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The Invitation of Desire for God Opened by the Stories of Christian Mystics

Kathi Gatlin

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE INVITATION OF DESIRE FOR GOD
OPENED BY THE STORIES OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
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BY

KATHI GATLIN

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Portland Seminary
George Fox University
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

Kathi Gatlin

has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 17, 2021
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation.

Dissertation Committee:

Primary Advisor: Carole Spencer, PhD

Secondary Advisor: Daniel Brunner, DPhil

Lead Mentor: MaryKate Morse, PhD

Expert Advisor: Carole Spencer, PhD

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EPIGRAPH

“You only need a naked intent for God. When you long for [God], that is enough.”

The Cloud of Unknowing

“Love is God’s meaning.”

Julian of Norwich

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ABSTRACT

As people are seeking to understand and find answers in the midst of making meaning of their life experiences, many are drawn to a deeper relationship with God. This dissertation proposes that the writings of Christian mystics, an ancient tradition of Christian spirituality, offer an invitation to a deeper understanding and relationship with God.

In this work, mysticism is defined as: *Christian mysticism, at God's invitation, is a journey of experientially knowing the God defined as Love. This journey leads to a knowing that is underneath the surface of rational thought and includes and transforms the whole self: body, mind, and spirit. Those on the journey are transformed from the inside out, which opens them to a broader consciousness of God, themselves, and the world.*

The first section describes the opportunity as spiritual seekers are yearning for more in their spiritual lives. If spirituality is linked to our desire for connection, then how we understand that in relation to God is essential. Consideration is given to how spirituality is defined in current Christian circles, along with the fears attached to our spirituality, desires, and mysticism. Section two describes the ways the church and the world try to meet the conscious and unconscious desires for ourselves and those we walk alongside. Section three proposes an alternative way to support spiritual seekers with the gift of story.

Sections four and five propose a book titled *The Story of God through the Eyes of Christian Mystics*. Sharing the stories of selected mystics through Christian history within the social, cultural, and political context of the specific time periods in which they lived

and the way each mystic related to God, will introduce the reader to the flow of thought around God through history and the potential of a lived experience with God.

SECTION 1: OPPORTUNITY OF DESIRE

Introduction

Many are drawn to a deeper relationship with God; this yearning is understood as our lived-out spirituality. Those drawn to more desire inspiration and transformation due to the unexpected and destructive events experienced in contemporary society. People are seeking ways to understand and find answers amidst the struggle of making meaning in these experiences.¹ Along the way, it is essential to have guides for the journey. The writings of the Christian mystics provide the guidance necessary and offer the hope of God meeting us in our desire for more than we have known.² As we approach their writings, it is imperative to define what we mean by Christian mysticism. For the sake of this work, I will define mysticism as:

Christian mysticism, at God's invitation, is a journey of experientially knowing the God defined as Love. This journey leads to a knowing that is underneath the surface of rational thought and includes and transforms the whole self: body, mind, and spirit. Those on the journey are transformed from the inside out, which opens them to a broader consciousness of God, themselves, and the world.

¹ Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2001), 3.

² William Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 1.

The mystics invite us to a Christian life defined as “the lived quality of God’s revelation among and in us.”³ Often, the old ways of rational explanations and definitions are unable to answer the more profound questions that arise through our lived experiences. Eugene Peterson defines this gap in our held understandings and our experiences as spiritual poverty. This condition develops as we seek a deeper relationship with God in the discovery that our profound questions remain unanswered by our old definitions, such as understanding pain and suffering in a world held by an omnipotent and loving God. This place of being unmet, being spiritually impoverished, is readily evident in our current contemporary society.⁴ As we wrestle with the construct of our understood theology and our desire to live out a relationally connected lived quality with God, we experience conflicting paradigms. This struggle is evident within us as well as in our communities.

A transition to a larger or broader understanding of God, beyond our rational understandings, is difficult. One of the hardest transitions in a person’s journey of transformation is leaving the god they have created, often in their own image, to discover the God who created them. As they persevere on this journey, however, they discover that the God they have come to know has been with them from the beginning.⁵

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2005), xi.

⁴ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 5.

⁵ Jeffrey VanVonderen, Dale Ryan, and Juanita Ryan, *Soul Repair: Rebuilding Your Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Books, 2008), 115–22.

Often, this kind of journey begins with an invitation of either great suffering or great love uncovering a desire for something more than previously known.⁶ This transformational journey confounds our conventional understanding of the world or the context of our current communities, even those based on faith. Our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world impacts the journey along this path. Spiritual formation is a process and provides a lens to define this journey as growing deeper in self-awareness and God-awareness. Along this way, one's old ways of doing things become unhelpful, and a new way is discovered that allows God to meet us in an experiential way, beyond what was previously known. This opening gift is a grace and only possible by the Spirit.

This study proposes that the writings of Christian mystics, an ancient tradition of Christian spirituality, offer an invitation to the deeper understanding and relationship with God that spiritual seekers desire. Defining Christian spirituality and Christian mysticism is an important part of this discussion and will be covered more deeply in this section. Continuing on, this research will show how their stories and understandings can expand our commonly held images of God constrained by concrete doctrinal categories, opening us to the possibility of encountering God. Some seekers have encountered God in experiential ways in our churches and have discovered their experience often pushes against the dualistic understandings, strict rules of right and wrong, currently in place. Such encounters move them beyond judgmental moralism and a black and white understanding of acceptable behavior, often leading to exclusion of others.

⁶ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 91.

A Story

Angie, not raised in a Christian home, wondered about the reality of God in her late twenties. She was in an emotionally abusive marriage and needed to know if the God she heard so much about was real or only the myth she had always understood Christianity to be. As she sought answers to her questions, Angie had an experience of God that overwhelmed her with love and acceptance beyond what she could comprehend. Joy and wonder bubbled out, as she shared with the congregation and leadership of a small rural church she had recently started attending.

They couldn't quite understand the experience and questioned the safety of what Angie shared with them. They never told Angie that her experience wasn't authentic, but disciplined her the only way they knew based on their rational understandings of God. Angie took their teachings and mentoring seriously. Her experience of God assured her of the reality of God. So, she pushed to learn the requirements of her new faith with everything in her. Unfortunately, the discipleship she received encouraged her to shut down her experiential relationship of God as unacceptable and something to fear.

Many years later and through hardship and significant loss, Angie's rational understandings of God didn't fit any longer. She desired more, and the memory of her first experience informed her that there was more to living a life of faith. Scripture also promised an abundant life. She wondered if an experiential relationship with God was possible or if it was, after all, just a myth. But even in her wondering, Angie held that first experience deeply in the core of her being. It wasn't something she could walk away from, so she held the possibility of a place of reality as worth reconsidering. Maybe there

was more to a life of spirituality, a life that matched the love and acceptance she had experienced so many years before.

An Invitation

Following the invitation to transformation is a lifelong journey. Humankind craves relief from the pain experienced in life, but we are usually either unaware of what actually ails us, or the idea of wholeness, even though inviting, is viewed as too much work.⁷ The lack of wholeness is the gap between what we hold to be true, our beliefs, and what we experience in our life, our reality; this is what needs healing.⁸ Our desire for wholeness along with either a lack of self-awareness, not knowing what to do, or the inability or unwillingness to change leaves us trying to fill our desires with what we can find. Sometimes we are even unaware that things could be different. We only know what we know.

Many yearn for more in their relationship with God, but it seems that the very thing they desire is out of their reach. This yearning is the beginning of the journey.⁹ Nevertheless, rationally thinking about God does not meet our desire to go deeper. Even though we espouse a relational view of God, the thought of actually experiencing God in relationship may bring us to a place of fear. We believe in God, but we often relate to

⁷ David G Benner, *Spirituality and The Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 37.

⁸ Benner, *Spirituality and The Awakening Self*, 71.

⁹ Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism & Other Essays* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 20.

God as more of a Santa Claus, dictator, superhero, or other kind of distant figurehead who looks more like how we view the world than how Jesus lived in the Gospel accounts.

This research will demonstrate that discovering and following the path of Christian mysticism enhances our capacity as humans to recognize and respond to the movements of God throughout our life and the world. Through the examples of Christian mystics, we discover we are not limited to only rational ways of knowing, but rather an expansiveness which integrates our experience and imagination. They invite wonder, curiosity, and humility, so necessary for an authentic and vulnerable relationship with God that incorporates all of our life experiences and deepest longing.

Yet walking this path is often fraught with uncertainty, leading to fear. A quick Google search turns up many reasons to fear mysticism. The results list blogs cautioning against mysticism due to a lack of holding to Scripture, following an internal voice, separating from the world, or too much navel-gazing.¹⁰ Much of the mystics' writings from the past sound confusing and even give credence to the fearful warnings of well-meaning Christian leaders.¹¹ Yet, when we can open up to an experiential relationship with God, how we live our lives and understand the world is transformed and God's beautiful creation becomes vividly real, and waiting for the afterlife becomes insufficient.¹²

¹⁰ Kevin DeYoung, "The Dangers of Mysticism," *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/dangers-of-mysticism/>; Sam Storms, "10 Things You Should Know about Mysticism - Bible Study," accessed May 19, 2020, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/10-things-you-should-know-about-mysticism.html>.

¹¹ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 75.

¹² Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, Reprint edition (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 57.

Discontent & Desire

Through interviews with participants of current spiritual formation groups and courses, I discovered many who shared the same story as noted through Angie's life. They spoke of their desire for something beyond what they had known previously through their individual church community's teaching of doctrine. One person, in particular, spoke to the feeling of being drawn to more, knowing there was more beyond her current experience and understanding. Many felt their lived faith, their old way of understanding things, did not fit their current reality. A couple of others who had spiritual experiences were either discounted or rejected by others when they shared their experiences. They discovered their faith communities were not open to an experiential relationship with God. Some expressed closing down the opening for an experiential relationship, while others stopped sharing their experiences. They spoke of feeling isolated and stuck. As they continued to share their stories in our meeting together, the theme of wanting more and not belonging was consistent.¹³

The apparent discontent and unmet desire of these participants is also evident in the literature on the topic of spiritual growth and formation. The problem in many churches is the belief that justification, being saved, is all that is necessary. The knowledge of going to heaven does not, in reality, help us live a full and abundant life. People want more than the emptiness they have known when more is promised.¹⁴

¹³ Interviews with Boldly Loved groups, March 11-15, 2019.

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation," in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 59.

Barriers

The rational understanding of literalism, so prevalent in conservative American Christianity, can get in the way of living an experiential relationship with God. Many assume that defending the literal understanding of Scripture defends God's existence. If a literal understanding of Scripture is dismissed, the implied result is discovering God is not real. There is little thought about how this understanding defines one's image of God.¹⁵

Analyzing Scripture as only a source of information without allowing it to open us in new ways to God presents a great danger.¹⁶ It limits a person's experience of God to something controlled and contrived by us instead of opening us to our own invitation to live our spirituality with a God who truly loves us. It becomes about what we think *about* God instead of an experiential relationship *with* God.

The beliefs we hold are necessary as we understand and engage with the world, for they provide containers for how we understand, how we behave, and what we value. We make meaning by forming narratives to help us make sense of the way we experience the world. These narratives are our own way of forming a subjective understanding of reality. Realizing the subjective nature of the stories we tell ourselves also allows for humility as we hold space for others in their own ways of making meaning.¹⁷ When a static belief system defines our reality, however, our worldview often works against us,

¹⁵ Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 44.

¹⁶ Christopher Hall, "Reading Christ into the Heart: The Theological Foundations of Lectio Divina," in *Life in the Spirit*, 143.

¹⁷ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 109, 111.

for it constrains our capacity to make sense and meaning of new and changing experiences and often becomes self-defeating in our life journey.

Understanding our story within the constraints of literalism and static rational truth may provide a sense of certainty, but can lack the vitality of a life lived with God. Understanding our story from a place of humility and vulnerability, potentially not having the complete answers, leads us to freely live an abundant life of faith.¹⁸ Realizing our image of God cannot contain all of who God is provides the capacity, resilience, and vulnerability that leads to life and an intimate relationship with God. We discover God in our ordinary lives as God rarely changes our circumstances but enters into our present experience of life to invite us to more.¹⁹ To live this ordinary life with God well requires being awake to ourselves without judgment or excuse. Letting go of our judgments and excuses, of either ourselves or others, is the lifelong journey of transformation.

As we engage in this process of transformation, it is crucial to recognize our worldview, the lens we use to understand the world, God, and ourselves in it. How we understand the character of God is based on childhood definitions, life experiences, and our communities. In this journey we then discover that our worldview is dynamic and will change and change again. Here lies the invitation of discovering more and being restored. “The journey into God is a journey of restoration of the unique self that we are—the self that was created in the image and likeness of God and which, from eternity,

¹⁸ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 151.

¹⁹ Ibid., 173–74.

has had our name. It is a restoration of the whole person to a knowing of love of God and our self-in-God.”²⁰

Spirituality

“Spirituality..., is not a law to be obeyed, but a presence to be seized, undergone, and given flesh to.”²¹ It is a perspective on life and a gift solely from God.²² We experience a relationship with God in the ordinary rhythms of our life. In this giving and receiving flow of love, even in the midst of suffering and grief, we experience what spiritual writers define as the flow of God moving in and through us.²³ This flow is what sustains us in the midst of all of life’s circumstances.

Navigating this conversation requires considering basic terms such as *soul* and *spirit*. Some spiritual writers define the term *soul* to include our spirit, emotions, and mind. Others include our physical self, our body, in the mix.²⁴ Thinking in terms of these parts of ourselves gives the impression that a soul, spirit, mind, or body is something we possess. This understanding allows us to compartmentalize pieces of ourselves in our

²⁰ Benner, *Spirituality and The Awakening Self*, 83.

²¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Reissue edition (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 107.

²² Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 165; Kelly Kapic, “Evangelical Holiness Assumptions in John Owen’s Theology of Christian Spirituality,” in *Life in the Spirit*, 100.

²³ Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 101.

²⁴ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*, Kindle (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2014), 39.

lived theology. It opens the possibility for shutting down parts of ourselves, even to the point of parts being shameful and deserving punishment, often leading to asceticism.²⁵

From a psychological perspective, Benner defines both the spirit and the soul as ways of being and not as distinct parts of ourselves. We do not possess a spirit or a soul. “We are spirit, we are soul, we are body.”²⁶ Each of these labels speak to a way we live life, instead as parts of ourselves they can be understood as dimensions of our individual and communal experience of being human. Following this way of defining these terms invites us to live integrated lives instead of isolating parts of our inner worlds.

Both of these understandings of spirit and soul as either parts or ways of living are different lenses to understand how we experience life. Both are helpful as we navigate this discussion of the inner workings of spirituality and the self. Having two perspectives both allows us to see how people understand themselves and grants us a more complete picture of the whole. In one way, seeing soul and spirit as parts allows us to focus on each individually, and viewing them as the way we live life allows a holistic view of ourselves and others.

Continuing deeper with Benner’s understanding, the soul is the “reflective space that transforms events into meaningful experience.”²⁷ If the soul is where we learn to hold our experiences and make meaning of our world, then the invitation is to enter into living a whole life with depth and passion. In order for us to live grounded in this way,

²⁵ David Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 42.

²⁶ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 42.

²⁷ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 137.

we must learn to interact with our soul.²⁸ If our soul is the place where we reflect on our experience, making meaning for ourselves, then interacting with our soul requires being attentive to this process without judgment. The invitation is to truly listen to our internal emotions, thoughts, reactivity, and response non-judgmentally, in order to understand what is going on beneath the surface. As we interact with our soul, spending time listening to ourselves without spending the energy judging by our or another's expectations, we can become integrated and whole. From this grounded place we discover new power and vision for what lies ahead.²⁹

Our spirit, on the other hand, is a dynamic force infused by our yearning for more than the circumstances of our experience.³⁰ This dynamic force is the passion that propels us into life. These longings and desires seem dangerous. They take us out of the safety of what we know. Yet, often, we yearn for more, and that yearning continues to move us forward.³¹ These aching longings, our desires, can feel like an “unquenchable fire” at the “core of our being,” a “fundamental life energy.” Freud called it *eros* which includes our sexuality and goes beyond the basic biological understanding, so that we can grasp it as a source that vitalizes us.³² Some define this type of energy as sublimated sexuality; however, limiting this energy to our biological sexual drive limits our understanding of

²⁸ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 121.

²⁹ Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Journals: Varieties of Religious Experiences Among Friends* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pubns, 1996), 5.

³⁰ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 137.

³¹ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

living a holistic spiritual life. Our understanding of spirituality as more than a biological sexual drive allows us to respond to our aching longings of connecting to more.³³

Defining humankind as being created in the image of God, the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26-27), allows us to put this argument into perspective. The question then becomes: How do we define the God in whose image we are created? Viewing God through the perspective of the Trinity, pictured in Andrei Rublev's 15th century icon (Appendix B), illustrates the relationality of God, or the *perichoresis*. This mystery of the Trinity refers to "an indwelling of mutual love, cleaving together, dancing around."³⁴ *Perichoresis*, a Greek theatre term, means "circle dance." The Cappadocian Fathers (including Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory Nazianzen) used this term to define the character of God as relational and communal.³⁵ The icon shows three persons of God; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of the faces holds a submissive physical deference to one another as their heads are bowed around a circular table. Defining the Triune God as this giving and receiving flow of love in a mutual relationship, instead of the Western hierarchical understanding often taught in churches, impacts how we view God, ourselves, and the world.

Within this view, sin is defined as a break in relationship and arises from a more Jewish understanding in contrast to a Greek behavioral understanding of "missing the

³³ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 17.

³⁴ Lisa Graham McMinn, *Sexuality and Holy Longing: Embracing Intimacy in a Beautiful, Broken World*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 8.

³⁵ Richard Rohr, "A Circle Dance," *Center for Action and Contemplation* (blog), February 27, 2017, <https://cac.org/a-circle-dance-2017-02-27/>.

mark.”³⁶ This makes sense given a relational view of God and Love. When we view God as relational and see that as part of the basis of who we are—as created in the *imago Dei*—we see how this intentional design drives us. Our own spirit, the *eros* energy, propels us toward healing the divides in us and around us. This is a movement toward wholeness, a reconciliation between God and human, within ourselves, human to human, and human to creation.

“The absence of desire means the absence of spiritual life.”³⁷ A healthy spirituality recognizes, allows, and accepts our desires and passionate longings and integrates them into our ordinary lives. Such integration originates from emptiness, a longing for something more, and does not come from a satisfied place.³⁸ Allowing ourselves to sit with the dissonance of this longing, without satisfying the emptiness too quickly, leads to the transformation toward wholeness and discovering our true self, our *imago Dei*, and God.³⁹ It is in these relationships where we can meet our desire to see and be seen, to know and be known, and to love and be loved.

In our desire for continued connection, our spirit invites us to look beyond ourselves to the cosmos and our soul translates what we experience to our ordinary life. This journey offers an invitation to allow ourselves to enter the flow of life that is outside our control. Our soul is the place that allows us to live life in the present and not in the past or the dreams or fears held for our future. The invitation is to discover in silence a

³⁶ Joseph Rhymer, “Jewish and Christian Understandings of Sin,” *New Blackfriars* 70, no. 832 (1989): 467–75, Wiley Online Library.

³⁷ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*, 15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁹ Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 225.

union and peace with God which allows an inward peace, secure, and with new knowledge and power.⁴⁰ We can live right here and right now. We can learn to live life in this flow of Love.

Becoming all of who we can be in the present is a natural spiritual desire forming the ground of the spiritual journey. “Any spirituality that does not emerge out of this soil will always lack soulfulness and will consequently remain too ethereal to be truly transformational.”⁴¹ It is in this idea of spirituality, being connected in relationship, that we live our life relating to what is transcendent to us.⁴²

Yet, we can only respond and understand what we experience in life from what we already believe or see as truth. We only know what we know. Our consciousness mediates how we perceive our experiences. So how we relate to or understand God is formed in our current developmental stage. A child understands God as a parent and as we mature our understanding offers an invitation to maturity, to an adult relationship with God. This maturing or awakening in our spiritual development occurs any time we become aware of realities outside of “our present self-organization.”⁴³

By giving consent to this opening within us, we welcome greater freedom and wholeness. Our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world around us expands. The only thing required is our consent, an active *yes* to join in the dance with God.

⁴⁰ Brinton, *Quaker Journals*, 4.

⁴¹ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 125.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 156.

Defining Christian Mysticism

In this section, we will delve a little deeper into a variety of definitions and historical uses of the term *mysticism*. One important component to consider is contemplative prayer, often described as an entrance into a mystical journey. Contemplation or contemplative prayer always points one to the love of God.⁴⁴ Walter Burghardt defines contemplation as a “long, loving look at the real.”⁴⁵ The Cloud of Unknowing speaks of centering prayer as a “naked intent for God.”⁴⁶ Being immersed in God as love opens us to God’s work of creating a new heart, a new creation in us from the inside out (Ezekiel 36:26).⁴⁷ This invitation to the mystical life is offered in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5:8).”⁴⁸

Historical Use of the Language of Mystery

In ancient Greek thought, the mystical ones (*hoi mystai*) were those who were initiated in the secret rites of mystery religions or cults. When Philo of Alexandria (c.20 BCE-c.50 CE) combined this Greek understanding with a Jewish one, the word’s meaning expanded to include an allegorical interpretation of Scripture. It was not about

⁴⁴ Carl McColman, *Answering the Contemplative Call: First Steps on the Mystical Path* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2013), xiv.

⁴⁵ Walter Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. George W Traub (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 91.

⁴⁶ Carmen Acevedo Butcher, trans, *The Cloud of Unknowing: With the Book of Privy Counsel*, 1st edition, (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 24.

⁴⁷ Kevin G Culligan and Regis Jordan, *Carmel and Contemplation: Transforming Human Consciousness* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), xvi.

⁴⁸ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 74.

rituals needing to remain secret, but redefined as the continual revelation of the hidden meaning of God's Word handed down through Scripture. The Church Fathers continued to follow this understanding as they used Christ as a means to unlock the meaning of the Hebrew text for the Christian faith.⁴⁹ Beyond Scripture, mysticism was understood to include a spiritual connection to the sacred mystery through the sacraments, such as the Eucharist and baptism.⁵⁰ Their broadened understanding of mystery opened mystical experiences from being exclusively for the elites or the chosen ones, to an invitation for all.⁵¹

In the fifth century, Pseudo-Dionysius, a Syrian monk, was the first person to use the term *mystica* in writing a letter to a disciple, offering practical instruction about a hidden discourse with God.⁵² This took the understanding of mysticism beyond the interpretation of Scripture to include mystical contemplation, which permitted one to know God by divine darkness, or unknowing.⁵³ William Johnson quotes St. John of the Cross: "In contemplation God teaches the soul very quietly and secretly, without its knowing how, without the sound of words, and without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty, in silence and quietude, in darkness to all sensory and natural things. Some spiritual persons call this contemplation knowing by unknowing."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Harvey D Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), xxi.

⁵⁰ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 26.

⁵¹ Dennis E. Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 8.

⁵² Jeffrey P Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 92; Emilie Griffin, *Wonderful and Dark Is This Road: Discovering the Mystic Path* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004), 6.

⁵³ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, xxi.

⁵⁴ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 6.

Scripture offers a basis for a mystical understanding of living out a spiritual life of faith. “The mystical truth of the New Testament is that we are in a union with Jesus that takes us beyond every kind of ego-centered relationship with him.”⁵⁵ Jesus speaks about union with God in his prayer requesting that we would be one with God as Jesus is one with the Father (John 17:20-23). When we can abide in this kind of relationship with God, we can let go of fighting to be seen or right. Without the basis of an experiential faith, we are tempted to reside in a kind of fundamentalism by which we control ourselves and others by through behavior management. Fundamentalism is a part of every religion and can leave one’s faith in “arrested development.”⁵⁶

Paul experienced this kind of transformation on the Damascus road. An experiential encounter with Christ thwarted his fundamental understanding and opened him to love, even for those outside of Judaism, the Gentiles (Acts 9). Peter fell asleep and encountered a vision from God, which opened him to enter Cornelius’s home and embrace his faith, another outsider of Judaism (Acts 10). These are just a few of many stories of God-encounters that drew people to a broader understanding of God, which led to greater inclusivity of those around them.

