mystically interpreted as symbolizing the relation between the soul and God.

In the Christian Scriptures of the New Testament the mystics found important sources in the writings of John and Paul. John's Gospel speaks about God's life in us and Jesus' call to his disciples to seek holiness and perfection in order to become true "children of God." Paul's great mystical experience on the road to Damascus, which changed him from an enemy into an ardent supporter of the early Christians, made him into one of the strongest witnesses to the power of the spirit of Christ, "in whom we live, move and have our being." While the Gospels describe Christ's life, his death and resurrection, the Pauline Epistles bear witness to an intense and deeply transforming faith, rooted both in powerful personal experience and in the community of the early disciples, which later became the Christian Church.

Paul describes himself as "a man in Christ," affirming a deep union with the Divine which does not negate his own identity but enables him to live within the divine nature itself: "I live, now not I; but Christ lives within me." He also sings the praises of active love, of charity, inspired by the fire of divine love and outlines a vision of the cosmic Christ, the Christ who "is all, and is in all."

Many other mystics have had similar experiences. The living encounter with God, as experienced by Paul on his way to Damascus, is so powerful and compelling that the mystic cannot resist the divine summons to a new life. The call to seek God's love above all things becomes a splendid adventure that engages the whole human being: body, mind and soul. It is an adventure that Christian mystics have pursued by many different paths, but usually in the context of community and fellowship, expressing their love in active concern for others, rather than as a lonely endeavor only benefiting themselves.

The greatest passages on Christian love, on the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit, and on the mystery of the Incarnation are found in John's Gospel where Jesus says at the Last Supper, "Love one another as I have loved you." Here the breaking of the bread, the celebration of shared fellowship and communion, which is a joyous thanksgiving, or *Eucharist*, reveals a profound truth about the interpenetration of spirit and matter, where matter itself becomes a vehicle for the Spirit, a sacrament. The mystics have been nourished by this sacramental spirituality expressed in Jesus' words: "I am that living bread which has come down from heaven: if anyone eats this bread he shall live for ever. Moreover, the bread which I will give is my own flesh; I give it for the life of the world.... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells continually in me and I dwell in him."

The Hellenistic World

Christian mystical theology cannot be understood without its biblical background and the historical and cultural context of the early Church. The early Christians lived within a Hellenistic culture. The development of Christian theology, whether mystical or doctrinal, was deeply influenced by Greek thought patterns. The word *mysticism* is connected to the mystery cults of the ancient Greeks, which revealed the knowledge of things divine to an inner circle of initiates, the Gnostics, who alone possessed true knowledge about the nature of reality and the human being. The very notion of the soul is Greek rather than

biblical, but it has had a very deep impact on Christian experience and thinking. Plato's philosophy and his description of the soul's journey from appearance to reality, the highest Idea of the Good, the teachings of Neoplatonism and the mystical philosophy of Plotinus—all influenced Christian thinkers to take up the contemplative ideal, the search for the true knowledge of God.

Mystics are sometimes called the “elect of the elect,” or the “friends of God.” Mysticism is not unique to Christianity, and Christian mystics share many characteristics with the mystics of other religions. Yet one must ask to what extent Christian mysticism is the same as or different from mystical experiences and teachings in other religions.

All mysticism is characterized by a passion for unity. To the mystic, true Being and Ultimate Reality are One. This can be experienced as both impersonal and personal, as Ground of Being, Ultimate Source, Perfect Goodness, Eternal Wisdom, Divine Love, God, or the Godhead. This Reality contains, yet transcends, everything there is. It is the One in whom all is lost and all is found.

Christian mystics aspire to an intimate union of love with God, seeking God's presence as the very “ground of the soul.” The human being is endowed with a spiritual sense that opens us inwardly, just as our physical senses open us outwardly. Thus Augustine of Hippo speaks of the “eye” of the soul and the “ear” of the mind, and others refer to the “eyes of faith,” which open us up to higher spiritual realities.

Based on their experiences, mystics have developed a complex set of teachings about divine knowledge and how it is to be obtained. This includes philosophical doctrines about the nature of God, the relation between God and the soul, the soul's journey to God and the abiding union and intimate love between God and the soul. At a practical level, different rules and exercises have been worked out to help seekers along the path and indicate the stages of the mystic way to communion with God.

Although Christian mystics aspired to true knowledge—a real *gnosis*—of God, they distinguished themselves from the Gnostics and the various forms of Gnosticism in the ancient world, which date back to pre-Christian times. In fact, there was much controversy between Christian and Gnostic writers. The latter were seen as heretics by Christians because of the distinction they made between spirit and matter, God and the world. Their teachings about a distant and absolute Divine Being and an inferior Creator God who had made the material world, including the flesh of human beings, were at variance with the Christian understanding of God and the world. The Gnostics laid claim to esoteric knowledge about God and the universe. They believed in a complex hierarchy of spiritual beings, but communicated this knowledge only to the elect, whereas the Christian message about Jesus was addressed to all. It would have been inconceivable for the Gnostics to accept that God could descend into matter, take up a human body and sanctify the flesh. Given the importance of martyrdom in the early Christian Church, before Christianity became an official state religion, Christian writers defended the reality and dignity of the human body, offered up for the love of God and sharing in the sufferings of Christ, which they understood as real and not merely apparent, as some people taught

Asceticism and Monasticism

Early Christian mysticism developed in a context of sharing in Christ's passion through martyrdom, which was followed by a strong emphasis on asceticism, which in turn led to the development of the monastic life. When Christianity became the official religion of the state in the fourth century, martyrdom was no longer necessary. Those who wished to practice the highest possible perfection opted for an ascetic life, often withdrawing to live in the desert, as Jewish and Egyptian ascetics had done before. The Christian ascetics soon developed the monastic ideal, originally as a solitary life (*monos*, meaning "alone" in Greek) pursued by the individual, but monasticism eventually took on a corporate character with rules, teachings handed down from one generation to the next, and leaders.

It was among the early Christian philosophers, ascetics and monastics that the foundations for Christian mysticism were laid. Many are the personalities who contributed their experiences and teachings, but they stand out much less sharply as individuals than do the Christian mystics of later centuries who often left autobiographical writings. It was the aim of ascetic and monastic life to achieve the conquest of self through renunciation so that, once purified from all obstacles, the soul might live the perfect life face to face with God, in direct communion and union with him. In the silence of the desert, in the solitude of the cell, free from all worldly entanglements, the mystic could ascend to the contemplation and knowledge of God, and loving union with him.

Some people maintain that these early Christians were not really mystics because their experiences were so different from those of the later mystics or that the mysticism they practiced was not really Christian but of a Greek philosophical kind, a sort of "philosophical spirituality" that had nothing specifically and originally Christian about it. This can be refuted, however. Although much influenced by its Jewish and Greek background and similar to other forms of mysticism in its passion for the Absolute, Christian mysticism also has very distinctive features of its own. While Platonic philosophy stresses the essentially spiritual nature of human beings and their kinship with the Divine, Christianity teaches that they are God's creatures rather than his kin, utterly dependent on and sustained by him, but created in the image of God, which is deeply imprinted in their being. The true nature of the human being is a balanced integration of spirit and flesh, a true unity, not a dualistic separation whereby only the spirit is close to the Divine. Platonic and Neoplatonic writers speak of the soul's ascent to God, whereas Christianity emphasizes the descent of God into the world so that the world and all humanity can become one with God. The mystic's intense longing for such union can be understood in different ways: It can literally mean absorption, fusion, and utter identity, as is the case in many mysticisms, or it can mean the highest consummation of love, where the lover and beloved in their most intimate union still remain aware of each other, as in Christian mysticism.

Love of God

Also very different is the rhythm between contemplation and action, which are held together in the ideal of Christian love. For the Christian the love of God is expressed

through the love of Christ, who unites human beings to him, and through him to one another. Thus the experience of the Christian mystic is not the Neoplatonic “flight of the alone to the Alone,” but rather occurs in a community context by seeking participation in the mystery of Christ, itself inseparable from the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ. The Christian mystic is not primarily seen as a privileged individual or a member of an intellectual elite, as among Platonists and Gnostics, but rather as a living cell of the Body of Christ. Thus the mystical life represents the full flowering of Christian baptism, which is the rite in incorporation, the foundational sacrament, for membership of the Church. Because of this, mystical experience is in principle open to all. It is for everybody, not just the elect.

Of great importance also is the concept of God who is not simply One, Ultimate Reality or the Absolute, but a personal Being who yet transcends all notions of personhood found among human beings by forming a community of persons within the mystery of the Trinity. God works mysteriously among human beings through his grace, his inexhaustible love, which creates the very possibility for the soul to seek and love God.

Evelyn Underhill has called the mystics the “ambassadors of God.” Given the Christian concept of a God of infinite love, however, it would be more appropriate to describe them as “the troubadours of the love of God” who have left us so many of their songs in the form of aphorisms, sayings, poems, hymns, essays and autobiographies—so numerous are the literary genres in which mystical experience has been celebrated and described. We have access today, as never before, to this treasure house of the human spirit. Surveying the rich heritage of Christian mystics, what are some of the main themes that directed and shaped their unending quest for union with God?

Stages on the Path

The way of the mystic has over time been divided into three significant stages through which the mystic had to pass to achieve union with God. It is like a “ladder of perfection,” or *scala perfectionis*, which begins with the lowest stage of the *purgative*

life, the way of purification, understood as detachment, renunciation and asceticism, to move away from the world of the senses and ego to the higher, eternally abiding reality of God.

Such purification of the senses and the mind, an utter stripping away that could include many practices of self-mortification, leads to the second stage, which is the *illuminative life*. At this stage the mystic draws nearer to divine unity, reaching the heights of loving contemplation. Fully illumined, he or she realizes the ultimate mystery of all that exists and dwells with joy in a state of sublime ignorance, likened to utter darkness, to an abyss of nothingness.

This is followed by the highest stage, the *unitive life*, the ultimate goal of loving union with God, an ecstatic experience of overwhelming joy. Some mystics have described this experience of union as a spiritual marriage between God and the soul, preceded by a spiritual betrothal during the stage of illumination. Others see the whole mystical journey as a process of “deification”—an important idea in Eastern Orthodox mysticism—but however intimate this union with God is, Christian mysticism never abandons the

otherness of God, and the mystic never ceases to be God's creature.

The Ultimate Goal

Christian mysticism can be Christocentric or theocentric, but these forms may also be combined. The mystic's devotion and contemplation can focus on the figure of Jesus Christ, his humanity with its healing ministry, suffering, death and resurrection, or on Jesus as the divine Logos and eternal Word, or on the presence of Christ in all things, his divine Lordship as *Pantokrator*, or ruler of the universe. There are many passages in the New Testament that inspire such devotions, and numerous Christian mystics give witness to a deeply personal and very intimate experience of the presence of Christ.

Theocentric mysticism focuses directly on God, on God's Being and attributes. It is here that Christian mystics have been most influenced by the Greek ideal of contemplation and taken over many ideas from Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. But Christian mystics also contemplate a triune God—God as Trinity—and God as Creator, who inheres with and in his creation. The visible universe reflects the beauty and perfection of the divine mind—expressed in Platonic terms, it is a reflection of its heavenly archetypes—and the image of God is reflected in the human soul.

Whatever mystics try to convey about their knowledge and experience of God, however rapturously and ecstatically they express it, their vision far transcends, in fact explodes all limits of human language. Given this intrinsic insufficiency of language, Christian mysticism distinguishes its descriptions of God by way of negation or affirmation.

Perhaps most widely used and known is the negative way, the *via negativa* (or apophatic way), whereby anything we say of God is so misleading that it must be denied. God is so unimaginably "other" that we can come to know him only by stripping away, by negating every attribute and description. This is why Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of the "divine darkness" of God, and an unknown medieval mystic refers to the cloud of "unknowing."

The *via negativa* has a great tradition in Christian mysticism both East and West, but it also has its critics. It is a question of whether it is simply a device to cope with the limits of language or whether it also comprises a certain metaphysics that leads to a rejection of the world, of anything that is not God.

Some Christian mystics have a strong preference for the *via positiva* (or the kataphatic way), which celebrates God in positive terms, affirming the divine perfections whereby God possesses all qualities in a sublime and limitless way. The goodness and beauty of creation, the positive attributes of all created things, the love between human beings can all help to seek, praise and find God.

The following chapters will show how different mystics have expressed their experience of union with God through the centuries, how particular themes find exemplary expression and embodiment in the life and writings of different individuals. From the early Christian mystics of the first five centuries who laid the foundations for all later Christian mysticism, we shall move on to its flowering in the Middle Ages. After considering the extraordinary richness and diversity of medieval mystics, we shall discuss important mystics of the early modern period, the time after the Reformation, which also

produced a number of outstanding Protestant mystics. We shall discover the great mystical tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church and meet some modern mystics of the twentieth century.

It is probably true to say that recent years have seen a greater interest and fascination with the mystics of all ages and faiths than any previous period in history. What can we learn from the great company of Christian mystics? What is the significance of their ceaseless quest today? How can the human community, living in the new millennium, make the right use of the invaluable treasures of Christian mysticism for its own greater good and well-being? Looking at the rich history of the Christian mystics will help us to answer some of these questions.

CHAPTER THREE

MEDIEVAL MYSTICS

The Middle Ages comprise the high point of Christian mysticism. From the early to the late Middle Ages a great company of Christian mystics appeared, some well known, others less so. Besides the great figures were many minor mystics, and new ones continue to be discovered. This is especially true of female mystics, many of whom are becoming known in new ways and are attracting attention more than ever before.

The mystical speculations of Dionysius the Areopagite greatly influenced the Middle Ages and were commented upon by several theologians. In Eastern Christianity it was Maximus the Confessor (580–662) who transmitted the mystical ideas of Dionysius; in the West it was John Scotus Erigena (810–77) who translated his writings into Latin, thus making them available as foundational texts for the mysticism of the Christian West. At first almost forgotten, these translations were rediscovered three centuries later, and thus it happened that from the eleventh to the twelfth century onward mysticism started to flourish in the Western Church. But by and large it remained a mysticism of monastics and celibate clerics.

One of the great mystics of the Christian tradition, and the dominant figure of the twelfth century, is St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The twelfth century is remembered for the Victorines, who lived in an Augustinian Abbey near Paris and also wrote commentaries on the writings of Dionysius. While Hugh of St. Victor is largely remembered as a theologian, Richard of St. Victor was such a well-known mystic that Dante referred to him in his *Paradiso* (X, 132).

