
Why the Mystics Matter

BY MICHAEL D. SCIRETTI, JR.

In our utilitarian, individualistic culture where we often feel abandoned and disconnected, the Christian mystics help us realize that we are at home in God's awe-full world. The mystics can help us cope with the problems of the modern world because they "carry us into the depths of divine love."

Who are the Christian mystics? Do they really matter today? The history of the Church is filled with great saints who are considered to be mystics, and many of these great souls have played crucial roles in the development of Christian thought and practice. Nevertheless, can twenty-first century men and women living in a globalized, individualistic, and technocratic world learn anything from these mystics?

LEARNING THE MYSTICS' WAYS

While not intended to be a "how-to book for becoming a mystic," Emilie Griffin's *Wonderful and Dark is This Road: Discovering the Mystic Path* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004, 191 pp., \$15.95) is a helpful primer on Christian mysticism. With a casual, conversational style, Griffin weaves together stories and writings of mystics in order to explore several distinctive features of the mystical life. Griffin shines in her use of the life stories of mystics to describe certain aspects of mysticism.

After defining mysticism as "close intimacy with a loving God," Griffin emphasizes in her first two chapters that mystics choose to open themselves to God's grace. This necessarily flows into a "mysticism of ordinary living" and a "mysticism of service." In other words, a Christian mystic is one who lives the life Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount.

The remaining chapters of the book sample different aspects of the mystics' path. Chapters that are particularly praiseworthy include "The

Way of Affirmation," "The Way of Negation," and "World-Transforming Mysticism." Griffin illustrates the two primary "ways" by describing some of their more famous practitioners. For example, Francis of Assisi, Dante Alighieri, Teresa of Avila, and Brother Lawrence practiced the way of affirmation; they affirmed that God can be found in creation and in the things of the visible world. Yet the way of negation claims that God dwells in darkness and that the only way to truly experience God is through abandoning one's self to God. Besides John of the Cross, Griffin identifies Gregory of Nyssa, the *Cloud of Unknowing* author, and Jean-Pierre de Caussade as articulators of this way. Also helpful in this chapter is her insistence (following Thomas Merton) that the two "ways" are essentially describing the same experience but in different terms, much like "positive" and "negative" are aspects of the same photographic image.

Yet Griffin's final chapter, "World-Transforming Mysticism," may be the most creative and timely in the book. Here we understand why the mystics really matter to Griffin. For while they are important because the Bible is full of them, and since they show us that our journey to God is one of grace and choice, they ultimately matter because they show us that "the world is deeply connected within the Divine Reality" (p. 151). They can lead us, therefore, toward a less hostile and more peaceful world civilization since they are conscious of the truth that God is within the world yet beyond the world. For these reasons, Griffin believes that the mystics are spiritual guides who can help awaken us to the interconnectedness of all humanity and lead us into a more peaceful world.

RESISTING THE WORLD'S THOUGHTLESSNESS

Wonderful and Dark is This Road is a good place to begin one's study of the mystics since it largely summarizes the work of other scholars of mysticism, most notably Evelyn Underhill, Harvey Egan, and Bernard McGinn. However, for a provocative and timely reinterpretation of mysticism, I highly recommend Dorothee Soelle's *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001, 325 pp., \$21.00). This stimulating book accomplishes two goals: to show the democratizing effect of mysticism and to develop the relationship between mystical experience and social-political behavior.

In our utilitarian, individualistic culture where we often feel abandoned and disconnected, Soelle contends the experience of mysticism makes us feel at home in God's awe-full world. Two medieval sources serve as her compass: a letter written by an anonymous late medieval German mystic and the writings of the Sufi mystic, Jalal Al-Din Rumi. Using these sources, Soelle guides the reader through a new way of becoming one with God in perceiving, understanding, and acting in the world. When one experiences God, who is the paradoxical silent cry, one cannot help hearing the silent cries of God's oppressed people throughout the world. We awaken from the slumber of our imprisonment. Thus, Soelle elucidates

a new yet ancient way of understanding mysticism, what she names a “mysticism of wide-open eyes” to the beauty of God in the world and to the present injustices of the world.

In a section called “What is Mysticism?” Soelle articulates new mystical language for the journey today. Drawing from diverse writers such as Meister Eckhart, Rumi, William James, and C. S. Lewis, Soelle begins by showing how all of us are mystics—we all have the ability to be amazed and experience awe. The climax of this first section is her new outline of the mystical journey for today, for which she draws heavily from two unlikely persons: the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Thomas Müntzer and the contemporary Episcopalian priest Matthew Fox. In the place of the three ways of classical mysticism (purification, illumination, and union), Soelle suggests new stages for the mystical journey today: amazement, letting go, and resisting. This one small section contains the seed from which all of Soelle’s later reflection grows and blossoms.

In “Places of Mystical Experience,” Soelle pursues her aim of “democratizing mysticism without trivializing it” (p. 97). Her premise is that the realm of God’s self-communication is not in extreme ascetic behavior but rather in human experiences of nature, eroticism, suffering, community, and joy. Particularly poignant is her chapter on a mysticism of suffering, where she discusses the “dark night of the world,” a contemporary appropriation of what John of the Cross called the “dark night of the soul.”

