

## 12. Christian Mystics in the Middle Ages

*“Mystic”*: a person who claims insight into mysteries transcending ordinary human knowledge, as by direct communication with the divine or immediate intuition in a state of spiritual ecstasy. From (1275-1325) Middle English *mystik* < Latin *mysticus* < Greek *mystikós*, equivalent to *myst* (*ēs*) an initiate into the mysteries + *-ikos -ic*; akin to *myeîn* to initiate, teach.

**Introduction** - To many Western Christians, words like "meditation", "mystic," and "mysticism" bring to mind Eastern religions, Sufism or New Age belief. However, mystics are part of the Christian heritage as well, arguably the core of Christian spirituality for some, even today. They are not Eastern ("Om") mantra mystics. Definition and context are important.

Christian mystics in the Middle Ages were mostly seeking a deeper, direct, personal, meaningful relationship with God. (Religion *had* to be personal, less institutionalised or structural; as Protestants were also experiencing.) They practiced meditation and prayer, and (often) abandoned worldly positions, belongings and other encumbrances to discipleship or the inner life. Some travelled and shared their visions. The writings of medieval mystics (especially after the invention of printing) opened their ideas and practices to increasingly wider audiences.

Certain mystics provoked Church intervention and denunciation. They were different, did not "conform". Could individuals "know" God in the way they claimed? Should they be controlled? Were they experiencing Him, or deluding themselves; opening their hearts and minds to forces of evil, or putting on a "show"? Most likely, there were some in every category. That does not invalidate what was authentic. If a mystic's visions interfered with the local church hierarchy they might be accused of Satanic practices and end up being excommunicated or burned at the stake. The lives of others resonated with the teachings of the Church and were celebrated.

Women visionaries, mystics and ecstasies were often looked upon with distrust. Some worked from within the framework of the Church, others did not. Marguerite Porete (1253-1310) renowned for her booklet, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, was charged with heresy and burned. It must be remembered that much of what occurred during the Inquisition was driven by fear, envy and power politics that dealt uncompromisingly and harshly with non-conformists.

According to Jewish historian Israel Abrahams, "All true religion has mystical elements, for all true religion holds that man can commune with God, soul with soul. In the Psalms, God is the Rock of the heart, the Portion of the cup, the Shepherd and Light, the Fountain of Life, an exceeding Joy. All this is, in a sense, mystical language". The Lord's Supper is another area where the elements of bread and wine can be held mystically (depending on the individual).

Meditation on God and His Word is good (Psalm 1:2). It is often necessary to disengage from the demands of daily life to focus to actively listen to the Holy Spirit (Matthew 13:9). Naturally, mysticism has potential dangers. It can confuse emotionalism and obsession with communion with God. In its medieval forms, it frequently focussed on intermediate beings, or angels, to supply the means for communion with God. This bordered on superstition. However, we can learn a lot from those who commit their lives to praying and sharing their insights (Acts 6:4).

The experiences and writings of some mediaeval mystics can teach us. No doubt there were some charlatans, but there were others for whom the central purpose of living was to know God. The majority remained obscure, in monasteries and reclusive orders. Many would have been regarded as eccentrics. Mediaeval society was predominantly non-urban and travel was difficult.

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*Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582)*



Born Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada in Avila, Spain, she was a prominent Spanish mystic, Carmelite nun and writer during the Counter Reformation. Teresa was the daughter of a Toledo merchant and his second wife, who died when Teresa was 15, one of ten children. Shortly after this event, she was entrusted to the care of Augustinian nuns. After reading the letters of Jerome, Teresa resolved to enter a religious life. In 1535, she joined the Carmelite Order. She spent a number of years suffering from illness that left her legs paralyzed for long periods. Teresa was strongly committed to meditation and prayer. She reported a vision of "the sorely wounded Christ" that changed her life. She also expressed a desire to convert the heathen.

Teresa entered a period of increasingly "ecstatic experiences" in which she came to focus sharply on Christ's passion. With these visions as her impetus, she set herself to reforming her order (which had become lax), beginning with her attempt to master herself and her adherence to the "Carmelite rule". Gathering a group of supporters, she endeavoured to create a more authentic type of Carmelite. From 1560 until her death, she sought to establish and broaden the movement of "Discalced" or shoeless Carmelites. During the mid-1560s, she wrote *The Way of Perfection* and *Meditations on the Canticle*. In 1567, she met John of the Cross, whom she enlisted to extend her reform into the male side of the Carmelite Order.