Also very important was Franciscan mysticism. Represented above all by St. Francis of Assisi himself, it is especially expressed in the writings of the great St. Bonaventure, the “*Doctor Seraphicus*,” who described the soul’s mystical ascent to God. Another example of Franciscan mysticism is found in Angela of Foligno (c. 1248–1309), a Franciscan Tertiary, or lay member, of the order who, after marriage, conversion and the deaths of her husband, children and mother, led an ascetic life. During a pilgrimage to Assisi she experienced mystical visions of the Trinity, which culminated in the knowledge of “Love Uncreate” and its image in the human soul.

Other great medieval mystics include Hildegard, the famous abbess from Bingen who has become especially well known in recent years. From Italy there are the two Catherines, a hundred years apart, one from Siena, the other from Genoa. In northern Europe we have the women’s movement of the Beguines, the Rhineland mystics from Germany and the Netherlands, and the English mystics, male and female, who exercised an important influence on English piety and devotion. All of these have attracted much attention in the twentieth century.

Who were these mystics of a bygone age? How did they seek and describe God, yearn for, desire and love the Divine, reach ecstatic union and communion?

The medieval mystic voices are so numerous that it would be impossible to listen to them all. By following the stories of some of the most significant ones, we can discover the patterns of their lives, the intensity of their devotion, and the adventures of their encounters with God. They form a story of many parts that begins in the late eleventh century and stretches through to the late fifteenth century. We start with the towering figure of Bernard of Clairvaux, whose life reaches into the middle of the twelfth century.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

Bernard was born near Dijon, in France, into a family of seven brothers and one sister of noble stock. Early on he chose the cloister rather than the traditional pursuits of the nobility. In the year 1112, after the death of his parents, he and his brothers entered the austere, new Cistercian monastery of Cîteaux, near Dijon, where he pursued his spiritual and theological studies. At that time the return to the primitive rule of St. Benedict and monastic reform spread rapidly throughout Europe. Three years after becoming a monk, the abbot asked Bernard to choose a place for a new monastery, and thus Clairvaux Abbey, near Troyes, in northeastern France, was established.

Bernard became its abbot, and soon made Clairvaux into an important center of the Cistercian order. Although he was a deeply devoted monk who more than anything else desired a quiet, contemplative life, he soon became much involved in the Church politics of his time, held offices, founded some sixty monasteries and helped in founding three hundred others. He could appear obstinate and impetuous, and was given to self-mortification and austerities whose excesses ruined his health; but he became known above all for his saintliness and love of God. He developed a doctrine of mystical love and struggled to combine mystical absorption in God with service to others and the institutional Church.

Bernard held strong orthodox views and was suspicious of secular learning and philosophy in matters of faith. He was not afraid to speak out, denouncing the persecution of the Jews, but also helping to condemn Abelard. He is considered the single most important figure of twelfth-century Western Christianity who, through his many writings, exerted an influence over many centuries to come. Canonized in 1174, just over twenty years after his death at Clairvaux, he was much later, in 1820, declared a “Doctor of the Church.”

As abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Clairvaux, Bernard became well known for his deep mystical devotion to the humanity of Christ, especially his childhood and suffering, and his veneration of the Virgin Mary. He was the first to write about the contemplation of the wounds of Christ, one of the great themes of medieval mysticism. His eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs also express many of his mystical insights, especially about Christ as bridegroom of the soul. His mystical experiences and his writing were always linked to a very active life in connection with his work for the Cistercian order and for the Church of his time.

In his teaching he insisted that prayer, preaching, self-denial and worship are central to the life of both Church and state, important for monks and laypeople alike. God should be loved simply and purely because he is God. Nowhere does this find a more sublime expression than in his short spiritual treatise *De diligendo Deo*, or *On Loving God*, which

has been called one of the most outstanding medieval books on mysticism.

Here he describes the ecstasy of the soul transformed into the likeness of God based on humility and obedience to God's will. Written between 1126 and 1141, in response to some questions raised by Haimeric, cardinal of deacon and chancellor the See of Rome, the text contains several major themes, all connected with the love of God. Loving God means, above all, to love without measure.

Bernard's clear and orderly mind sets out the different reasons for and the several degrees of this exalted love. Why should human beings love God above all? Bernard lists three reasons: We should love God because of God's gift to us, because of the gifts of nature and, last not least, because of the gift of ourselves. The whole of spiritual life is thus seen as a response to God's gratuitous love.

If we know ourselves, we are already on the way to God because God created us in the divine image. But we cannot find God unless we have first been found and led by him so that we desire to seek him more. Bernard distinguishes carnal and social love, love of self and love of others, and divides love into four degrees. First we love ourselves for our own sake; then we love God, but for our own sake. Different again is when we love God for his sake and, the highest degree, our love of ourselves for God's sake. The divine love is sincere because it does not seek its own advantage. "Tasting God's sweetness entices us more to pure love than does the urgency of our own needs," Bernard writes. This is how he describes this highest experience:

To lose yourself, as if you no longer existed, to cease completely to experience yourself, to reduce yourself to nothing is not a human sentiment but a divine experience....

It is deifying to go through such an experience. As a drop of water seems to disappear completely in a big quantity of wine, even assuming the wine's taste and color, just as red, molten iron becomes so much like fire it seems to lose its primary state; just as the air on a sunny day seems transformed into a sunshine instead of being lit up; so it is necessary for the saints that all human feelings melt in a mysterious way and flow into the will of God. Otherwise, how will God be all in all if something human survives in man?

At other times, Bernard appeals to the imagery of the Song of Songs and speaks of Christ as the bridegroom coming into the soul. He comes without being seen or heard, from without and within, from the highest parts and the deepest depths of the soul, stretching farther than Bernard could see and yet being utterly inward so that he can affirm with Paul that "In Him we live and move and have our being." He speaks of Christ's wisdom, his gentleness and kindness, his renewal of spirit and mind. Bernard expresses his wondrous amazement that in his inmost being "I have beheld to some degree the beauty of His glory and have been filled with awe as I gazed at His manifold greatness."

One of Bernard's favorite themes was the wisdom of God, which builds herself a house in Mary and each Christian. Mary, the symbol of feminine qualities par excellence, is highly exalted in Bernard's works, especially in his *Homilies in Praise of the Virgin Mother*. What is most interesting to us is Bernard's view that both feminine and masculine qualities can be legitimately applied to God—and some writers have even

compared his views to Jungian theory—and his emphasis on the necessity of the feminine in the work of salvation.

Richard of St. Victor (c. 1120–1173)

One of Bernard's friends and the most famous teacher of his day was William of Champeaux. He founded the Augustinian Abbey of St. Victor, near Paris, in 1113, which developed into a famous center of medieval philosophy, theology and mysticism. While its monks were no less intent than Bernard on fostering mystical contemplation, they did not mistrust secular learning as he did, but cultivated the liberal arts and philosophy as an aid to mystical contemplation. The abbey thus produced a number of prominent scholars, mystics and poets, of whom we shall only mention Richard of St. Victor, who was prior of the abbey from 1162 until his death in 1173.

A Scot by birth, Richard was steeped in philosophy but dedicated himself above all to contemplation, or what we now call mysticism. Not unlike Bernard, he speaks of the *Four Degrees of Burning Love*, as one of his writings is entitled. But his best-known texts are the so-called *Benjamin Minor*, or *The Preparation of the Soul*, and *Benjamin Major*, or *Contemplation*, titles that are based on his allegorical reference to Jacob's twelve sons, each of whom personifies one of the virtues. Benjamin, the youngest, stands for contemplation, and for this reason these two important texts on mysticism came to be called *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Major* after the Middle Ages.

Richard of St. Victor was the first theologian to attempt a systematic treatment of mystical theology. His works exercised a wide influence on both contemporary and subsequent medieval writers. He was also the first medieval mystic to apply systematic psychology to the mystical experience when he describes the ascent of the mind from the contemplation of visible to invisible things and ultimately to a final transforming union. The ultimate state is one of utter self-surrender and ecstasy which, however, must make the soul return to compassionate work in the world in imitation of Christ.

Richard follows the Augustinian tradition in seeing knowledge of God as an ascent. The human mind is active in thinking, meditation and contemplation. Whereas the activity of thinking remains largely undisciplined, however, meditation requires a sustained mental effort, and contemplation takes the mind beyond the reach of reason to a state of ecstatic "alienation" outside and beyond itself. Ecstasy takes place when the soul has ascended to the point where it has left behind both imagination and reason. Richard speaks of the "wedding" of the human with the divine spirit, implying a state of complete self-surrender. In describing the ecstasy of the human mind, he relates it to three causes:

For it comes to pass that sometimes through greatness of devotion, or great wonder, or exceeding exultation, the mind cannot possess itself in any way, and being lifted up above itself, passes into ecstasy. The human mind is raised above itself by the greatness of its devotion, when it is kindled with such fire of heavenly desire that the flame of inner love flares up beyond human bearing.

In such a state the human soul is "radiant with infused heavenly light and lost in wonder at the supreme beauty of God" and "torn from the foundation of her being" so that she "no longer thirsts for God, but into God" But what should those feel who have never

experienced such ecstasy? Are they not loved? Do they perhaps not love to the highest degree? Richard assures his reader:

Whoever you are, if you loved fully and perfectly perhaps the perfection of your love, the urge of your burning desire would carry you away into this kind of ecstasy...if you were truly worthy of divine love, perhaps he would enlighten the eyes of your intelligence so greatly with the effulgence of his light and inebriate the desire of your heart with such a taste of his intimate sweetness, that thereby he would carry you up above yourself and lift you up to divine things by ecstasy....

But God's presence, the sublime fruit of contemplation, is not enough on its own. It is further surpassed by a higher, a "fourth degree of love," whereby the soul withdraws from its annihilation and is raised in Christ, following his example and "bringing forth its children" through compassionate work in the world. Like all Christian mystics, Richard's understanding of mysticism is not solely centered on the soul's enjoyment of God, but it becomes fecund in the world. Richard of St. Victor thus combined the affirmative way of mysticism with the negative methods advocated by Dionysius the Areopagite.

Dante refers to Richard in his *Paradiso* (X, 132) as "In contemplation more than a man." Richard's synthesis of Augustinian and Dionysian elements, combined with his interest in the experiential psychology of the spiritual life and his careful analysis of the different stages of contemplation, no doubt provided many contemplatives with the necessary framework for their spiritual quest. It is thus not surprising that the works of Richard of St. Victor were widely read during the Middle Ages, not only in France, but also in England, Germany and Spain. Directly or indirectly, they influenced most later spiritual writers in the Christian West.

Medieval mysticism was not only linked to the monasticism of the cloister. Important new elements were introduced into religious and spiritual life through extramonastic developments. It was above all the figure of St. Francis and his radical mentality in imitating the poverty of Christ in a literal sense that led to a new sensibility and intense devotion to the presence of God within all created beings, a perspective that highlighted the importance and interdependence of humanity and the world of nature.

St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226)

This great charismatic and Christlike figure of utter humility and simplicity created a new spiritual consciousness in the Christian West. Although he left few writings, his sense of God's all-pervading presence, his intensive love for all God's creatures, great and small, human and animal, gave the Church an important spiritual legacy that has attracted fresh attention again and again, not least in the new movement of creation spirituality in our own time.

Whereas earlier medieval mystics pursued their flight from the world and its burdens, their *fuga mundi*, by seeking the stability of monastic life, such flight into perfection was now sought in the instability of life on the road, in pilgrimages and crusades, so that St. Francis addressed his brethren as "pilgrims and strangers."

But who was this charismatic twelfth-century figure whose simplicity and freshness of

vision created such a stir and influenced so many people right up to this day?

Until the age of twenty Francesco Bernardone lived the life of the son of a rich cloth merchant in the Italian town of Assisi, helping his father in business. Then in 1202, during a border dispute with a neighboring town, he was taken prisoner and held captive for some months. After his release he suffered a serious illness during which he became dissatisfied with his worldly life. He underwent an inner conversion and from that time on devoted himself to a life of prayer and service to the poor.

During a pilgrimage to Rome he was moved by the beggars outside St. Peter's and exchanged his clothes with one of them, spending a day begging for alms himself. This experience affected him deeply, and on his return to Assisi he decided to minister to lepers and repair the ruined church of St. Damiano, which led his father to disown him. One morning in church, Francis heard the words of the Gospel in which Jesus asks his disciples to leave everything in order to follow him. Francis understood this as a personal call, discarded his belongings, put on a long, dark garment girded with a cord and set out to save souls. Before long he gathered a band of like-minded followers devoted to a life of poverty, compassionate service and preaching of the Gospel. Soon he drew up a simple rule of life for himself and his followers, and this was the beginning of the Franciscan order.

These ideals were equally attractive to a noble woman of Assisi, Clara, or Clare, who took Francis as her spiritual teacher and guide, and founded a similar order for women, centered at the church of St. Damiano in Assisi. *St. Clare (1193?–1253)* became a nun in 1212. She outlived Francis by many years, remaining always faithful to his vision of poverty, mutual love and shared contemplation of "the Lord who was poor as he lay in the crib, poor as he lived in the world, who remained naked on the cross," as Francis wrote in his *Testament*. There was a deep spiritual friendship between her and Francis that was based on the love and veneration of the humanity and poverty of Christ.

Setting up his order, negotiating with and befriending several ecclesiastical figures of his time, together with various travels, made Francis's life eventful. In 1214 and 1215 he visited the south of France and Spain with the intention of converting the Moors to Christianity. Illness prevented him from reaching Africa, but in 1219 he undertook another preaching tour to eastern Europe and Egypt.

Francis identified his whole life and that of his brothers as "the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" Consumed by the consciousness of God's all-pervading presence and purpose, he saw everybody as a child of God and craved to know the uncreated Father through all of creation, especially through the humanity of his Son.

Toward the end of his life Francis retired to a hermitage at Mount Alvernia in the Apennines, where in September 1224, two years before his death, he fasted for weeks and contemplated Christ's sufferings. After an entire night spent in prayer, as the sun rose in the morning, he had a glorious vision of a crucified seraph with six outspread wings. Stirred to his depths, he felt sharp stings mingled with ecstasy and it was then that he received the stigmata, the impression of the five wounds of Christ crucified, on his own body. This experience is well testified by several thirteenth-century sources and left a deep impression on the medieval mind.