Soelle concludes with her main point, that “mysticism is resistance,” through a reinterpretation of the monastic vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity. Soelle names

two trends that determine the prison of our culture: globalization and individualization. She then articulates the “vows” of today’s mystic: “ego-lessness,” “possessionlessness,” and “nonviolence.” Soelle’s grasp of the heart of the mystical tradition is acute at this point. She counsels that our consumer ego must be freed from the values of the First World kingdom (power, possessions, and violence) if we are ever to escape from our “common blind captivity to the world.”

Though her final chapter is entitled “A Mysticism of Liberation,” she chooses “resistance” as her operative word because resistance seems more appropriate for a people who live in exile and are immersed in the thoughtlessness of the world. Rather than being tied to specific historical,

Mystics ultimately matter because they show us that “the world is deeply connected within the Divine Reality.” They are spiritual guides who can help awaken us to the interconnectedness of all humanity and lead us into a more peaceful world.

liberating events (e.g., the exodus from Egypt), resistance is the “long-term praxis that is learned in the Babylonian exile: refraining from eating the fruits of apartheid, publicizing the profits of arms manufactures and traders” (p. 204). To grow in this type of resistance is to be empowered, to begin living as if we already lived in a liberated world.

The Silent Cry is a work of great intricacy, but it is by no means dense. Each chapter contains many stirring symbols of mysticism and resistance, such as Francis of Assisi, Marguerite Porete, John Woolman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dag Hammarskjöld, and Dorothy Day. Soelle’s insight into the lives of these saints is acute. She is to be commended for integrating the lives and writings of the mystics with the contemporary critiques of liberation theology, feminist theology, and creation spirituality, as she charts an ancient-future way of being and acting in the twenty-first century.

COPING WITH THE WORLD’S CHALLENGES

A more devotional approach is taken by Frederick C. Bauerschmidt in *Why the Mystics Matter Now* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003, 154 pp., \$12.95). Of all three books, this one most easily initiates the beginner into the world of Christian mysticism by showing how certain mystics can help us journey through the challenges of contemporary life.

In his introduction, which is one of the most clear and succinct explanations of the mystical journey I have read, Bauerschmidt explains the meaning of “mysticism,” the threefold journey to God (through purification, illumination, and union), and the dominant mystical themes of “seeing” and “receiving.” He candidly reviews the problems of our modern world and examines how the mystics, when we attentively listen to them, can “open a space in our self-confidence” (p. 21). If we allow this to happen, we may see that our most fundamental reality is that we are loved by God and are meant to receive this love as a gift, both in life and in death.

Unlike Griffin who did not set out to tell us “how-to” be a mystic, Bauerschmidt has written a clever “how-to” book on living in the contemporary world in light of the teachings of seven mystics. Chapters include “How to Live in A World Without God” (Thérèse of Lisieux and the trial of faith), “How to Live in a World with Too Many Gods” (Ignatius of Loyola on the discernment of spirits), “How to Receive” (Meister Eckhart on detachment), “How to Give” (Catherine of Siena on love of God and neighbor), “How to Be Green” (Hildegard of Bingen on *viriditas*), “How to Be Blue” (Julian of Norwich on happiness and depression), and “How to Live and How to Die” (Thomas Merton on following a path). In short, Bauerschmidt offers us a manual for living and a fine introduction to how the mystics are relevant to ordinary people living in a confusing world. While all the chapters are very beneficial, the chapters on loving our neighbor, depression, and living and dying are particularly insightful.

Each chapter has four sections. For example, the chapter on Thomas Merton begins with his famous prayer in *Thoughts in Solitude*, “My Lord

God, I have no idea where I am going....” Next, Bauerschmidt discusses how we are lured by our technological savvy into thinking we can control life and death. However, as he illustrates through the life of Merton and a commentary on his famous prayer, the only way to overcome our loss of control is to confess the lostness around us (the path we are on) and the lostness within us. Only then can we begin to see that God is in the darkness, and that life is a gift from God whom no mind can grasp. Finally, Bauerschmidt concludes with a concise summary of why Merton matters now—because he summarizes the heart of the mystical tradition. According to Bauerschmidt, all these mystics tell us that “we see best when we see our blindness; we walk most confidently by letting ourselves be led, by relinquishing our plans and programs, by living our lives as a gift received rather than a prize won” (p. 152).

CONCLUSION

Why the Mystics Matter Now would be perfect for a small group desiring to learn more about the Christian mystical tradition. After studying Bauerschmidt’s book, I would suggest moving on to Griffin’s summarization of Christian mysticism. Finally, for those brave of heart and comfortable with the language of mysticism, I recommend immersing oneself in Soelle’s articulation of the mystical journey for today.

As we apply teachings of the mystics to our lives, we must be careful not to turn to them for purely pragmatic reasons, such as to cope with the problems of the modern world. While coping skills are good, living in loving intimacy with God is about much more. All three authors urge us to take a wider view of the mystics. “They matter because they can help us see and receive the deep mystery that pervades the world,” Bauerschmidt concludes. “They matter because they can carry us into the depths of divine love” (p. 154).



MICHAEL D. SCIRETTI, JR.

is a Ph.D. candidate in church history at Baylor University and Minister to Youth at Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.