Contemporary Definitions

Experts in the field of study about mysticism offer a variety of definitions containing the individual components that are necessary to be regarded as a mystic.

⁵⁵ Laurence Freeman, *Jesus, The Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 38.

⁵⁶ Freeman, *Jesus, The Teacher Within*, 38.

Johnston simply defines mysticism as “nothing but a living of the Gospel at a deep level of consciousness.”⁵⁷ Nuth shares this definition:

Mystical experience involves an intense awareness of God’s presence, accompanied by a knowledge and love of God that are recognized as extraordinary. Such awareness is difficult to put into words, and often results in a dramatic transformation in the one who receives it. Like every experience of grace, mystical experience is attributed to the utterly gratuitous love of God. It is not the result of any purely human activity, although it can be desired, petitioned, and even prepared for to some degree.⁵⁸

King defines a mystic as “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.”⁵⁹

McGinn, a known scholar of Christian mysticism, defines “mysticism as the part, or element, of Christian belief and practice that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of what the mystics themselves have described as a direct and transformative presence of God.”⁶⁰ He further emphasizes that mysticism is better defined as a “mystical life,” because it is a process or journey to God and is not only a brief moment in life. One who follows this journey prepares for the intervention of God in ordinary life. The goal is union with God, or as some would emphasize, experiencing the transformative Presence of God.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 9.

⁵⁸ Joan M Nuth, *God’s Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 14–15.

⁵⁹ King, *Christian Mystics*, 3.

⁶⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, Modern Library pbk. ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2006), xiv.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xiv–xv.

A Quaker understanding of a mystic is one who “cultivated, with strenuous care and discipline, a soul attuned to the ‘still small voice’ of the living Christ.”⁶² William Penn held that this mystical awareness in the inner life was the internal place of hope for both humankind and the world. We often seek answers in the external world for solutions to the crises we face, but the hope for healing and our survival lies in our internal journey.⁶³ Rufus Jones was only interested in an understanding of Christian mysticism that impacted the external world. Also, it needed to be biblically sound, Christ-centered, intellectually sound, and service-oriented.⁶⁴ Another Quaker, Thomas Kelly, stated that Christian mysticism had to be both grounded in solitude and a concern for the world.⁶⁵

My Definition

For the sake of this work, this is my definition: *Christian mysticism, at God's invitation, is a journey of experientially knowing the God defined as Love. This journey leads to a knowing that is underneath the surface of rational thought and includes and transforms the whole self: body, mind, and spirit. Those on the journey are transformed from the inside out, which opens them to a broader consciousness of God, themselves, and the world.*

⁶² James R Newby, *Reflections from the Light of Christ: Five Quaker Classics* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1980), xiv.

⁶³ Newby, 12; William Penn, *The Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers* (Philadelphia: H. Perkins, 1838), 23.

⁶⁴ Newby, *Reflections from the Light of Christ*, 71; Rufus Jones, *Practical Christianity*, New and Enlarged Ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The John C Winston Co., 1905), 83–85, Google Books.

⁶⁵ Newby, *Reflections from the Light of Christ*, 103; Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1966), 15.

Conclusion

As human beings, we are spiritual beings. It is part of the way we have been designed as created in the *imago Dei*. Yet, we often do not understand our spirituality or how it is linked to our desire for more than what we have known. The promise of an abundant life seems far-fetched to many walking and living the Christian faith. Many yearn for more without the hope of ever being met in their desire.

Our spirituality, when defined through the relationality of God, in the Trinity, is seen in our desire to be connected through relationship. Often our rational understanding of faith as “right belief” and a literal understanding of Scripture can form a barrier to living an experiential spirituality. Christian mystics, through history and in contemporary society, write about these kinds of encounters with God. However, the fear and misunderstandings surrounding mysticism in many Christian churches do not allow these great teachers to show the possibility or the way of encountering God.

But the yearning for more and the desire of being connected to ourselves, God, and one another continues. In the next section, I will share some of the ways that the church and society have attempted to meet this natural desire for more. Some of the responses are helpful and some continue to create divisions, even though each of them is well intended by those who try to meet this deep hunger of the ones they walk alongside.

SECTION 2: ALTERNATIVE RESPONSES TO DESIRE

As we consider our spiritual yearning for more in our relationship with God, we discover varied responses by individuals and communities trying to meet that yearning. In this section we will discuss the ways we try to define and meet this yearning both inside and outside the church context. Some of these ways are helpful and others are not. I propose we add the life stories and writings of the mystics to this array as an opening to deeper spiritual formation.

Part of the work is to recognize the misidentification and misdirection of our internal yearning and the yearning in those around us. This requires silence, stillness, and patience; however, we as a society expect instant gratification and productivity, so delaying long enough to follow the root of our discomfort is not a valued or realized practice. We enjoy the process of desiring much more than the actual meeting of our desire. In fact, desire is only noticed when it is unmet.⁶⁶ Within our capitalistic economic system, we try to fulfill our desires—usually our social desires of identity and belonging—by consuming more stuff. If we can wait, we will discover more about who we are and how we relate to the world. Letting go of the tension of holding the dissonance we feel and allowing our yearning to remain unsatisfied long enough allows the transformative inner work to open our yearning to be more fully realized and met.⁶⁷

It can be difficult to hold our unmet desires without resolving them. As mentioned earlier, our desire is for connection, either within ourselves, with God, or with those

⁶⁶ Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 119.

⁶⁷ Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 221, 225.

around us. When we do not reflect deeply on what ails us, we tend to numb our experience through activity (work, play, sleep) or by self-medication, trying to meet the recognized symptom without realizing what is underneath the surface. When this is our pattern, we are only applying a band aid and not allowing an inner healing toward wholeness to be realized.

Throughout society are numerous means of trying to meet the conscious and unconscious desires for ourselves and those we walk alongside. The church navigates meeting individuals through their understanding of God shaped by the doctrine around which they have formed and shared beliefs. Outside of a religious worldview, society tries to meet this desire for more through psychology or self-help books.

The writings of the Christian mystics offer another avenue for discovering a relational understanding of God. Many have written books about mystics, including portions of their stories and excerpts of their writings. In addition to others' writings about them, the original mystics' writings in modern translations are available as well.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the average church attender is often unaware of these rich resources.

The Church's Response

The Church recognizes the desire for more and throughout history has tried to meet the presented need through rational and behavioral approaches. Of course, the approaches are held within the theological understandings of God in the context of their doctrinal beliefs. The church has long used discipleship as a method to walk alongside

⁶⁸ "Classics of Western Spirituality," Paulist Press, accessed August 4, 2020, Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

those newer in their faith teaching them the “right” way to believe. In the process, participants are introduced to small groups as a helpful way to build community, an important component of growing spiritually.

But if our basis for understanding God is through a rational lens, making sure that we memorize Bible verses and try to behave correctly, we will not necessarily show up vulnerably or understand the true loving gaze of God. We tend to force correct thoughts and behaviors upon ourselves and then enforce that same understanding on others. As we act out these understandings, we push those who are different from us outside of our community. This does not bring the desired result of an abundant life for any involved. Due to this perceived and experienced emptiness in Christianity, many have left the church to discover wholeness and understanding elsewhere. They are looking for the same kind of life that the historical Jesus exemplified in life: seeing and being with the oppressed.

Much of Evangelicalism rejects silence, solitude, and reflection and deems it dangerous. They warn that when we quiet our minds to listen, we can too easily be deceived by Satan or our own emotions. One training, offered by Campus Crusade for Christ states that our emotions are like a caboose. They belong at the end of the train and not in the position of the engine, our rational mind.⁶⁹ When our emotions do not line up with what we rationally know, we are thinking incorrectly.⁷⁰ The answer is to know our identity in Christ and stand in what we rationally know by not listening to the part that

⁶⁹ “Personal Follow Up: Your New Life (Reformatted) | Cru,” Cru.org, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/beginning-with-god/personal-follow-up-your-new-life-reformatted.html>.

⁷⁰ David Eckman and Tim Rule, *The Immersion Experience*, Second Edition (Meridian, ID: Aphesis Group Ministries, n.d.), 191.

doesn't buy into this truth.⁷¹ This kind of teaching contributes to living divided lives, judging our heart and emotions as evil and our rational mind as good.

In his early writings, Dallas Willard, a renowned teacher who led the way in bringing the topic of spiritual formation to Evangelical Christianity, warned against following our desires. He seemed to link our dying to self as discounting, ignoring, and negating our desires.⁷² When we discount what is going on internally, ignoring our suffering to experience only the good things in life, we miss the transformational experience offered by embracing our suffering.

Paul speaks to this transformational work in the book of Romans:

'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not *be conformed* to this world, but *be transformed* by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2, NRSV, emphasis mine).

Notice how Paul uses passive language with the instruction to not *be conformed* to the world but to *be transformed*. St. Teresa of Avila shared a helpful image for this inner journey using a wax seal. She stated that the wax isn't able to impress the seal upon itself or even to soften itself, it can only remain where it is placed, quiet and consenting. She compared that to a soul, willingly embracing this inner work.⁷³

In this understanding, we do not “arrive,” but we grow deeper into our relationship with God and in a growing awareness of ourselves. This inner journey isn't

⁷¹ Eckman and Rule, *The Immersion Experience*, 167.

⁷² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ*, Anniversary edition (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 66.

⁷³ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (First Start Publishing eBook, 2012), 50.

one we can climb up to, but we fall into.⁷⁴ It is a journey that comes from a desire that God has for each of us, awakens in us, and meets within us. As we engage in silence, solitude, and reflection, the Spirit opens us from the inside out, rather than a rational, outside-in approach. This allows an invitational, non-hierarchical understanding of God represented in Rublev's Trinity Icon (Appendix B).

Most of the people I have worked with have not experienced this relational and open understanding of God in their churches' teaching. One of the most important steps they embark on is to relate to God in this loving approach instead of in the hierarchical understanding that is often taught. So much of this hierarchical teaching comes from reading Scripture within our own cultural lens outside of the context of the original culture. When we read Scripture from more of a relational understanding of God or a loving God, it changes the way we relate to God, ourselves, and one another. As we trust God is most certainly a God of love without us having to prove our worthiness, we can love those around us with that same openness.

Spiritual Formation

Some churches have started to embrace spiritual formation as a means of walking alongside people in their relationship with God. This approach allows for more of a relational understanding of God and a holistic view of humanity. It brings into context more ways we relate to ourselves, God, and those around us.

Greenman defines spiritual formation as "our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy

⁷⁴ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 74.

Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.”⁷⁵ It is imperative to note it involves a human consent to God’s invitation, the continual *yes* along this journey.⁷⁶ In it, we engage a process to discover and know our true self, who we have always been created to be, our *imago Dei*, while surrendering our false self, who we desire to be.⁷⁷ For example, we may pretend to be kind because that is how we understand we need to interact in the world but underneath we are covering up our understanding that we are naturally unkind. If we allow ourselves to know our true self, our *imago Dei*, then living out a practice of kindness comes from our real identity of being made in God’s image.

Another significant noticing is that this process of discovery is not self-generated, but a response to the invitation of the Spirit. As we continually respond to this invitation, it is “primarily a matter of cultivating an intimate relationship with the Triune God.”⁷⁸ God invites us. Both the invitation and our being received in the giving and receiving flow of love are all by God’s grace. In it, we enter “a process of allowing our self to establish deep roots in the truth of who we, in reality, are, a process in which we consent to our becoming a larger and more authentic self rather than fashioning that self in the shape of whom we want to be seen to be.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Jeffrey P Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classical Issues, Contemporary Challenges,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 24.

⁷⁶ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation,” in *Life in the Spirit*, 46.

⁷⁷ Benner, *Spirituality and The Awakening Self*, 130.

⁷⁸ Jeffrey P Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classical Issues, Contemporary Challenges,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 24.

⁷⁹ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 130.

Greenman's definition, based in a Christian lens, speaks to the Triune God's invitation, cruciformity toward a likeness of Christ, and the flow of the Spirit. We have the historical Jesus as the visible image of this unseen God's heart toward humanity (Col. 1:15). Paul, continuing in Colossians, shares more about the Cosmic Christ,

for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. Everything is in Christ and Christ is in all things (Col 1:16-17; 19-20, NRSV).

Some of the essential components for spiritual formation include the following:

Creating Space for Silence and Solitude. The space for self-reflection and experiencing God requires intentionality to allow the process of transformation in silence (quieting the rational mind) and solitude (stilling the outer chaos). *The Cloud of Unknowing* speaks about this intentionality as a “naked intent for God,”⁸⁰ and encourages the reader to allow the stirring of love to be the impetus to the journey.⁸¹

Embracing Both Joy and Suffering. As we experience both joy and suffering, we are invited to notice the barriers that tend to block the giving and receiving flow of God's love. These barriers or gaps between our beliefs (what we hold true about God, ourselves, and those around us), and the realities of our inner life need to be healed.⁸²

⁸⁰ Carmen Acevedo Butcher, trans, *The Cloud of Unknowing: With the Book of Privy Counsel*, 1st edition, (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 24.

⁸¹ Ibid., 21.

⁸² Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 70.

Noticing without judgment allows us to hold the tension, without resolving it prematurely, to allow the transformation.⁸³

Showing Up in Vulnerable Community. This work—of becoming all we are created to be—is only done in community. “In Paul’s theology the presence of the Spirit is the reality of God’s personal presence in the midst of [God’s] people.”⁸⁴ Our transformational journey happens in an individual relationship with God and in community. We experience God’s relational flow of love amid people. Authentic transformation cannot fully happen outside of community.

Spiritual formation at its best involves a reciprocal dynamic between gathering and scattering, contemplation and action, silence and speech, being and doing, receiving and giving. Outward-focused spiritual disciplines such as hospitality and “works of mercy” complement inward focused disciplines. In the words of Elizabeth O’Connor, “Just as we are committed to being on an inward journey for all of time, so we are committed to being on an outward journey, so that the inner and the outer become related to one another and one has meaning for the other and helps to make the other possible.”⁸⁵

Engaging the Other. Not only does authentic transformation happen inside community, it also impacts one’s view of humanity. The invitation of spiritual formation is evident in an increased capacity of love for God, self, and others.⁸⁶ Our formation is for the sake of the world without striving toward making that happen. As we notice through

⁸³ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Reissue edition (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 221, 225.

⁸⁴ Willard, “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation,” 41.

⁸⁵ Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective,” 27; Elizabeth O’Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 28.

⁸⁶ David Gushee, “Spiritual Formation and the Sanctity of Life,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 214.

the gift of the incarnation that every human life matters, there is “that of God” in everyone, we allow ourselves to see the face of God in the other.⁸⁷

Yet, even in embracing the thought of spiritual formation in our churches, the way we navigate the conversation is always held within our doctrinal beliefs. It cannot help but be so given that our beliefs shape how we view God, ourselves, and the world. We all start somewhere, and doctrine provides us a starting place. But if the spiritual formation programs used in our churches are based in strictly held doctrinal beliefs, we limit the freedom of encountering a God larger than we have known. As we encounter God, we begin to form and hold questions that are larger than our current understanding and context. A church or community needs to allow the freedom to engage and hold those questions and allow the uncomfortable dissonance of not finding a full and sound answer. When we struggle to hold the mystery of not knowing, we limit God to the current doctrinal box we hold.

Opening to a fuller understanding of God encompassing more than we knew continues to open us to more of God. This is the invitation of the mystics: opening ourselves to more of God, ourselves, and the world. The mystics show us the possibility of more and different ways of living out our spirituality. Reading their stories within the context of their historical time reveals the movement of God through time and through specific people of God, holding the unanswerable questions of faith, resting in the mystery of unknowing, and becoming transformed in the process. This allows the possibility for the reader to become curious to more for themselves.

⁸⁷ Gushee, “Spiritual Formation and the Sanctity of Life,” 215, 222, 226.

The World's Response

Many have left the institutional Church due to its inability to live up to their expectations to provide guidance as they seek more in their life. Many young people have left because the churches they grew up in do not align with their current understanding of the world. The ostracization of the LGBTQ+ community and the devaluing of women's contributions and gifts both lie outside of many younger Americans' views of acceptability. In addition, the discounting of science and the uncovering of moral and sexual scandal and the misappropriation of funds lead to a distrust of the institutional church. Some understand their own spirituality outside of the religious context they were raised in. The church is viewed as the empty shell of religion because of many churches' inadequacy to teach about a spiritual relationship with God that seems to matter in real life.⁸⁸

Many who consider themselves spiritual but not religious discover that the biggest loss for them in leaving the church is community. They discover they can read books on spirituality and engage in meditation but lack the natural community offered by the church.⁸⁹ Given how much they have grown personally in their relationship with God, they find that they become less comfortable in their old communities of faith. They find new communities in Meet Ups, local groups of like-minded people to gather and do an activity together, dance lessons, happy hours, or neighborhood gatherings. But in these other arenas, it's often difficult to talk about spiritual things or go deep in conversations.

⁸⁸ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*, 68.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Those outside of the church context teach meditation as a means to relax and ground oneself. There are three different basic groups of meditation taught both inside and outside Christianity and in nonreligious settings. One can focus on a specific thing such as breath or a simple mantra. Another option would be to pay attention to the ebb and flow of thoughts and emotions without attaching to anything noticed. The third approach is by way of surrender, releasing anything that is noticed. The goal is inner stillness and an expanded awareness.⁹⁰ A continual practice of meditation, or often called contemplation in the Christian tradition, leads us to a “path from ordinary awareness to spiritual awareness, from a knowing about things to a knowing of them.”⁹¹

Due to the helpfulness of meditation recognized first in Eastern Spirituality, psychologists teach mindfulness as a path of greater awareness of ourselves and our unconscious to help relieve patients of recurring anxiety. In this approach we see the same desires or drive for connection understood through Christianity and our discussion of spirituality. Some would critique this psychological approach, meditation without God, as a means of opening our inner selves up to danger. Often, the church warns against these practices and connects them to contemplative prayer.

The mystics speak about meditation as a means to be found in our “center – by the Spirit of God – and there in truly find our self.”⁹² When we trust that there is God in each of us, we can trust God to lead us to the awareness that we are in God’s presence and that we can find that God meets us there, wherever we are. When we can trust that is true, we

⁹⁰ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 224–26.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁹² *Ibid.*

can trust that God will meet others where they are as well. The mystics show us how this is both a possibility and the way forward.

Julian of Norwich, overwhelmed by the severe struggle and death so evident around her in England during the fourteenth century, asked to know why a God of love allowed so much suffering. She related through her writing that God showed her a hazelnut in God's hands and stated that "it is all that is made."⁹³ As she reflected on this experience with God, she understood that God loves all that is made and felt comfort that everything God made was completely in God's care. When God later shared that "all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well,"⁹⁴ she could trust the God of those words with all of her and all those around her.

Other Avenues to Discover the Christian Mystics

There are various resources to discover more about Christian mystics and our own desires for more in our relationship with God. Some of the available resources are strictly academic in their approach to mystical theology such as William Johnston⁹⁵ and Bernard McGinn.⁹⁶ These are both renowned scholars studying the topic in depth, but may be unapproachable for many outside academia. In addition, John Tyson provides an ecumenical anthology, a 474-page book describing a small amount of background along

⁹³ Julian of Norwich, *Showing of Love*, trans. Julia Bolton Holloway (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 8–9.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 37.

⁹⁵ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*.

⁹⁶ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*; Patricia Ferris McGinn and Bernard McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 2003).

with original texts from mystics throughout history starting with Ignatius of Antioch through Desmond Tutu.⁹⁷ Egan offers another anthology, a 700-page text listing a few pages of background with original texts ranging from biblical mysticism, Origen through Karl Rahner.⁹⁸ Both of these texts cover a broad range of time, 2,000 years, and include original texts from 76 and 56 individual mystics respectively. These two texts are large compilations which are academic in approach, making it more difficult to engage for those outside academia.

Others, such as Ursula King⁹⁹ and Emilie Griffin,¹⁰⁰ are much more approachable but only give a basic overview of mystical understanding without the stories of the individual's lives. Griffin shares much of Evelyn Underhill's thoughts in a thematic and devotional approach while King offers a more academic and historically inclusive approach.

Richard Foster offers a typological approach in his *Streams of Living Water*,¹⁰¹ but both the stories and the available written words of the mystics are limited. Foster, along with others, does offer more depth in his *Devotional Classics* and *Spiritual Classics* texts, which are both accessible and offer greater context.¹⁰² In these compilations, he

⁹⁷ John R Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹⁸ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*.

⁹⁹ King, *Christian Mystics*.

¹⁰⁰ Griffin, *Wonderful and Dark Is This Road*.

¹⁰¹ Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*, Reprint edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001).

¹⁰² Richard J. Foster and Emilie Griffin, eds., *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines*, 1st edition (HarperOne, 2000); Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*, Revised and Expanded ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005).

offers a broader range of mystics. The background available is limited to more of the story of each particular mystic but doesn't address the cultural, social, and political context during the lives of the various mystics. Richard Schmidt also has written a book describing 33 mystics through a long span of history; it's both approachable and helpful in discovering more about various mystics.¹⁰³ Describing the cultural, social, and political context of each of the mystic's historical time helps one to understand what often comes across as weird or misunderstood in our own contexts.

Carl McColman engages a robust approach over several texts that are both readable and approachable on the topic of Christian mystics.¹⁰⁴ The first one, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism* offers a broad overview of mystical theology and spiritual practices while sharing where to find more information about specific mystics. *The Small Book of Christian Mysticism*, groups small quotes of specific mystics around certain spiritual themes. Still the individual stories, regarding the context of mystics' lives is not fully formed. Even so, his *Answering the Contemplative Call*¹⁰⁵ offers a conversational dialogue regarding one's own desire for more through contemplation. McColman shares greater insights on his blog post and podcast, *Encountering Silence*.¹⁰⁶ In addition, he offers participants experiential teachings through various online courses and retreats

¹⁰³ Richard H. Schmidt, *God Seekers: Twenty Centuries of Christian Spiritualities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

¹⁰⁴ Carl McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2010); Carl McColman, *Christian Mystics: 108 Seers, Saints, and Sages* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2016); Carl McColman, *The Little Book of Christian Mysticism: Essential Wisdom of Saints, Seers, and Sages* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2018).

¹⁰⁵ McColman, *Answering the Contemplative Call*.

¹⁰⁶ Carl McColman, "Anamchara," n.d., <https://carlmccolman.com/latest-posts/>; Carl McColman, Cassidy Hall, and Kevin Johnson, "Encountering Silence," n.d., <https://encountering Silence.com/>.

through his website. This is incredibly helpful for those who are interested in learning more about the varied mystics spoken about. Yet, McColman shared how he is labeled a heretic by those who view contemplative prayer as dangerous, which may present a pause for those seeking more.¹⁰⁷

Richard Rohr is another resource for discovering more about Christian mysticism through the Center of Action and Contemplation.¹⁰⁸ This Franciscan organization teaches courses and spiritual formation programs for those interested in learning more about spirituality and mysticism. Rohr has written several books,¹⁰⁹ blog posts, and podcasts about mysticism, and brings in teachers who share in the work: Cynthia Bourgeault,¹¹⁰ James Finley,¹¹¹ Mirabai Starr,¹¹² and Illia Delio,¹¹³ among others.

¹⁰⁷ Carl McColman, Interview by author. Zoom recording, October 30, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Rohr, "Center for Action and Contemplation," n.d., <https://cac.org/>.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning To See As the Mystics See* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2013); Richard Rohr, *Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016); Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2019); Richard Rohr, *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016); Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2016); Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2010).

¹¹¹ James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005); James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, 40th Anniversary Ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2017); James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000).