Shortly afterward, Francis composed his great *Canticle of Brother Sun*, a poetic hymn in praise of the Most High by a man fully at peace, in harmony with the whole cosmos, to

whom all elements are brothers and sisters. Well known, too, is his prayer “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love.... O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console...to be loved as to love....”

In comparison with other mystics Francis left few writings. His mystical spirituality lives on through the example of his life; it is found in his simple faith, his passionate devotion to God and human beings, his love of nature and his deep humility. The greatness of this man was immediately recognized by the Church, which made him a saint in 1228, two years after his death. His inspiring example also lived on in the Franciscan order, whose conflicts had already begun during Francis’s lifetime. It became subdivided and developed into several branches, but all of them were inspired by the great figure of their founder, one of the most cherished saints of the Christian Church. His example determined the shape of Franciscan spirituality, which later contributed several popular devotional practices to Christianity, such as the Christmas crib, the Stations of the Cross, and possibly the Angelus, also known as the Ave Maria. All of these directly relate to and celebrate the humanity of Christ.

Soon after Francis’s death, the stories associated with his life were collected together and several “Lives” were written. In 1266 the Franciscan order officially authorized the *Legenda Major*, the life written by St Bonaventure, and ordered the suppression of all others. This led to the growth of oral legends which culminated in the classic collection of the *Fioretti, the Little Flowers of St. Francis*, a widely read and much loved book.

We shall now turn to the great Franciscan mystical theologian, St. Bonaventure, who lived shortly after St. Francis.

St. Bonaventure (1221–1274)

Born near Viterbo in central Italy, Bonaventure studied at the University of Paris and subsequently became a professor of theology there. In 1242 he entered the Franciscan order, of which he was made head, or minister general, in 1257. Later still he was made a bishop and cardinal. As such he played a significant part at the Council of Lyons in 1274, which was still sitting when he died. He left a considerable body of writings, including commentaries on the Scriptures, but he was most influential through his mystical theology, which he set forth in his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, or *The Mind’s Journey to God*, his greatest speculative and mystical work.

Following in the footsteps of St. Francis, Bonaventure tells us how, shortly after becoming minister general and thirtythree years after the death of his founder, he ascended Mount Alvernia to meditate in the same place where St. Francis had experienced the miraculous vision of the crucified seraph. While there, Bonaventure was blessed with the same vision, that of a six-winged angel, whose three pairs of wings came to symbolize for him the three major phases of the soul’s ascent to God. He recounts this extraordinary experience in the prologue of his *Itinerarium*, to which he gave the subtitle *The Mendicant’s Vision in the Wilderness*. It is because of this vision of the seraph that St. Bonaventure was later called “The Seraphic Doctor.”

It is through this mystical theology that Bonaventure provides his spiritual instruction, which is centered on the unifying experience of divine illumination. He holds an

essentially mystical theory of knowledge that follows the Augustinian tradition. This made him less interested in the new Aristotelian doctrines that became known at that time and are chiefly associated with the theology of St. Thomas of Aquinas.

For Bonaventure, contemplation is both the goal and the journey. The spiritual allegory of the seraph with six wings grouped in three pairs symbolizes the three major phases of illumination in the soul's ascent to God. Prayer is vitally important in this, and divine help comes to those who seek the knowledge needed for the ascent.

The *first pair* of stages involves reflecting on the sensible, corporeal world, which is a ladder for ascending to God because the world bears traces of God's hand, so that we can recognize traces of his creative power in it. We understand God *through* sensible things, but we also see God *in* sensible things as essence, potency and presence.

In the *second pair* of stages, understanding is gained by entering our own minds and taking them as objects of our reflection. We can see God's image stamped upon our natural powers of memory, intellect and choice. For Bonaventure, memory, intelligence and will reflect the Trinity of "Father, Word, and Love," and the soul in the "trinity of its powers" is seen as being created in the image of God. After having learned the way of God through contemplating the world, the awareness of the *truth* of God is gained through and in our own minds.

The *third and final pair* of the ascent occurs when our minds turn to what is "eternal, most spiritual and above us," the first principle of being, or God himself. By reflecting on pure being, we know God as unity; by reflecting on the goodness of pure being, we know God as Trinity.

The six stages of ascent correspond to the six stages of the soul's powers through which the ascent is made: sense, imagination, reason, intellect, intelligence and the illumination of conscience. The final, ultimate goal beyond the six stages is not within the soul's power to reach. It is given as a gratuitous gift: a seventh stage of repose and illumination by supreme wisdom made possible through Christ as mediator. It is a stage of mental and mystical elevation in which all intellectual operations cease, a unifying experience of divine illumination that is "mystical and most secret, which no man knows but he that has received it." Bonaventure cannot say more than:

If you should ask how these things come about, question grace, not instruction; desire, not intellect; the cry of prayer, not pursuit of study; the spouse, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the wholly flaming fire which will bear you aloft to God with fullest unction and burning affection.

This is a mysticism of a fundamentally Christocentric emphasis, also expressed through Bonaventure's devotion to the Sacred Heart, as when he writes: "Behold, I have one heart with Jesus." Influenced by Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite, it is a mysticism of darkness expressed through the classic threefold way of purgation, illumination and union.

Franciscan devotion to the humanity and passion of the crucified Christ expressed itself in a rich heritage of spiritual and mystical writing. Franciscan wisdom touches on the heart of human, cosmic and divine reality. Entering into the poverty of the cross of Jesus is to know and find there the compassionate wisdom of God from within God. In

one of his sermons on the nativity, Bonaventure describes this wisdom as a union in which “immensity is tempered by smallness; strength by weakness; clarity by obscurity; immortality by mortality; divinity by humanity; and riches by poverty.”

Somewhat akin to Bonaventure’s own spiritual journey are the visions of the *Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248–1309)*. A penitent Italian widow from Umbria, she joined the Third Order of the Franciscans, which grouped together lay followers of St. Francis. Her journey of intense spiritual experience, linked to frequent visions of Christ’s passion, is preserved in a writing called *Memorial*, which divides the spiritual ascent to God into thirty different steps.

It is impossible to describe these here in detail, but with the cross as her inspiration she discovered new abilities to see, taste, feel and smell, and was able to return Christ’s love for her by fervently loving the crucified Christ. She experienced the cross from within as she entered into the experience of Christ, his absolute poverty and helplessness on the cross, which led her into a “most horrible darkness” and suffering. Through following and embracing Christ crucified, she participated in the complete self-emptying of Christ on the cross and thereby found a radically new experience of God, touching the uncreated All-Good, which is darkness to the limited human mind.

Evelyn Underhill, the well-known writer on mysticism, considers Angela of Foligno as “in many respects the most remarkable of the great Franciscan mystics,” but we shall leave her to look at three other, quite different women mystics who are generally better known and belong to different centuries.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

The great mystical visionary Hildegard comes from Bingen in Germany. She lived a century before Angela of Foligno but left a much more substantial body of writings. Her works are now enjoying a great revival, whereas earlier writers on mysticism paid little attention to them. Yet she is the first major German mystic, a poet, musician and painter, who wrote on nature and medieval medicine and, above all, gave us her major work, *Scivias*, or *Know the Ways*, whose visions are accompanied by very striking, colorful miniatures. The end of this book is a drama set to music that describes the eternal battle between good and evil. It has been described as the earliest morality play yet discovered. With such great creative achievements it is no surprise that Hildegard is sometimes compared to such visionary writers as Dante and Blake.

Hildegard was the tenth and youngest child of a noble German family. At the young age of eight her parents entrusted her for education to the recluse Jutta von Spanheim, who raised her. When older, Hildegard decided to take her vows and follow the Benedictine way of life. After Jutta’s death, she was elected the new abbess of her convent, which soon moved to Rupertsberg, near Bingen, on the Rhine.

Hildegard had been a spiritually precocious child who experienced mystical visions from a young age to the end of her life. For her, God was the living light, the *lux vivens*. She describes her visions in terms of light, speaks of mystical rapture and prophecies, and expresses her passionate desire for God with great intensity. Her visions are marked by brilliant colors, her descriptions by apophatic negations.

Because of the vivid apocalyptic visions of her prophecies, Hildegard is sometimes

referred to as the “Sibyl of the Rhine.” It seems that she always had poor physical health and suffered psychosomatic troubles. It has even been suggested that many of her visions might be related to migraine attacks. Yet she was a woman of indomitable energy and great strength who founded two convents, undertook a great deal of traveling and preaching, and dictated her works to a scribe, the monk Volmar. Her second abbey, Eibingen near Rudesheim, became the center of Hildegardian reform and renewal.

Hildegard produced a trilogy of visionary books of which the first, *Scivias*, is the most important. In 1141, when she was “forty-two years and seven months old,” she received a disturbing vision from God commanding her, “Write what you see and hear!” She began, and it took more than ten years to complete the work. At first she was hesitant and sought advice, not least from her near contemporary, Bernard of Clairvaux, who encouraged her and influenced the pope to give his approbation to this female prophet.

Scivias is a complex book that has been called an encyclopedia of salvation. Divided into three parts, it describes twenty-six visions in all, accompanied by thirty-six miniatures. One of Hildegard’s major themes is the search for wisdom, that “elusive treasure,” which dwells “wonderfully in the Godhead’s heart” and which we have to recover as our “original wisdom.” Wisdom is cosmic too as the keeper of cosmic order and justice. Wisdom is compassion, and Christ, the incarnation of God’s compassion, is also the incarnation of God’s wisdom. Wisdom is deeply involved in the ongoing work of creation:

I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows. I gleam in the waters. I burn in the sun, moon, and stars. With every breeze, as with invisible life that contains everything, I awaken everything to life.

I am the breeze that nurtures all things green. I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits. I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.

Hildegard’s thought is holistic and healing; it celebrates the cosmos and seeks compassion, peace and justice. For her, wisdom is less about thinking than tasting. In Latin, wisdom (*sapientia*) and taste (*sapere*) are words stemming from the same root. To build the house of wisdom in ourselves and in our community means to learn the art of savoring and the joy of living.

Hildegard’s struggle for wisdom was gained at the cost of great physical and spiritual pain. We can discern in her works the immense effort to break free from traditional patterns and create something new. Though still constrained by the feudal structures of her time, Hildegard brought forth a cosmic and universal vision of extraordinary power and inspiration. Her visions are not exclusive, but wholly inclusive. The work entrusted by God to humankind has to be carried out by man *and* woman together. She also includes the feminine element in her understanding of God, for God’s love is above all a maternal, life-giving love.

The extraordinary richness, prophetic power and great mystical unity of Hildegard’s visionary creations are being drawn upon only now, when the threat to our environment makes us seek new spiritual resources for nurturing a deeply reverential attitude to the sacredness of all life. Hildegard challenged the clergy and laypeople of her time; the

ecstatic nature of her writings, paintings and music are challenging us now, but in a new way.

It is said that on September 17, 1179, two streams of light appeared in the sky and formed a cross over the room where Hildegard lay dying. While the visions of her lifetime had come to her from the “living light,” her death made her enter the eternal light, an event marked by a vision visible to all.

Hildegard is the first great woman mystic from northern Europe whom we have encountered so far, but we shall meet several more later. We will now turn back to Italy, to tell the story of the two Catherines who, each in her own way, so well combined the contemplative and the active life.

St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Italy produced a rich spiritual literature, full of mystical devotion and religious fervor. Several of its works come from female mystics, of whom Catherine of Siena is perhaps the best known.

Born into the family of a dyer in the district of Siena, Catherine was the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children. Influenced by the austerities of the desert fathers, she took a vow of virginity at the age of seven and became a Dominican Tertiary at the age of sixteen. That meant that she was a lay member of the order bound by simple vows, but living outside the convent. She soon gained a reputation for her great holiness and severe asceticism. From early on she experienced visions, ecstasies and spiritual struggles that culminated in 1366, when she was not yet twenty, in her “mystical marriage with Christ,” so beautifully depicted in several Renaissance paintings.

This experience showed her the need to go out into the world and help her neighbors out of love for God. Thus she was not only an ascetic and mystic, but also became an activist, always motivated by God’s love for the human being, about which she said: “Nails would not have held the God-man fast to the cross, had not love held him there.”

She devoted herself with such dedication to the sick and poor of Siena that they called her “our Holy Mother.” Her guiding thought was that “there is no perfect virtue—none that bears fruit—unless it is exercised by means of our neighbor.” Her public ministry also involved great concern for the Church, which she understood as the kingdom of God on earth. She first worked for peace when Florence was placed under an interdict because it was in arms against the pope, Gregory XI. This made her travel to Avignon to plead with the pope on behalf of the city, but also to persuade him to return to Rome. Later when the Great Schism of the papacy broke out, she became an active supporter of Pope Urban VI, urging bishops and monarchs in many letters to return to his obedience. Thus she played an active part in the ecclesiastical politics of her day. She did not shrink from writing to the pope himself, reminding him that care for spiritual things stood above things temporal. By the time she died, she was greatly exhausted from her public life and the sacrifices she had made. But her public ministry ultimately derived its strength and authority from her intense spiritual experiences which were recognized by others.

She had an extraordinary devotion to the Precious Blood, the blood of Christ shed during his passion. Devotion to this blood, especially in connection with the Eucharist, and belief in its redeeming power go back to the early Christian centuries. The great

intensity of her mystical devotion and trances produced, as with St. Francis, the physical imprinting of the stigmata, of the five wounds of Christ on her body, which she described in the following words: "I saw the crucified Lord coming down to me in a great light.... Then from the marks of His most sacred wounds I saw five blood-red rays coming down upon me, which were directed towards the hands and feet and heart of my body. Wherefore, perceiving the mystery, I straightaway exclaimed, 'Ah! Lord, my God, I beseech Thee, let not the marks appear outwardly on the body.'... So great is the pain that I endure sensibly in all those five places, but especially within my heart, that unless the Lord works a new miracle, it seems not possible to me that the life of my body can stay with such agony."

The record of her mystical experiences is found in her book *Dialogo*, her dialogue with God, which she dictated as she did all her writings. It illustrates her view of the "inner cell" where the knowledge of God and of the self is found. Speaking movingly of her experience of God she writes: "The more I enter, the more I find, and the more I find the more I seek of Thee. Thou art the Food that never satiates, for when the soul is satiated in Thine abyss it is not satiated, but ever continues to hunger and thirst for Thee."