Teresa sought to heal divisions with Protestant Christians. She also left a significant legacy of writings, including *Concepts of the Love of God*, *The Interior Castle* (an allegorical explanation of the life of prayer) and an autobiography.

Quotes:

- May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.
- May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.
- May you use gifts you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.
- Prayer is like irrigating and cultivating a garden in dry terrain; be patient and persistent.
- May you be content knowing you are a child of God.
- Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing away:  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things.  
Whoever has God lacks nothing;  
God alone suffices.

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- Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours,  
Yours are the eyes through which to look out  
Christ's compassion to the world  
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about  
doing good;  
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.
- God save us from gloomy saints!

## *John of the Cross (1542-1592)*



John was a major figure of the Counter-(or Catholic) Reformation; a Spanish mystic, a Carmelite friar and a priest.

Born in Spain in 1542, John learned the importance of self-sacrificing love from his parents. His father gave up wealth, status, and comfort when he married a weaver's daughter and was disowned by his noble family. After his father died, his mother kept the family together as they wandered homeless in search of work.

At fourteen, John took a job caring for hospital patients who suffered from incurable diseases and madness. Moved by what he saw, in time, he joined the Carmelite order, where Teresa of Avila (whom he followed) asked him to help her reform movement. John supported her belief that the Order should pursue a life of prayer.

However, many felt threatened by reform, and some members of his own Carmelite Order (opposed to reform) kidnapped and tortured him. He was punished for not leaving Avila. This included being locked in a cell six feet by ten feet. He reported later that he was lashed three times a week by the monks. His diet was minimal. After nine months, he escaped by unscrewing the lock on his door and creeping past the guard. Taking only a series of mystical poems he had written in his cell, he climbed out a window using a rope made of strips of blankets. He hid from his pursuers in a convent infirmary where he read his poetry to the nuns. From then on his life was devoted to sharing his experiences of God's love. He had come to believe that reason alone (as emphasised by the Scholastics) was not enough; what mattered was the reality of his relationship with God through the person of Jesus Christ. While some of John's writings reveal his Catholic origins, it is clear that he sought a close walk with God.

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John's life of poverty and persecution could have produced a bitter cynic. Instead it gave birth to a compassionate man, who lived by the beliefs that "Who has ever seen people persuaded to love God by harshness?" and "Where there is no love, put love -- and you will find love."

John left poems and books of practical advice on spiritual growth and prayer that are relevant today. These include: *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul* and *The Bridegroom Christ*. He was canonized as a saint in 1726 by Pope Benedict XIII.

Quote:

- The soul that desires to surrender to God must surrender entirely to him without keeping anything for itself.

## *Meister Eckhart (1260-1328)*

One of the most influential mystics of the Middle Ages, Eckhart von Hochheim (a German) was born near Erfurt in Thuringia and in his distinguished career became a Parisian Professor of Theology and took a leading pastoral and organisational role in the Dominican Order.

Eckhart wrote "God is infinite in his simplicity and simple in his infinity. Therefore he is everywhere and is everywhere complete. He is everywhere on account of his infinity, and is everywhere complete on account of his simplicity. Only God flows into all things, their very essences. Nothing else flows into something else. God is in the innermost part of each and every thing, only in its innermost part."

His views about God appear to be more deist than Christian. His views about the incarnation are more philosophical than evangelical:

*In his human life Jesus becomes a pattern for man; and in all that he did and experienced, above all in his passion and death there is an overwhelming power that draws man to God and brings about in us that which first took place in Christ, who alone is the way to the father.*

Eckhart was charged with heresy by the church, but was eventually restored.

The church was right to reject certain of Eckhart's statements. Although he studied Scripture for a deeper understanding of God - to bring life to the soul - he speculated and at times actually seemed to oppose scripture. For example, whereas the Bible teaches that love is the greatest thing (1 Corinthians 13), Eckhart taught that solitude is, because in solitude one can "force" God down into one's own soul. Eckhart's thinking fits well with certain gnostic or New Age ideas, for he described every creature as both a revelation of God and a part of him, blurring the lines between God and his creatures. Perhaps we should not take such writings too literally.

## *Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)*

Hildegard has been called "one of the most important figures in the history of the Middle Ages. She lived during the era of Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux, the rise of the great universities and the building of Chartres cathedral in France.