¹¹² Mirabai Starr, *God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing Co., 2012); Teresa Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2003); Mirabai Starr, trans., *Showings of Julian of Norwich: A New Translation* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2013); Mirabai Starr, *Wild Mercy: Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom of the Women Mystics* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2019).

¹¹³ Illia Delio, *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St. Francis* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011); Illia Delio, ed., *From Teilhard to Omega: Co-Creating an Unfinished Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014); Illia Delio, *The Humility of God* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005).

Another possible avenue to engage the mystics is through their own writing. But this direct approach can be confusing as their words are often in Old English or in other languages. In addition, these original writings have been edited throughout history, with some editors keeping the original Old English, or portions of it, and others translating the original words in ways a contemporary reader could understand. Even so, the original meaning is often distorted when we read them through our own cultural lens. For example, Hildegard of Bingen considered herself to be a “spiritual man.” Outside of the context of her time and place, that phrase is confusing and can be off putting. However, once the reader understands that in that time, a woman being a “spiritual man” was understood as one who was cloistered and celibate, it becomes apparent that this understanding gave her the confidence and the voice to engage both church and world leaders with letters that impacted world engagement.¹¹⁴ Providing the context allows a fuller and richer understanding of how each mystic understood themselves, God, and their invitation to engage the world.

There are many other books around Christian mysticism. Most of the texts either speak to contemplative prayer, give a brief historical context along with some of the original words of mystics, or delve deeply into one mystic. All of these are helpful ways to encounter the writings of the mystics.

Both the world and the church recognize our desire for more and offer ways to meet that desire in both helpful and unhelpful ways. Our spirituality, our desire to be connected, is part of our being human. The world offers avenues that neglect our spiritual selves, and the church often relates in a rational way that consequentially negates our

¹¹⁴ Rohr, *The Naked Now*; Rohr, *Falling Upward*.

spirituality as well. The mystics' words offer a unique invitation to an experiential relationship with God; encountering a mystic's spiritual journey allows an opening to meet the yearning we have for more.

The resources to learn more about the mystics are many and varied. Yet, I propose sharing a slightly different approach in the next section; writing a book that offers through stories both the mystics' lives and the cultural, social, and historical context of the times in which they lived. To accomplish this task, I will need to limit the number of mystics included to ten. This limits the scope covered in this book but will allow the reader to delve deeply into the discovery of our understanding of God through time. With this more in-depth context, I intend to include some of the original texts, the mystics' way of relating to God spiritually, and their contribution to humankind's continual development of thought around spirituality and God. My hope is that this introductory text will invite readers to engage more fully in the discovery of the ancient and contemporary mystics and to delve deeply into many of the works I mentioned earlier.

SECTION 3: CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM AS AN ENTRY POINT

Introduction

Christian mystics offer a unique view of an intimate relationship with God. As we have discussed, each of us, created in the *imago Dei*, desires to be connected to more than we have known. The mystics invite us to listen internally to that desire and to trust that God will meet us there. They show us the way to invite God into our ordinary lives, recognizing God's presence even in the absence of our awareness of God's closeness. As we read their writings and their stories, we are invited to more than we have known, but the information we gather is filtered by the lens through which we view God, ourselves, and the world. Our encounters with God and with the mystics nudge those understandings and invite us to allow the transformation of the belief system we hold about God toward an experiential knowing of God. For example, Howard Thurman shares how important it is to discover the God in your own heart and to face the scrutiny of that God, yet he also shares how that same place is where the Island of Peace is discovered and how terrible it is for a person to not find that place. Through his words Thurman shares an understanding of God that has greater compassion and safety than what was largely understood at that time, one of peace and safety and not one of scrutiny shaped by creed or doctrine.¹¹⁵

My proposal is to share the stories of selected mystics through Christian history from the Apostle Paul through contemporary mystics, within the social, cultural, and political context of the specific time periods in which they lived and the way each mystic

¹¹⁵ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 18.

related to God. Since I am not an expert in all these fields, the goal of this undertaking is for spiritual formation purposes, not an academic study. Including a background of the cultural, social, and political context and how that shaped each mystic in their own time, will allow the reader to understand each mystic in their context and to begin to understand how the flow of thought around God and spirituality has changed through time. Church history reveals our understandings around God have not always been the same through our history. The mystics have helped to shape our beliefs, and my hope is to open the reader to the possibility to more in their spiritual relationship with God.

In this section, I will delve more deeply into the components of mysticism, while recognizing the fears the topic uncovers. A clear background of these specific elements and how we came to discount this ancient tradition of spirituality will help to shape the context of the book I propose. Sharing the stories of the mystics is a specific way to introduce spiritual seekers to the gift of a lived-out spirituality. This section will explain how stories change the brain and uncover many of the biases in our unconscious, which opens us to more in our relationship with God. I will explore how Jesus used story to relate to those he walked alongside, and how Scripture is the means those stories are shared with us. This section will also examine mysticism in Scripture.

Components of Mysticism

In reading the writings of Christian mystics throughout history and those who have studied them, several components of Christian mysticism are consistently mentioned.

Experiential, Encounter, and Consciousness. Lacy Borgo prefers the word *encounter* to define the mystical experience of God's presence. She continued to say that

some speak to God and expect God to respond to their seeking. Others wander into a mystical encounter by accident. Borgo defined the encounter as a largely embodied knowledge of the Divine, a knowing that is more profound than exclusively rational.¹¹⁶ Merriam Webster defined the word *encounter* as being confrontational with an enemy, unexpected or face to face.¹¹⁷ The definition that closely represents the use of *encounter* for a mystical experience would be the proximity of a face-to-face, and potentially unexpected, encounter.

Many writers use the word *experience* to define this kind of encounter. Merriam Webster defines the term *experience* to include several understandings, but the one that fits this context is “something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through.” The other definitions include participating in and learning through the experience.¹¹⁸ This seems to include a broader understanding of what is often experienced by mystics when they describe their encounters with God.

McGinn prefers to use the term *consciousness* to describe the experiential encounters with the Divine. He stresses the complexity of the term *experience*, which may lead to defining mystical experiences as limited to feeling or sensible perceptions and excluding higher mental forms of understanding, judging, willing, and loving. He uses the word consciousness, “to stress that mysticism (as the mystics have insisted) is more than a matter of unusual sensations, but essentially comprises new ways of knowing

¹¹⁶ Lacy Finn Borgo, Interview by author. Zoom recording, November 4, 2019.

¹¹⁷ “Encounter,” in *Merriam Webster*, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encounter>.

¹¹⁸ “Experience,” in *Merriam Webster*, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/experience>.

and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming center of life.”¹¹⁹

God’s Presence. If God is not an object to be grasped, experiencing God is not an isolated experience. Mysticism is a journey, a lifelong journey to God. Part of the difficulty in understanding God’s presence is that it can be felt directly and unmediated. The paradox is that it is often felt through absence or negation. We may sense God’s presence through a perceived absence of God’s presence. Prayers and icons may be a starting place but those then fall away as God is felt on the “deepest and most fundamental layer of self.”¹²⁰ Exploring God through absence and negation requires courage and tenacity to follow the desire for a deeper relationship with God.¹²¹

The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* states, “You only need a naked intent for God. When you long for [God], that is enough.”¹²² Merton shares how this journey toward God is in a deep place, “faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine Light.”¹²³ As we seek after knowing God more deeply, God meets us exactly where we are and brings us deeper into a relational and intimate knowing.

Mystics write about different ways of seeing or experiencing God’s presence. Corporeal visions, or concrete visions, are experienced but are not necessary on a

¹¹⁹ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, xvi.

¹²⁰ Ibid., xv–xvi.

¹²¹ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 11.

¹²² Carmen Acevedo Butcher, trans., *The Cloud of Unknowing: With the Book of Privy Counsel*, 1st edition (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 24.

¹²³ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Reissue (New York: New Directions Books, 2007), 130.

mystic's journey. Spiritual visions, images in one's own mind, are also not a requirement but are often experienced earlier in following the desire to know God more deeply rather than later in their journey. Some mystics experience intellectual visions, immediate understandings of a concept without an image, which opens them to a greater capacity for understanding. These visions can come either ecstatically, outside of the usual way of sensing, or directly, which engages the human mind to receive the fullest it is capable of holding by God's grace.¹²⁴

Unknowning. The interiority of the mystical journey lends itself to be underneath our ability to put it into words or to even rationally know it.¹²⁵ "Since God cannot be imagined, anything our imagination tells us about [God] is ultimately misleading and therefore we cannot know [God] as [God] really is unless we pass beyond everything that can be imagined and enter into an obscurity without images and without the likeness of any created thing."¹²⁶ We think we can speak of God, but as we experience God, we seem unable to put that experience into words, yet some mystics make an attempt.¹²⁷

Being touched by God through mystical encounters is beyond our ability to reason, express, imagine, or even clearly feel. Apophatic spirituality is the term several authors use to define this ineffable knowing.¹²⁸ Rolheiser uses the term *inchoate* to hold the meaning of mystical knowledge, an understanding just beginning and not fully

¹²⁴ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 165.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 162, 165.

¹²⁶ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 131.

¹²⁷ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 161.

¹²⁸ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 76.

formed or developed.¹²⁹ This understanding is communicated well in McGinn's intention of using the word consciousness, as the knowledge learned includes our whole selves; mind, spirit, and body. It is a knowing underneath our traditional understanding of ourselves, God, and the world, yet we know by faith. This ineffable knowing is a key component causing fear and distrust in those on the outskirts of a mystical understanding of God. Those who study the mystics share that they are more defined by their longing or desire than their experiences.¹³⁰

Transformative. Underhill suggests our yearning is the beginning of the journey.¹³¹ For Underhill, mysticism allowed her to move from her head, the intellectual mode she preferred, to her heart.¹³² Yet, there is still much that gets in the way of our seeking a deeper relationship.

According to the great mystics, our awareness is both reduced and clouded by self-concern, excessive preoccupation with our own agendas, and with restless distractions, and we lack the purity of heart necessary to experience any God that is not our own creation. In the mystical tradition, the road beyond practical atheism and idolatry lies in the purification of our awareness – that is, in the purging from our minds and hearts of narcissism, pragmatism, and distraction.¹³³

It is in this space of Christ-consciousness, becoming Christ-like, where one finds the true place of transformation, leading to changed behaviors. The gap between our beliefs and the realities of our inner life needs to be healed. We don't necessarily understand this in the present, but we become aware of the journey in looking back. The

¹²⁹ "Inchoate," in *Merriam Webster*, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inchoate>.

¹³⁰ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 76.

¹³¹ Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 20.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³³ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 75.

mystics teach this as spiritual theology, which is grounded in experience. As they desire to understand God, they move their minds to their hearts, and then they move to the center of their being.¹³⁴ Christian mysticism is participation in this transformational journey toward union with God in love.¹³⁵ Yet, it isn't leaving the world, but about living wholly in the world.

Mysticism is experiencing the presence of God that leaves you feeling vulnerable or naked in God's presence, as defenses and masks begin to fall away.¹³⁶ This healing of our fragmented consciousness changes everything in our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world. A mystic's true attainment is measured by the impact of their experiential relationship with God and the world.¹³⁷ Underhill claims that a true mystic reflects on their experiences and surrenders the ego; otherwise, their experience is a sham.¹³⁸

By God's Grace. Mystical theology is knowledge of God directly infused by God; it is a relational and not rational knowing.¹³⁹ It is understood as a special kind of knowledge through a passive experience with God, by God's grace, and not by human

¹³⁴ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 69–71.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 74.

¹³⁶ McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 9.

¹³⁷ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 12.

¹³⁸ Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 22.

¹³⁹ J. M. Houston and Jens Zimmerman, *Sources of the Christian Self: A Cultural History of Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 432.

effort.¹⁴⁰ Yet, both Western and Eastern traditions believe that humans can be changed in radical ways by practicing spiritual disciplines.¹⁴¹

In the literature, mysticism is often divided into three formative stages: purification, illumination, and union. Purification is a means to remove all the inner and outer obstacles through spiritual practices based in detachment, renunciation, and asceticism.¹⁴² The goal of these practices, especially as experienced through asceticism and monasticism, is to purify yourself so that the soul can be face to face with God, in direct communion with the Divine.¹⁴³ The illuminative is a drawing nearer to God in me.¹⁴⁴ This is God's grace, being open to and met by God regardless of how we understand God. Unitive, which we will go into greater detail below, is defined as a spiritual betrothal between the Creator and creature.¹⁴⁵

Another way to describe the division between the activity of God and ourselves in mysticism can be explained in the flow of *praxis* and *theoria*. Praxis contains the practices used to open ourselves to God, such as meditation, asceticism, religious practice, moral practice, and social justice. The mystics share their own praxis in their writings, outlining the way forward for their readers. "In praxis the heart correctly

¹⁴⁰ Kenneth J Collins, ed., *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 234.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1967), viii.

¹⁴² King, *Christian Mystics*, 18; Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 21.

¹⁴³ King, *Christian Mystics*, 17.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

disposes itself.”¹⁴⁶ Theoria holds the heart as passively receiving God’s presence, and the presence of others and the world.¹⁴⁷ This double movement, a giving and receiving flow of love, continues along the journey toward a deeper relationship with God as we prepare to be open and receptive and as God touches us deeply and intimately.

Union with God. Underhill claims that union with God is essential to mysticism.¹⁴⁸ It is a place of fear among those on the outside of a mystical understanding. Many of the medieval mystics speak about this stage of the spiritual journey using sexual and often erotic language and imagery. Female mystics during this time, speak about a relationship with God as varied, intimate, and personal. It draws them up toward joy and not down into the depths of despair. They use relational words such as spouse, lover, mother, nurse, or friend. The depth of this knowing is a continuing and constant relationship with God that overtakes them and impacts their full theological understanding.¹⁴⁹

Many struggle with the use of the term union and prefer communion, relationship, or friendship to describe this type of relational understanding of God and humankind. Yet, these other terms communicate a less intimate relationship than often represented by mystics. Communion can be understood as an intimate relationship but not necessarily in the common understanding of communion as partaking of the Eucharist, which can be used to remember a transactional relationship with God. When we consider our

¹⁴⁶ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 27.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁸ Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Elizabeth Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality: Hildegard of Bingen and Hadewijch of Brabant* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 29–30.

spirituality as a drawing or yearning to be connected to more, the language of the mystics make sense.

Julian of Norwich defines union as the path, seeking to know God in order to know our own soul, which is enclosed in God.¹⁵⁰ Mystics define this journey as experiencing an all-consuming love affair with God and the world, profound spiritual integration, promises of joy and passion, ecstasy, overcoming suffering, spiritual wholeness, and a reaching out to the goal of losing oneself in God. This goal of an intimate union of love with God is the center and very ground of the soul.¹⁵¹

Meister Eckhart believed that union with God was possible because of the divine spark in each of our souls. Meister Eckhart defined the divine spark as the light within our soul, or as Quakers would understand it as “that of God in everyone.”¹⁵² Some have difficulty with the idea of each person having a divine spark or light within. However, Genesis 1:26-27 states that all humankind is created in the image of God, the *imago Dei*.

Through church history, many have debated the subject of the *Imago Dei* and the fall. Human nature, as defined by Christianity, states we are created for and invited into a relationship with our Creator God, one another, and the world. This companionship or relationship with God frees us to love as a response to God’s intimate love for us.¹⁵³ Some would say that when sin entered the world that humankind lost their *imago Dei*;

¹⁵⁰ Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: An Invitation to Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992), 146.

¹⁵¹ King, *Christian Mystics*, 7, 15.

¹⁵² King, *Christian Mystics*, 109; Wilmer A. Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990), 69.

¹⁵³ Clark Williamson, “The Human Question,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William Placher, First Ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 161.

however, the Hebrew Scriptures do not say anything about our losing this important component of being human.¹⁵⁴ More can be added about the debate of sin and the fall, but the controversy remains and is not the subject of this work. However, if our identity is being created in the image of God, the *Imago Dei*, then that is the invitation for each of us to live in union with God. This does not mean that the seeker becomes God but lives in communion with God. Julian adds to this conversation, “Our soul is at home in God. God dwells in our soul and our soul dwells in God.”¹⁵⁵

Love. Christian mystics abandon all things for Love. They release the need for reasoning, conceptualization, forms, and all securities. This includes much more than material possessions. For them, this is the pearl of great price because love, not salvation, is everything.¹⁵⁶ Mysticism is marked by this excess of love, as God reveals God’s self, and we as humankind respond to God’s gaze of unconditional and inclusive love.¹⁵⁷ “To know God is to love God and to know that one is loved by God.”¹⁵⁸

“The mystical life begins with a deep experience of this infusion of divine love.”¹⁵⁹ This deep experience changes everything. As we begin to embrace the overwhelming reality of God’s complete love for us as a form of knowing deeply within ourselves, our view of God, ourselves, and the world changes. As we experience God’s love, we can’t help but be propelled outside of ourselves and into loving the world. John

¹⁵⁴ Williamson, “The Human Question,” 162.

¹⁵⁵ King, *Christian Mystics*, 136.

¹⁵⁶ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 28.

¹⁵⁷ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, xv.

¹⁵⁸ Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, 25.

¹⁵⁹ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 5.

states, “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and as Bernard of Clairvaux states, “Love is the ‘law’ of God’s being”¹⁶⁰ Julian of Norwich understood love even more broadly as the meaning of the universe.¹⁶¹

Fear of Mysticism

The writings of the mystics are often considered strange and bizarre. Merton shared that mysticism can be a disturbing subject since it can be so easily misunderstood.¹⁶² Many are unable to clearly understand the writings of the mystics, and so view the mystics’ offerings as irrational, impractical, and not part of daily life.¹⁶³ Some view these writings as esoteric, miraculous, beyond us, and abnormal.¹⁶⁴ Others consider the writings with even greater suspicion, viewing them as parapsychological phenomena or even part of the occult or demonology.¹⁶⁵

In reading some of these ancient writings it does not take long to determine that part of the argument against them is understandable. Many of their practices seem distant from our experiences within our own culture. Mystics understand anew, interiorly, and struggle to conceptualize this unknowing enough to put it into words as they try to

¹⁶⁰ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 217, 229.

¹⁶¹ Freeman, *Jesus, The Teacher Within*, 113.

¹⁶² Griffin, *Wonderful and Dark Is This Road*, 7.

¹⁶³ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, xxiv.

¹⁶⁴ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 76.

¹⁶⁵ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, xxiv.

communicate it to others.¹⁶⁶ Yet, they are often filled with a burning desire to share what they have come to know.¹⁶⁷

The Great Divide

How did we get to this place of distrusting such a vital part of the church's teaching and tradition? A necessary component to remember is that Christian mystics, through the early church until relatively recently, have been an essential part of the way we, as Christians, have understood God. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the late Scholastic period, theology and spirituality became separated in our understanding of God and religion as theology moved from the monasteries into the universities. The chasm between holding a rational understanding based on intellectualism and a devotional and affective faith widened. Spirituality became individualistic and subjective as some of those who pursued a mystical relationship with God moved away from being tied to doctrine, or "right" belief. Theology became focused more on rational knowledge gained through academic study.¹⁶⁸

With this division in understanding and a reframing of what it meant to live a devout Christian life, individuals followed diverse paths in their relationship with God. The leaders of the church, in their desire to protect and guide people, followed the academic approach to understand religion and God. It was a time when Christians did not want to see through a glass darkly but wanted to understand things tangibly. The

¹⁶⁶ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 76.

¹⁶⁷ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, xv.

¹⁶⁸ Philip Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness: Explorations in Contemporary Spirituality* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1988), 9.

Protestant reformers associated this mystical theology with Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, and the Graeco-Roman mystery religions.¹⁶⁹ In rejection of what seemed unsafe in Catholicism, a faith based on works due to the discipline of prayer evident in the monastic communities, a holistic and lived spirituality through mystical experiences was denied.¹⁷⁰

To communicate this adjustment in thought, Luther emphasized Scripture, “the external word,” and an objective understanding of faith, “righteousness outside of us,” and “Christ for us.” He taught an understanding of God which was outside of the human person in contrast to the work of faith represented by those living a vocational call in Catholicism. Luther himself didn’t completely disregard an experiential understanding of faith, but created this emphasis to encourage others to realize that we are unable to earn grace. Even though Luther’s understandings of Christ for us, an objective faith, and of Christ in us, a mystical understanding, are interrelated, these two traditions eventually separated, and the intellectual structures took precedence over the inward understanding.¹⁷¹ This fracturing of Western Christianity through the Protestant Reformation along with a greater emphasis on scientific discovery caused greater suspicion of mysticism.¹⁷²

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Enlightenment period brought even more growth toward scientific inquiry as a means to certainty, and the

¹⁶⁹ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 42–43.

¹⁷⁰ Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, 127.

¹⁷¹ Collins, *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, 123, 125.

¹⁷² McColman, *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*, 55.

chasm between a rational and spiritual faith widened. It was during this time that the connection between the mind and the heart was severed.¹⁷³ This place of certainty and rationality made way for holding a dualistic mindset. Dualism is defined as perceiving reality in a framework of two opposing understandings, judging one side as good and the other as evil. As we severed the mind and heart connection, we began to relate to ourselves, God and the world in a dualistic way, judging the mind as good and the emotions or heart as bad.¹⁷⁴ From this place of judgment, a holistic and lived spirituality became suspicious and regarded as only inward-focused without caring for others.

Those who pursued a spiritual life by practicing asceticism or monasticism viewed spiritual disciplines as a means to purify themselves so their soul could be face-to-face with God, in direct communion or union with God.¹⁷⁵ An authentic mystic uses spiritual practices such as asceticism as a means to an end, encountering God, and then often discards such practices.¹⁷⁶ The goal is not having mystical experiences of ecstasies or raptures, but union with God for God's sake and the sake of the world. It is this longing for God that defines a mystic as opposed to one's experience of God. When mystics communicate their understanding from their experience, it can be beyond reason or rational thought. Their knowing is contemplative, an understanding "uncluttered by thought," based on a direct and personal encounter.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness*, 9.

¹⁷⁴ Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 42.

¹⁷⁵ King, *Christian Mystics*, 17.

¹⁷⁶ Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 23.

¹⁷⁷ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 76.

As the development of Christianity continued, the suspicion of mysticism continued as well. In 1738, John Wesley felt a warming in his heart as he was seeking a living faith. He came to understand in his study that the literal interpretation of Scripture did not necessarily align with his experience. The Holiness movement, grounded in Wesleyan spirituality, renewed an interest in spiritual experience; however, as time continued, the mystical understanding fell away into rational thought and “right” belief.¹⁷⁸

As the American revivals appeared across the nation, it was a time for a renewal of Christians’ first love. People were awakened to the possibility of a lived spirituality and recommitted themselves to living a life of faith. Often, they had experiences of mystical encounters with God.¹⁷⁹ But as time continued this spiritual awakening became incased in a doctrine of ‘right’ belief. Through the twentieth century the world became even more secularized. Two world wars cast doubt on the inherent goodness of people. Where was God in this? Social scientists in sociology and psychology started to explain things outside of a religious context.¹⁸⁰

An understanding of both a rational faith in God and an experiential spirituality through mysticism with God is important. Richard Foster, Carl McColman, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Mirabai Starr, among others, have studied the ancient Christian writings and brought their discoveries to us, allowing past understandings to influence our present and future thoughts regarding spirituality. These scholars have

¹⁷⁸ Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, 319–20.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 348–49.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 376–77.

sparked a renewed interest in the writings of the mystics. They show that both the study of theology, a rational understanding, and a contemplative life are crucial to a full faith.

When we try to separate a rational understanding of God from an experiential understanding we run into difficulty. Since God is truly mystery, we are unable to fully know God cognitively. If God is defined as love, we are unable to know that as a reality fully through knowing about God, we have to experience love to understand the truth of it in the depth of our being. In reality, we are also unable to separate the God in whom we rationally believe from our experience of that God. Our thoughts about God shape how we understand our experience. Furthermore, we cannot separate the God we experience from the many injustices in our world.¹⁸¹ What we think about God and how we experience God matter in the way we relate to ourselves and to the world. If we see God as a God of wrath, we can rationalize violence between our nations. If we see God as a God of relationship and love, then we would lean toward fighting injustices with nonviolence, viewing that of God in the other.