Much of the book was dictated when Catherine was in a state of ecstasy. Its central message is that love is the way to perfection, and the heart of the book describes Christ as the bridge that must be crossed, from earth to heaven, by those who would find God. The bridge is built of the stones of true and sincere virtues. On the bridge is an inn where food is given to the travelers. Those who cross the bridge go to eternal life; those who go underneath it find everlasting death.

Soon after her death, Catherine of Siena was recognized as a saint, but it was only in 1939 that she was declared the patron saint of Italy, and more recently still, in 1970, that she was proclaimed a doctor of the Church, a title very few women hold.

St. Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510)

Catherine came from the famous Fieschi family in Genoa, where she received a careful and sound education as befitted her noble status. Her early aspirations to become a nun were frustrated by her relatives when, for political reasons, they married her off at the age of sixteen to a young man, Guiliano Adorno, who was worldly, pleasure-loving and indulgent. Catherine experienced considerable unhappiness and spent some sorrowful years in seclusion until she was able to free herself from her husband. She then devoted herself to prayer, contemplation and strict discipline. In 1473 she underwent a deep mystical experience marked by close union with God. From now on her life was transformed. She reached great spiritual heights, but balanced ascetic discipline with an active life of service to the ill and poor.

She founded the first hospital in Genoa, where she gave such selfless service that her husband was eventually converted by these efforts and assisted her in her care of the sick. He later became a Franciscan Tertiary, but Catherine herself never joined any order. Her devotion to the Eucharist was so intense that from 1475 onward she received communion almost daily, a practice extremely rare in the Middle Ages except for priests.

Soon she gathered around her a band of devoted friends and followers, to whom she described her mystical experiences in conversations between 1499 and 1507. These

accounts were given a literary form, probably not by Catherine herself, and published only much later, in 1551, as *Vita e dottrina*. This work forms the basis for two separately published books, *Dialogues on the Soul and the Body* and *Treatise on Purgatory*. In the early twentieth century, attention was drawn to Catherine's remarkable mystical, mental, and at times almost pathological, experiences through the classic study by Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element in Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (1908).

The last ten years of Catherine's life were marked by violent interior emotions, mentioned in her works. It has been said that in many ways Catherine of Genoa is a "theologian of purgatory," a purgatory that she herself experienced in a marriage she did not desire, in her care for plague victims, and also in her nervous illness. She also experienced purgatory spiritually as the soul's realization of its own imperfections, in her search for salvation and purification.

Influenced by Plato and Dionysius, the focus of her mysticism was, in spite of her eucharistic devotion, not so much Christ, but above all the infinite God. Her mysticism is primarily theocentric, not Christocentric. She speaks of the absorption into the totality of God as if immersed into an ocean: "I am so...submerged in His immense love, that I seem as though immersed in the sea, and nowhere able to touch, see or feel aught but water." At the height of her mystical experiences she could exclaim: "My being is God, not by simple participation but by a true transformation of my being."

Catherine of Genoa was beatified in 1737, and in 1944 Pope Pius XII proclaimed her patroness of the hospitals in Italy. Unlike her predecessor, Catherine of Siena, she did not get involved with the political concerns of her time. Neither the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which had considerable repercussions on the city of Genoa, nor the historic landing of her townsman Columbus in America in 1498 find any mention in her works. Her entire attention was devoted to her charitable works and to her circle of women friends, who may well have been responsible for putting her personal teachings into literary form and getting them published. We know little about this group of Italian women surrounding Catherine, but we have far more information about the female mystics living in northern Europe, the Beguines.

THE BEGUINES

Until the recent revival of interest caused by the women's movement, the work of medieval women mystics had for a long time remained a neglected part of the Christian mystical heritage. Yet between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries we can observe a significant increase of women's participation in the religious life, with a strong emphasis on mystical and paramystical phenomena. The different life patterns of medieval men and women also led to a noticeable contrast between *lay* female saints and *clerical* male saints.

Women's spirituality reflects the importance of affectivity—of body and feeling—and many spiritual themes are gender-specific. Female saints have been called "models of suffering" in contrast to male "models of action." Women's writing was less grounded in theological training than men's; it was more affective, experiential and devotional, with

an emphasis on Christ's suffering humanity and the Eucharist—God was both mother and father, “judge” and “nurse” to human souls.

Of particular richness is the much neglected heritage of the Beguines, laywomen who lived an ideal of Christian spirituality in self-sufficient communities in different parts of Europe. Their groups spread from the Low Countries along the Rhine Valley to Germany and France, even to England, and given their independence and self-sufficiency, they have been called “feminists before their time.” A much smaller, parallel male lay movement, the Beghards, also came into existence. These women and men were considered by many of their contemporaries as the most devout Christians of their age.

The Beguines formed their own settlements, the *beguinages* (of which some are still in existence in the Netherlands and Belgium), which consisted of many different houses and sometimes also a church, cemetery, hospital, brewery, public square and streets. The city of Cologne is said to have had a total of a hundred Beguine houses between 1250 and 1350, holding a thousand women, whereas Strasbourg housed some six hundred Beguines in the fifteenth century—figures that attest to the popularity of the movement at that time.

But what does *Beguine* mean? The word *beghina* first came into use at the end of the twelfth century, and much speculation has occurred as to its origin. Some have suggested that it may derive from the verb “to beg” or from the “begging orders,” the mendicants who became popular at that time, or from a contraction of the word *Albigenses*, referring to heretics. Others again have proposed that the name points to the gray-colored clothes these pious women used to wear, or that it was a kind of nickname derived from the Middle Dutch word *bagga*, meaning “wearing thick clothes.”

But none of these explanations seems satisfactory. What is certain is the fact that pious women followed a spiritual vocation of their own choosing and formed a movement of *mulieres indisciplinatae*, of women who lived without a religious rule. They lived singly, but also grouped themselves under the guidance of a *magistra*, or “mistress,” whereas a priest, also known as “master,” gave spiritual direction.

Thus the movement developed some kind of pattern, and later still Beguines came to live together in an enclosure in a special district of a town, developing their own rule. Eventually the more populated enclosures with their church and other institutions grew into an independent parish of the town, with small houses for one or two Beguines, communal houses for small groups of women, the house of the grand mistress, the guest house, where visitors stayed and where the old and sick were cared for, and alms houses for poor Beguines. It was a whole world of its own that could serve as a safe place of refuge for those in need of help and advice. One can still sense something of the spirit of such places today when visiting the wellknown “Princely Beguinage” in Bruges.

Among the Beguines were many mystics and visionaries who wrote stirring mystical poetry about their love of God, but also about the humanity and passion of Christ. Women were rarely allowed to preach, but they felt compelled by God to write and communicate their powerful inner experiences. The Beguines preferred vernacular language to Latin and adopted the courtly love lyric for their mystical poetry. Describing the relationship of the soul to God in autobiographical form, they used highly charged, erotic images to convey their own relationship *with* God rather than just writing *about* God. Many of the expressions of their mystical experiences and insights influenced the much better known

male Rhineland mystics. Because of their lyrical love mysticism expressed in songs and poetry, these female mystics have been called “women troubadours of God.”

It is impossible to give a comprehensive account of all the Beguines, especially as new material about different figures is constantly coming to light. Each woman is a different individual, with her own history, and her own religious and mystical vocation. Yet what unites the Beguines is their intense love and longing for God. Out of the large number of Beguines in the Netherlands, Germany and France, four different figures from the mid-thirteenth to the early fourteenth century are presented here. They are roughly contemporaries, although it is unlikely that they knew of one another’s work. All four emphasize love above knowledge and write in praise of an intensive love mysticism between the human soul and God.

St. Mechtild of Magdeburg (c. 1210–1297)

Mechtild was born some time between 1207 and 1210 in Lower Saxony, in Germany. She came from a well-to-do family, probably of noble descent, and received a good education, as is evident from her literary style and knowledge of court manners. We know little of her family except that she had a younger brother. Early in her life, at the age of twelve, she received a revelation from the Holy Spirit, and at the age of twenty-three she moved to the city of Magdeburg to live there as a Beguine, a lay-woman joining other women in a community caring for the sick and needy.

For many years she concealed the exceptional graces bestowed on her, but finally she confided in her Dominican confessor, who encouraged her to write down her experiences of loving union with God. Although Mechtild felt unworthy that “a poor despised little woman should write this book out of God’s heart and mouth,” she began the task that took her many years. She wrote on loose sheets of paper that were later collected, copied and translated from Low German into Latin, and thus the first six parts of her book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* were circulated during her lifetime. It is possible that Dante may have read them, for there are parts of his *Divine Comedy* that are strikingly similar to certain scenes in Mechtild’s work.

Contemporary readers were surprised “at the masculine way in which this book is written,” and Mechtild felt aggrieved about this, for she attributed the strength of her writing about the power of divine love to the same God who made the apostles strong and fearless, gave Moses courage before the Pharaoh, and Daniel wisdom to speak as a youth.

Yet her work seems to have attracted considerable clerical antagonism. After having been a Beguine in Magdeburg for about forty years, it is thought that in order to escape persecution and calumny in her old age, she joined the Cistercian convent of Helfta, a remarkable center of learning, where the abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn received her in 1270. It is here that Mechtild wrote the seventh and last part of her book.

She recorded her visions and spiritual union through the language of courtly love, expressed in the form of dialogues between Mechtild and Christ. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* consists of a series of long and short poems, interspersed with narrative prose. The dialogues take different forms: They are between God and the Soul, between Lady Soul and Lady Love and other allegorical figures such as Fidelity, Constancy, Pain and Withdrawal of God. The major theme of the book is a celebration of God’s love. The

soul is created for loving communion with God, as a bride with her bridegroom, in a relationship of total mutuality.

Mechtild's work is motivated by the deep desire that the soul return to its original being in God. It is her true nature to live in the flowing light of the Godhead, just as it is a bird's nature to fly in the air and a fish's nature to swim in water. She has emanated from the heart of God, where she must return, but she discovers her utter nakedness before and in God: "Lord, now I am a naked soul!" Yet her intense love pours out in praise of God:

O God! so generous in the outpouring of Thy gifts!

So flowing in Thy Love!

So burning in Thy desire!

So fervent in union!

O Thou who doest rest on my heart

Without whom I could no longer live!

These love poems between God and the soul may be influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs, with which Mechtild was probably familiar, as she was with the works of Richard of St. Victor and Joachim of Fiore. Her poems use the cadences of worldly love songs and the conventions of courtly love poetry as well as the rich symbolism of biblical imagery.

Written over twenty or even thirty years, one can glimpse from *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* how the stages of Mechtild's spiritual journey corresponded to those of her physical and emotional life. The last part of the book, written in old age, makes her reflect on her childhood and youth. But she also speaks of her illnesses and laments the decline of her physical strength. Yet God assures her: "Thy childhood was a companion of My Holy Spirit; thy youth was a bride of My humanity, in thine old age thou art a humble house-wife of My Godhead." Thus she could maintain her confidence and trust in God's love and ever present help, knowing full well that she was never alone.

Many passages in Mechtild's book offer comfort and consolation to seeking souls at all stages of life. She writes vividly about the world of corruption and suffering from which she wishes to see Christianity delivered. But she has little to say about the persecution of the Jews that took place in medieval Germany and which she must have known about at Magdeburg. It was probably from St. Bernard and Richard of St. Victor that Mechtild learned the great Neoplatonic and patristic theme of the return to our original nature in God. She also uses the ancient image of "living in the desert" in a metaphorical way, as in the following poem, "The Desert Has Twelve Things," which makes skilled use of paradox to a striking effect:

You must love no-thingness,

You must flee something,

You must remain alone

*And go to nobody.
 You must be very active
 And free of all things.
 You must deliver the captives
 And force those who are free.
 You must comfort the sick
 And yet have nothing yourself.
 You must drink the water of suffering
 And light the fire of Love with the wood of the virtues.*

Thus you live in the true desert.

Mechtild's book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* was not preserved in its original Low German form, but has only come down to us in Middle High German and Latin translations. The German translation was only discovered in 1860 and has attracted considerable interest since then, especially in recent years. In some ways Mechtild of Magdeburg already points to a change in medieval thought and the beginnings of modern spirituality.

Beatrijs of Nazareth (1200–1268)

Beatrijs was a Cistercian nun who became prioress of the convent of Our Lady of Nazareth at Lier, near Antwerp. She left us only one short work describing her visions and mystical experiences, *The Seven Degrees of Love*. Written in Middle Dutch, it is the first mystical work that describes the soul's ascent to God in a vernacular language, and thus it is of particular importance in the history of Christian mysticism. But the manuscript of this text was only rediscovered in 1895.

Beatrijs also left a diary, her *Book of Life*, which, together with memories by the sisters of her community and her own sister, provided a "brother and servant" confessor of the convent with the necessary sources to write a *Vita*, a hagiography that sets out the main events of her life and spiritual development, at least until she came to the convent of Nazareth in 1236.

Born around the year 1200, Beatrijs was the youngest child of a well-to-do merchant family in Tienen, in the Belgian province of Brabant. She seems to have been a serious little girl who apparently at the age of five already knew by heart the Book of Psalms, which in those days served as the first book for practicing reading. After she had lost her mother at the age of seven, her father entrusted her to the Beguines at Léau for her education, later to be continued at the Cistercian convent at Florival, which her devout father had founded.

Together with her two sisters, Christine and Sybilla, Beatrijs became a Cistercian novice in 1215, when she was still only fifteen, taking her vows a year later. She was then sent for some time to the Abbey La Ramée near Nivelles, where she learned the art of calligraphy and manuscript illumination at the scriptorium (copyist workshop). While there, she formed a close friendship with the visionary and mystical writer, Ida of

Nivelles, who was still a novice then, but being more mature than Beatrijs, she could give counsel and guidance to her young friend. The two women formed a close friendship and remained in touch until Ida died.

Beatrijs pronounced her final vows in 1225, and from 1236 onward she lived at the convent of Nazareth. She became prioress soon afterward and held this office until her death. Little has been recorded about her life there, except that she accomplished her duties “in a perfect manner.”