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Hildegard was the daughter of a knight. When she was eight she went to the Benedictine monastery at Mount St Disibode to be educated. The monastery was in the Celtic tradition, and housed both men and women (in separate quarters). When Hildegard was eighteen, she became a nun. Twenty years later, she was made the head of the female community at the monastery. During the next four years, she had a series of visions, and devoted the period 1140-1150 to writing them down and commenting on their interpretation and significance.

Hildegard's work was investigated by a commission set up by Pope Eugenius III, which found it to be orthodox. Hildegard urged the Pope to work harder for reform in the Church.

The community of nuns at Mount St Disibode was growing rapidly, and they did not have adequate room. Hildegard accordingly moved her nuns to a location near Bingen (in Germany), and founded a monastery. She then travelled throughout southern Germany, Switzerland and France, preaching. Her sermons deeply moved the hearers and she was asked to provide copies wherever she went.

Hildegard died on 17 September 1179. Her surviving works include more than a hundred letters to emperors and popes, bishops, nuns, and nobility. (People of all classes wrote to her, asking for advice, and one biographer calls her "the Dear Abby of the twelfth century."). She wrote 72 songs including a play set to music. She left about seventy poems and nine books. She also wrote a commentary on the Gospels and another on the Athanasian Creed. Much of her work has recently been translated into English.

Hildegard's major works are three books on theology: *Scivias* ("Know the paths!"), *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (on ethics), and *De Operatione Dei*. They deal with the material of her visions.

Hildegard has undergone a remarkable rise in popularity in recent years, since many readers have found in her visions, or read into them, themes that seem to speak to many modern concerns. For example, her writings bring science, art, and religion together; she was involved in all three, and looked to each for insights that would enrich her understanding of the others. She used parables, symbols, visual imagery, and non-verbal means to communicate her messages. She wrote and spoke extensively about social justice, about freeing the downtrodden, about the duty of seeing to it that every human being, made in the image of God, had the opportunity to develop and use the talents that God had given him or her. She also wrote about the natural world as God's creation, demonstrating His beauty and energy; entrusted to our care, to be used responsibly for our benefit.

Some non-Christian groups (eg pantheists) have co-opted the work of Hildegard to support their approaches to creation and the environment.

## Quotes:

- A human being is a vessel that God has built for himself and filled with his inspiration so that his works are perfected in it.
- God hugs you.  
You are encircled by the arms  
of the mystery of God.

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- O Eternal God, now may it please you  
to burn in love  
so that we become the limbs  
fashioned in the love you felt  
when you begot your Son  
at the first dawn  
before all creation  
And consider this need which falls upon us,  
take it from us for the sake of your Son,  
and lead us to the joy of your salvation.

*Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)*



Catherine was the 25th of the 26 children of a northern Italy wool dyer named Giacomo di Benincasa. Her family belonged to the lower-middle class.

At a very young age she began to spend long periods of time in prayer, and to report having mystical visions. She consecrated her virginity to Christ when she was seven.

At the age of twelve, her parents sought to arrange a marriage for her, but she begged to be allowed to remain single. To discourage her from this course, they put her in charge of some of the family business, hoping this would change her mind. After some years, her father relented; Catherine joined the Third Order of Dominicans, and spent the next three years 'in the desert' in a room in her parent's home. During this time, she underwent what she called a 'spiritual espousal, where she claimed that she had a vision of the Infant Jesus offering her a wedding band. (Try to see what might have been in her heart in making such a commitment.)

Catherine then began to serve the sick. Many people were attracted by her wisdom. She served the poor and prayed for the conversion of sinners. She spent much time in prayer. Despite opposition by local clergy and others, she gathered disciples. When another vision commanded her to enter the 'public life of the world', Catherine began to correspond with the princes and republics of Italy. She was consulted by papal representatives about affairs of the Church (including the impact of the Great Schism, in which claimant Popes were located at both Rome and Avignon), and began working to repair the damage of civil war and religious factions in Italy.

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Catherine's letters, advice, and persistence convinced Gregory XI to leave Avignon and return to Rome, to reform the clergy and administration of the Papal States, and to call for a Crusade to regain Jerusalem from Muslim control. Catherine travelled to many cities (at a time when travel was not easy, especially for women) working for peace in Italy and the Church. She wrote hundreds of letters. She also wrote a book, called *The Dialogue*, a conversation between the Eternal Father and the human soul, discussing the whole of mankind's spiritual life. For this body of work and her service to the Church, she was named a Doctor of the Church.

Catherine emphasised, in her public ministry and private devotions, that the principle goal of the Christian is to be completely surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Catherine died on 29 April 1380, when she was just 33 years old. She was canonised in 1461. Since 1939 she has been a patron saint of Italy, along with Francis of Assisi.