Mysticism in Scripture

Many believe that teachings about Christian mystics will lead them to fall down the slippery slope toward heretical teaching. This perception leads to fear around Christian mystics considered as outside of orthodoxy and similar to Buddhism, Interfaith, or New Age. In actuality, this fear discounts Scripture's teachings about mystery, silence, ongoing prayer, and waiting.¹⁸² In reality, all the elements of mysticism are evident in

¹⁸¹ Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness*, 10–11, 17.

¹⁸² McColman, interview; Carole Spencer, Interview by author. Zoom recording, October 15, 2019.

Scripture¹⁸³ such as Paul's use of "in Christ" throughout his writing, and Jesus sharing the possibility of being in the Father and praying we will be in God (John 10, 14). Also, many writings of the mystics have been studied diligently and verified as orthodox by the Catholic Church.¹⁸⁴

Even so, the word *mysticism* is not found in Scripture, yet the reality of mysticism is evident throughout Scripture. Examples of God's mystical relationship with people are evident in the stories of God's encounters with Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and the Prophets. The Patriarchs of Hebrew Scriptures were called, tested, and wrestled with God and then blessed by God in the same encounters. They were first fearful in God's presence and then transformed as they encountered God. The prophets had words and experiences burned into them, and they were unable to remain silent.¹⁸⁵

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus Christ is shown as the "foundation of all mysticism."¹⁸⁶ He is the full representation of the union of humanity with the Divine through the Incarnation.¹⁸⁷ Paul communicates this truth for us in his usage of "in Christ" and Christ "in us," which was formed as he reflected on his Damascus road encounter with the Living Christ.¹⁸⁸ This experience changed the way Paul viewed everything, making him the first Christian mystic.¹⁸⁹ This is evident in Paul's writings as he preaches

¹⁸³ McColman, interview.

¹⁸⁴ Mimi Dixon, Interview by author. Zoom recording, October 15, 2019.

¹⁸⁵ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 2.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸⁷ King, *Christian Mystics*, 11.

¹⁸⁸ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 9.

¹⁸⁹ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 4.

a gospel that came “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:12). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul shares how he was ecstatically taken up to the “third heaven” either in his body or out of his body and heard things that he could not speak (2 Cor 12:2). John shares this same message through the use of abiding and the “Word became flesh” (John 1:14). John defines God as Love and teaches that “those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16).

Greek thought patterns heavily influenced much of early Christian thought.¹⁹⁰ However, the foundation of Christian mysticism is found in Scripture and is not based on Greek philosophy.¹⁹¹ In Greek thought, mystery connected to secrets and ceremonies of the mystery religions. The Church Fathers, in contrast, used the word, mystery, to describe the “divine seeds already implanted in Judaism” and flowering in Christ and the newborn church.¹⁹² “The Christian sees in Jesus’ death and resurrection the very cause and exemplar of the mystical life in all its purity.”¹⁹³

Often there are two seemingly different approaches to reading Scripture, one engaging as a scholar using a critical approach and the other as a contemplative using a mystical or allegorical approach. These two methods do not negate one another.¹⁹⁴ A mystic reads Scripture not for an academic understanding but as a window to the living Source beyond the printed text, to the “inner sense of the Bible.”¹⁹⁵ It takes us beyond

¹⁹⁰ King, *Christian Mystics*, 4.

¹⁹¹ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 13.

¹⁹² Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 25.

¹⁹³ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 14.

¹⁹⁴ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 6.

¹⁹⁵ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 3.

what we can rationally know from reading Scripture to a deeper meaning that is only possible through a mystical understanding.¹⁹⁶ This approach opens the possibility to savor and relish the “sacred page of faith.”¹⁹⁷

Lectio Divina is a spiritual experience through reading Scripture. We can discover and consider the text through our rational thought, or we can taste the delicacies of what we discover in the words printed. This is a third way of experiencing Scripture, to taste it, opening ourselves to different layers of meaning. Even though we may not fully comprehend what we are reading, we resonate with our discovery. This is accepting our understanding as mystery, beyond our rational thought. However, if we neglect our capacity to use our intellect or reason as we reflect on what we discover, the acceptance of mystery is only temporary.¹⁹⁸

A Path through Mysticism

Mystics, themselves, are not special people. They do not need to be set up on a pedestal as though they are able to experience something different than is open to us. We are all able to have an experiential relationship with God.¹⁹⁹ Each and every person can live out this kind of relationship with God, in their own way and the way God invites them. Nevertheless, mystical experiences are not something to achieve; God invites us to an experiential relationship. Living our life in relationship with God is the goal and our

¹⁹⁶ McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 4.

¹⁹⁷ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 7.

¹⁹⁸ Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 27–29.

¹⁹⁹ Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, 23.

only guide or source on the journey is God. But as we read the writings of the mystics, they participate with God in guiding us along the way.²⁰⁰ Their lives, their understandings, their ability to lean into unknowing, show us the way to live life with God through spiritual practices, surrender, and prayer.

For those outside of a mystical understanding, the thought of Christian mysticism is scary. Even though people are hungry for an encounter with God, a heavy reliance on rational thought makes it difficult to hold experiential encounters.²⁰¹ Some are fearful of an encounter of God based on their implicitly held image of God. Safety is a concern in being vulnerable with an angry or wrathful God. Others are afraid of the transformative change that may result. Still, others fear being overwhelmed by what may be underneath the surface in their inner selves, emotions, or the possibility of God being too much to hold.²⁰²

With all of this stacked against us, we have tended to follow the institution or doctrine of others and are more interested in arguing what is considered “right” belief. Many are not interested in an experiential understanding or encounter with God. They know what is “right.” An invitation to humility is to hold both the rational and the experiential together, knowing God as mystery and that we only know God in part. As we integrate both the rational knowledge and experiential God encounters, our religion goes beyond what we knew toward a deeper spirituality and a greater awareness.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ McColman, *Christian Mystics*, xiv.

²⁰¹ Borgo, interview.

²⁰² Maria Tattu Bowen, Interview by author. Zoom recording, November 18, 2019.

²⁰³ Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, 12, 15, 20.

Even so, mystics are often viewed with suspicion, and their voices marginalized from many spiritual or religious conversations. Often this is due to misunderstanding or doubt regarding the experiences they share. Mystics, themselves, struggle in discerning if the visions or gifts are from God, so it is important that they test their experience in community.

Even though mystical experiences are difficult to describe with words, many relate their experiences with language. Regardless of a person's stance on religion, mystical experiences often bring a sense of compassion and feelings of connection or oneness.²⁰⁴ Life becomes less about striving or trying to get it "right." When one experiences God, the encounter changes the person and leads to greater inner freedom and wholeness, which is noticed by a greater capacity for love and compassion.

Noticing these areas of openness within one's self and another is an important practice of discernment for us as we engage in the stories of the mystics. We need to consider what happens in us when we read a mystic's writings and pay attention to see if there is an opening for us in what we read. Do the mystic's words offer an expansion in our inner selves and open us to a greater capacity to hold space for others? God always invites us to freedom, and mystics show us the way. It is also important to discern whether experiences of God lead us to greater freedom and wholeness within ourselves, in relationship with God, and with those around us. If they lead us to fear and a greater desire for control, they probably are not from God.

²⁰⁴ Bradley Lewis, "Mindfulness, Mysticism, and Narrative Medicine," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 37, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 29, SpringerLink.

Many seeking more in their relationship with God may start seeking the experience instead of the person of God. Teresa of Avila believed that visions and ecstatic experiences did not matter as much as how one lived among others in love. Even in the midst of several ecstatic experiences, she warned others to not seek the experience but the God of love.²⁰⁵ This awareness brings us back to discernment; authentic encounters with God allow the mystic to more wholly embody love.²⁰⁶

In following this way, mystics have often rejected the ways of the world to discover a God they were unable to imagine.²⁰⁷ As we read their writings, they show us the way forward into God encounters. They model praxis for us through meditation, asceticism, religious practice, morality, and social justice. Some of these they lived out in helpful ways and some in harmful ways. Understanding their intentions requires understanding their cultural, social, and political contexts. For example, the invitation of asceticism in our world might be to live a life of simplicity instead of beating ourselves as some of those who have gone before us have understood. Many lived a celibate life, believing that this was a means to prepare themselves for God. It is essential to listen to their understandings of God within an understanding of their context before we can bring their modeled praxis into our own lives. Those with a harsher understanding of God based in their own context still met a God of love, and that awareness changed the way they related to God, themselves, and others.

²⁰⁵ McColman, *Christian Mystics*, 1–2.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁰⁷ King, *Christian Mystics*, 21.

Remembering that each of the mystics was an imperfect human being relating to a God of love is helpful in this process. Then when we engage in the healthy spiritual disciplines they shared, we correctly dispose our heart and listen to God. As we listen, we open to God, to others, and to the world.²⁰⁸ Encountering God in this way ushers in openness, freedom, and wholeness—allowing a greater capacity for love and compassion, not only for ourselves but for those around us encompassing the world.

Throughout history, we have tended to make religion institutionalized and intellectual. Mysticism brings in the experiential to invite the community of faith to live wholeheartedly throughout life. But an over-emphasis on our individual encounters with God can make us self-centered or lead to emotionalism. Paul warned the Church of Corinth not to seek the exotic gifts but to realize that love is the greatest gift of all (1 Cor. 14:18).²⁰⁹

So, here is the invitation to greater wholeness. We are always invited gently to “abandon our self-improvement projects,” which only fortifies our false selves, so we can become who we have always uniquely been.²¹⁰ “Authentic spiritual growth will always make us more deeply human, more fully alive, more authentic, and much more. It will not simply be reflected in more conformity to religious standards or ideals.”²¹¹

Even though this is the path toward greater wholeness, contemporary mystics are often harder to accept within the institutional church than those from our ancient past. A

²⁰⁸ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 76.

²⁰⁹ Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, 18–19.

²¹⁰ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 33.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

mystic's voice is often at the edge of whatever is considered orthodox in their lifetime. So, mystics speaking today, as McColman shared, are often criticized and labeled as heretical because their message pushes the boundaries of their audience.²¹² Nevertheless, as time passes, the pearls of the mystics' words remain for those who read their writings even if the reader does not agree with all of their theology.²¹³ The invitation for those drawn to more, in contemporary society, will often be the voices from ages past. However, for some, the contemporary voices present an invitation for something deeper: voices like, Richard Rohr, Carl McColman, Cynthia Bourgeault, and James Finley among others.

Impact of a Culturally Defined Image of God

Within contemporary culture, the writings of historical mystics often bump up against our own understandings of language and culture (Borgo, 2019). It is difficult to understand their writings without being aware of the mystics' historical context. Human spiritual experience is entwined with unreal and temporary elements based on personal, political, and cultural understandings, the way we relate to the world.²¹⁴

But our yearning for more can continue to open us beyond our unconscious to recognition that there is more beyond what we have previously known. God always meets us where we are, so our unexamined bias does not get in the way of God meeting us. However, our bias may distort our understanding of that experience, by obscuring our

²¹² McColman, interview.

²¹³ King, *Christian Mystics*, 222.

²¹⁴ Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 9.

ability to make meaning by the prejudices and rational understandings held in our unconscious. To fully consider a God encounter requires space to reflect upon what we hold true to become aware of these ingrained biases.²¹⁵

The ego is this unobserved self, our unconscious, where differences between us and others leads to an us-versus-them construct. Our ego hates change and so we do whatever it takes to survive by fighting to keep the status quo.²¹⁶ True mystics reflect and surrender this ego; otherwise, they are a sham, pretending to be enlightened but only creating that image to support their false self.²¹⁷

A person's view of God is evident in the way they relate to the world. In a sociological research study held at Baylor, the researchers asked a nationally representative sample of Americans to determine how they perceived God. Those who understood God as authoritative believed that God punishes people for bad behavior and their understanding correlated with their agreement with the death penalty. In the same study, those who believed in a benevolent God—only 23% of those surveyed—were not inclined to respond with wrath but with empathy.²¹⁸

In 1999, through the first brain-scan study of Christian contemplation, Newberg studied a group of nuns who had practiced Centering Prayer for a minimum of fifteen years. This study showed neurological changes in the brain much like Buddhist

²¹⁵ Lewis, "Mindfulness, Mysticism, and Narrative Medicine," 408; Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 21.

²¹⁶ Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 90.

²¹⁷ Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 22.

²¹⁸ Andrew B. Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings From a Leading Neuroscientist*, 1st ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 110–11.

practitioners who were studied previously. The activity in their frontal lobe increased while their limbic, emotional responses, decreased. Both the Buddhist practitioners and the nuns experienced a peaceful state of consciousness. The brain scans show that as the Buddhists and nuns meditated, their parietal lobe showed decreased activity, allowing them to have a sense of feeling at one with the object of their contemplation; for Christians that was defined as God.²¹⁹

In further study, Newberg surveyed participants about their spiritual experiences and noticed a lack of an element of the character of God that the Baylor study missed: the mystical personality of God. In his own work, Newberg discovered that spiritual contemplation changed the brain by strengthening the neural pathways, enhancing social awareness and empathy. This practice, as shown with the Buddhists and nuns, tended to subdue the hard or destructive emotions that are evident in a religion based in fear. The research showed that this change was different than the change from rationally thinking about things or even learning to play a musical instrument.²²⁰

Richard Rohr, a contemporary mystic, shares, “Surely God does not exist so that we can think correctly about Him – or Her. Amazingly and wonderfully, like all good parents, God desires instead the flourishing of what God created and what God loves – us ourselves.”²²¹ In fact, the basic theological understanding a person rationally knows is never fully adequate to hold a full understanding of God, nor is it essential. When we examine how we understand God, our definitions and experience of God change. We

²¹⁹ Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, 48–52.

²²⁰ Ibid., 110–14.

²²¹ Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 97.

start with our childhood images and understandings of God and when they become inadequate to hold our experiences, we find new ways to make meaning that hold an image of God that is larger and more expansive.²²²

Mystics are more comfortable with the ambiguity of not fully being able to understand God and the workings of God within their own historical period of orthodoxy. They are comfortable without a clearly defined image of God and so are more tolerant of other's images.²²³ Christian mystics through time, may describe mysticism differently, but one can tell the source is the same. Many differences are witnessed due to culture, education, personality and giftings. But the highest wisdom in their writings is a message of Love.²²⁴

Opening Through Story

If learning about the Christian mystics can open us to the possibility of more and awaken our desire for more, then how do we get past the fear we have for an understanding of God that seems so expansive and foreign? Stories are how we as humans universally make sense of the world. We are designed to both create and to respond through narrative, especially when what we experience contradicts the way we understand.²²⁵ A story is different than a narrative of facts because it includes emotions and sensory information. This allows it to be experienced more authentically due to it

²²² Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, 103.

²²³ Ibid., 103.

²²⁴ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 29.

²²⁵ Richard Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling: A Sacred Journey of Personal Discovery*, 1st ed. (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 1–6.

being a multidimensional experience, including a person holistically.²²⁶ It is this holistic experience that allows a story to disrupt the status quo of what we hold to be true.²²⁷

As we relate in life, we tend to put up barriers which are often held in our unconscious. We may think our behavioral choices are purely rational. Research shows, however, that our choices are more often motivated by emotions or feelings.²²⁸ Story can move past the unconscious barriers we have put in place, simplifying our world by breaking down our assumptions.²²⁹ Story affects our emotions thus impacting our subconscious by using parables, metaphors, and dreams—the language of our brains.²³⁰

In this way, these stories connect to the higher functioning areas of our brains, our limbic and cortical systems. The limbic brain, our emotional brain, lies between the reptilian brain and the cortical system, the place of higher reasoning and thinking. This allows our limbic system to manage the fight and flight response of our reptilian brain located in the brain stem and spinal cord.²³¹ When we can relax the fight and flight response and allow the emotions of the story to engage our higher reasoning and thinking, we can allow the stories we hear to impact us. It is these stories that can open us

²²⁶ Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2002), 31, 33.

²²⁷ Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 232.

²²⁸ Ibid., 55.

²²⁹ Ibid., 30.

²³⁰ Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, 1–6.

²³¹ Aileen Taylor de Faoite, Eileen Prendiville, and Theresa Fraser, “Telling Tales: Weaving New Neural Networks,” in *Creative Psychotherapy*, 1st Ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 175–76.

to “expansive realities” by molding our perceptions and touching our unconscious mind.²³²

One lasting gift of story is the distinct ability to hold paradox. By holding two diametrically opposing “truths” together, story can make sense out of the chaos, adding structure to places of confusion.²³³ It is in the story that allows the context, opening us to receive what we might be reluctant to hear otherwise. Facts are most often interpreted through the lens of what we already know through the stories we have told ourselves. The introspection necessary requires a safe space to look at these stories based in our own memories, because everything we take in comes through these closely held narratives. “The brain never permits naked reality to intrude in consciousness.”²³⁴ Stories shaped in context, opens us to see deeper than we have known before.²³⁵ The impact brings us to greater self-awareness and can last a lifetime.²³⁶

A story must be meaningful to inspire action from those listening. It must connect as a reality, showing an invitation to more being possible.²³⁷ For this to happen the listener or reader must trust the storyteller, knowing the person to be one of character along with a capacity to relate to them.²³⁸ They are more interested in the why of

²³² Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, 1–6; Simmons, *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling*, 29.

²³³ Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 37–39.

²³⁴ Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *General Theory of Love*, First Vintage (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 116.

²³⁵ Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 51.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29, 45.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

something versus the what or how of the same thing. Sharing the why is necessary to invite them to engage in the struggle or tension of the journey.²³⁹

Often story is used to motivate others by using fear. “A fear story may work faster but fear stories create ‘move away from’ patterns that prevent the connections that build tolerance, compassion, and long-term growth.”²⁴⁰ Through the study of the history of the Church, one can see how this approach has been used repeatedly. It is also an approach used against engaging in Christian mysticism when others warn about the dangers of contemplation, quieting our minds, or being present with our emotions. So, to invite people to understand more about Christian mysticism or to engage in contemplative prayer, it is important to understand the warnings and fears, the resistance, to this more experiential approach by uncovering the unconscious bias people may have.²⁴¹

Stories are a helpful means to uncover this unconscious bias. Through story, we hear views and experiences that may be different than what we hold to be true. Since we hear them through a story, we can listen below our reactivity, which also requires the storyteller to acknowledge and honor the reader where they are. If readers feel judged or on the outside, they will not be able to engage in the story.²⁴² A writer engaging the stories of Christian mystics may do this by acknowledging the various perspectives on the topic and offering different viewpoints without being critical in the process.

²³⁹ Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 17.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 224.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 144.

²⁴² Ibid., 159–60.

Since it is our nature to listen to and tell stories and to make meaning from our own experiences, this process allows us to remember we are not alone, others have similar experiences. Stories have the “power to go right through us, reaching into every cell, changing our chemistry and profoundly affecting our well-being.”²⁴³

“When we tell stories about our deepest spiritual experiences, or about the spiritual experiences of others, we can reenter the sacred space where Spirit resides.”²⁴⁴ This is how Jesus used stories in relating to those who listened to his teaching and to communicate the deeper spiritual truths, for example “the Kingdom of God is like...” (Mark 6) or the stories of the lost sheep or coin (Luke 15).

Spiritual transformation continues to occur after we read and begin to grapple with the questions presented through the stories being mediated through our imaginations. Our imaginations take a central role when we encounter stories, allowing us to make meaning along the way toward spiritual growth. They allow us to see more expansively, and once we see more, we are unable to go back.²⁴⁵

We can tend to forget the intention and gift of story, presented as a myth, in our search for literal scientific truth. A myth shares an important truth through the language of story.²⁴⁶ Native Americans, in their practice of communicating core truths through story, hold that truth isn’t what we believe to be true but what we experience.²⁴⁷ As we

²⁴³ Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, 4, 23.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 203.

²⁴⁵ Sandra M Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008), 78.

²⁴⁶ Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, 70.

²⁴⁷ Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, 117.

listen to another's story, it opens us to new things.²⁴⁸ Our brain struggles to distinguish between fact and fantasy, real or unreal. Both our conscious and unconscious understanding of things are formed from the way we make meaning. Since story impacts our unconscious, the language of our brain, it bypasses our fears and assumptions, allowing a mystic's attempt to communicate a God encounter to reach beneath the surface of our conscious rational thought, based often in fear.

For example, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi* relates the miracles and stories of St. Francis and his Order. Through these written understandings, St. Francis, and others in his name, share their own discernment of the meaning of God through their personal experiences.²⁴⁹ Many who are familiar with St. Francis of Assisi will be aware of some of the stories such as taming the wolf or preaching to the birds.²⁵⁰ Some of the stories in *Little Flowers* sound more like a myth to our contemporary ears, but regardless of literal truth they share a true message relating a life lived in faithfulness. Through St. Francis' stories, we begin to see a man completely devoted to God, living more and more like Christ.

Sharing the Stories of Christian Mystics

"Humans tend to think that because they agree or disagree with the idea of a thing, they have realistically encountered the thing itself. Not at all true, says the

²⁴⁸ Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, 57.

²⁴⁹ John Thornton and Susan Varenne, "About the Vintage Spiritual Classics," in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, ed. W Heywood, Reprinted Edition (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998), xii.

²⁵⁰ Madeleine L'Engle, "Preface to the Vintage Spiritual Classics Edition," in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, ed. W. Heywood, Reprinted Edition (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998), xvii.

contemplative. It is necessary to encounter the thing itself.”²⁵¹ We get caught up in religion as a means of authority and control, which communicates a dualistic process, either/or thinking. Religion teaches us to be rigid thinkers implying that “right” thinking is faithfulness and obedience as a means of God bringing order.²⁵²

Encountering God is a vulnerable experience very much out of our own control. The Apostle Thomas understood about Jesus but was invited to touch him to experience him, to truly experientially know the truth of the risen Christ (John 20).²⁵³ When it comes to experiencing or encountering God, we often wonder if what we experience as new is “true” and we don't consider our feelings about it. The mystics invite us to consider our experience of pleasure or acceptance, not if it is rationally true.²⁵⁴ When we consider Scripture or the writings of the mystics as metaphorical, what we read can be inspirational instead of a merely literal understanding that governs our lives and how we live in the world.²⁵⁵ “Authentic Christian mysticism is nothing but a living of the Gospel at a deep level of consciousness.”²⁵⁶ Saying yes to the invitation of more to God opens us to more of life.²⁵⁷

Telling the stories of the mystics within their own historical context can share the possibility of that invitation as a reality. Stories from the past help us to connect deeply to

²⁵¹ Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 35.

²⁵² Ibid., 35–36.

²⁵³ Ibid., 35.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 52.

²⁵⁵ Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, 122.

²⁵⁶ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 9.

²⁵⁷ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 156.

our origins to begin to understand the way forward.²⁵⁸ Reading stories of mystics can be an intimate act as we engage an inner dialogue through the stories of their lives. The stories also allow us to grasp the concepts they engaged in their own writing. As the reader engages these people from the past, within their own historical context, the reader's imagination can engage the story and writings of each mystic and become potentially more in the process.²⁵⁹ In addition, encountering the different mystics' journeys with God invites the reader to a conversation with each mystic, the author, God, and themselves. They co-create an inner dialogue as they read, inviting them to more possibilities and understandings as they live their own spiritual journeys.²⁶⁰

As part of the research for this work, I surveyed seminary students engaged in a Mystical Experiences/Images of God course at Portland Seminary. The students were asked via an online survey regarding their thoughts both at the beginning and end of the course. The pre-course survey showed some curiosity with greater reluctance to engage in the course content. They viewed mystics and their relating of their experiences as magical and heretical. After engaging in the writings of several Christian mystics, through the post-course survey they communicated their new understanding holding the possibility of encountering God in a way they actually desired, a deeper relationship. They related that the writings opened them to that distinct possibility awakening a

²⁵⁸ Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, 3, 36.