As in Mechtild of Magdeburg’s work, we find in Beatrijs’s the influence of both Bernard of Clairvaux and of the imagery of courtly love. Her book *The Seven Degrees of Love* powerfully describes the visionary ascent from the lower forms of love to the highest of all, rendering an ecstatic foretaste of the bliss in heaven. Beatrijs describes how she is impelled by a fervent desire, how she feels the attraction of God, which makes her vehemently wish to follow Christ and be united with God. It also motivates her to undertake exaggerated penances in order to reform her nature, wounded by sin, and rediscover the purity of the state in which she was created. She expresses this desire for God in the following words:

The soul seeks God in his majesty; she follows him there and gazes upon him with heart and spirit. She knows him, she loves him and she so burns with desire for him that she cannot pay heed to any saints or sinners, angels or creatures, except with that all-comprehending love of him by whom she loves all things. She has chosen him alone in love above all, beneath all and within all, and so she desires to see God, to possess and to enjoy him with all the longing of her heart and with all the strength of her soul.

“Love takes seven forms which come from the apex and return to the summit.” Here we have the Neoplatonic movement of the soul coming from and returning to God. In its lower forms love is moved by desire; it is like an apprenticeship, its aim being to reach the final goal: union with God. Ultimately love is gratuitous; it is sweetness and delight, and gives one new energy. But in order to ascend to the highest form of love, suffering and denial are an integral part of the way. At the summit, love itself becomes the master and gives Beatrijs all she longed for: well-being and freedom, purity, knowledge and equality with the Lord. She describes this freedom as the immensity of love, a sense of spaciousness that make her spirit roam around the depths and heights of love, just like the fish explores the vastness of the ocean and the bird the heights and vastness of the air, a traditional image we have already encountered in Mechtild of Magdeburg.

In the light of contemplation Beatrijs is stripped of her own will. All her forces are unified and participate in the service of God, so that there is no longer any distinction between active and contemplative life. The passive element seems to dominate because the soul is drawn into another sphere, which she can only describe through paradoxes. Beatrice speaks positively of God as all-powerful and all-understanding, yet refers at the same time to his incomprehensible wisdom, his inaccessible height. To be united with God she must rise beyond time, beyond all human ways, above her own nature, in order to enter a different being and sink into the “profound abyss of the Divinity.”

The vision culminates in the experience of the mystery of the Trinity as well as

participation in the love and knowledge of the blessed spirits. Her biographer has specially recorded two trinitarian visions of Beatrijs. In one of these she sees God as the source of a river from which flow different streams and rivulets. The river is for her the Son of God, the streams his stigmata, and the rivulets are the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In another experience, during Mass, she sees Christ on the altar with arms outstretched and she feels literally united to him, heart to heart, and all Christ's spirit pervades her. They make a love pact where she agrees to do everything he asks for and he impresses his image upon her, as upon soft wax, to make her similar to himself.

In contrast to Hildegard's brilliantly colored visions, the descriptions of Beatrijs's experiences are much less visual. But tactile sensations play an important part, as when she *feels* God's presence passing through her whole body. The Lord pierces her soul with the fire of his love, as with the point of a sword, drawing her heart to his. On another occasion she speaks of the blood from Christ's wounds flowing into her soul.

This is a deeply affective mysticism centered on the heart, singing about the desire, the power, the immensity and eternity of love, of loving embrace both human and divine. Such ecstatic love, such "manner of sublime loving" leads a soul so blessed to "the unattainable heights and the immense abyss of the Godhead, which is all in all things and which is immutably all-existent, all-mighty, all-comprehending and all-powerful in its deeds."

Hadewijch of Brabant (Thirteenth Century)

It is difficult to discover precise details about this Flemish woman mystic who has left us a considerable body of writings, composed of *Poems*, *Visions*, and *Letters*, but we do not have a written account of Hadewijch's life. She is considered one of the creators of Dutch lyrical poetry, and it is thought that her works were written some time during the second quarter of the thirteenth century. But they were forgotten after the fourteenth century. Medieval specialists rediscovered them only in the nineteenth century, and their first critical edition appeared in 1920. Thus it is not surprising that even today many books on Christian mystics do not mention Hadewijch.

It seems she was a Beguine, a "mistress" or spiritual guide to an unorganized group of Beguines to whom she speaks with authority. But some of her remarks also point to considerable difficulties and opposition to her from both inside and outside her own community. Like other Beguines, she seems to have devoted herself to charitable activity, such as the care of the sick.

Given Hadewijch's knowledge of Latin and French and her use of courtly imagery, it is thought that she came from a noble family, probably from somewhere around Antwerp or Brussels, for she writes in the dialect of medieval Brabant. Influenced by the love mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux and others, her work represents an "experiential radicalization of the theology of love." Love is her spouse, her companion, her Lady Mistress, her God. Love is a person to whom one can speak, a lady, a queen whose strength and richness are praised. But love is above all Divine Love whose gifts inebriate and whose strength makes her experience all the rage and fury, the suffering of love when love becomes inaccessible. The contradictions and paradoxes are held in tension in her poems, as when she describes love as:

*Sometimes burning and sometimes cold,
 Sometimes timid and sometimes bold,
 The whims of Love are manifold...
 Sometimes gracious and sometimes cruel,*

*Sometimes far and sometimes near...
 Sometimes light, sometimes heavy,
 Sometimes sombre and sometimes bright,*

In freeing consolation, in stifling anguish,

*In taking and in giving,
 Thus live the spirits
 Who wander here below,
 Along the paths of Love.*

The storms and fury of love also bring moments of despair as well as rapture and delight. This is expressed in her *Letters* written to others, giving them advice about the relationship between God and the soul. "The soul is a bottomless abyss in which God suffices to Himself and ever finds His plenitude in her, just as the soul ever does in Him. The soul is a free way for the passage of God from His profound depths; again, God is a way for the passage of the soul into her freedom, that is to say, into the abyss of the Divine Being, which can be touched only by the abyss of the soul." God is the illumination of the soul and once so illumined, the soul can follow God's will in a perfect manner and do everything "in accordance with the truth of Love's laws."

In her later poems, Hadewijch uses striking language and metaphysical themes that were to be further developed by the German mystic Meister Eckhart. She speaks of nakedness and void, of the shedding of the will, of all images and forms in order to attain "pure and naked Nothingness," so that union with God is no longer experienced as the highest stage of beatitude but as a plunge into boundless unknowing, into the "wild desert" of the Divine Essence. To reach the divine summit, nothing must remain to encumber the spirit: "The circle of things must shrink and be annihilated so that the circle of nakedness can grow and extend in order to embrace the All."

Hadewijch's language expresses the superabundance of spiritual experience, reflecting her participation in the trinitarian mysteries. She celebrates the divine names: Presence in the Son, Overflow in the Holy Spirit, Totality in the Father. Union with the three persons of the Holy Trinity in active and contemplative life leads to ultimate Unity, to the repose and silence of the soul in the depths of God. There exists an abyss between this experience of spiritual plenitude and her efforts to say something about it. Words are utterly insufficient here, yet they must be used to communicate something of the "blessedness of being lost in the fruition of Love" to those who are capable of receiving such a message.

The stark love mysticism of Hadewijch provided much inspiration to the fourteenth-

century mystic, Jan van Ruusbroec, who knew her works. Like her, he emphasized the primacy of love, its storms and delights, as well as the idea of “living in the Trinity.” But not all women mystics were revered and accepted; some suffered much opposition and even persecution, such as Marguerite Porete, who fell victim to the Inquisition and died at the stake for her views.

Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)

Few details are known about Marguerite, who does not seem to have been part of a community of Beguines, but lived by herself and wrote down her teachings in an appealing vernacular form, popular. She produced a book that became very taught a mysticism of pure love: God is love and love is God, which the soul, stripped of all else, can reach and be fused with. Her famous text, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, was rediscovered in 1867, although the link with its author was clearly established only as recently as 1946.

Marguerite was courageous, persevering in her teaching, as explained in her book, even when faced with the greatest difficulties and staunchest opposition from the Church authorities. Her work was condemned by the bishop of Cambrai in 1306 and then publicly burned on the square of Valenciennes. Furthermore, its use was prohibited under pain of excommunication. Later, Marguerite was imprisoned in Paris for eighteen months. When she refused to retract her teaching, she was threatened with death, declared a relapsed heretic and on June 1, 1310, she was burned at the stake on the Place de Grève in Paris in the presence of civil and ecclesiastical authorities. A large crowd of people was present too, but they rather took her side when witnessing Marguerite’s attitude toward death.

Although it is not entirely clear which detailed charges were brought against her, it is of considerable significance that the documents of Marguerite’s trial were preserved so that historians can now work on them. It seems that Marguerite was put to death for her views, which “render the soul simple” and make it free through the radical, unconditional love for God. This radical sense of freedom and what has been called a “mysticism of self-abandonment” made her appear a threat to the institutional Church and its authority.

But Marguerite’s death did not put an end to the popularity of the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, which enjoyed a great success in Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially in women’s convents. The Inquisition was unable to suppress the text in spite of continued persecutions. Written in Old French, the book has only recently been recognized as a major spiritual oeuvre of French literature, a work that was able to overcome linguistic barriers more than any other mystical text in the vernacular because it was translated into Old Italian, Middle English and even Latin.

Marguerite’s work is presented in the form of a play with allegorical characters, the chief ones being Soul and Lady Love (who is God himself in his essence). It stresses the “annihilation” of the soul, its nothingness before God. A hundred years after its condemnation, the *Mirror of Simple Souls* found a famous supporter in the person of Marguerite of Navarre, the only sister of Francis I, who was friendly with the nuns at the Madeleine Convent of Orléans, where the original version of the *Mirror*, in Old French, was kept. Later in her life, Marguerite of Navarre mentions the *Mirror* in her own writing as one of the books “which follow unconditionally the intention of the Sacred Bible.” She

says about Marguerite Porete, its author: “Oh, how attentive this woman was to receive that love which burned her own heart and those to which she spoke! Well she knew by her subtle spirit the true friend whom she named Noble.”

Marguerite’s work is not based on visions, like Hildegard’s or Mechtild’s, but it is presented as an inner dialogue of the soul who, after the practice of asceticism and her obedience to the commandments, completely and utterly abandons herself to the will of God and has no more will of her own. Central is the theme of liberation, of abandonment and “annihilation” of the soul, who stands in complete “nakedness” before God. Such “simple, annihilated souls” only “dwell in the will and desire of love,” as the full title of her book proclaims. And God is this love that meets all desires and gives all joys. Abandoning herself, the soul has no more will and desire except that of God. She has lost her individual identity like a river that has emptied itself into the sea.

Marguerite praises those who love without question. Without denying the role of doctrines or the practice of virtues, she preaches the essential freedom of the soul, and it is this freedom that was a real threat to the authority of the learned and the power of established religious institutions. During the Council of Vienne (1311–12) the teachings of her *Mirror*, together with other manifestations of northern mysticism, were condemned, so that eventually the movement of the Beguines declined in the Church. Yet these medieval women mystics broke free from established scholarly and literary conventions in praising the powers of the human heart and celebrating the love of God in the popular tongues of their time. They spoke with great spiritual authority to their contemporaries. Centuries have passed and much has changed since then, but the freshness and lyrical beauty of their works still speaks to us today, as do some of the values they lived and died for.

THE RHINELAND MYSTICS

Among all the medieval mystics, the Rhineland mystics are perhaps the ones best known today. They are widely accessible and cited more frequently than any others. Their message has a directness and freshness of expression that communicates itself across the centuries. Initially one might expect that all mystics from the Rhine region would be counted as Rhineland mystics. This would, for example, include Hildegard of Bingen, whose work we have already met. But the term “Rhineland mystics” is customarily used in a more restricted sense. It refers only to the mystics of the fourteenth century who lived in Germany and the Low Countries. It applies particularly to a group of several men—Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, Johannes Tauler and Jan van Ruusbroec.

The fourteenth century experienced a revival of interest in the apophatic mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite. The influence of his thought can be seen in both the Rhenish and the English mystics, although the former were more speculatively inclined than the latter. The Rhineland mystics combined the traditional Neoplatonic themes of contemplation with a spirit of analysis and reflection learned from the medieval schoolmen. The most daring and original of the Rhenish mystics was Meister Eckhart, whose disciples were Johannes Tauler and Henry Suso. These three Germans all belonged to the Dominican order. Suso is seen as the most intimate and personal mystic;

Tauler was known as an inspiring preacher, whereas the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec was probably the most profound.

These men, deeply involved in the theological debates of their own age, describe the deepest levels of inward experience where God is known in the inner recesses of the human soul, a most intimate presence that is also a transcendence. Their message addresses us so directly because it relates to a search for what is most essential to religion, its deepest, most inward dimension, and it emphasizes a real indwelling of ourselves in God and of God in us.

The mysticism of the Rhineland is known in German as *Wesensmystik*, a mysticism of being or essence, whereas the mysticism of the Beguines is called *Liebesmystik*, or love mysticism. This mysticism of being is concerned with the ultimate ground of all things, with God in Godself, or the Godhead. Central ideas of this Rhenish mysticism are the ground of the soul, the path of self-stripping and the process of detachment, whereby the mystic advances to the knowledge of an imageless and formless God, a *Deus nudus*. Not all these ideas found easy acceptance; some, particularly the teachings of Meister Eckhart, were even condemned as heretical.

Meister Eckhart (1260–1327)

Born of a noble family in Hochheim, in the province of Thuringia in the eastern part of Germany, Eckhart entered the Dominican order at a young age. He began his training in Erfurt, but soon moved on to the more advanced *studium general* in Cologne. This enjoyed a particularly high reputation at that time because of its association with the teaching of Albertus Magnus and Thomas of Aquinas. Eckhart completed his studies in Paris, where he became a “master” (or *Meister*) of theology in 1302, and henceforth he was known as Meister Eckhart.

He soon rose to eminence in the hierarchy of the Dominican order. In 1304 he was made provincial of the Saxon Province of his order, and in 1307 he was entrusted with the reform of its houses in Bohemia. In 1311 he was sent as a teacher to Paris but soon returned to Germany, living first in Strasbourg and later in Cologne, where he became known as a great, popular preacher who enjoyed an immensely high status and reputation during his lifetime.

Strasbourg was then one of the foremost religious centers in Germany, containing a wide spectrum of religious groups, including Beguines and Brethren of the Free Spirit, and Eckhart may well have been influenced by some of their ideas. It was in 1322 or earlier that he was sent to Cologne to take the place of Albertus Magnus at the *studium generale*, where Eckhart could propound his ideas. These were expressed in many works, written in both German and Latin, especially in his *Sermons* and *Treatises*.

