
Meeting Christian Mystics

BY YOLANDA ROBLES

These three books, representative of a spate of recent publications, point to a renewed interest in the lives and works of Christian mystics, especially among a general audience. This may result from a need within the Church at large—a hunger for a radical encounter with the presence of the Triune God.

In her introduction to *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2001; 270 pp., \$20.00), Ursula King says her aim is to “open a window on [the] rich heritage of Christian mystical experience which speaks so strongly across time and place to our own need and circumstance” (p. 7). All three books under review here share the goal of introducing us to Christian mystics’ lives, works, and contributions to mystical theology. They invite us to consider how these mystics speak to our own circumstance and what we stand to gain by studying this aspect of our Christian heritage.

Bernard McGinn and Patricia Ferris McGinn note in *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Visions of the Spiritual Masters* (New York: Crossroad, 2003; 256 pp., \$18.95) that the mystics sought to attain deeper contact with God (p. 12). An immediate concern, however, is whether or not intimate contact with God, often characterized by mystics as an extraordinary encounter, is a practical possibility for average Christians who, for the most part, do not share in the ascetic, rigorous lifestyles most mystics led. Can these Christians speak to us today in the midst of contemporary consumer culture?

The authors answer this question by demonstrating that mystics do not represent an elite class within the Christian faith. Divine encounters like those that the mystics experienced are accessible to all Christians by an extension of God’s grace. The lives and works of mystics give insight into the steps required to achieve this intimacy in our relationship with God.

INTRODUCING THE MYSTICS

Ursula King's *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages* is best suited for those with little or no knowledge of mystical theology or its primary figures. She begins by describing the background and fundamentals of Christian mysticism, noting its scriptural foundations and the cultural context of the early church. King then proceeds chronologically, devoting chapters to early Christian, medieval, early modern, and modern mystics as she discusses central figures such as Clement of Alexandria, St. Catherine of Siena, George Fox, and Evelyn Underhill.

One of the greatest strengths of *Christian Mystics* is the fifth chapter that focuses on Eastern Orthodox mystics. Many introductory books either fail to mention figures in the Eastern Church who made substantial contributions to mystical theology and practice or focus only on a few early theologians like Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. King surveys the broader scope of Eastern Orthodox mysticism, including the author of *The Way of the Pilgrim* and Vladimir Solovyov in the nineteenth century, and analyzes how Orthodox mystical thought diverges from Christian mysticism in the West.

Another of the book's strengths is the emphasis on lesser-known female mystics. King examines several Beguines, such as St. Mechtild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, "laywomen who lived an ideal of Christian spirituality in self-sufficient communities in different parts of Europe" (p. 89). Through her discussion of these women, she demonstrates the specifically female characteristics of Christian spirituality, which include an emphasis on affectivity and experience, the exploration of Christ's humanity, and the Eucharist. King provides much insight into this little-explored aspect of Christian mysticism.

EXPLORING THE MYSTICS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Readers who have an introductory knowledge of Christian mysticism will find Bernard McGinn and Patricia Ferris McGinn's *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters* to be a challenging but rewarding read. This book is an adaptation of the first half of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn's four-volume magisterial study. Thus *Early Christian Mystics* is a more accessible version of the information in *The Presence of God*, a work that is better suited for seminarians and academicians.

However, *Early Christian Mystics* is not as undemanding as you might think. Each of the twelve chapters (a number chosen by the authors for its sacred significance) presents a single figure from Origen to William of St. Thierry, discussing his or her life, background, theological position, and contribution to mysticism. The text does not cheat us by giving an oversimplified presentation of the mystics' thought.

This more technical quality of the book makes it better suited to readers who have some familiarity with Christian mysticism. Also, as the title

Early Christian Mystics suggests, its scope is limited to the beginnings of Christian mysticism, through the year 1200. While they do not cover the breadth of history that King does, McGinn and McGinn provide more information on the mystics they consider, giving us a detailed account of their theological positions and special contributions they made to the development of mystical thought and practice.