²⁵⁹ Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, 76.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 77.

longing they had for more. Some of the students felt validated in their own experiences of God, trusting that they were not on the outside of Christian experience after all.²⁶¹

I also interviewed participants in the *Being Boldly Loved and Loving Boldly* spiritual formation groups.²⁶² This series was, for most of the participants, their first encounter with Christian mystics. They found the stories inspiring as they showed that an experiential relationship with God was possible. In addition, hearing the stories validated some of the participants' experiential encounters with God. One person shared it was like a long deep breath—giving a “new/old way of receiving the love of God in their own heart and life.” One of the most encouraging responses was that their old way of understanding Christianity and living a life of faith, before attending the *Being Boldly Loved and Loving Boldly* studies, did not work any longer. They knew there was more and the possibility of that being a reality was made evident in the stories shared during our time together. They have grown comfortable in following an experiential relationship with God and being able to discern the trueness of those experiences.²⁶³

Conclusion

People yearn for more in their relationship with God and yet this yearning is not clearly understood within the context of the church or society as a whole. In fact, most

²⁶¹ Surveys of Portland Seminary Students in the Spring 2020 sections of Mystical Experiences/Images of God with Dr. Carole Spencer.

²⁶² Kathi Gatlin, *Experiencing God: Creating Space through Contemplative Prayer*, Being Boldly Loved and Loving Boldly 1 (Newberg, OR: Boldly Loved LLC, 2017); Kathi Gatlin, *Resting in God: Healing the Violence Within*, Being Boldly Loved and Loving Boldly 2 (Newberg, OR: Boldly Loved LLC, 2017); Kathi Gatlin, *Dancing with God: Creating Space for Others*, Being Boldly Loved and Loving Boldly 3 (Newberg, OR: Boldly Loved LLC, 2018).

²⁶³ Interviews with Boldly Loved groups, March 11-15, 2019.

communities are uncomfortable with the concept of yearning and desire within the context of spirituality or God language. Christianity has often become a faith based on doctrine and “right” belief instead of an experiential relationship with God. Yet, Scripture and spiritual writers share that there is more.

As we consider that many of us desire more in our relationship with God and this desire is living out our humanity, then the stories of those who have related with God intimately and authentically will open the door to live out our desire. As I have related previously, stories of selected mystics and their writings will open the reader to an awareness of their fear-based defenses and the unexamined biases we all hold. Not only will we encounter the stories of their relationship with God, the stories within context will help the reader see that what we currently hold true about God has not always been the whole God story.

My proposal for this book project is large and will only be able to encompass ten mystics over the span of 2,000 years. Since I am not an expert in the field of theology, history, or biblical study, my writing will be for the sake of spiritual formation, inviting the reader to recognize the yearning for more in their relationship with God and the possibility of that yearning being met. Further study will be beneficial by encountering a broader span of mystics, going to a greater depth in the other fields of study, and researching how the study of mystics could also benefit those who have left any sense of God understanding.

However, my hope is for those like Angie, the story at the beginning of this work, which is my own story. I have discovered—and I hope others will too—both the validation of their yearning and the distinct possibility of being met in their desire to

connect with the God who created them as a true reality. I hope that the book I am proposing will be a gentle nudge to follow the invitation to discover a God that intimately and fully loves. As Julian of Norwich states, God's meaning is Love.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Showing of Love*, 124.

SECTION 4: THE ARTIFACT: SHARING CHRISTIAN MYSTICS' STORIES

Given our desire as humans to relate to ourselves, God, and the world, the stories of the Christian mystics open the way for our yearning to be both realized and met. There is so much we do not understand about our Christian faith and the doctrines we hold as Scriptural truth in our church communities. We tend to think that what we are taught from the pulpit is what we have always believed to be true.

Writing a book, sharing the story of God through the lens of specific Christian mystics through the last 2,000 years since the Early church, will serve as an invitation to encounter God, to recognize a yearning for more, and to engage in the stories of those who have come before us. In these selected stories, readers will come to realize that much has shaped our understanding of God, of Scripture, of doctrine than what we have recognized as a reality. This writing will nudge the readers' understanding of God in gentle ways as they are invited to follow the journey of those in the past to relate to God in their own spirituality.

To engage this conversation will require readers trust both me, the author, and each of the individual mystics. The introduction will define mysticism and my understanding of spirituality based on streams of thought including Scripture, spiritual formation, and psychology. This will provide the framework for the conversation.

The stories themselves will set the backdrop of both the cultural and theological historical contexts of the mystics' lifetimes. Within this backdrop, readers will see the mystic as a product of their time, pushing the edges of what was considered orthodox in their lifetime. In their old and new understandings, readers will hopefully experience a resonance with their own journeys, recognizing that these mystics have shaped much of

what they hold true. Often, Scripture is understood as a manual of propositions shaped by doctrine and dogma held as truth instead of as story that can shape our lives.

My hope is that this book will serve as invitation, a gentle nudge for more, and not a violent undertaking for the reader. I desire to invite them along the journey of more being available than they knew and to recognize that the God who created them is available and desires an intimate relationship with them as they recognize that this desire is theirs too.

SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION: BOOK PROPOSAL

Title: The Story of God through the Eyes of Christian Mystics

Author: Kathi Gatlin
3716 Grand Oak Dr.
Newberg, OR 97132
(503) 476-7845
kathi@boldlyloved.org

Overview: This will be a book that tells the story of God through the eyes of ten selected Christian Mystics across approximately 2,000 years. Both the mystics' understanding of God and their relaying of their relationship with God is a product of the time and culture of their lives.

Purpose: To engage the reader, through narrative, in the lives of Christian mystics within their cultural context and own way of experiencing a relationship with God. In this format, the reader will begin to understand their own beliefs have been shaped through time and haven't always been the same. As the reader engages with these specific stories, the hope is that they will experience an awakening in their desire for more and seek relating to God in freer ways and to engage more with the Christian mystics.

Promotion and Marketing: I've been asked by Carl McColman to keep him updated on my work with this book. I intend to request an endorsement from him as well as other authors in spirituality, MaryKate Morse and Carole Spencer.

In teaching a course on Christian mystics through the Companioning Center, I will engage this material with those seeking to know more as well as those seeking spiritual

direction training. In addition, I will be able to publish excerpts on the Boldly Loved and Companioning Center blogs and social media platforms.

Competition: Many books are already available for those who desire to know more about Christian mysticism. Some have brief descriptions of the mystics' stories with original writings, and others share broadly around Christian mysticism. This book will be different than those listed as it will relate the stories of selected mystics within the cultural understandings of their time. This allows their writings to be understood within the broader context of their own cultural and theological understandings.

Other Available Books:

- *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages* by Ursula King offers a basic overview of a mystical understanding within an academic and historically inclusive approach but doesn't include stories of individual mystics' lives.
- *Wonderful and Dark Is This Road: Discovering the Mystic Path* by Emilie Griffin also offers a basic overview of mysticism through a thematic and devotional approach using Evelyn Underhill's writings. She doesn't include individual stories of mystics.
- *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* by Richard Foster offers a typological approach but with limited stories and writings of the mystics included.
- *God Seekers: Twenty Centuries of Christian Spiritualities* by Richard Schmidt shares brief biographies and writing excerpts from 33 selected Christian mystics.

- *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism, The Small Book of Christian Mysticism, Christian Mystics: 108 Seers, Saints, and Sages* by Carl McColman defines mysticism, offers quotes, and shares brief stories and writings respectively.

Book Format: After an introduction that defines Christian mysticism and the reality of our desire for more, each of the remaining ten chapters will relate the story of each mystic within the context of their time in history, given the theological and cultural underpinnings of their time. Included in their stories will be their understanding of spirituality and the way they relate to God along with their contribution to how we understand God today.

Chapter Outline:

- **Prologue** – The beginning of this book will start with my own journey of discovery of an experiential relationship with God.
- **Introduction: The Gift and Invitation** - This section will define spirituality as our desire for more in our relationship with God as well as defining Christian mysticism. This definition will require some historical background, evidence within Scripture, and acknowledgement of the fear around the topic.
- **Chapter 1: St. Paul the Apostle (5 - 66)** – Paul (Saul) of Tarsus was transformed from a zealous Pharisee persecuting Christians to a devoted follower and teacher of Christianity through a mystical experience on the Damascus road. Contemporary Christianity often views his contribution as a great theologian but that understanding overlooks the mystical language evident in his sharing of his

own encounters with God. When Paul's descriptions are viewed through the lens of mysticism, he opens the reader up to more in their understanding of living a life of faith with a God that is for them.

- **Chapter 2: Desert Fathers and Mothers (269 – 373)** – Through 300 years of persecution, Christians defined living faithfully as being willing to be martyred. After Constantine formalized Christianity as the state religion, this understanding was skewed to be a powerful religion of the empire. Antony and others took their faith to the desert to live a faith often defined by ascetism to live and show others that Christianity could be experienced differently than within the power structure of the empire.
- **Chapter 3: Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430)** – For the last 1600 years, Augustine has influenced Western Christian thought more than any other besides Jesus and the biblical authors. He defended doctrine against those he viewed as a threat to what he considered to be orthodox at the time. Like all of us, his views were definitely a product of his patriarchal culture and are not always welcome in many circles today, yet he has shaped our understanding of living a life of faith. Even though his language can come across as prejudiced toward the human body and women, he believed in a God of love which is also evident in the way he shaped our understandings.
- **Chapter 4: Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179)** – Hildegard, a Benedictine abbess living in the Medieval period, was a renaissance woman living long before the Renaissance. She was an accomplished composer, artist, preacher, natural

scientist, prophet, and respected leader in a time when women would not have had a voice in the political or ecclesiastical arenas.

- **Chapter 5: St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) and St. Claire of Assisi (1193-1254)** – Francis of Assisi is a favorite saint of many due to his love of animals and his life of simplicity. Born in a wealthy middle-class family, he left the expected life before him and encountered a life of struggle to imitate the Christ he loved. He challenged others to live a life free of the hypocrisy so evident around him. One of those impacted by his teaching and life was another in Assisi. She embraced the same kind of life against her families wishes. She joined Francis in the work of inviting others and creating space so others could join.
- **Chapter 6: Julian of Norwich (1342-1423)** – Julian lived during one of the most horrific periods in England. In her search for finding meaning in all the pain, struggle, and severe loss, she encountered God. Through visions, she came to know that the true meaning of God was love and that love was God's true intention toward humankind. She was the first female to write a book in the English language and is known as the first woman of letters in the English language. There is very little we know about her background yet she prayed, contemplated her visions, and wrote down how she grew to understand them in ways that are still inviting her contemporary audience to wholeness and freedom.
- **Chapter 7: Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)** – During the late sixteenth century, Spain distrusted new understandings of God. This was the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Teresa, a Carmelite nun, experienced God in ecstatic ways that impacted her understanding of the inner

journey. She came to understand that we are not in charge of our times in prayer but that God leads the way into an ever deeper relationship. John met Teresa four years after entering the Carmelite order and was intrigued by her plans of reform. He was a gifted poet and is known broadly for writing about the Dark Night of the Soul.

- **Chapter 8: George Fox (1624-1691)** – Through the Reformation period, a time of rich religious interest and debate, George Fox sought an answer to why religion did not make “bad” people “good.” The question arose from seeing such rampant deceit and corruption in the institutional church. As he conversed with various religious leaders, he became frustrated that no one had the answers to the questions so prevalent on his mind. He encountered God, not in the churches or in the church leadership but within his own soul. What Fox discovered about God’s character changed how he viewed, lived around, and ministered to people. Through his faithfulness, Quakerism became a movement that has impacted our view of God in ways we may not be aware.
- **Chapter 9: Dorothy Day (1897-1980)** – Dorothy Day authentically lived out her faith in tangible ways that mattered. She had no theological training and no positional authority in the church but became one of the most significant and influential people in American Catholicism. A primary driving force for Dorothy was seeing those who were oppressed in the systemic divide created during the industrial revolution and the Great Depression. She was passionate to meet in practical ways those who were suffering during this painful time. One of the propelling desires in her that gave her mission such purpose was to love and be

loved. She found that in her relationship with God as she served those on the outside. In her faithfulness, not only were people encourage and served, the Catholic church was changed.

- **Chapter 10: Howard Thurman (1899-1981)** – Growing up in a time when Blacks were treated as less than with regard to education, Howard Thurman persisted through opportunities offered to him by people who believed in him. Through losing his father as a young child and the way the local church community treated him, Thurman decided never to become a Christian. Yet, as he grew up he was drawn to connect to a God who loved him and was for him. American Christianity still held much of the racial oppression that was so evident in his childhood but that did not define the God he came to know. Through being a pastor, a Dean of chapel, and writing 22 spiritual and inspirational books, Thurman shared about a God who loved and saw people, impacting the social justice issues of his time.
- **Conclusion: The Way Forward** – This last piece will tie the introduction through the specific stories listed in a way that invites the reader to pursue more information on the mystics, mysticism, and a contemplative approach to spirituality.

Intended Readers: Those interested in learning more about Christian mystics and those who are seeking a deeper relationship with God.

Manuscript: Approximately 45,000 words to be completed by Summer 2021.

Author Bio: My own life has been impacted by the study of Christian mystics, and my work with spiritual formation groups has made evident others have the same desire for more of God that has drawn me into reading about the mystics. Through my work, I see people drawn to more by hearing the stories of the mystics I have offered. I teach a Christian Faith and Thought course at Portland Seminary (George Fox University) discussing how worldview impacts our view of God, Christianity, and spirituality. Again, I see the opening in my students as they hear these stories against the woundedness they often bring into the classroom. Currently, I am in the process of co-creating a spiritual direction training program and part of the spiritual formation courses we are putting in place offers courses looking at our image of God and the way we view the world. One of the courses is a course on Christian mystics as a means to nudge and open our understandings of God, ourselves, and the world.

Publishing Credits:

Being Boldly Loved and Loving Boldly Spiritual Formation Curriculum

- Experiencing God: Creating Space to Experience God
- Resting in God: Healing the Violence Within
- Dancing with God: Creating Space for the Other

Boldly Loved and Companioning Center Blogs

SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT

As I have reflected on my own journey as well as walking alongside others in theirs, I have noticed that many of us desire more in our life around spirituality. Part of what gets in the way is how we view God, spirituality, and Christianity. We all have preconceived ideas of ourselves, God, and others, yet we do not intentionally become aware of the biases or understanding we actually have. We don't necessarily know that our thinking isn't the same as others or that we might in actuality be wrong or at least not necessarily right.

This journey is the basis for creating a book covering Christian mystics within their historical, sociological, and cultural contexts. However, introducing the concept and navigating the conversation requires understanding the desire we all innately have in being human and created in the Imago Dei. So, much of my research was around spirituality, spiritual formation, and how various writers define these concepts. This research provided a background for understanding the *why* behind the desires I have experienced personally and have witnessed in others. I have read about these same human desires in the mystics I have encountered, and this has given me hope that what I have experienced and witnessed is normal and encountered by others throughout history.

However, the validity of our desire for spiritual connection does not bypass the fear around following it or accepting it as a part of our ordinary life. Sharing stories of the mystics nudge us in those fearful areas because we do not necessarily understand their stories within our context, and in actuality, experiencing God can be a frightening thought. Stories engage our emotions and weave under our biases and rational understandings and allow us to engage the possibility that not only our desire for more is

acceptable but also possible. There actually can be more in our relationship with ourselves, God, and others.

To engage the stories of the mystics I have chosen will require extensive research from their writings and experts who have studied them. It will also require research in the flow of thought around God and Christianity through history. Since the book is devotional in nature and an overview of the mystics' context and specific writings, it will not be able to go into great depth. I hope the reader will be introduced to the concept of mysticism and being met by God in experiential ways. Once their curiosity is piqued and their fear has subsided, there are many other resources available for them to grow deeper in relating to the mystics and an experiential relationship with God.

Other Avenues

I have reviewed a variety of methods for inviting people deeper into their relationship with God. I have attended training and discipleship programs through churches, as well as engaging in Biblical counseling. Most of these have been within the context of a religious Christianity where one needed to believe a particular doctrine. In the mystics, I became aware of the difference between encountering Scripture and reading through the lens of a particular doctrine. I have discovered that same journey in many others.

Also, there are various books on Christian mysticism, and they all encounter their audiences in different ways. I believe that my intention of using the flow of history and the relational dynamic of story as the basis of this book on mystics will invite the readers differently. Again, I hope to communicate below their biases and rational understandings to invite them to the possibility of more in their relationship with the God of Love.

Lessons Learned

This research has allowed me to study more deeply a topic that I have a particular interest in. One of my greatest joys is seeing people open to more of who God is and God's intimate love for them. Researching the dynamics of our spiritual life and how many define the terms and understand God's relationality and our encounters with God has created a firmer foundation for my vocational call. Also, learning about the use of narrative and contemplation linked to science has supplied even greater language as I teach others on this topic.

Since this dissertation was limited to 25,000 words, it really only was able to touch the surface of many of the topics presented. More significant research and writing would be beneficial to go deeper in the science of narrative, contemplative prayer in a variety of contexts, and the gift of learning about the lives of Christian mystics. More research would be beneficial to unearth many more of the fears people have concerning mysticism and the variety of theological understandings and arguments for and against them. I hope to continue the research and learning in these areas and hope others embark on the journey as well.

May we all continue to be curious and engaged in our journey of understanding ourselves, God, and others in more and more inclusive and real ways.

APPENDIX A: THE STORY OF GOD THROUGH THE EYES OF CHRISTIAN
MYSTIC

Title Page

The Story of God
through the Eyes of Christian Mystics
By Kathi Gatlin

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Prologue

Prologue

Have you wondered if there was more to life than what you have or are experiencing?

Is there more possible than what you have known in your relationship with God?

Is this really all there is?

I remember sitting in church one Sunday and hearing these questions rise in me again and again. Life was hard and the promises that I kept hearing about on Sunday morning were not addressing the desire I had for more in life. I taught about living a life of faith and yet I was questioning this life of faith. Wasn't an abundant life promised? What about the promise that God won't give you more than you can handle?

My life felt empty and lonely. My life's desires weren't being met. And I didn't know what to do or who to talk to about my uneasiness. If I shared my feelings or thoughts in these areas perhaps I wasn't trying hard enough or I was falling down that slippery slope of doubt.

Part of this was external to me, what people told me to do; part of it was my own internal makeup, the voices inside my head. In the midst of all these external and internal voices, there were no answers to my questions.

Then life got worse. I lost my job. I had struggled through other things in life—a difficult marriage, a divorce, being a single mom, cancer—but losing my job when I had tried to do everything correctly crushed my understanding of God, of the world, of my being able to try harder to succeed, or at least to be okay. I found myself in a place where trying harder didn't work any longer. I struggled with what to do; there was no place that felt safe enough to ask my questions or to process what was going on in my life.

I had just started taking seminary classes and so I continued my studies full-time. I discovered my questions were allowed and I was given the freedom to struggle through a process to find answers. What I discovered was a growing understanding that I didn't need certainty or black-and-white answers to my questions. I became more comfortable with understanding God as mystery.

The questions I was asking are important questions that many have asked and are still asking. Learning to behave like a Christian and to believe the right things has proved, at least for many, to be unhelpful in a messy life inconsistent with the abundant life promised.

Many who sit in churches walk away because the hardships they encounter in life do not seem to match the promises they have tried so hard to hold on to. For others, the exclusion they experience within many religious communities doesn't fit their understanding of the world. And for others still, their questions are not welcomed in a religious context based in "right" answers. Could there possibly be more to a life of faith?

As we are drawn to a deeper relationship with God, this yearning is understood as the way we live out our spirituality. Those drawn to more desire something more, often due to unexpected and destructive events experienced in life. People seek ways to understand and find answers amidst the struggle to make meaning in their experiences.

Often, there is a gap in what we believe or understand about the way things "should" be and what we actually experience in life. Our old ways of rational explanations and definitions are often unable to answer the more profound questions that arise. This gap of understanding is often experienced through a desire for wholeness and this gap is what needs healing. We experience this gap as we seek a deeper relationship with God and discover that our profound questions remain unanswered by our old definitions, such as understanding pain and suffering in a world held by an all-powerful and all-loving God.

This place of being unmet—this gap between our understandings and our experiences—is readily evident in contemporary society. As we wrestle with our understandings of God and our desire to live out a relationally connected life with God, we experience conflicting understandings of the way things are. We struggle inside ourselves and in our communities. And when we feel that our questions are not welcome in our communities, we struggle alone.

We all hold a concept or image of God. This image is based on our childhood experiences, our family of origin, and the communities we grew up in as well as the ones we surround ourselves with. This is true even if we claim no belief in God. There is always an image of God we either believe in or not.

I teach a college course on discovering our worldview called "Christian Faith and Thought," with students from a variety of backgrounds, beliefs, and faiths. It is a course requirement for their major, so the course is not optional. Some are excited about it because they either identify as Christians or are curious about Christianity. Others are fearful and wonder if the conversation will be safe enough to bring their vulnerable questions and concerns.

My first lecture invites them to look at the lens they use to engage the world. I often hold up the glasses I wear as an example of what shapes our view of things. We look at what shapes our view and what we discover doesn't define who we are nor does it define others. Then we discuss how to create a safe space to host the conversation as they navigate the material in the course.

It always takes a week or so before students start to trust the space. The course itself is only six weeks long. Yet, they all enter into the conversation as they experience a safe space with one another and discover that no one, including me, is going to tell them what

to believe. As the professor, I hold the space for safe conversation given the covenant we have created as a group to keep it that way.

The material I bring nudges their understandings of what they hold to be true. I follow the educational theory that when we nudge rather than shove, we invite the other to think through the material and discern a new understanding. The nudge makes them a little off balance and they are able to recenter themselves. This process helps them to know what they believe and why they believe it. The lens we use is often unconscious. And our conversations with those who believe differently than us invite us to consider what we unconsciously believe as true.

I invite all of us to observe our thoughts and understandings enough to look at what we say we believe and how we explicitly live out our beliefs. This requires a place of non-judgment where what we hold to be true or how we act it out doesn't define us. We must be able to hold this place of non-judgment for both ourselves and for others. If we judge ourselves or others, even in comparisons, we remain in an "us-versus-them" stance. Comparison leads to defining one side as good and the other as bad. When we can hold our understandings in a non-judgmental way, we can observe the differences with curiosity and notice what we notice without our noticings defining us, or them, in any way.

Struggle is a good word to describe this transition as we navigate our understandings of God, the world, or ourselves. In the process we may find that the God we have known isn't something or someone we can believe in any longer. This journey is difficult. It is one of the hardest transitions in a person's journey of transformation.

But in the process we receive a gift of understanding that God is more than we have known. We begin to realize that the god we have created, often in our own image, isn't all of who God is. We can then discover the God who created us. If we can persevere on this journey, we discover that the God we have come to know has been with us from the beginning of our journey. Just maybe, this God, the one we have come to know, has only broadened our understanding and is more than what we have previously understood to be true.

Spiritual formation is a process and provides a lens to define this journey as a growing depth in self-awareness and God-awareness. Along the way, our old ways of doing things become unhelpful, and we discover a new way that allows God to meet us experientially, beyond what we have previously known. This opening gift is a grace and only possible by the Spirit.

Along the way, it is essential to have guides for the journey. The writings of Christian mystics, an ancient tradition of Christian spirituality, offer an invitation to the deeper understanding and relationship with God that spiritual seekers desire. Defining Christian spirituality and Christian mysticism is an important part of this discussion. So, before we begin to enter into a selected group of Christian mystics' stories, let's take a moment to define the context of what will shape our conversation.

Introduction: The Gift and Invitation

Introduction

The Gift and the Invitation

What is Spirituality?

Many writers define spirituality differently. For the context of our conversation through the writings included in this book, I am defining spirituality as “a desire for connection that can be experienced through relationship with God through the ordinary rhythms of our life.” It is in a giving and receiving flow of love, even in the midst of suffering and grief, that we can experience what spiritual writers define as the flow of God moving in and through us.²⁶⁵ It is this flow that sustains us in the midst of all of life’s circumstances.