Meister Eckhart was highly acclaimed as a teacher and thinker among his contemporaries. His teaching can be summed up as an attempt to express the highest mystical union in terms of a daring metaphysics, deeply rooted in the Augustinian theological tradition. In his mysticism the ground of God and the ground of the soul are the same ground. His strong emphasis on the absorption of the self into God in unitive mystical experience may well have been the source of his difficulties with the Church.

The archbishop of Cologne at that time, a Franciscan, was much opposed to mystical

speculation, which he associated with heretical sects. Given his attitude, it is not surprising that in 1326 he began proceedings against Eckhart, who was tried before the episcopal court. The case dragged on, and Eckhart appealed to the pope, though he acknowledged that many of his teachings had been misunderstood or distorted, but he did not consider himself a heretic. Unfortunately Eckhart died before a final judgment was reached. In March 1329 the pope published a bull condemning twenty-six articles from Eckhart's Latin and two from his German works.

This meant that from now on Meister Eckhart's teachings were met with suspicion, that his works fell into obscurity and many were lost. A modern revival of interest occurred when an Austrian scholar published a selection of Eckhart's German works in 1855. This led to a rediscovery of this great German mystical writer by the Romantic poets. It also produced a great many divergent interpretations, claiming Meister Eckhart as a forerunner of Luther's emphasis on faith or of Hegel's pantheism or of other philosophical views. In recent years, more careful historical scholarship and detailed studies have led to a much better knowledge and revised assessment of his work, so that in 1980 the Dominican order could formally request that all censures on his teachings be lifted.

Deeply steeped in Neoplatonism, Meister Eckhart's teachings are at one level very dualistic whilst ultimately celebrating the highest unity. To find such unity, we must retreat from the world and its images to an inner state of utter denudedness in order to experience the "birth of God in the soul." Eckhart was preoccupied with God as Being. He drew the famous distinction between *God* and the *Godhead*. God is revealed to us as a person, but behind this revelation, this manifestation, there is the unrevealed Godhead, the "ground" of God, undifferentiated and above all distinction, an eternal unity of which nothing can be said, the "Nameless Nothing," the unoriginated purity of Being, the *puritas essendi*, the Eternal Now, which we can only meet in utter stillness and silence and which Eckhart celebrates in soaring thoughts and startling paradoxes. Meister Eckhart's metaphysics of the Godhead is sometimes compared with what Indian Vedanta teaches about *Brahman* without attributes, especially as found in the works of Shankara.

For Meister Eckhart, human union with God is made possible through the divine spark in the soul, the *Seelenfünklein*, both the center and the ground of the soul, partaking of the very nature of God. He speaks of this spark also as "the citadel in the soul" or the "light" of the soul. But in order to be united with God, the soul must be purified by practicing asceticism, detachment, silence and withdrawal, by forgetting ideas and concepts, and by not loving anything that is created. Human perfection consists in becoming "distant from creatures and free from them, to respond in the same way to all things, not to be broken by adversity nor carried away by prosperity, not to rejoice more in one thing than in another, not to be frightened or grieved by one thing more than another."

The soul's union with God is immeasurably deep and is the soul's greatest desire. Through such union the soul becomes through grace what God is like by nature. The soul then knows God as God is in Godself. In one of his sermons Eckhart writes: "The union of God with the soul is so great that it is scarcely to be believed. And God is in himself so far above that no form of knowledge or desire can ever reach him.... Desire is deep, immeasurably so. But nothing that the intellect can grasp and nothing that desire can desire is God. Where understanding and desire end, there is darkness and there God's

radiance begins.”

Eckhart also speaks of *jubilatio*, of the joy of those who know God. His high, abstract system of thought seems to shun practical devotions, yet many eloquent and vivid passages speak about concrete, everyday concerns, instructing his listeners and readers to find the peace of God and be with God always and everywhere. Here is a passage from Meister Eckhart’s *Talks of Instruction*:

Whoever has God truly as a companion, is with him in all places, both on the street and among people, as well as in church or in the desert or in a monastic cell.... Why is this so? It is so because such a person possesses God alone, keeping their gaze fixed upon God, and thus all things become God for him or her. Such people bear God in all their deeds and in all the places they go, and it is God alone who is the author of all their deeds.... If we keep our eyes fixed on God alone, then truly he must work in us, and nothing, neither the crowd nor any place, can hinder him in this. And so nothing will be able to hinder us, if we desire and seek God alone, and take pleasure in nothing else.

Henry Suso (1295–1366)

Another Dominican mystic of this period is the Blessed Henry Suso, or Heinrich Seuse, to give him his original German name. The son of a noble Swabian family, he was born near Lake Constance, on the border between Switzerland and Germany. His father was very worldly, his mother deeply devout. As he tells us in his own *Life*, written in later years, one of his earliest memorable experiences occurred on the death of his mother when he was still young. She appeared in a vision and told him to love God, then kissed and blessed him, and disappeared. Suso’s sense of loneliness and abandonment, his excessive asceticism in later life, harshly maltreating his body in imitation of Christ’s suffering, and his expressions of tender love addressed to God may all have been linked to “starved human affections seeking an outlet,” as Evelyn Underhill has suggested.

Suso entered the Dominican order at the age of thirteen, but found monastic life rather difficult until he experienced a conversion and spiritual awakening. He subsequently studied under Eckhart in Cologne and became a devoted follower and great admirer of his beloved teacher. By 1326 Suso was back in Constance, where he wrote his famous *Büchlein der Wahrheit*, or *Little Book of Truth*, which is full of mystical reflection. Originally written to combat the Brethren of the Free Spirit, who consisted of various mystical sects professing to be independent from ecclesiastical authority and thus deemed to be heretical, this book of practical meditations became one of the classics of German mysticism.

Constructed in the form of dialogues between the Disciple and Truth, it explores a wide range of mystical topics. For example, the Disciple asks the Lord, “what is true self-abandonment?” Truth then expounds the “five kinds of self” found in every person and the nature of complete abandonment into God:

The first “self” he has in common with a stone, and that is existence. The second he has in common with a plant, and that is growth. The third, with the

animals, and that is feeling. The fourth, with all men, is that he has a human nature like they. The fifth, which belongs to him individually, is his personality, both according to the essential and to the accidental. Now what is it that leads a man astray and robs him of his salvation? Only his last "self" by means of which a man turns away from God and towards himself.... He thoughtlessly makes himself a "self" of his own. That is to say, he blindly appropriates to himself what is God's, makes this his goal, and eventually falls into sin.

A truly "self-abandoned man," by contrast, enters the joy of his Lord and becomes inebriated with the immeasurable abundance of the Divine:

He is quite dead to himself, is entirely lost in God, has passed into him, and has become one spirit with him in all respects, like a little drop of water which is poured into a large portion of wine. Just as this is lost to itself, and draws to itself and into itself the taste and color of the wine, so it likewise happens to those who are in the complete possession of blessedness. All human desires fall away from them in an inexpressible manner, they melt away into themselves, and sink completely into the will of God.

Human beings, thus self-abandoned and exalted to the extent that they are united with God, become one with him:

They are deprived of their own being and are transformed into another form, into another glory, and into another force.

Now what else is this other strange form but the divine nature and the divine essence into which they flow and which flows into them, in order to be one with it?

What else is this glory than to be transfigured and glorified in the light of being, to which man has no access?

What else is this other power than that the divine strength and power are given to man through this personality and this union, to do and to leave undone all that belongs to his salvation?

Suso experienced intense mystical states and visions that made him see ultimate reality as eternal, uncreated truth in which all things have their source and being. He goes even beyond Eckhart in his understanding of divine and human oneness—a state in which "something and nothing are the same."

The *Little Book of Truth* finishes with a hundred brief meditations on Christ's passion, for it is Christ's humanity that is the way to know God. Suso's book was widely read in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and included Thomas à Kempis among its admirers. During 1334 Suso himself made a Latin adaptation of this work, but he also produced several other writings, especially the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*. It consists of dialogues between the Servant and Eternal Wisdom, or the Servant and the Virgin Mary. It speaks of God's attraction of the elect, even though they may not know it. It teaches that to know God one must know and love him in his suffering humanity and die in this life by dying to self.

Suso preached widely in the Upper Rhineland and Switzerland, enjoying great popularity wherever he went. Yet his defense of Eckhart brought some rebuke from his order and led to his being deprived of his teaching position. He was greatly valued as a spiritual director in many women's convents, especially those of the Dominican order. The savage asceticism and austerities that he practiced over many years are vividly described in his *Life*, where he speaks of himself in the third person:

In winter he suffered very much from the frost.... His feet were full of sores, his legs dropsical, his knees bloody and seared, his loins covered with scars from the horsehair, his body wasted, his mouth parched with intense thirst, his hands tremulous from weakness. Amid these torments he spent his nights and days; and he endured them all out of the greatness of the love which he bore in his heart to the Divine and Eternal Wisdom, our Lord Jesus Christ, whose agonizing sufferings he ought to imitate.

But after some twenty years of severe ascetic practices he abandoned them as nothing more than a beginning on the way to the highest knowledge of God, whose overwhelming beauty he praised with great tenderness: "Ah, gentle God, if Thou art so lovely in Thy creatures, how exceedingly beautiful and ravishing Thou must be in Thyself!... Praise and honor be to the unfathomable immensity that is in Thee!"

Suso must have left a deep impression on his contemporaries, for the veneration of the "Blessed Henry Suso" began soon after his death, although officially the Church did not beatify him until 1831.

Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361)

If Meister Eckhart's teachings are highly abstract, intellectual and speculative, Tauler's are much closer to ordinary Christian life and its devotions are easier to absorb and follow, although he retains much of Eckhart's thought and terminology and shows a genuine understanding of his master's message.

We have few details of Tauler's life except that, like Eckhart, he entered the Dominican order at a young age in Strasbourg, where he probably came under Eckhart's influence and also that of Henry Suso. He would have received a basic education in the arts and in theology, but he was not singled out for advanced studies. Thus he was not sent to the *studium generale*, as Eckhart had been, and received much less formal training. Tauler never wrote in Latin, the universal language of medieval scholars. While he possessed a healthy suspicion of mere book learning, he nevertheless had a deep grasp of theological truths and, in about 1325, was ordained a Dominican priest.

He soon became famous as a spiritual director, especially of nuns, and acquired a tremendous reputation as a popular preacher. His popularity probably also had much to do with his many travels. He even visited Groenendaal, outside Brussels, to meet Jan van Ruusbroec. During the Black Death of 1348 he devoted himself to the care of the sick, which further increased his popularity and reputation.

The years 1338 through 1343 were spent in the city of Basle, where he had close contact with a group of *Gottesfreunde* or Friends of God, a widespread, loosely grouped movement that emphasized mystical, visionary and prophetic experience over mere head

and book knowledge. Devoted to ascetic practices and renunciation, these small groups of Friends, guided by a leader, denounced the abuses of the Church and considered themselves as an inner Church directed by the Holy Spirit. They based their teaching on Eckhart's notion of the divine spark and had a considerable following without being against the Church as such.

Tauler is so closely associated with Strasbourg, where he died and is buried, that he is sometimes called "Johannes Tauler of Strasbourg." His popularity meant that numerous works were later attributed to him, but few are genuine. He left eighty-four sermons in German, recorded by his listeners, most likely written down by nuns. But the clarity and form of these texts makes one think that he revised or at least approved their final version. These *Sermons* were first printed in 1498 and then translated into Latin in 1548. They found their widest diffusion in this Latin form and became known as far as Spain. Luther read Tauler's German Sermons and greatly admired "such sterling theology, equal to that of the ancients." But this referred mainly to Tauler's spiritual advice on practical matters, whereas Luther mistrusted his essentially mystical teaching.

Like Eckhart, Tauler emphasized the indwelling of God in the human soul without stressing the identity of creature and creator to the same degree. Tauler has more room for the role of grace and for the place of the Holy Spirit in mystical union. Yet his deeply mystical theology is, like Eckhart's, based on "the uncreated ground of the soul" present in all human beings, the soul's insatiable hunger for God, and the need for passivity so that God can work in the soul. This work can be a form of suffering, however, a teaching whereby he already anticipates the later "dark night of the soul" in St John of the Cross.

Tauler also stresses the immense spiritual value of our everyday tribulations. He describes the mystic way as consisting in the practice of virtues, especially that of humility and abandonment to the will of God. The desired union with God produces in the soul greater love and charity as well as strength to lead a life of suffering and self-sacrifice. The difference between Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler was later summarized by contrasting Eckhart as a *Lehrmeister*, a "master of thinking," with Tauler as a *Lebemeister*, or a "master of living."

Yet Tauler follows Eckhart in describing God in negative terms when he writes:

God is pure Being, a waste of calm seclusion...much nearer than anything is to itself in the depth of the heart, but He is hidden from all our senses. He is far above every outward thing and every thought, and is found only where thou hidest thyself in the secret place of thy heart, in the quiet solitude where no word is spoken, where is neither creature nor image nor fancy. This is the quiet Desert of the Godhead, the Divine Darkness—dark from His own surpassing brightness, as the shining of the sun is darkness to weak eyes, for in the presence of its brightness our eyes are like the eyes of the swallow in the bright sunlight.

The way to God is for Tauler the *via negativa* of the desert fathers and of Dionysius, finding God in withdrawal and the wilderness. At the same time he also possesses a strongly affirmative spirituality, as when he says that works of love are more acceptable to God than even contemplation, that spiritual enjoyment is food for the soul, which

should be taken only to support us in our active work. Thus his mystical teaching is eminently practical, translating experience into action. The down-to-earth, commonsense humility of this Dominican mystic is well expressed in the often quoted words: "One man can spin, another can make shoes, and all these are gifts of the Holy Spirit I tell you, if I were not a priest, I should esteem it a great gift that I was able to make shoes, and I would try to make them so well as to be a pattern to all."

Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381)

Another celebrated Rhenish mystic, the Flemish priest Jan van Ruusbroec, was a friend of both Tauler and Suso, and much inspired by the Beguine Hadewijch and the Cistercian nun Beatrijs of Nazareth. He shares with these women the mystical themes of the primacy of love and the idea of "living in the Trinity." This trinitarian love mysticism, actualized in the world through grace, has distant origins in St. Augustine and shows the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux and other medieval writers. Ruusbroec was a figure of luminous sanctity, but also gifted with great literary expression. This is evident from his great works *The Sparkling Stone* and *The Spiritual Espousals*, sometimes called *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*.