## Quotes:

- I turn and lean against the most Holy Cross of Christ Crucified, and there I will fasten me.
- No one should judge that he has greater perfection because he performs great penances and gives himself in excess to the staying of the body than he who does less; neither virtue nor merit consists therein; for otherwise he would be an evil case, who for some legitimate reason was unable to do actual penance. Merit consists in the virtue of love alone, flavoured with the light of true discretion without which the soul is worth nothing.
- Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.
- All the way to heaven is heaven, because Jesus said, "I am the way.
- Do not be satisfied with little things, because God wants great things.
- Leave it all to Him, let go of yourself, lose yourself on the Cross, and you will find yourself entirely.
- To the servant of God ... every place is the right place, and every time is the right time.

## *Julian of Norwich (1342-1416)*



English mystic and first known woman writer in English.

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Almost nothing is known about Julian, but tradition associates her with St Julian's church, Norwich (England), near which she lived a solitary life of prayer and meditation. Her fame rests on her book *The Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, which she wrote in 1393.

After falling seriously ill, Julian recorded that she received sixteen different mystical revelations on one day in 1373; in this work, she describes and reflects upon those revelations. She focuses on the mysteries of Christianity, in particular, the vast love of God and the existence of evil. In states of ecstasy she claimed that she saw visions of the sufferings of Christ and of the Trinity. She meditated on these visions for twenty years, concentrating on the love of God, which she taught supplies the answer to all life's problems and especially to the evil in the world. Her book contains both the original visions and her meditations on them.

Scholars believe that Julian was influenced by a book on mystical experience, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in Middle English in the latter half of the 14th century. The text is a guide on contemplative prayer, typical of traditions in the late Middle Ages. The underlying message of this work proposes that the only way to truly "know" God is to abandon all preconceived notions and beliefs or "knowledge" about God and be courageous enough to surrender one's mind and ego to the realm of "unknowingness," at which point it is possible to glimpse the true nature of God. Critics believe it is a Christian extension of ancient Greek (pre-Christian) Platonism. God does not expect us to come to Him "mindless".

Julian summed up her doctrine of God in these words:

"And I saw full surely that ere God made us He loved us; which love was never slacked nor ever shall be. And in this love He hath done all His works, and in this love He hath made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting."

## *Others*

Other mystics celebrated by Catholic tradition include: Henry Suso (1295-1366) a German Dominican mystic. He wrote many texts including the "Little Book of Truth"; Birgitta of Sweden (1302-1373), who was said to have the gift of prophecy and healing powers; Mechthild of Magdeburg (1208-1282); Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241-1299); Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), who used Neo-Platonic ideas to approach the "Unknowable God"; and Gertrud the Great (1256-1301).

## **A Protestant View of Christian Mystics**

Evangelicals often confuse mysticism with New Age spirituality; others associate it with creepy psychic "mysterious" phenomena that have little to do with "normal" Christian living; others, however, speak reverently about a transcendent experience of God that made them wonder if for only one brief and beautiful moment they themselves were mystics. "Knowing God" is more than academic belief. (We should not be afraid of the word "mystic".)

In one sense, a mystic is someone who has a lived experience of Jesus in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. They have experienced Him and, through prayer and meditation, continue to encounter Him in such a way that they gain a new appreciation for the urgent immediacy of God in all things. Too many Christians barely involve God in their daily lives.



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Conservative Protestants often argue that mysticism is not the experience of a Christian. The Bible teaches that God dwells in all Christians and that we can experience God directly through belief in Jesus. Christ-likeness is achieved only by dying to self—not by self-effort or by seeking to emulate Jesus or particular Christians - spiritual truth is discerned/revealed through the work of the Holy Spirit, who lives in all believers (John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

Unbelievers cannot comprehend such things. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment: For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

A biblical account that an unbeliever might conclude was a mystical experience could be the apostle Paul’s “Damascus Road” encounter with Jesus Christ (Acts 22:1-21), or the experience he described in 2 Corinthians: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell” (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

Consciousness of God is part of the common definition of the mystic’s experience. By contrast, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

Much conservative Christian theology excludes the type of relationship with God, who still speaks, guides, corrects, comforts, reveals, to individual Christians, as part of “walking in the Spirit”; Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians would argue that this is the “normal” Christian life. In the final analysis, all experiences must be in line with Biblical teaching. Some experiences may be subjective, but that is no reason not to accept that the Holy Spirit still moves in real ways in people’s lives. Never forget that genuine Christianity involves devotion to Christ, being humble and without spiritual pride, refraining from judgment and trusting that God speaks to the heart of each person in a way and time of His choosing.