First, this understanding relates to the way we understand God. When we hold a harsh or unapproachable view of God, it is difficult if not impossible to trust that God. Many find that holding on to trusting this kind of image of God is a little like white knuckling through believing harder. But what if God is different than we thought? What if our understanding of God is skewed by our life experiences and the doctrine we hold to be true?

One image that has helped me understand a God that is different from the harsh image that I had previously held is the 15th century Trinity Icon by Andrei Rublev (Appendix B). Icons are said to be written even though they are painted images. In a time of illiteracy, this would have been the only Scripture that many would have read. It depicts an understanding of God that is different than the image I understood in the churches I attended after becoming a Christian. Take a moment and look at the image in the Appendix and see what you notice.

When I show this image, either in a classroom or a group study, I ask those present to share what they notice. People point out the background, the color of the clothing, and the way each of the three heads are leaning. They seem to be deferring one to another. These three, understood as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are gathered around a table with a chalice. The one aspect that I point out, is that the rectangle on the front of the table is thought to be a place where a mirror was attached. The gathering of the Trinity

²⁶⁵ Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 101, 107.

around the table welcomed, even included, the one viewing the icon. This, for me, represents an image of God, a giving and receiving flow of Love.

This is different than the hierarchal understanding I had known previously. And for me, it changed everything. If this God, the one I believed in, included me in this community of Love, then I didn't have to do or be anything different than who I am. And I didn't have to be afraid to approach or be in relationship with this God.

We often claim a relational view of God, but the thought of actually experiencing God in relationship can bring us to a place of fear. We believe in God, but we often relate to God as more of a Santa Claus, dictator, superhero, or other kind of distant figurehead who looks more like how we view the world than how Jesus lived in the Gospel accounts.

But what if the God depicted in the Trinity icon is a truer depiction of God than the images, we hold to be true in our Western Christianity? What would that mean? How does that inform our being created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27)? What does that say about our spirituality?

If our spirituality is more about connection than about behaving correctly, then we can understand spirit and soul in this same vein. Some spiritual writers define the terms soul and spirit as parts of ourselves, something we possess. David Benner, from a psychological perspective, defines them each as ways of being, ways we live our life as we navigate the world.²⁶⁶

Both of these understandings of spirit and soul as either parts or ways of living are two different lenses to understand how we experience life. Both are helpful as we navigate this discussion of the inner workings of spirituality and of ourselves. Having two perspectives allows us to see how people understand themselves and grants us a more complete picture of the whole. In one way, seeing soul and spirit as parts allows us to focus on each individually, and viewing them as the way we live life allows a holistic view of ourselves and others.

According to Benner's understanding, the soul is the space where we reflect on the events in our life as we create meaning from our experiences.²⁶⁷ If our soul is where we learn to hold our experiences and make meaning of our world, then the invitation is to enter into living life holistically. Interacting with our soul requires being attentive to the meaning-making process without judgment. The invitation is to truly listen to our internal emotions, thoughts, reactivity, and response in a place of non-judgment in order to understand what is going on beneath the surface.

As we interact with our soul, spending time listening to ourselves without spending the energy judging ourselves by our or another's expectations, we can become integrated and whole. This makes sense when we think about our spirituality as connection—allowing

²⁶⁶ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 42.

²⁶⁷ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 137.

the non-judgmental process of noticing what is going on beneath the surface open the way to connect to our inner selves.

Our spirit, on the other hand, is a dynamic and often passionate force which holds our yearning for more out of life.²⁶⁸ Our longings and desires may seem dangerous. They take us out of the safety of what we know. Yet often we yearn for more, and that yearning continues to move us forward. These aching longings, our desires, can feel like an “unquenchable fire” at the “core of our being,” a “fundamental life energy.” Freud called it *eros* which includes our sexuality and goes beyond the basic biological understanding to grasp it as a source that vitalizes us. Some define this type of energy as sublimated sexuality; however, limiting this energy to our biological sexual drive limits our understanding of living a holistic spiritual life. Our understanding of spirituality as more than a biological sexual drive goes deeper as our response to our aching longings of connecting to more.²⁶⁹

As we hold these three definitions—the Trinity as a relational view of God, our soul as a place where we make meaning, and the spirit as our desire to connect to more, within ourselves, with God, and with others—then we begin to understand how we are spiritual beings thriving in connection, in relationship. Within this view, sin is defined as a break in relationship (from a more Jewish understanding)²⁷⁰ in contrast to a Greek behavioral understanding of “missing the mark.” This makes sense given such a relational view of God and Love. When we view God as relational and see that as part of the basis of who we are—as created in the *Imago Dei*—we see how this intentional design drives us. Our own spirit, the *eros* energy, propels us toward healing the divides in us and around us. This is a movement toward wholeness, a reconciliation between God and ourselves, between ourselves and others, and between ourselves and creation.

A healthy spirituality recognizes, allows, and accepts our desires and passionate longings and integrates them into our ordinary lives. This integration originates from being unmet, unsatisfied, wanting. It is important to allow ourselves to sit with the dissonance of this unmet longing without too quickly satisfying the emptiness we experience. This space of dissonance allows the transformation toward wholeness and we begin to discover our true self, our *Imago Dei*, and God.²⁷¹ This is what we desire in relationships, in seeing and being seen, knowing and being known, loving and being loved.

Part of the work is to recognize the misidentification and misdirection of our internal yearning and the yearning in those around us. This requires silence, stillness, and patience. As a society we naturally expect instant gratification and productivity, however, so delaying long enough to follow the root of our discomfort is not a valued or realized

²⁶⁸ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 137.

²⁶⁹ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 17, 19.

²⁷⁰ Rhymer, “Jewish and Christian Understandings of Sin,” 470.

²⁷¹ Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 225.

practice. We enjoy the process of desiring much more than the actual meeting of our desire. In fact, we only notice our desires when they are unmet.

Within our capitalistic economic system, we try to fulfill our desires—usually our social desires of identity and belonging—by consuming more stuff. If we can wait, we will discover more about who we are and how we relate to the world. Letting go of the tension of holding the dissonance we feel and allowing our yearning to remain unsatisfied long enough allows the transformative inner work to open our yearning to be more fully realized and met.

It can be difficult to hold our unmet desires without resolving them. As mentioned earlier, our desire is for connection, either within ourselves, with God, or with those around us. When we do not reflect deeply on what ails us, we tend to numb our experience through activity (work, play, sleep) or by self-medication, trying to meet the recognized symptom without realizing what is underneath the surface. When this is our pattern, we only apply a band aid and do not allow an inner healing toward wholeness to be realized.

In our desire for continued connection, our spirit invites us to look beyond ourselves, and our soul translates what we experience to our ordinary life. This journey offers an invitation to allow us to enter the flow of life that is outside our control. Our soul is the place that allows us to live life in the present and not in the past or the dreams or fears held in our future. The invitation is to discover in silence a union and peace with God which allows an inward peace, secure, and with new knowledge and power.²⁷² We can live right here and right now. We can learn to live life in this flow of Love.

By giving consent to this opening within us, we welcome greater freedom and wholeness. Our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world around us expands. The only thing required is our consent, an active *yes* to join in the dance with God.

What is Mysticism?

The conversation on spirituality is important because it shapes how we can begin to understand Christian mysticism. The mystics, through the ages, have yearned for more in their relationship with God. George Fox desired answers to his questions outside of the corrupt religious institutions. Julian of Norwich struggled in understanding the pain and loss so evident in 14th century England. These people from long ago struggled with many of the same questions and desires for more that we see in ourselves and in those around us.

The writings of the Christian mystics provide the guidance we need and offer the hope of God meeting us in our desire for more than we have known. As we approach their

²⁷² Brinton, *Quaker Journals*, 4.

writings and their stories, it is imperative to define what we mean by Christian mysticism. As we define what mysticism means it is important to consider contemplative prayer, often described as an entrance into a mystical journey.

Contemplation or contemplative prayer always points one to the love of God.²⁷³ Walter Burghardt defines contemplation as a “long, loving look at the real.”²⁷⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing* speaks of centering prayer as a “naked intent for God.”²⁷⁵ Being immersed in God as love opens us to God’s work of creating a new heart, a new creation in us from the inside out (Ezekiel 36:26). This invitation to the mystical life is offered in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5:8).”

Scripture alone offers a basis for a mystical understanding of living out a spiritual life of faith. “The mystical truth of the New Testament is that we are in a union with Jesus that takes us beyond every kind of ego-centered relationship with him.”²⁷⁶ Jesus speaks about union with God in his prayer requesting that we would be one with God as Jesus is one with the Father (John 17:20-23).

When we can abide in this kind of relationship with God, we can let go of fighting to be seen or to be right. Without the basis of an experiential faith, we rest in fundamentalism, a means of controlling ourselves and others by behavior management. Fundamentalism is a part of every religion, but it leaves us in an immature faith that struggles to hold mystery.

Paul experienced this kind of transformation on the Damascus road. An experiential encounter with Christ thwarted his fundamental understanding and opened him to love, even for those outside of Judaism, the Gentiles (Acts 9). Peter fell asleep and encountered a vision from God, which opened him to enter Cornelius’s home and embrace his faith, another outsider of Judaism (Acts 10). These are just a few of many stories of God-encounters that drew people to a broader understanding of God, which led to greater inclusivity of those around them.

So, what is this mystical life and what defines it? In reading the writings of Christian mystics throughout history and those who have studied them, several components of Christian mysticism are consistently mentioned.

Experiential & Encounter

Some define an experiential encounter with God’s presence as unexpected and more profound than exclusively rational. Others note that this type of encounter is personal and

²⁷³ McColman, *Answering the Contemplative Call*, xiv.

²⁷⁴ Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real,” 91.

²⁷⁵ Carmen Acevedo Butcher, trans, *The Cloud of Unknowing: With the Book of Privy Counsel*, 1st edition, (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 24.

²⁷⁶ Freeman, *Jesus, The Teacher Within*, 38.

a lived experience. Christian mysticism holds both of these understandings as true. An experiential encounter with God is more than unusual sensations, but holds new ways of knowing and love based on an increasing awareness of God's presence in our inner world. God or an experience of God isn't something that we can grasp but has the capacity to transform our very lives.

God's Presence

If God is not an object to be grasped, experiencing God isn't an isolated or one-time experience. Mysticism is a journey, a lifelong journey with God. Part of the difficulty in understanding God's presence is that it can be felt directly and unmediated. It is often felt through an experience of God's absence. We may sense God's presence through our perception that God isn't with us at all.

Prayers and icons may act as a starting place but then fall away as God is felt in deep places within ourselves. Exploring God through God's absence requires courage and tenacity to continue to follow the desire for a deeper relationship with God.²⁷⁷

The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, states, "You only need a naked intent for God. When you long for [God], that is enough."²⁷⁸ Thomas Merton shared how this journey toward God is in a deep place: "faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine Light."²⁷⁹ As we seek after knowing God more deeply, God meets us exactly where we are and brings us deeper into a relational and intimate knowing.

Mystics write about different ways of seeing or experiencing God's presence. Visions are experienced but are not necessary on a mystic's journey. Spiritual visions—images in one's own mind—are also not a requirement but are often experienced earlier rather than later in a mystic's journey as they follow the desire to know God more deeply. Some mystics experience intellectual visions, immediate understandings of a concept without an image, which opens them to a greater capacity for understanding. These visions can come either ecstatically, outside of the usual way of sensing, or directly, which engages the human mind to receive the fullest it is capable of holding by God's grace.²⁸⁰

Apophatic Spirituality or Unknowing

The interior nature of the mystical journey lends itself to be underneath our ability to put it into words or to even know rationally. Being touched by God through mystical

²⁷⁷ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 11.

²⁷⁸ Butcher, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 24.

²⁷⁹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 130.

²⁸⁰ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 165.

encounters is beyond our ability to reason, express, imagine, or even clearly feel. Apophatic spirituality is the term several authors use to define this ineffable knowing.

This knowing is often an understanding that is just beginning and not fully formed or developed and includes our whole selves: mind, spirit, and body. We think we can speak of God, but as we experience God, we seem unable to put that experience into words. Yet some mystics make an attempt as they share their experiences and new knowing.

Since this knowing is underneath our traditional understanding of ourselves, God, and the world, it may cause fear and distrust in those on the outskirts of a mystical understanding of God. Yet the mystics know what they know by faith and trust in God. Living out their faithfulness allows them to be more defined by their longing and not the experiences they have.

Transformative

Our yearning is the beginning of the journey. But there is still much that gets in the way of our seeking a deeper relationship.

According to the great mystics, our awareness is both reduced and clouded by self-concern, excessive preoccupation with our own agendas, and with restless distractions, and we lack the purity of heart necessary to experience any God that is not our own creation. In the mystical tradition, the road beyond practical atheism and idolatry lies in the purification of our awareness – that is, in the purging from our minds and hearts of narcissism, pragmatism, and distraction.²⁸¹

It is in this space of Christ-consciousness, becoming Christ-like, where one finds the true place of transformation, leading to changed behaviors. The gap between our beliefs and the realities of our inner life needs to be healed. We don't necessarily understand this in the present, but we become aware of the journey in looking back.

The mystics teach this as spiritual theology, which is grounded in experience. As they desire to understand God, they move from their minds to their hearts, and then to the center of their being. Christian mysticism is participation in this transformational journey toward union with God in love. Yet, it isn't leaving the world, but about living wholly in the world.

Mysticism is experiencing the presence of God that leaves you feeling vulnerable or naked in God's presence, as defenses and masks begin to fall away. When we are met in this way by a God of Love the healing of our fragmented consciousness changes everything in our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world. A mystic's true attainment is measured by the impact of living an experiential relationship with God and the world. Being changed on the inside can't help but impact a mystic's outer world.

²⁸¹ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 75.

By God's Grace

Mystical theology is knowledge of God directly infused by God; it is a relational and not rational way of knowing. We understand as a special kind of knowledge through passively experiencing God, by God's grace, and not by human effort. Yet, both Western and Eastern traditions believe that we can change our lives in radical ways by practicing spiritual disciplines. The disciplines are helpful to prepare ourselves for an experience with God but do not cause an experience. We can't make it happen.

One way to describe the division between the activity of God and ourselves in mysticism can be explained in the flow of *praxis* and *theoria*. *Praxis* contains the practices used to open ourselves to God, such as meditation, asceticism, religious practice, moral practice, and social justice. The mystics share their own praxis in their writings, outlining the way forward for their readers. "In praxis the heart correctly disposes itself."²⁸² *Theoria* holds the heart as passively receiving God's presence, and the presence of others and the world. This double movement, a giving and receiving flow of love, continues along the journey toward a deeper relationship with God as we prepare to be open and receptive and as God touches us deeply and intimately.

Union with God

Those who study mysticism claim that union with God is essential to mysticism. It is a place of fear among those on the outside of a mystical understanding. Many of the medieval mystics speak about this stage of the spiritual journey using sexual and often erotic language and imagery. Female mystics during this time, speak about a relationship with God as varied, intimate, and personal. It draws them up toward joy and not down into the depths of despair. They use relational words such as spouse, lover, mother, nurse, or friend. The depth of this knowing is a continuing and constant relationship with God that overtakes them and impacts their full understanding of God.

Many struggle with the use of the term *union* and prefer communion, relationship, or friendship to describe this type of relational understanding of God and humankind. Yet, these other terms communicate a less intimate relationship than often represented by mystics. Communion can be understood as an intimate relationship but not necessarily in the common understanding of communion as partaking of the Eucharist used to remember a transactional relationship with God. When we consider our spirituality as a drawing or yearning to be connected to more, the language of the mystics make sense.

Julian of Norwich defines union as the path, seeking to know God in order to know our own soul, which is enclosed in God.²⁸³ Mystics define this journey as experiencing an all-consuming love affair with God and the world, a reaching out to the goal of losing

²⁸² Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern* 27.

²⁸³ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 146.

oneself in God. This goal of an intimate union of love with God is the center and very ground of the soul.²⁸⁴

Meister Eckhart believed that union with God was possible because of the divine spark in each of our souls. Meister Eckhart defined the divine spark as the light within our soul, or as Quakers would understand it as “that of God in everyone.”²⁸⁵ Some have difficulty with the idea of each person having a divine spark or light within. However, Genesis 1:26-27 states that all humankind is created in the image of God, the Imago Dei.

Through church history, many have debated the subject of the Imago Dei and the fall. Human nature, as defined by Christianity, states we are created for and invited into a relationship with our Creator God, one another, and the world. This companionship or relationship with God frees us to love as a response to God’s intimate love for us.²⁸⁶

Some would say that that humankind lost their Imago Dei; however, the Hebrew Scriptures do not say anything about our losing this important component of being human. More can be added about the debate of sin and the fall, but the controversy remains and is not the subject of this book. However, if our identity is being created in the image of God, the Imago Dei, then that is the invitation for each of us to live in union with God. This doesn’t mean that we become God, but we can live in communion with God. Julian of Norwich adds to this conversation, “Our soul is at home in God. God dwells in our soul and our soul dwells in God.”²⁸⁷

Love

Christian mystics abandon all things for Love. They release the need to reason, conceptualize in order to fully cognitively understand God. They give up the need for material possessions, especially being identified by them. For them, this is the pearl of great price because love, not salvation, is everything. Mysticism is marked by this excess of love, as God reveals God’s self, and we as humankind respond to God’s gaze of unconditional and inclusive love.²⁸⁸ “To know God is to love God and to know that one is loved by God.”²⁸⁹

“The mystical life begins with a deep experience of this infusion of divine love.”²⁹⁰ This deep experience changes everything. As we begin to embrace the overwhelming reality

²⁸⁴ King, *Christian Mystics*, 7, 15.

²⁸⁵ King, *Christian Mystics*, 109; Wilmer A. Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990), 69.

²⁸⁶ Williamson, “The Human Question,” 161.

²⁸⁷ King, *Christian Mystics*, 136.

²⁸⁸ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, xv.

²⁸⁹ Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, 25.

²⁹⁰ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 5.

of God's complete love for us as a form of knowing deep within ourselves, our view of God, ourselves, and the world changes. As we experience God's love, we can't help but be propelled outside of ourselves and into loving the world. John states, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and as Bernard of Clairvaux states, "Love is the 'law' of God's being."²⁹¹ Julian of Norwich understood love even more broadly as the meaning of the universe.²⁹²

My Definition

The mystics invite us to live out a Christian life that follows the movement of God that is with us and in us. Given these essential components for Christian mysticism and for the sake of this book, I am defining mysticism as:

Christian mysticism, at God's invitation, is a journey of experientially knowing the God defined as Love. This journey leads to a knowing that is underneath the surface of rational thought and includes and transforms the whole self: body, mind, and spirit. Those on the journey are transformed from the inside out, which opens them to a broader consciousness of God, themselves, and the world.

Fears of Mysticism

Discovering and following the path of Christian mysticism enhances our capacity as humans to recognize and respond to the movements of God throughout our life and the world. Through the examples of Christian mystics, we discover we are not limited to rational ways of knowing, but rather an expansiveness which integrates our experience and imagination. The mystics invite wonder, curiosity, and humility, so necessary for an authentic and vulnerable relationship with God that incorporates all of our life experiences and deepest longings.

Yet walking this path is often fraught with uncertainty, leading to fear. A quick Google search turns up many reasons to fear mysticism. The results list blogs cautioning against mysticism due to a lack of holding to Scripture, following an internal voice, separating from the world, or too much navel-gazing. Much of the mystics' writings from the past sound confusing and even give credence to the fearful warnings of well-meaning Christian leaders.

I remember my own uncertainty as I registered for a course on Christian Mysticism. But I discovered voices in their writings that described my own growing relationship with God. Some of the writings can be difficult to understand, given the time they were written and the old language used. This can be disturbing because these writings can be so easily misunderstood. Because of our misunderstanding we can view their writings as irrational, impractical, and not part of daily life. The writings can easily be considered as esoteric, miraculous, beyond us, and abnormal, even to some as parapsychological phenomena or part of the occult or demonology.

²⁹¹ McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics*, 217, 229.

²⁹² Freeman, *Jesus, The Teacher Within*, 113.

When reading some of these ancient writings it does not take long to determine that part of the argument against them is understandable. Many of the practices seem distant from our experiences within our own culture. Mystics understand anew, interiorly, and they struggle to conceptualize their knowings enough to put them into words as they try to communicate what they know. Yet, they can't help but try to communicate their understandings as they are filled with a burning desire to share with others.

As we read their writings, we are invited into the same type of experiential relationship with a God of Love. As we follow their invitation, the way we live our lives and understand the world is transformed and God's beautiful creation becomes vividly real, and waiting for the afterlife becomes insufficient. So how did we get to this place of distrusting such a vital part of the church's teaching and tradition?

The Great Divide

A necessary component to remember is that Christian mystics, through the early church until relatively recently, have been an essential part of the way we, as Christians, have understood God. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the late Scholastic period, theology and spirituality became separated in our understanding of God and religion as theology moved from the monasteries into the universities. The chasm widened between holding a rational understanding based on intellectualism and a devotional and affective faith. Spirituality became individualistic and subjective as some of those who pursued a mystical relationship with God moved away from being tied to doctrine, or "right" belief. Theology became focused more on rational knowledge gained through academic study.²⁹³

With this division in understanding and a reframing of what it meant to live a devout Christian life, individuals followed diverse paths in their relationship with God. The leaders of the church, in their desire to protect and guide people, followed the academic approach to understand religion and God. It was a time when Christians did not want to see through a glass darkly but wanted to understand things tangibly, to know them rationally. The Protestant reformers associated mystical theology with heretical teachings and the Graeco-Roman mystery religions.²⁹⁴ In the Catholic monastic communities, the monks followed a strict daily discipline of prayer as part of their vocational life call. As the reformers aligned this practice with a faith based on works, they rejected this practice and a holistic and lived spirituality through mystical experiences was denied.²⁹⁵

To communicate this adjustment in thought, Martin Luther emphasized Scripture, "the external word," and an objective understanding of faith, "righteousness outside of us," and "Christ for us." He taught an understanding of God which was outside of the human person in contrast to the work of faith represented by those living a vocational call in Catholicism. Luther himself didn't completely disregard an experiential understanding of

²⁹³ Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness*, 9.

²⁹⁴ Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, 42–43.

²⁹⁵ Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, 127.

faith but created this emphasis to encourage others to realize that we are unable to earn grace. Even though Luther's understanding of Christ for us, an objective faith, and Christ in us, a mystical understanding, are interrelated, these two traditions eventually separated, and the intellectual structures took precedence over the inward understanding.²⁹⁶ This fracturing of Western Christianity through the Protestant Reformation along with a greater emphasis on scientific discovery caused greater suspicion of mysticism.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Enlightenment period brought even more growth toward scientific inquiry as a means to certainty, and the chasm between a rational and spiritual faith widened. It was during this time that the connection between the mind and the heart was severed.²⁹⁷ This place of certainty and rationality made way for holding a dualistic mindset. Dualism is defined as perceiving reality in a framework of two opposing understandings, judging one side as good and the other as evil. As we severed the mind and heart connection, we began to relate to ourselves, God, and the world in a dualistic way, judging the mind as good and the emotions or heart as bad. From this place of judgment, a holistic and lived spirituality became suspicious and regarded as only inward-focused without caring for others.