Born in 1293 in Ruusbroec, near Brussels, he came from a simple village background. He moved to Brussels at the age of nine to live in the house of his uncle, a canon at the collegial church of St. Gudule, now the cathedral of Brussels. He undertook his studies at the chapter school of St. Gudule and became a priest in 1317, serving on the church staff for many years. But dissatisfied with the low spiritual standards in the city, he withdrew in 1343 with his uncle and some other priests to a hermitage in Groenendael ("Green Dale") in the forest of Soignes, southeast of Brussels, where the men could live a more secluded, contemplative life. It is here that Ruusbroec wrote many of his works.

This group of men was soon joined by others. In 1349 they adopted the rules of Augustinian canons, and Ruusbroec became their prior, an office he held until his death. It was not long before Groenendael became a celebrated center of pilgrimage visited by Johannes Tauler and Geert de Groote, Ruusbroec's most famous disciple. Groenendael exercised a lasting influence through the popular movement of spiritual reform founded by de Groote and known as Brethren of the Common Life, or New Devotion (*devotio moderna*). This movement affected both Erasmus and Luther, and produced its most celebrated adherent in Thomas à Kempis and his widely read *Imitation of Christ*.

Although without a university education, Ruusbroec's lack of formal training has sometimes been unnecessarily exaggerated. He was no illiterate rural mystic, although he always maintained that his writing was directly impelled by the Holy Spirit. But as a priest he would have known Latin, and he read the works of other mystics. He was also deeply steeped in vernacular mystical literature, for example, the writings of Hadewijch.

Ruusbroec left eleven spiritual treatises. Though based on scriptural exegesis, they are all concerned with the soul's absorption into the inner life of the Trinity through love. During his own time his writings exercised much less influence on his contemporaries than his saintly life, although some of his ideas already circulated in England during the fourteenth century, chiefly among Carthusians. But it was, above all, the sixteenth-century Latin translation of Ruusbroec's works by a Carthusian monk from Cologne that

made the Flemish mystic known all over Europe.

Ruusbroec's most famous and most systematic work is *The Spiritual Espousals*, probably written about 1346, although some of his shorter works such as *The Book of Supreme Truth* or *The Sparkling Stone* are perhaps more accessible. According to Evelyn Underhill, the latter in particular reaches "the high water mark of mystical literature." The book takes its title from Revelation 2:17: "To him who is victorious I will give a sparkling stone, and on the stone will be written a new name, known to none but him that receives it" For Ruusbroec the sparkling stone is a symbol of mystical union and also of Christ's humanity. The stone is white and shining, radiating the glory of God, a flawless mirror in which all things are alive. Its roundness signifies that truth has no beginning or end; its smoothness means that truth is equitable; its slightness shows that although truth is immaterial, it bears upon heaven and earth by its strength.

The Sparkling Stone says less about the stone itself than what a human being must do to be worthy of receiving it. For this reason the book also bears a second title, *The Treatise of Perfection of the Sons of God*. The three stages to perfection are traditionally called those of the beginner, the proficient and the perfect. In *The Sparkling Stone* Ruusbroec describes them as those of the faithful servant, the secret friend, and the hidden son or "God-seeing man." From the outward, active life marked by virtue and good works the seeker progresses to the inner life concerned with inward devotions, the life of grace and movements of love toward God. At the highest, contemplative stage a "God-seeing life" is reached where the human being is drawn up through love into the inner flux and rhythms of the Trinity and loses itself in the abyss of God's love: "There we shall flow forth and flow out of ourselves into the uncomprehended abundance of God's riches and goodness. There we will melt and be dissolved, eternally taken up in the maelstrom of God's glory."

Ruusbroec's mystical doctrine has its source in the teaching that human beings are made in the image of God and thus possess the potential for deification. His entire thought is permeated by the image of the Trinity. There is first of all a simple Trinity in God, consisting of God's essence or Godhead, the divine nature, and the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Within the human being, created in this image, there exists a threefold "created trinity," consisting of spirit, reason and the essential nature of the soul. Then there are the three stages of the spiritual ladder—the active, interior and contemplative life—by which the created spirit can ascend to the uncreated God.

Through turning inward, the heart must be freed of all images. Sinking into an "imageless nudity," inward freedom is achieved through which union with God can be found, a life of secret or inward friendship wherein the "true sons and daughters of God" are rapt out of themselves and "burned up in the flame of love." This highest union is attained only by a few and remains momentary in the present life. After losing or finding oneself in an immeasurable abyss above reason, melted into union, light and truth, the vision ends and the human being "falls back into reason" and the ordinarieness of daily life. In seeing God, the soul becomes God without ever losing its own identity.

It is an active, affirmative vision of love, for the power of this seeing and knowing of God must empower those "who live in the spirit" to share the blessings they have received and to spend themselves on those who are in need. Reaching the transcendent God is thus not a passing from one life to another, but a perpetual deepening, heightening

and enriching of human existence and common life.

Ruusbroec speaks of the union with God in passionate terms. Learning of God's love, the soul experiences a "gaping and inner craving," a stir and storm of fury with a heat so great that love flashes between the soul and God like lightning in the sky. This fury of love cannot be appeased, but "from each mutual renewing touch come yet more storms of love." The soul thirsts and hungers for God,

...for ever striving for what it lacks, ever swimming against the stream. One cannot leave it, one cannot have it: one cannot lack it, one cannot gain it: one cannot tell it, one cannot conceal it, for it is above reason and understanding.... But if we look deep within ourselves, there we shall feel God's Spirit driving and urging us on in the impatience of love; and if we look high above ourselves, there we shall feel God's Spirit drawing us out of ourselves and bringing us to nothing in the essence of God, that is, in the essential love in which we are one with Him, the love which we possess deeper and wider than every other thing.

Ruusbroec's description of mystical union have been greatly admired and attracted many to study his works. The symbolist poet Maurice Maeterlinck translated *The Spiritual Espousals*; the philosopher Walter Stace edited some of Ruusbroec's works, comparing his thoughts with those of the Indian Upanishads; Evelyn Underhill edited and extensively commented on his work in a book wholly devoted to Ruusbroec, whom she declared her favorite of all mystics.

The ideas of the fourteenth-century Rhineland mystics were made widely known during the fifteenth century through two popular works whose authors are unknown to us. The first, *German Theology*, or *Theologia Germanica*, one of the classic books of Western mystical literature, may be the work of a knight of the Teutonic Order, simply referred to as "the man from Frankfurt" Here we find a selective treatment of the great themes of Eckhart and Tauler but with a special emphasis on the submission of the human will to the divine will, and a stress on a deeply felt inward religion and a certain resistance to the authority of the Church. The work sums up the spiritual teaching of the Friends of God movement and became immensely popular, influencing the first generation of Protestant reformers. Its message appealed greatly to the young Luther, who later said that with the exception of the Bible and Augustine's works, he had learned more from this book than any other.

A simple, undogmatic faith, with a passive acceptance of suffering and a special devotion to the passion of Christ, is also the mark of the *Book of Spiritual Poverty*, the second anonymous, widely read text, which emphasizes the need of combining external, freely chosen poverty with the internal poverty of detachment.

During the next few centuries, the powerful insights and daring speculations of the Rhineland mystics were shaped into the pattern of a tradition that lived on almost more through these two devotional works than through the original writings of the mystics themselves. The two books shaped much of Christian piety and devotion, but in a less dynamic and original way than what had been expressed in the keen, soaring thought, the passionate feelings and joyful celebrations of divine glory and splendor of the great

theologian-mystics of the Rhineland who preceded them.

ENGLISH MYSTICS

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the English Church experienced the rise of several outstanding mystics whose works possess an intimate, even homely flavor in their descriptions of the mystical life. In speaking about contemplation and union with God they use a language—mostly their native English tongue—marked by both affirmation and negation when describing the depth of divine life and unitive mystical experience. A considerable number of English medieval mystics have been rediscovered, and the manuscripts of yet more mystical authors may still be found in ancient libraries not ravaged by the Reformation. But the most outstanding, best-known figures are four mystics, sometimes grouped together as “Middle English” mystics because of the language in which they wrote. These four are the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and Mother Julian.

There has been much debate about the influence of Continental mysticism on the English mystics. How far, for example, did the greatest German mystic, Meister Eckhart, influence English mysticism? Does *The Cloud of Unknowing* perhaps reflect some of the characteristic traits of the Dominican mystics of the Rhineland discussed earlier? It is difficult to give a definite answer to these questions. But it is probably much more likely that the Rhenish and English mystics share certain features because they were both influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius.

All four mystics belong to the fourteenth century. But the English mystics do not form a distinct school in the way that the Rhenish or later Spanish mystics do. They are too individual for that. They all wrote independently from one another, each with a distinct style, although they knew something of one another’s work.

They wrote at a restless time full of conflict, when England was experiencing the debilitating repercussions of the Hundred Years’ War. Also, during the middle of the century (in 1348–49) and again in 1361, England was ravaged by the plague, which reduced the population by a third or even by as much as half. It was a time of major social change and also of lawlessness. In 1381, the threatening Peasants’ Revolt was put down, but none of this turmoil is reflected in the works of these four mystical writers. Yet it is perhaps not surprising that they wrote as solitaries, turning away from the chaos of their time to contemplate the unchanging holiness, great beauty and all-consuming love of God.

The author of the *Cloud* wrote for another hermit; Rolle was himself a hermit; Hilton wrote for an anchoress; and Julian lived as an anchoress, enclosed in her cell at Norwich. Other characteristics common to them are their writing in English—although Rolle and Hilton also wrote certain of their works in Latin—a strong personal testimony about their own religious experiences, and the accessibility of their writings, which share a directness and purpose based on common sense rather than artful rhetoric. Furthermore, they have in common the fundamentally affective nature of their mysticism and a shared distaste for theological learning. This affectivity is so strong, especially in Rolle, that the experience of God is described in terms of a spiritual sense of perception when he writes of eating

and tasting God, feeling and touching, hearing and speaking, seeing and having God. Even Hilton, who is regarded as the theologian among the four, writes with great warmth and out of a personal rather than an abstract theological perspective.

Strongest in the Dionysian tradition of apophatic mysticism is the anonymous work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose author, it has been suggested, could easily have been a woman but was more probably a priest, perhaps even a monk or hermit. His work is addressed to those following a life of solitude and contemplative prayer, concentrated on God alone and linked to a “mysticism of darkness,” for ultimately God is beyond all description. If the mystic wishes to reach him, he must pass through the *cloud of forgetting* and pierce the *cloud of unknowing* that exists between himself and God.

The Cloud has a profound sense of the greatness of God, as is beautifully expressed in the following passage:

For silence is not God, nor speaking; fasting is not God, nor eating; solitude is not God, nor company; nor any other pair of opposites. He is hidden between them, and cannot be found by anything your soul does, but only by the love of your heart. He cannot be known by reason, he cannot be thought, caught, or sought by understanding. But he can be loved and chosen by the true, loving will of your heart.

The Cloud of Unknowing is a practical, unemotional book of instruction to the contemplative life, the first so written in the vernacular. It is stark in its radical insistence on stripping away all earthly ways of knowing. Other contemplatives of the time—Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich—used more affirmative images, closer to ordinary daily experience, in expressing their understanding of contemplation which, in its fullest sense, meant the highest union with God. Such contemplation far transcended ordinary prayer and culminated in the direct, mystical knowledge of God. Such union, however, cannot be found by the soul alone—it is ultimately the gift of God’s grace poured out on human beings in quest of the Divine.

Drawing on biblical stories, the mystical writers contrasted contemplation and action by comparing them to the parable of Martha and Mary in the New Testament. Martha, the woman busy around the house, symbolizes active involvement in the world whereas Mary, sitting quietly at Jesus’ feet and listening to his words, exemplifies detachment and the quest for the contemplative life.

The mystical themes of contemplation and action, of divine knowledge and ultimate union with God, unfold in the lives of the fourteenth-century English mystics whose motive for writing was the attainment of contemplation, understood in the sense of the highest union with God, as it had been since the early Christian centuries.

Richard Rolle (c. 1300–1341)

The earliest of the fourteenth-century English mystics, Richard Rolle, was born in Thornton-le-Dale in Yorkshire. Judging by the number of manuscripts we still possess of his writings, he was probably the most prolific and popular of the English mystics. But while his works are well known, the facts of his life are less certain. He seems to have studied in Oxford, but broke off his studies at the age of nineteen, taking on a hermit’s

dress and way of life. He first lived on a friend's estate and later at various other places where he prayed, wrote and gave guidance to others. His last years were spent attached to a Cistercian community at Hampole, near Doncaster. According to tradition, he probably died through helping others during the plague.

Rolle is sometimes called "the father of English mysticism." Best known among his numerous writings in English and Latin are his lyric poems, his commentary on the Psalms, his letters, the Latin treatise *Incendium Amori*, later translated into English as *The Fire of Love*, and *Ego Dormio*, or *I Sleep and My Heart Wakes*, based on a quotation from the biblical Song of Songs.

His great theme is the loving contemplation of God, linked to a passionate devotion to Christ and the holy name of Jesus, on which one should ponder day and night. This is not unlike the Eastern Orthodox practice of the "Jesus prayer," with its continued repetition of the biblical sentence "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." Far removed from the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition and Eckhart, Rolle's mysticism is firmly rooted in the humanity of Christ. His writings contain a clear testimony to the power of his own mystical experience, and he also emphasizes the physical concomitants of this experience. His most distinctive terms for these are heat or fire, song and sweetness.

Richard describes in *The Fire of Love* how, when sitting quietly meditating in the chapel, he suddenly had an intensive experience of heat and burning that was so real "as if it were being done by physical fire," just as "when a finger is placed in the fire." The ardor of this fire was as if an elemental fire burned in the soul and set it aflame with a burning desire for the love of Christ, for God the beloved. The highest rapture into God is described using an imagery that is pervasively sexual, substantiated by biblical quotations and allusions. Such love scorns all pleasures of the flesh, all worldly concerns, all earthly rank, all "ostentation of glory and learning," but lives in strict poverty "in the love of God" by praying and meditating.

He praises the love of God to the exclusion of all else, he urges it even to the point of nagging and irritation. Theological knowledge is chastised and scorned, for God cannot be studied; God's vastness, mystery and ineffability must be experienced. Vainglory, pride of self and confusion are human presumptions that cannot reach God, nor is the human mind an adequate instrument for the discovery of the infinite spirit, and theology is certainly not the path by which to discover the love of God.