Early Christian Mystics also addresses the question of why these twelve mystics matter today. The chapter on Gregory the Great, for example, highlights his insistence that God can be contemplated in this life by every Christian and not just by the monastics (which was a radical idea coming from this monk who became pope at the end of the sixth century). This suggests that contemplation is a viable practice for ordinary Christians today. Helping us discern how early Christian mysticism applies to our faith and practice today may be this book's greatest contribution.

The suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter are very helpful guides to navigating the volumes of scholarship on each mystic, including the best translations of the mystic's writings, other introductory texts, and helpful scholarly studies.

LETTING MYSTICS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman's anthology, *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, second edition (New York: Paulist Press, 2001; 463 pp., \$24.95), allows the Christian mystics to speak for themselves through a thoughtful selection from their writings. It gives general readers the necessary background and context to study works they might not otherwise read or grasp. Each chapter surveys the life of a mystic, provides a few well-chosen readings for an overview of the mystic's contribution to theology, and describes the significance of his or her works.

This version of *Light from Light* is fully updated and revised. Gone are some figures that readers found to be less interesting in the 1988 original volume, such as Henri Le Saux, William Law, and Maximus the Confessor. In their stead, figures like Francis and Clare of Assisi, Jeanne de Chantal, and Evelyn Underhill have been incorporated into the anthology.

Dupré and Wiseman admit that they have included some figures who do not meet all of the characteristics we associate with the terms "mystic" and "mysticism." Some, like Thérèse of Lisieux and Evelyn Underhill, did not have an extraordinary encounter with the divine presence. Defending the inclusion of such figures in the volume, Dupré and Wiseman note that "through the centuries we have come to consider certain texts mystical more for the unique insight—at once cognitive and affective—in the spiritual nature of reality they convey to the reader than for the assumed (but totally hidden) experience that led to their writing" (p. 5). In other words, Dupré and Wiseman consider those individuals who convey a special religious vision of reality, which unites the cognitive and affective functions of the mind, to be mystics. Such a view prevents us from getting caught up in

the individual's personal experience and subjective feeling and leads us to focus instead on the content of their thought and work.

Like King's book, *Light from Light* covers a broad spectrum of Christian mysticism, examining not only the famous but also some lesser-known figures from the early church down through the twentieth century. The readings come in a rich variety, from treatises to poetry and personal letters. Some of these minor works include Clare of Assisi's *Letters to Blessed Agnes of Prague*, St. John of the Cross's *Stanzas Concerning an Ecstasy Experienced in High Contemplation*, and Jeanne de Chantal's *Letters of Spiritual Direction*. Also, much like *Early Christian Mysticism*, each chapter concludes with a selected bibliography that guides us to primary source material and studies of the mystic. *Light from Light* could serve as an introductory textbook on Christian mysticism.

CONCLUSION

The recent publication of these and many other books on the lives and works of Christian mystics points to a renewed interest in them, especially among a general audience with no formal training in church history and theology. This interest may result from a need within the Church at large—a hunger for a radical encounter with the presence of God.

Of course, in a culture that is increasingly antagonistic to the Christian perspective and lifestyle, the possibility of a distinctly Christian mystical encounter with the Triune God is generally denied. Such an encounter is deemed subjective and individualistic and, therefore, is devalued. As a result, the reliability and credibility of Christian mystics' personal accounts of their encounters with the divine presence has come under fire. Much skepticism surrounds orthodox Christian mysticism as a whole.

Yet in spite of this skepticism, many people today want to understand Christian mysticism. Perhaps they want to counteract the line of thought that calls into question this part of the rich heritage of Christianity and to participate with the mystics in an ineffable encounter with God. However we characterize their motives, those who are delving into a study of Christian mysticism are taking a radically countercultural stance. Students of mysticism stand in opposition to a society that denies the real presence of God. In recovering this part of Christianity's legacy, we may yet learn to embody a prophetic stance within the world while at the same time growing in our awareness and love for God.



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