Those who pursued a spiritual life by practicing asceticism or monasticism viewed spiritual disciplines as a means to purify themselves so their soul could be face-to-face with God, in direct communion or union with God. An authentic mystic uses spiritual practices such as asceticism as a means to an end—encountering God—and then often discards such practices. The goal is not to have mystical experiences of ecstasies or raptures, but union with God for God's sake and the sake of the world. It is this longing for God that defines a mystic as opposed to one's experience of God. When mystics communicate their understanding from their experience, it can be beyond reason or rational thought. Their knowing is contemplative, an understanding “uncluttered by thought,” based on a direct and personal encounter.²⁹⁸

As the development of Christianity continued, the suspicion of mysticism continued as well. In 1738, John Wesley felt a warming in his heart as he was seeking a living faith. He came to understand in his study that the literal interpretation of Scripture did not necessarily align with his experience. The Holiness movement, part of the formation of Wesleyan and Methodist denominations, renewed an interest in spiritual experience; however, as time continued, the mystical understanding fell away into rational thought and “right” belief, once again.²⁹⁹

As the American revivals appeared across the nation, it was a time for a renewal of Christians' first love. People were awakened to the possibility of a lived spirituality and recommitted themselves to living a life of faith. Often they had experiences of mystical

²⁹⁶ Collins, *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, 123, 125.

²⁹⁷ Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness*, 9.

²⁹⁸ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 76.

²⁹⁹ Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, 319–20.

encounters with God. But as time continued this spiritual awakening became incased in a doctrine of “right” belief. Through the twentieth century the world became even more secularized. Two world wars made people doubt the inherent goodness of humankind. Where was God in this? For the first time, social scientists in sociology and psychology started to explain things outside of a religious context.³⁰⁰

An understanding of both a rational faith in God and an experiential spirituality through mysticism with God is important. Richard Foster, Carl McColman, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Mirabai Starr, among others, have studied the ancient Christian writings and brought their discoveries to us, allowing past understandings to influence our present and future thoughts regarding spirituality. These scholars have sparked a renewed interest in the writings of the mystics. They show that both the study of theology, a rational understanding, and a contemplative life are crucial to a full faith.

When we try to separate a rational understanding of God from an experiential understanding we run into difficulty. Since God is truly mystery, we are unable to fully know God cognitively. If God is defined as love, we are unable to fully know that as a reality through knowing about God; we have to experience love to understand the truth of it in the depth of our being.

In reality, we are also unable to separate the God in whom we rationally believe from our experience of that God. Our thoughts about God shape how we understand our experience. Furthermore, we cannot separate the God we experience from the many injustices in our world. What we think about God and how we experience God matters in the way we relate to ourselves and to the world. If we see God as a God of wrath, we can rationalize violence between our nations. If we see God as a God of relationship and love, then we would lean toward fighting injustices with nonviolence, viewing that of God in the other.

As We Embark on the Adventure...

As human beings, we are spiritual beings. It is part of the way we have been designed as created in the *Imago Dei*. Yet, we often do not understand our spirituality or how it is linked to our desire for more than what we have known. The promise of an abundant life seems far-fetched to many walking and living the Christian faith. Many yearn for more without the hope of ever being met in their desire.

Our spirituality, when defined through the relationality of God, through the Trinity, is seen in our desire to be connected through relationship. Often our rational understanding of faith, “right belief,” and a literal understanding of Scripture form a barrier to living an experiential spirituality. Christian mystics, through history and in contemporary society, write about these kinds of encounters with God. However, the fear and

³⁰⁰ Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, 376–77.

misunderstandings surrounding mysticism in many Christian churches do not allow these great teachers to show the possibility or the way of encountering God.

But the yearning for more and the desire of being connected to ourselves, God, and one another continues. Both the church and society throughout history have attempted to meet this natural desire for more. Some of the responses have been helpful and some continue to create divisions. Regardless, each of them is well intended by those who have tried to meet this deep hunger of the ones they walk alongside.

As we read church history and the writings of the mystics, we can see both how our understanding of God has changed through time and how mystics have helped to shape what we hold true. The Christian mystics were often on the inside edge of what was considered orthodox in their lifetimes. They nudged those who were in leadership and the status quo of what was considered 'right' belief.

As we continue, you may feel that what they understood is completely contrary to what is true. It is important to remember that they were also a product of their own time. For example, Hildegard of Bingen considered herself, as was properly understood in her time, a spiritual man. This understanding was based on her being a cloistered virgin female. It seems so odd to our ears but this title gave her the confidence and permission to speak to those in leadership in the church and in the empire. And she boldly spoke truth to power.

So, as we read their stories, try to let go of the judgments that will come due to their odd experiences and words and get to know these people from our developing history of the story of God.

Notice their relationship with God and what made it real to them.

Notice the way they impacted their own time and ours.

And notice what stirs in you as you discover more of God and the story of God through their mystical understandings.

What do you desire in your own relationship with God?

Let's begin the journey...

Chapter 4: Hildegard of Bingen

Chapter 4

Hildegard of Bingen

1098-1179

*Whoever has knowledge in the Holy Spirit and wings of faith,
let this one not ignore My admonition,
but taste it, embrace it, and receive it in [their] soul.³⁰¹*

In a time when women were considered unfit to engage in positions of political, religious, or social influence, Hildegard of Bingen left a lasting impression that still impacts society today. She has been legitimately called a renaissance woman before the Renaissance.

Hildegard was a prophet, scientist, mystic, visionary, poet, dramatist, musician, composer, artist, and theologian. More than 400 letters exist today, letters she wrote to emperors, popes, bishops, archbishops, nuns, nobility, and laity throughout her lifetime, both encouraging and reprimanding them for their actions. Her compositions were famous and are still accessible for contemporary listeners. She wrote a morality play that was set to music, an opera for the time. She wrote books on theology, nature, a holistic book of healing, liturgical poetry, and visionary tracts. In addition to her writing and teaching, she formed two convents which housed 80 women each. Those around her viewed Hildegard as a spiritual mother and a cherished friend.

Just how did a woman have such a large impact in a society that didn't value the female voice? Let's delve a little deeper into her story...

The Beginning

In 1098, Hildegard was the 10th child born to an aristocratic, upper nobility family in Bermersheim, Germany.³⁰² Her father was a knight. At an early age, she experienced visions and saw a spiritual light. When she was three years old, she questioned her nurse and discovered that not everyone saw things the way she did and she decided to keep

³⁰¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 69.

³⁰² Katharina M. Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 109.

quiet about her experiences.³⁰³ When she was eight years old, her parents dedicated her to religious life by presenting her to a Benedictine Monastery of Disibodenberg. Some have speculated that this might have been a means of education for a gifted and intelligent young girl during that time. Others believe she may have been a family tithe to the church, being the 10th child.³⁰⁴ We do not honestly know the motives of her parents and yet it seems, given what we know about Hildegard's childhood, they may have very well recognized her giftedness.

Sending a young child to live in a monastery would be unheard of today. However, during the Middle Ages, women were considered weaker and lower than men. This understanding impacted their ability to receive an education as well as their ability to teach or stand in their authority. Women had to know their place in society due to being judged for their emotionality. Men were able to pursue a university education and teaching positions yet this was entirely out of the question for women. Wealthy families interested in an educational opportunity for their daughters sent them to convents at a young age.

Hildegard came under the care of a family friend, Jutta von Spanheim, who was just around six years older and lived as an anchoress connected to the monastery. An anchoress was someone who had decided to pursue a religious life of solitude, prayer, and study. During this time, choosing this kind of life meant a woman could be free to pursue her relationship with God and not a life devoted to marriage and family. She could choose her own way to live. Those who chose a religious life were considered more spiritual, or closer to God, than those outside the church.

Even within her own limited knowledge, Jutta was able to teach her young student to read from the Latin Bible and to recite the Benedictine office, a series of written prayers designed as a liturgical worship or spiritual practice. Through their years together, other young women were drawn to this life and joined Jutta and Hildegard. When Jutta died in 1136, the other sisters requested Hildegard to be their new abbess.³⁰⁵

Moving Forward

In 1141, at the age of 43, Hildegard experienced an astonishing series of revelations. She began to consider these visions as a prophetic gift from God. She wrote:

...a burning light of tremendous brightness coming from heaven poured into my entire mind. Like a flame that does not burn but enkindles, it inflamed my entire

³⁰³ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, trans. Radd K Ehrman and Joseph L Baird, vol. I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

³⁰⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, I:11.

³⁰⁵ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 78.

*heart and my entire breast, just like the sun that warms an object with its rays...*³⁰⁶

Earlier in life, she vowed to keep these experiences to herself, but now she felt God command her to write what she saw. At first, she refused, and she became severely ill until she obeyed what she felt God was inviting her to do.³⁰⁷ At this time, it was unheard of for a woman to write about God or theology. Only men were allowed to go to the university to study and learn about such things. Women had no place in writing or teaching about these topics. But in this discrimination was a gift. Since women were unable to attend the university and learn a more rational understanding of God based in the dualistic understandings taught at the time, women brought an experiential spirituality that showed a different side of God. Without the formal theological education, they could only interpret their understandings through their experiences.³⁰⁸ But would Hildegard share her experiences, and would men be open to receive them?

Over the next ten years, Hildegard set to work and wrote a visionary book of theology that she titled *Scivias*. It contains three books holding three main themes: creation, redemption, and sanctification. *Scivias*, translated as *Know the Ways of the Lord*, follows a relational or Trinitarian flow based on her non-dual understanding of God.³⁰⁹ This was a different understanding than many shared based on how theology was taught in a patriarchal medieval society. Given her earlier tutelage under Jutta with regard to reading Latin, Hildegard's writing took a more exegetical instead of experiential approach, but still came from her experience with the living God.

Hildegard's own reluctance is evident in her beginning words:

O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth? Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not by a human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God. Explain these things in such a way that the hearer, receiving the words of his instructor, may expound them in those words, according to that will, vision and instruction. Thus therefore, O human, speak these things that you see and hear. And write them not by yourself or any other human being, but by the

³⁰⁶ Carol P MacCormack, "Hildegard of Bingen, A 12th Century Holistic Worldview," *Blossoming of a Holistic World View* (Landenberg, PA: Quaker Universalist Fellowship, 1992), 2.

³⁰⁷ Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, 110.

³⁰⁸ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 19.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 77–78.

*will of Him Who knows, sees and disposes all things in the secrets of His mysteries.*³¹⁰

The use of “filth of filth” from this excerpt in *Scivias* is the term the early Church fathers used to describe women. As she starts her first writing, these words show how she felt God speak to her regarding her ability to speak from her own strength.³¹¹ She spoke boldly because she felt she was a mouthpiece for God. Her sense of nothingness, her understanding of her weakness as a woman, only showed the strength and power of God more fully. Still, how would a way forward be made so others would receive her words?

Bernard of Clairvaux, a popular monk in the same time period with broad religious and political influence, was aware of Hildegard and the work she was doing. So, he encouraged Pope Eugenius III to send someone to confirm Hildegard’s gifting. A woman’s voice had to be approved by men as theologically sound and acceptable. Once the Pope received a confirmation of Hildegard’s gifting from the group he had sent, he read her unpublished work to a formal gathering of bishops at the Synod of Trier. This action gave unprecedented papal approval to Hildegard as an approved theologian in the church, giving credit to her writing and to her voice.³¹² Not only did the Pope endorse Hildegard’s writing, he encouraged her to continue to write more.³¹³

In her writing and teaching, Hildegard encouraged others to begin to see things clearly. She spoke of a holistic God and view of the world by often linking the created and spiritual world.³¹⁴ As she witnessed in her study of creation plants becoming green, she linked that same movement in nature to the movement of the Holy Spirit. This greening, or as she wrote *viriditas*, was the expression and connection of God through the Holy Spirit representing God’s bounty. Those who were filled with the Holy Spirit were filled with green, just as she saw in the natural rhythms of creation.³¹⁵

To communicate this level of spirituality in her illustrations, Hildegard would use brilliant colors like a red, purple, and green combined with black and white. The color green was prevalent in both her illustrations and writings to symbolize spiritual and physical health, growth, and the freshness of redemption. As she linked the created and spiritual world, she would encourage her readers to use all their senses and would invite them to an all-consuming and passionate relationship with God. For Hildegard, a

³¹⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 59.

³¹¹ Dietrich, “The Visionary Rhetoric of Hildegard of Bingen,” 204.

³¹² Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, 110.

³¹³ MacCormack, “Hildegard of Bingen, A 12th Century Holistic Worldview,” 2.

³¹⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, I:10; Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 81.

³¹⁵ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 80–81.

passionate love of God meant despising the world and fleshly desires, a view much like her culture.³¹⁶

Still today, we tend to judge and fragment our perception of the world, yet Hildegard's writings invite her readers to see things outside of a dual perspective. She viewed people both as creators and as created. Her view of humanity held our capacity to be gracious, compassionate, and loving while also recognizing our capacity to be destroyers, malicious, and self-indulgent. She was able to hold both our capacity for great good and great evil in tension within her non-dual understanding.

She thought the world spiraled through ages of justice and injustice, continuing until the universe was consummated in love.³¹⁷ It was in this hope that Hildegard desired to communicate her message to influence reform in the church, changing things in small ways and still allowing things to be not quite right. As she understood it, God's provision of restoration and reform was available as long as humankind needed the help.³¹⁸

The Middle Ages were turbulent and disorderly, full of wars, fierce struggles, undisciplined Church leaders. There were popes, anti-popes, emperors, and anti-emperors. There was a bloody conflict between Church and State over the control of society and religion. Henry IV was the king of Germany and a punitive ruler of the empire.³¹⁹ It was a violent and divisive time.

Because of Hildegard's aristocratic background and her position within the hierarchical church, she supported both gender and class structures, but also took a stand against injustice in those same structures. So, she spoke from within the structure and as one from the outside.³²⁰ She considered herself a mosaic figure calling the church to reform from within to a new age of the Holy Spirit. In this, she hoped to be a voice into a new understanding of morality within a relationship with God.³²¹

But if priests do not show the people the authority of their office, they are not priests but ravenous wolves, for they hold their office by robbery as a wolf cruelly snatches a sheep, doing their own will instead of caring for the sheep. And, because they live perversely, they are afraid to teach true doctrine to the people;

³¹⁶ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 79–81, 86.

³¹⁷ Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 130.

³¹⁸ Ann Astell, "The Eucharist, Memory, Reform, and Regeneration in Hildegard of Bingen's Scivias and Nicholas of Cusa's Sermons," in *Reassessing Reform*, ed. David Zachariah Flanagan and Christopher M. Bellitto (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), EBSCOhost.

³¹⁹ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, I:10.

³²⁰ Dietrich, "The Visionary Rhetoric of Hildegard of Bingen," 204–5.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

*they consent to iniquity as to a lord, for they harbor carnal desires, and they close the door of their heart to a helper as if to a stranger; for justice is of God.*³²²

She continually exhorted others to live a life of intense virtue. Anything short of that would be lukewarm, not having a genuine commitment to living a life of virtue. She had singleness of purpose and was willing to threaten people to get them to that level of commitment.³²³ She challenged leaders, both those inside and outside the church, from becoming comfortable and soft in their lives of luxury and bodily pleasure. They were fighting bloody wars, not for the justice of God, but for their own comfort and power.³²⁴

In contrast to the immoral actions of the church, a movement rose called Catharism. This flow of thought taught that the material world was evil and that those who believed in God should live a life of purity. Hildegard pointed out through her writing how the material world declares the glory of God.³²⁵

Even in the harshness witnessed during this time, Hildegard could view everyone having the image of God within. She understood the violence and corruption that was so evident in the Church within the knowledge that these same people were also capable of great good. She believed she could speak as a mouthpiece of God to the need for reform inside the Church by looking past the “fallenness” of these leaders to also see the beauty, as God continued to bring us to love.

It was this gift of seeing both the fallenness and the beauty in those she wrote letters to that allowed her recipients to receive and hear her words. These men in leadership positions held her in great respect as is evident in Bernard of Clairvaux’s words to her:

*Therefore, we beg and entreat you to remember us before God and also those who are joined to us in spiritual union. For since the spirit in you is joined to God, we have confidence that you can in great measure help and sustain us.*³²⁶

Continued Faithfulness

In 1148, after Hildegard received the Pope’s endorsement for her writings, she wrote the Abbott of Disibodenberg, in the monastery overseeing her convent. She had sensed God was asking her to establish her own convent on the desolate slope of Rubertsberg. Kuno, the abbott, tried to discourage her and Hildegard became severely ill again. Kuno visited

³²² Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 285–86.

³²³ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 95.

³²⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, I:13.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 1st pbk. print. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 260. (Bernard, letter 366 Ad Hildegardem abbatissam, PL 182: col. 572 B-C.)

her at her bedside and she was unable to even lift her head. Seeing how ill she was, he finally relented, and she immediately got up and prepared to go. Once given permission, Hildegard arranged everything that was required for the transition. Eighteen of the nuns moved with her. The new facility had running water, a scriptorium, which gave authority to her written work, and a document that established its independence from the male leadership of Disibodenberg.³²⁷

During this time, she finished her writing of the *Scivias* and learned to deal with the ramifications of fame. She also encountered and worked through a great sense of loss. Richardis von State, a nun that Hildegard mentored and loved dearly, accepted an abbess position against Hildegard's counsel but on the encouragement of her own family. Hildegard wrote this young nun and requested that she return and Richardis agreed. However, before she could return, she became ill and died. Hildegard was struck with a great grief.³²⁸

Hildegard continued to struggle through sickness as her convent grew even more independent from male-dominated leadership. She was a gifted leader who was not afraid of speaking to those in authority based on how she felt God spoke to her. She was undoubtedly the product of her time in understanding gender roles, yet she was able to speak to both secular and religious leaders, calling them out on their lax and immoral behavior.³²⁹

In one way, she encouraged women to be submissive in society, but she did not hold herself to that same standard due to her understanding of becoming a "spiritual man." The thought during this time was that a celibate, cloistered woman gained the position of a "spiritual man." In one way this strengthened her ability to speak and in another her weakness as a woman allowed God's power to be made visible.³³⁰ But even so she did not write so her audience would see her writing as a woman. She wrote to recall those who were lukewarm and faithless leaders to God.³³¹

As time went on, Hildegard's writing and fame increased. As was a common practice for all writers during the Middle Ages, Hildegard had a secretary, Volmar, who transcribed her writings. He had been a mentor in her youth and had remained a close confidant until his death in 1173. Hildegard, being female, was unlearned as to proper Latin grammar and Volmar was permitted to make minor changes to her writing to make it more readable. Toward the end of her life, Guibert of Gembloux took on the task and was

³²⁷ Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, 110–11.

³²⁸ Ibid., 111.

³²⁹ Dietrich, "The Visionary Rhetoric of Hildegard of Bingen," 201.

³³⁰ Ibid., 204, 210.

³³¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 5.

given even more leniency in making grammatical changes, so much so that there is some controversy regarding the authorship of her later works.³³²

As Hildegard's fame increased, she began preaching tours through Germany, Switzerland, and France. She would leave behind texts of her sermons for the people present who were considerably moved by her teachings.³³³ A woman teaching outside of her convent was unheard of at the time. Women were not allowed to hold a priestly office, preach, or be a spiritual counselor.³³⁴ Extraordinarily, Hildegard was able to complete four preaching tours during her lifetime.³³⁵

Before Hildegard completed her fourth preaching tour, she encountered another bout of severe illness which lasted three years. She had just founded a second convent at the Augustine monastery of Eibingen which housed another 80 sisters.

A Great Injustice

One particular story that shows Hildegard's courage and boldness in the face of injustice concerns a revolutionary, an excommunicated nobleman. She had allowed his remains to be buried in the convent cemetery upon his death. Those in authority demanded that she remove the man's bones from the grounds. Hildegard refused, and they were able to place her convent Rupertsberg under an interdict which meant the nuns were unable to take the sacraments, and music, which was an important part of their faith, was forbidden.³³⁶

For those who have given their lives to a religious order, taking the religious sacraments was vital in how they lived their relationship with God. To have those taken away was a great sacrifice for all involved. But even at this great cost, Hildegard and the nuns persisted. This continued for a long time as Hildegard wrote letter after letter to have this interdiction removed.

At this time, Hildegard was 81. She walked the grounds and removed everything that could have possibly been used to dig up the nobleman's bones. She was not going to give up this stand. Finally, the interdiction was removed through her continual letters. She died soon after, in 1179, on the exact date she had foretold to her sister.³³⁷

³³² Mike Kestemont, Sara Moens, and Jeroen Deploige, "Collaborative Authorship in the Twelfth Century: A Stylometric Study of Hildegard of Bingen and Guibert of Gembloux," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 2015, 201, 205.

³³³ MacCormack, "Hildegard of Bingen, A 12th Century Holistic Worldview," 2.

³³⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 3.

³³⁵ Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, 112.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

³³⁷ MacCormack, "Hildegard of Bingen, A 12th Century Holistic Worldview," 2.

Conclusion

There is such a large body of material available on Hildegard, which is impressive considering she was a woman in the Middle Ages. One could judge her for her tendency to support the class and gender hierarchies during her time. Yet, one also has to consider the cultural understandings that surrounded her. It is astonishing to see the boldness and courage she used to speak to those in power and to grasp the authority she was allowed.

Hildegard approached her speaking and writing on the basis of being a weak woman. The force and courage she approached in all of her contributions were due to her being a mouthpiece for God. She spoke to both secular and religious leaders boldly because she felt, due to her nothingness, all of what she achieved could only be God.³³⁸ Hildegard wrote as hearing directly from God.

Hildegard invites a holistic understanding of a religious life where head and heart, action and faith orient one towards God. She invites the Church to a singleness of purpose of integrity and justice. A life lived with God is not only an individual relationship with God but includes sacrificial action for the sake of others.³³⁹

In truth, it was due to her outspokenness and the endorsement of papal authority granting her the ability to be published and to preach that has allowed her to be such an example for those who followed after her. Later, other female religious writers were given a platform. During the 13th and 14th centuries and the increasing prosperity of society, women became able to have more free time, and some of them took up writing. They were still unable to attend seminary, so instead of being exposed to the dialectical arguments presented in the educational institutions, they wrote from more of a mystical discourse, their own experiences with the Divine.³⁴⁰

Hildegard, in her works and her life, has given us an example of living a life of faith. However, it is essential to understand her life within her own culture, recognize her courage and faith, and then notice what the invitation is for us in our own time. It will probably look very different, but can we accept the invitation to not readily accept the status quo and speak to a new and fresh relationship with God in our own time? And with that perspective, how does that fresh relationship impact our world?

³³⁸ Marian Bleeke, "Considering Female Agency: Hildegard of Bingen and Francesca Woodman.," *Woman's Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (2010): 42.

³³⁹ Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 99–100.

³⁴⁰ Dietrich, *Passionate Spirituality*, 12.

Chapter 8: George Fox

Chapter 8

George Fox

1624-1691

And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition," and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.³⁴¹

Outside of Quaker circles, George Fox is not widely known. Yet his life was one of seeking out God and then faithfully following the God he discovered. As he sought out God and lived out his life as faithfully as he knew, people were impacted. What Fox discovered about God's character changed how he viewed, lived around, and ministered to people.

Fox wasn't trying to start a church or a movement but felt God had given him a message for the world that was different from the hypocrisy he judged as evident in the church.³⁴² Sharing that message became his consuming passion. By the start of the 18th century, Quakerism had around 50,000 followers.³⁴³ Fox is remembered as being a loving pastor and spiritual guide; his focus was on the people.³⁴⁴ Even though many Christians haven't heard much about him, his thoughts have impacted much of what we hold true about God and continue to invite us to more.

³⁴¹ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John Nickalls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 11.

³⁴² Hugh Rock, "Quakerism Understood in Relation to Calvinism: The Theology of George Fox," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70, no. 3 (2017): 334, Cambridge University Press.

³⁴³ Walter R. Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1987), 113.

³⁴⁴ John Punshon, *Portrait In Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1984), 38, 41.

To understand Fox's story, we first need to look at the context of the time in which he lived.