His criticisms are not only directed against theologians "ensnared in infinite questionings" and the worldly wise, but even more strongly against women. Misogyny is found throughout his work. Rolle considers the love of women here on earth as the chief rival to the love of God. While he admits that friendship with women is possible, he considers it hazardous and best to be avoided, for there is no sin more damnable than lust and no creature more dangerous to spiritual attainment than woman. This strongly antifeminist streak rather mars Rolle's work for contemporary women. His approach to spirituality can also appear rather negative and dualistic to us today, as when he writes: "It is a perfect spiritual life to despise the world and to desire the joy of heaven; to destroy through the grace of God all the wicked desires of the flesh; to forget the solace and the love of your family, and only to love God." However exalted this love of God may be in Rolle, it seems to demand a high price, and one that sounds rather inhuman.

To follow his description of the stages of love and union, after the first stage of heat and burning, the stage of fire, there is the second stage of great joy in spirit brought about by heavenly song and intoxication, followed by a third stage of great sweetness, which he compares to divine drunkenness. Thus he describes three stages of spiritual intensification, of rapture and ecstasy. In rapture there is not only the “rapture out of the senses,” but also the rapture of the mind into God, when the human spirit is lifted up to God in contemplation. The human being then sees “the door of heaven swing back to reveal the face of the Beloved,” and his inner eye can “contemplate the things that are above.”

Walter Hilton (1340–1396)

What little we know about Hilton is derived from occasional manuscript references. From these it can be deduced that he studied at Cambridge, possibly canon law, and may have taken a degree. References to Hilton as “Magister” may even indicate that he was a doctor of theology. He certainly is the most theological writer of the English mystics, but he first lived as a hermit until, some time after 1375, he became an Augustinian canon at Thurgarton Priory, in Nottinghamshire, where he died in 1396.

He wrote profusely in English and Latin but his fame rests almost entirely on his work *The Ladder (or Scale) of Perfection*, a masterpiece of spiritual writing that influenced numerous spiritual writers after Hilton. Written in English, it was first published in 1494 but is also known under its Latin title, *Scala Perfectionis*.

The *Ladder* falls into two parts. It is written for the spiritual guidance of one person, an unnamed anchoress, to whom Book I is addressed. Book II does not seem to address anyone in particular, and its more advanced teaching indicates perhaps that it was written several years after Book I. Hilton describes with authority and insight the spiritual development of the soul in very practical terms. Unusual for his time, the active and contemplative life are related so that the higher stages of prayer are not reserved for the enclosed but are available to anyone willing to make the necessary effort. Thus the contemplative life is seen as a continuation and further development of the normal life of grace in the soul.

The foundation of the spiritual life is the reestablishment, or what Hilton calls the reforming, of the defaced image of God in the soul. This reform takes place in two stages. The first is a restoration “in faith,” and the second is a reforming of “faith *and* feeling.” These two stages are separated by the mystical “dark night” in which the soul becomes gradually detached from earthly things, and its eyes are opened and directed to things of the spirit:

The opening of the spiritual eyes is a glowing darkness and rich nothingness.... It may be called: Purity of soul and spiritual rest, inward stillness and peace of conscience, refinement of thought and integrity of soul, a lively consciousness of grace and solitude of heart, the wakeful sleep of the spouse and the tasting of heavenly joys, the ardor of love and brightness of light, the entry into contemplation and reformation of feeling....

Here the importance of affection is stressed, but feeling does not simply refer to an

emotional state; it describes the awareness of the soul of the working of God's grace within it. Unlike Richard Rolle, Hilton warns against sensible, physical phenomena accompanying the spiritual life. The soul must recollect itself inwardly and remember its three original powers of memory, understanding and will—a created trinity that is made perfect in its mind, vision and love by the uncreated Trinity.

Hilton speaks of three degrees of contemplation. The first consists of the knowledge of God and such spiritual matters that can be attained by reason, reading and studying Christian teachings and scriptures. The second degree consists in affection and feeling, a love of God and great devotion. It is subdivided into two further stages where the lower may be reached by those leading an active life, whereas the higher stage is only achieved by those wholly devoted to the contemplative life who, after much physical and spiritual effort, can progress to the third and highest stage, characterized by “cognition and affection,” the perfect knowledge and love of God linked to mystical union, as far as this is possible in the present life. The ultimate stage of perfection can only be reached in heaven.

Those who aim for a reform of both faith and feeling are like pilgrims on their way to the city of Jerusalem, the city of peace, which stands for the ultimate stage of contemplation. Like all pilgrims, they must leave unnecessary things behind and overcome all kinds of obstacles:

A real pilgrim going to Jerusalem leaves his house and land, wife and children; he divests himself of all that he possesses in order to travel light and without encumbrances. Similarly, if you wish to be a spiritual pilgrim, you must divest yourself of all that you possess; that is, both of good deeds and bad, and leave them all behind you. Recognize your own poverty, so that you will not place any confidence in your own work; instead, always be desiring the grace of deeper love, and seeking the spiritual presence of Jesus. If you do this, you will be setting your heart wholly on reaching Jerusalem, and on nothing else.

Jesus is seen as the guide on this pilgrimage. The desire for a reform of feeling comes from him. Loving Jesus and desiring oneness with him, the soul will enter the luminous darkness that forces out false love of the world. Knowledge of Jesus' humanity through the imagination can bring the soul to the light of Christ and create the deepest feeling, the most fervent love for God, who is uncreated Love. In a chapter entitled “How Jesus must be sought, desired and found,” Hilton writes:

...because the eyes of your spirit are not yet opened, I shall give you one word to express everything which you must seek and desire and find...and this word is “Jesus.” I do not mean the letters “IHS” painted on a wall or written in a book, I do not mean the sounds of the word which you form with your tongue, I do not mean the name as it can be fixed in the heart...: through such exercises man in love may find Him, but here by “Jesus” I mean all goodness, everlasting wisdom, love and sweetness, your joy, your dignity and your eternal happiness, your God, your Lord and your salvation....

...However much you know or feel of Him here in this life, He is still far above it; and therefore if you want to find the whole of Him as He is in the bliss

of love, never cease whilst you live to long spiritually for Him.

Through grace, the soul can rise in contemplation to God, withdraw into a secret chamber where it can see God, hear God's counsels and be wonderfully consoled. It is here that the soul, freed from worldly concerns, hears with spiritual joy the whisper of God. But once this grace is withdrawn, the soul sinks back into its state of natural weakness and ordinary dullness, only to wait for the grace of God's sweetness to return.

Julian of Norwich (1342–c. 1423)

Until the mid-seventeenth century, Hilton, Rolle and *The Cloud of Unknowing* were much better known than Julian of Norwich, whose work enjoyed none of their popularity. But today Julian is probably the best known of all the medieval English mystics. Her thought, though complex and profound, is expressed in a homely style, and her work is now one of the most accessible. Interest in Julian has experienced a great revival in recent years, not least through the contemporary "Julian Meetings" dedicated to retreats and contemplation. But who was this famous medieval English woman mystic?

We know little about her personal life, except what she tells us in her writing, supplemented by some information in wills found in the city archives of Norwich. Born in 1342, she may first have joined a Benedictine community but later lived alone as an anchoress in a cell or a little houselike structure attached to a church. Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries ninety-two such anchoresses are known to have lived in England, compared to only twenty anchorites. The name *anchoress* does not mean that these women were "anchored" to a church, as the medievals supposed, but it comes from the Greek word *anachorein*, meaning "to go apart." To live as an anchoress was the commitment to a life of contemplation and prayer, to stay in one place until one's death, to follow certain rules and to live under the protection of the bishop. It was not meant to be a hard ascetic life, but one without luxury and disturbance, dedicated to a deeply spiritual orientation. The anchoress was not without contact with the outside world, for visitors could come to seek counsel, and a maid brought food and water and attended to the fire.

The anchoress of Norwich was probably given the name Julian because her cell was attached to the parish church of St. Julian at Conisford in Norwich. Before she became an anchoress, in May 1373, at the age of thirty and a half, Julian fell ill to the point of death, so that she was given the last rites. But she then received a series of sixteen visions and recovered from her illness. Shortly afterward she wrote down her visions, and the resulting work is entitled *Showings, or Revelations of Divine Love*, the first book known to be written by a woman in English. It exists in two versions, a short text of twenty-five chapters and a much longer text of eighty-six chapters. The first is thought to have been written immediately after the visions were received, whereas the second is the fruit of twenty years' meditation on the meaning of these visions and includes much editorial reworking.

Julian claims to write as a "simple unlettered creature," but this is merely a rhetorical device. Her work proves that, far from illiterate, she was a person of great literary skill and profound learning, with a good knowledge of the Latin Bible and the great mystical

writers of the Western spiritual tradition. It is uncertain where she received her education, but as a young girl she may have been educated by the Benedictine nuns at the nearby priory at Carrow.

Julian's *Revelations* are a classic of mystical theology, containing one of the clearest yet most complex records of the life of a mystical soul. Julian desired three graces from God: to have a recollection of Christ's passion and see his sufferings on the cross, as had Mary his mother and "others who were Christ's lovers"; to have a bodily sickness when she was thirty; and to be given three wounds as God's gift—contrition, compassion and longing with all her will for God.

She vividly describes her illness—how she was so sick that her mother stood by her bed and a priest placed a crucifix before her eyes. She felt that the lower half of her body was already dead and the upper part was beginning to die when suddenly all the pain left and her visions began. These visions were very physical and bodily, and this is especially evident when she describes Christ's suffering. Yet at the same time they were also very spiritual, and their powerful, inspiring theme is the greatness of God's love for us, enfolding us like "our clothing." God embraces, guides and surrounds us with a love "so tender that he may never desert us."

Julian's visions are concerned with God, Christ and the Trinity, but also with Mary, with Christ's death and ours, with prayer, with the spiritual understanding of sin and Christ's victory over the devil. For her the soul is at home in God: "Greatly should we rejoice that God dwells in our soul—and rejoice yet more because our soul dwells in God. Our soul is created to be God's home, and the soul is at home in the uncreated God."

Julian also saw something small, "no bigger than a hazelnut," lying in her hand and understood this as everything that is made by God. She marveled at it because it seemed so little that it could "suddenly fall into nothing." Yet she was assured that it lasts, and always will, because God loves it so much. Profoundly aware of God's love, Julian also knew of the existence of evil and sin, which she described as "the greatest pain that the soul can have." She tried to combine her deep experience of God's constant, steadfast love with the Church's teaching on sin, but said of God, "I saw him assign to us no kind of blame." God wishes to cure us of two kinds of sickness: impatience and despair. He is all wisdom and can do everything, he is all love and wishes to do everything. Julian's great experience of God who is all love finds expression in her profound trust that "All is well, and every kind of thing will be well."

Perhaps she had a deep love of her own mother that influenced her teaching about the motherhood of God—a theme already found in St. Anselm but much further developed by Julian, who speaks of God as our Mother as well as our Father: "God rejoices that he is our Father, and God rejoices that he is our Mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and that our soul is his beloved wife." It is particularly Christ who is "our Mother, brother and savior," "our kind Mother, our gracious Mother." Reflecting on this image she writes:

The Mother's service is nearest, readiest and surest.... We wit that all our mother's bearing is the bearing of us to pain and dying: and what is this but that our Very Mother, Jesus, he—All-Love—beareth us to joy and endless

living.... This fair lovely word Mother, it is so sweet and kind itself that it may not verily be said of none but him; and to her that is very Mother of him and of all.

It is known that about 1410, Julian received a visit from *Margery Kempe* (c. 1373–1440) in her cell at Norwich. Margery was another woman whose life was taken up by visions and revelations, with a deep devotion to the love of God, to Christ and the Virgin. She came to seek Julian's counsel, for the reputation of the anchoress was such that her contemporaries sought her expert advice in spiritual matters. Margery's life and mystical experiences are in great contrast to Julian's. She traveled extensively and made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, Germany and Spain. Her eventful life is reflected in a colorful account that she as an illiterate woman dictated to two clerks. Now known as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, this is the first spiritual autobiography in English, whose full text was only rediscovered in 1934. Opinions as to how far this relates genuinely mystical experiences vary greatly. David Knowles has described Margery as "filling every role from that of a saintly mystic to that of hysterical exhibitionist"

Margery's book is as emotional as it is vivid. Its stark descriptions give us an insight into the religious life of an ordinary fourteenth-century Christian, revealing a remarkable portrait of a strong-willed and forthright woman. While the book is not a treatise on contemplation, as are the works of Rolle, Hilton or Julian, it makes its own contribution to the rich legacy of medieval mystics and includes as one of its major themes that God loves, is revealed to, and uses quite ordinary people in his many extraordinary ways of dealing with the world.

The great tradition of medieval mystics came to an end with the Reformation. After this long drawn-out process of reform and renewal had created a new world and shaped new sensibilities, new mystical trends began to emerge again in different countries of Europe. Among Catholics, some of the old traditions prevailed, but these were now adapted to the context of a different age that made new demands on Christian life. Among Protestants the structures of medieval monasticism were rejected, and with them went much of the mystical heritage of the Middle Ages. But a new group of mystics soon emerged among Protestants—great saintly figures who combined a deeply mystical piety with life in the modern world. Thus the mystics of the early modern period in Europe present us with a different but equally rich tradition of Christian spirituality focused on the search for perfection and loving union with God, expressed with great vigor and intensity, though embodied in very different forms from those found in the medieval Church.

Most mystics, or those with the ability to practice mysticism, simply want to study and understand the unknown. Dozens of mystics have gained prominence throughout history, from the Greek empire era to modern time. Mystics also come from just about any religion. St. Catherine of Siena is one of the most important female mystics in the Catholic and Christian traditions. Born in Italy, Catherine believed she was spiritually wed to Jesus Christ. Christian mysticism refers to the development of mystical practices and theory within Christianity. It has often been connected to mystical theology, especially in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christianity (both the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox traditions). The attributes and means by which Christian mysticism is studied and practiced are varied. They range from ecstatic visions of the soul's mystical union with God to simple prayerful contemplation of Holy Scripture (i.e., Lectio Divina). Witches, mystics, or any sort of group delving into sorcery or the mystic arts are not compatible with the Christian label. There's enough Scripture that condemns sorcery and anything to deal with spirits, mediums, energies, etc etc. because those things are not from God. God wants us to turn to HIM, not to any other sort of power, not even as a "supplement".