Many modern “mystical groups” (sought and celebrated as such) suggest either things that lack substance, or would appear to challenge Biblical doctrine, which invalidates them. In societies where the paranormal is part of everyday living, people seek mystical experiences, but these have nothing to do with Biblical teaching.

In summary, it is important not to confuse modern mystics with the lives of Christ-followers in the Middle Ages who separated themselves to develop a deeper relationship with God, which should be the desire of all of God’s people (although “experiences” and conclusions still need to meet Biblical standards and are not ends in themselves).

External forms of Christianity change, but God is eternal. Christian faith wants to know the unchanging God to whom the Holy Spirit leads us, through our encounter with Christ, the One behind the beliefs and the words, the One whom beliefs and words cannot describe, who “lives in our hearts by faith”. We want to follow Jesus’ example more closely, but go beyond the religion about Jesus, and deepen our first-hand knowledge of the Father, relationship *with* Jesus and intimacy with the Holy Spirit.

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## Discussion

How do you pray? When do you sense the presence of God? What are you doing to deepen your intimacy with Him?

Does Christian mysticism have a role to play in the church today? What are the boundaries and implications?

Do you keep a journal of your relationship with the Holy Spirit? How can people's experiences and claims be tested?

What would you do if you believed the Holy Spirit was leading you to reform but those around you opposed you??

## Reading

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## MYSTICISM - A SWOT ANALYSIS

### Strengths

- God is a spirit; we are His children; we are to worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:24); it stands to reason that part of our Christian life will be spiritual in expression.
- Christians are “in the world, but not of it” (John 17:15); a spiritual dimension should be normal in each of our lives.
- The patriarchs endured because they worshipped and followed an “invisible” God (Hebrews 11:27).
- The Psalmist often spoke of communing with God day and night.
- Old Testament prophets (eg Ezekiel) had what can only be described as mystical experiences (Ezekiel 1)
- Peter had what could be seen as a mystical experience in Joppa (Acts 10:10-17).
- The Apostle John experienced the Revelation of Jesus in similar circumstances (“in the Spirit”).
- When external forms and power relations in the church dominated “Christianity” the move of God in the lives of individuals was positive.

### Weaknesses

- The Christian life should not be reduced to “private revelations”, opinions; the focus must always be Christ.
- Over-reliance on visions limits God’s work in human lives to a privileged few; this misses the point that relationship with Him through Christ is for all.
- Reliance on visions is not enough; even Jesus moved between Transfiguration and service.
- Can be seen as “too subjective”.
- Needs to be tested for accuracy/truth/ source (evaluate prophecies, 1 John 4:1).
- Cloistering can be “escapism”. Jesus prayed a lot but did not hide.
- Over-reliance on fasting, trances, ecstasies, stigmata, sufferings for penance go beyond the Gospel.
- Lack of accountability (where this is the case) can lead to error, wrong teaching.

### Opportunities

- Personal relationship with God, and experiencing His presence, are possible, encouraged by the Bible. With appropriate safeguards, Christians with special gifts can help lead the church back to basics and relationship with the Holy Spirit and present a living/ communicating God to the world.
- God still speaks; we should be actively listening for Him. What is he saying to the church today through some he calls to be mouthpieces?
- The mystical experiences of Middle Ages Christians were good counters to dominance by the political church.
- Friendship with the world = enmity with God (James 4:4); a life of solitude and deeper relationship with God is laudable.
- Relationship with God, and being able to live wholly committed to Him, are arguably preferable to “service”; cf Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42).
- Can contribute to spiritual growth, without needing sacraments or priests.

### Threats

- Those who claim revelations threaten the status quo - discernment is necessary.
- Often assert they should not be challenged.
- May lead to pride on the part of those who practice over those who do not.
- Can lead to Gnosticism, false doctrines (cf Galatians 1:18; 1 Timothy 4:1).
- Can produce charlatans, counterfeits (cf Colossians 2:18).
- Threat that those in spiritual authority or more traditional denominations will rush to judgment).
- Threatened “establishment Christianity” (“worldly” church) in terms of questioning who is *genuinely* Christian.
- Risk that illiterate, poor, oppressed, superstitious might seek to have “copycat” experiences. Imagination can be confused with revelation.
- Can lead to spiritual abuse, division, and manipulation of others.