The Backdrop

The 17th century wasn't a time when religion was neglected. In fact, religion was generally on everyone's minds. People talked about doctrine and the practice of living out one's faith. They argued over the rightness and the wrongness of minute points of doctrine, understandings about the church, practices of worship, and proper dietary restrictions. When a public meeting on religion was offered, people attended in large crowds. Many came to enjoy the debates and to judge for themselves the validity of the arguments presented.³⁴⁵

We see these types of arguments throughout Church History, one side claiming rightness over another. This time, in particular, was a time when people believed in religious liberty for themselves but were unwilling to grant it to others. Intolerance ruled when it came to understanding God and living a life of faith. People felt it not only their right but their duty to enforce their own convictions on one another.³⁴⁶

One of the greatest movements that impacted England's view of religion was the Reformation, led by Martin Luther in 1517, leading to a different understanding of the church. Part of the conflict behind the Reformation was the combination of state and church which allowed the corruption of power to influence both. For example, King Henry VIII had a disagreement with the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope would not support his desire for a divorce on the basis of not having a male heir, so he separated the Church of England from the church in Rome and appointed himself "Supreme Head of the Church."³⁴⁷

This move allowed a Protestant influence into the Church of England, which became an institution of compromise through time between Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholicism was understood as high church, with a top down method of understanding God and relating to people. God's voice was discerned through those placed in authority. Protestantism shared an understanding of God that allowed for the common person to have a relationship with God. In fact, Luther stated the underlying principle of Protestantism was "the individual conscience was finally the ultimate standard in matters of faith and that the institutional restraints had to give way before it."³⁴⁸ Both of these contrasting religious understandings share a different characterization of God. King

³⁴⁵ Walter R. Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism* (Newberg, Or.: Barclay Press, 1987), 13.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 24.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

³⁴⁸ H. Larry Ingle, *First among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism* (Cary, US: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

Henry VIII in leading the church kept the framework of a top down ruling structure and placed himself in the seat of the leading authority in place of the Pope.

The reformation, itself, was possible due to enlightened princes and rulers protecting the pursuit of these new ideas. So, Martin Luther and others protesting the hypocrisy of the church were given sanction and the financial support to pursue ideas that confronted the way things had always been. This movement allowed Protestant churches to be established legally, but only under certain terms. For some, it only seemed like only a switch from Catholic authority to Protestant authority.³⁴⁹ Throughout history, the church and the state struggled over who had the authority over the other. The general population had no power. The driving thought of those in leadership considered the common person needed to be protected from themselves.

This battle for power in the church continued after Henry VIII's death through his young son, Edward's short reign and then almost came to a standstill during his oldest daughter's reign, Mary. She was a devout Catholic and was given the title Bloody Mary for her ruthless reign against Protestantism. During this time, many Protestants left England for Geneva and were greatly influenced by Calvinism, another stream in the Reformation. After Mary's death, the other daughter, Elizabeth I, was placed on the throne and many of the formerly persecuted Protestants returned with an even greater slant toward a Calvinistic Protestantism, with a rooted understanding in the depravity, or evilness of humankind.³⁵⁰

Queen Elizabeth I placed the Geneva Bible, an English translation, into the hands of the common people. Almost every home had their own copy by 1560. With no heirs in this family line, James I from the Stuart dynasty ruled, after Queen Elizabeth I. In 1611, King James I funded a second translation of the English Bible for the commoner in his own name.³⁵¹ This movement of allowing the common person to hold their own copy of Scripture was started by Wycliff in the fourteenth century. This allowed the possibility of thought that one could have a relationship with God without a priest. This was a critical step in the evolution of thought around Christianity that permitted George Fox's understanding of God and living out a relationship with God.³⁵²

Yet the Church of England continued to struggle, and this struggle was very apparent in the systems of government. The English Civil War started during the reign of King Charles I (1625-1649) as Parliament struggled with monarchs seeking greater authority. The battle between the Crown and Parliament was mainly an issue over monarch power but was also influenced by the Puritans' unease around the King's understanding of God's sovereignty and humankind's free will being compatible. The King held that both

³⁴⁹ John Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 14–15.

³⁵⁰ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*, First Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 431.

³⁵¹ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 11.

³⁵² Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 15.

were true, which was in contrast to how Calvinism understood God's power as being a controlling force over humankind's freewill.³⁵³

As this struggle continued to build up, Parliament argued internally over the equality of people in different styles of government. Oliver Cromwell was one of the leading voices that held a view of more power in government through the Parliament instead of the monarch.³⁵⁴ Eventually, Parliament won the conflict over the monarch and King Charles I was beheaded in 1649. King Charles was quoted as stating: “ ‘Remember, I am your King, your lawful King,’ had been forced to surrender his life, and to answer, despite his determination not to do so, to what he deemed ‘a new unlawful authority.’ ”³⁵⁵

Parliament took over governing England, but due to continued infighting, Cromwell became the Lord Protector. Those leading were guided by the ideals of individualism, equality, democracy, and republicanism. They desired to control this new order for the collective benefit, yet human selfishness and greed undercut their ability to live out their ideals.³⁵⁶ This entire period lasted until 1660 when the monarchy was reinstated under King Charles II due to significant arguing continuing throughout this time known as the Interregnum period.³⁵⁷

Quakerism, as a movement, started during the English Civil War and this political revolt against the Stuart Monarchy. Religion was breaking away from the institutional church and the economy was suffering from inflation and depression. British historian Christopher Hill is quoted as saying “the world turned upside down.”³⁵⁸ Quakerism was a response to this tumultuous time. As Fox and his followers shared what they felt were God's revelations for them and the world, they faced many trials with the religious and legal authorities.³⁵⁹

The Beginnings...

George Fox was born in 1624 to a devout Puritan family living in Central England. He was one of several children. His father was a weaver by profession as well as a church

³⁵³ Caitlin Corning, *World History: A Short, Visual Introduction*, Kindle (Fortress Press, 2015), Ch. 4.

³⁵⁴ Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 28–29.

³⁵⁵ Ingle, *First among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism*, 5; Charles Petrie, ed., *The Letters, Speeches, and Proclamations of King Charles I* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), 244–45.

³⁵⁶ Ingle, *First among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism*, 5.

³⁵⁷ Corning, *World History*, Ch. 4.

³⁵⁸ Cooper, *A Living Faith*, 2.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

warden and his mother was said to come from “the stock of martyrs.”³⁶⁰ The family attended a local parish that taught a doctrine based in Calvinism.³⁶¹ As a young child, Fox had another frame of mind from most children. He seemed to be more religious, inward, still, solid, and an observer. His mother noticed and was tender and indulgent with him.³⁶²

At the young age of 11, Fox shared that he knew pureness and righteousness. After watching the adults around him, he desired to act faithfully both inwardly with God and outwardly with humankind. His family thought Fox should be trained for ministry, but others counseled against it. So, after attending grammar school, he apprenticed to a shoemaker who also had cattle and sheep.³⁶³ Fox enjoyed working with the sheep especially, which became an education toward ministry.³⁶⁴

Having left his schooling behind by accepting an apprenticeship, Fox probably had not been influenced by the classical curriculum of the day. This would have both limited his perspective and protected it from the theology being taught in the upper levels of education.³⁶⁵ Even though he did not have the opportunity for a formal education, he learned to read and through time acquired an adequate education for his vocational call of ministry.

Seeking Answers

Fox continued to attend the local parish with his parents until he was 19. At this time, he stopped attending because he became more confused and acted on this feeling of spiritual unrest. He could not understand why religion did not make “bad” people “good.” Those in the church talked about faith and God, yet they looked just like the world.

Fox started seeking answers from the different streams of Christianity. No one could speak to his “condition.” With no answers that met his questions, he left his friends and family to wander. He sensed this journey of wandering to be directed by God. He wandered through this soul-hungry condition for three to four years. As he continued, he became even bolder in his questions.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁰ George Fox, *George Fox, an Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1903), 66; Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 41.

³⁶¹ Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 44.

³⁶² William Penn, “Extracts from William Penn’s Preface to the Original Edition of George Fox’s Journal, 1694,” in *The Journal of George Fox* (Cambridge: Cambridge at the University Press, 1952), xxxix.

³⁶³ Fox, *George Fox, an Autobiography*, 66.

³⁶⁴ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 3.

³⁶⁵ Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 39.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

During this time, he read Scripture and sought God. Both his Geneva Bible and his King James translation became worn by his careful study. He continued to ask ministers and professors questions and discussed with them his own findings. They would reason with him but did not have answers for what he was seeking. God met him in his questions but outside of the leaders of the church or academia. He called these new understandings from God, “openings.”³⁶⁷ He sensed God tell him,

“All Christians are believers, both Protestants and Paptists;” and the Lord opened to me that if all were believers, then they were all born of God, and passed from death to life; and that none were true believers but such; and, though others said they were believers, yet they were not.³⁶⁸

This was during a time of conflict where Protestants and Catholics (Paptists) didn’t trust the other side knew God at all. Fox also sensed that it wasn’t an education at Oxford or Cambridge that qualified one to be a minister of Christ even though this was a common belief. Fox felt astonished and grateful for this awareness and the goodness of God showing him.³⁶⁹

Understanding that God did not approve of men as ministers due to education and another awareness that God did not dwell in specific buildings brought a freedom to Fox that opened a way to discover God outside of both of these culturally approved means.³⁷⁰ In anguish at times, Fox continued seeking answers from God to appease his soul hunger. In this place, he sensed God meet him and he penned this oft-quoted phrase:

And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,” and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.³⁷¹

In this place as a “heart hungry seeker,” Fox became a “joyous finder.” From this time on, Fox reports that his desire for the Lord grew along with his zeal for pure knowledge of God without the help of other men, books, or writings.³⁷² Other seekers who desired a satisfying experience with God listened to Fox and joined together in small groups. For the next three years, Fox led them while continuing to work part-time as a shoemaker.³⁷³

³⁶⁷ Fox, *George Fox, an Autobiography*, 73–74.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁷¹ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John Nickalls (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 11.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 5.

Fox's Message and Ministry

George Fox had moved from an understanding of God formed in Calvinism to a new way to experience and know God, to be sanctified or made new. He didn't call this Quakerism but the Truth. Fox started preaching in 1647 and people began gathering around due to their own seeking and dissatisfaction with the way religion was lived out.³⁷⁴

Fox wasn't trying to build a church but to communicate the message he felt God had given him for the whole world. He believed the world would hear this message and become the True Church with Christ as the head. All the deceit he saw in the church came from people betraying the basic principles of Christianity. The only way out, in Fox's opinion, was an inward submission to God, acceptance of God's grace, and Christ's voice in the inner self.³⁷⁵

Fox was an evangelist with a focus on the people and not on forming a theological doctrine. As Christ met him, he felt Christ, the Light within each person, would teach each one. He felt to be convinced was to be convicted of sin, and it was that convincement that led to true repentance. This Light within is the one who "guides, warns, encourages, speaks, chastens, cares."³⁷⁶ This Light illumines the Scripture and is the Christ we seek.³⁷⁷ This foundational piece found in John 1:9 and 8:12 opened a way for Fox to experience a relationship with God in tangible ways.

In contrast to Puritanism, Fox's belief was that it didn't matter if you had a pure heart or agreed outwardly to doctrine but what mattered was how you responded to the Light. So, Fox didn't point people to the Scripture or the cross but to the Inward Light of Christ, bringing their lives to the Light.³⁷⁸ The Light is an essential aspect of Fox's teaching. One of his main complaints with the Christian church was that they were "interested in a savior who could forgive sin but not in a Christ with moral power to overcome sin."³⁷⁹

Some have taught that the Inward Light in each of us is only a spark, part of the whole. Fox believed we might all have different measures of light based on our own journeys, but we don't have a piece or fragment of God but a presence of God. There is only one true Light, and we enjoy this fullness of God in community. We can't practice our faith journey in isolation but need community around us.³⁸⁰ As we become reconciled to God

³⁷⁴ Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 43–44.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 46.

³⁷⁶ Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 36.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 36.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 48–49.

³⁷⁹ Cooper, *A Living Faith*, 13.

³⁸⁰ Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 50.

and creation, this Light is the source of truth, the power to act on that truth, and unity with God and others.³⁸¹

It was this understanding of God revealing things to him—“openings”—that caused some problems for Fox. Fox experienced this Inward Light through his own seeking of God and being a student of the New Testament. This experience changed his understanding, and his fundamental theology was undoubtedly on the edges of what was considered orthodox at the time. He felt that the physical practice of the sacraments remaining in Protestant churches kept people from experiencing the real meaning represented. He didn’t disagree with the historical creeds but rejected them as being formulated for political and diplomatic reasons. Those who held to them used them as a test of orthodoxy, killing those who disagreed. Fox felt these practices were not from the spirit of Christ but were in actuality devilish.³⁸²

In Fox’s ministry travels, his understanding that humankind, all people, could discern and learn through Christ, not necessarily through the leadership of the church, got him in trouble. In 1648, as he was entering Nottingham with a group of Friends, he sensed God instruct him to speak against the message of the upcoming church service. He didn’t tell his friends but held this message of instruction in his heart.

During the service, the priest instructed the congregants to pay great attention to the Scriptures for their guidance, linking the Word used by Peter to be the Scriptures they held in their hands. Fox, feeling the power of the Spirit, rose to his feet and stated: “Oh no; it is not the Scriptures!” and shared that Peter was speaking of the “Holy Spirit, by which the holy men of God gave forth the Scriptures, whereby opinions, religions, and judgments were to be tried; for it led into all truth, and so gave the knowledge of truth.”³⁸³ He continued linking the Jews from following the Scriptures but missing the Christ as proof that they held the truth of the written word without trying it by the Holy Spirit.³⁸⁴

This was a common practice to speak up in church services but his rebuke to the teaching of the priest caused quite a commotion. Officers were called and they removed Fox from the church and took him to jail. However, his faithfulness to speak in the service proved enlightening to those present, and Fox shared how God’s words continued to ring in their ears. As he was brought in front of those in authority, he shared how he was following what he sensed God had directed him to do.³⁸⁵

³⁸¹ Cooper, *A Living Faith*, 13.

³⁸² Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 47–48.

³⁸³ Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, 109–10.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

The main sheriff became convinced and brought Fox home to reside at his house. They held meetings there and the sheriff, who had previously dealt unfairly with a woman along with another sheriff, sought out a means to make restitution. Both the other sheriff and the woman denied the encounter. The first sheriff—Fox called him friendly—followed through on paying the restitution to the woman and exhorted the other sheriff to do so as well. The friendly sheriff was completely changed, and this change was apparent to those who knew him.³⁸⁶

The sheriff felt directed to teach about this repentance in the marketplace the following day. The magistrates became incensed at this display and removed Fox from the sheriff's house and placed him once again in jail. He spent a long time in this jail, in his words, "a pretty long time." After his release, he continued his traveling, teaching, and ministering to those who were ill with healing.³⁸⁷

Part of Fox's teaching was suspect compared to what was considered orthodox at the time. There were four main differences between Fox's understanding and Calvinism. The first was that Fox believed humankind could live without sin now and Calvinism insisted that humanity was depraved which left no hope of living without sin until after the resurrection. The second point dealt with predestination. Calvinism taught that only the "elect" would be saved and Fox understood that Christ died for all.³⁸⁸ Calvin's Christ passively received the number of people given him by God. By contrast, Fox's Christ was an active seeker who had the power to gather all.³⁸⁹

The third held the authority of Scripture as being the only source of Truth and Fox taught about the Inward Light and revelations outside of Scripture. The last point regards Calvin's understanding of salvation in that God holds all the power to save humankind and that humans only experience it as free grace. Fox believed that humankind does experience the universal gift of grace but that humans are also involved in salvation and living one's life of faith because humans can resist the process.³⁹⁰

What Fox understood about God and humankind, the possibility of living in the Divine Presence, went well beyond his teaching. He lived out the application of his beliefs in ways that impacted those around him and with significant hardship for himself.³⁹¹ He

³⁸⁶ Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, 112.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁸⁸ Hugh Rock, "Quakerism Understood in Relation to Calvinism: The Theology of George Fox," 337.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 345.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 337.

³⁹¹ Rufus Jones, "Introduction," In *George Fox, An Autobiography*, 15–45, (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1903), 33.

believed the truth revealed to him was substantial and he saw the implication of what he understood as truth received by ordinary working men and women.³⁹²

If every person has the Light within, then all are created equal without regard to race, gender, or anything else. He actually criticized meetings that didn't allow women to speak and supported many women in leadership roles.³⁹³ This understanding was also behind his unwillingness to take up weapons of war since "that of God" was in every human.³⁹⁴ The social inequalities so firmly in place were abhorrent and needed to be eliminated. This understanding led to a different way of speaking to one another without the social constructs formed to keep people in place, such as labels and the removal of one's hat in the presence of a superior.³⁹⁵

Fox's all-consuming passion drove him to share what he had discovered on his own soul-hungry journey to a people he felt were being misled by the institutional church of his time. He had sensed early on that God had called him to this hard ministry and that he would be part of opening a way for people to the Lord.³⁹⁶

A common practice during this time was to go to a church and address the congregation after the priest finished. Sometimes due to either interrupting the teaching or with a disagreement with what Fox taught, resentment continued to build against him.³⁹⁷ Throughout his ministry, Fox was imprisoned eight times, held in foul conditions.³⁹⁸

One time, after being imprisoned for a year, Fox was questioned by a justice, Gervase Bennett. Bennett created the label "Quaker" for Fox and his followers as a derogatory term due to their quaking and trembling during their gatherings which they called Meetings for Worship. Fox preferred to call the group, "Children of the Light," or "Friends of the Truth." Due to Bennett's mockery, Fox shared the names of many biblical figures who were described as trembling before the Lord.³⁹⁹

Margaret Fell

In 1652, Fox traveled to Swarthmoor Hall, the home of Judge and Margaret Fell. He was told it was a hospitable home and when he arrived the Judge was away on business and

³⁹² L. V. Hodgkin, "George Fox," ed. E. G. Selwyn, *Theology: A Monthly Journal of Historic Christianity* IX, no. 49 (December 1924): 23, Sage Journals.

³⁹³ E. Glenn Hinson, "George Fox," *Great Thinkers of the Western World*, 1992, 3.

³⁹⁴ Hodgkin, "George Fox," 30.

³⁹⁵ Jones, "Introduction," 34–35.

³⁹⁶ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 1–2.

³⁹⁷ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 6.

³⁹⁸ Punshon, *Portrait In Grey*, 39.

³⁹⁹ H. Larry Ingle, *First among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism*, 54–55.

Margaret was gone for the day. Their children were home with the rector of Ulverston. Fox and the Rector spoke at length and soon the Rector left the home in great anger and distress over Fox's understandings of God. That evening when Margaret returned, after hearing that the Rector and Fox disagreed, began to ask questions of Fox's understandings. She invited him to stay over and attend church with her and her family later in the week. Fox at first declined the offer but eventually did attend. After the sermon, he requested an opportunity to speak which was a common practice during that time.⁴⁰⁰

And so, he spoke of his own great spiritual experience, of the inwardness of true religion, of the indwelling Light of Christ, of the Light that would gather every man to God. I stood up in my pew and wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before. Then he went on to rebuke those who understood the Scriptures only for themselves, without the illumination of the Spirit of Christ. This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart: and I saw then clearly that we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew again, and cried bitterly; and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, "We are all thieves; we are all thieves; we have taken the Scriptures in words, and know nothing of them in ourselves." ⁴⁰¹

Margaret Fell became convinced and invited Fox to continue to teach in her home, to her family and servants. She struggled with the dilemma that her husband was not home. She couldn't deny the truth of what Fox taught but felt the need to speak with him about what she had discovered. When Judge Fell returned home from his trip to London, the Rector and other gentlemen from the area met him before he arrived back at Swarthmoor Hall to inform him of this great disaster that had fallen on his home. His wife and children had been bewitched by this travelling preacher.⁴⁰²

This was a serious charge but when the Judge returned home, he discovered his wife and children to be moved by God and was amazed without knowing what to think of it all. When Fox returned to the Hall, he spoke to the Judge who could see the truth to the words offered and considered them through the night. When the Rector came to speak with the Judge the next day, through earnest conversation the Rector could not persuade the Judge to cast Fox out. In fact, when those present were considering where to hold meetings, the Judge offered to host them at Swarthmoor Hall.⁴⁰³

Judge Fell continued to attend the Rector's church for another year or two, but eventually stopped. He often sat in the parlor with the door open to the hall where the Meeting for Worship was held. The Judge listened but never shared his acceptance of Fox's teaching, yet he was sympathetic to the Friends' cause and protected them through his influence

⁴⁰⁰ Isabel Ross, *Margaret Fell: Mother of Quakerism*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949), 10–11.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁰² Ross, *Margaret Fell: Mother of Quakerism*, 12–14.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 15–16.

while he was alive. Even though there is no evidence, Fox believed that Judge Fell came to see the Truth that Christ was the teacher of his people and not the teachers of the world before his death in 1658.⁴⁰⁴

Margaret became one of the most adamant financial and political supporters and organizers for Fox and Quakerism. She wrote letters to the King for the release of those in prison, including Fox, and eventually she and Fox were imprisoned for being dissenters, those worshipping God outside of the Church of England. Eleven years after her first husband died, she married Fox, and they worked together to influence and grow the Quakerism movement. Margaret Fell is known as the Mother of Quakerism.

Many followed the opening toward God that Fox taught. Within the first six years, the convinced members of Quakerism totaled 30,000 to 40,000. In 1691, the year of Fox's death, Friends represented the largest non-conformist group in England.⁴⁰⁵

In 1666, upon release after a three-year sentence, Fox used his gifting as an organizer to create forms of structure of the Society of Friends. He realized that more was necessary to form this group as it continued to grow. His understanding of God helped him to create a non-hierarchical structure to support sustained growth in Quaker meetings.⁴⁰⁶ Fox modeled his movement and church structure after Paul's universal Church of many members. His vision was for the church to be unified by the Holy Spirit and not by humans.⁴⁰⁷

As time went on things became more comfortable for this group as well as others who disagreed with the Church of England. In 1668, the Indulgence Act was passed which gave more freedom of movement for the Separatists, those who did not conform to the culturally understood church structure including the Puritans, Quakers, and other non-conformists.

After James II was deposed, William the Orange and his wife Mary became joint sovereigns. In 1689, they passed the Toleration Act, releasing those imprisoned for religious reasons.⁴⁰⁸ This battle for religious liberty was necessary but difficult. By the 18th Century, 50,000 Friends attended Quaker Meetings in England.⁴⁰⁹ This number is astonishing, given that 15,000 Friends were imprisoned, with 450 dying as a result of

⁴⁰⁴ Ross, *Margaret Fell: Mother of Quakerism*, 15-16.

⁴⁰⁵ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 50-51.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 90, 93.

⁴⁰⁷ Brinton, *Quaker Journals, Varieties of Religious Experiences Among Friends*, (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1966), 43.

⁴⁰⁸ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 43, 110.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 113.

their imprisonment through the Stuarts' Monarchy and another 5,000 being imprisoned through the Commonwealth period.⁴¹⁰

In America, things were a little more comfortable. Though Quakers were still imprisoned, starved, hung, and banned from some of the colonies, they had greater freedom. The Puritans, insecure in their own salvation given their understanding that only the elect were chosen, tended to govern people to act appropriately for their own good. Those who believed differently than they did were seen as the enemy, and this dehumanization allowed the poor treatment of those on the outside.⁴¹¹ Quakers suffered significantly at their hands due to a completely different understanding of God's grace and the gift of God being in each person.

However, the number of Quakers in America at one time were thought to make them one of the most influential religious groups in the colonies. William Penn founded a Quaker colony in Pennsylvania and others became governors of other colonies. In fact, by the eighteenth century, many Quaker meetings were formed.⁴¹²

Conclusion

As Fox sought and experienced a relationship with God outside of the norm in the context of his lifetime, he encountered a God that reached out to him as Fox reached out to God. In his story we view a man distraught with what he viewed in the world and through his encounter with God, both Fox and the world were impacted. As Fox sought out answers from God, his understanding and his relationship with God were transformed and that transformation changed how he thought about people. As he was convinced, he boldly spoke up to invite others into this same type of relationship.

William Penn wrote that Fox's ministry and teachings were not something that came from learning from other men or through his own study. It was evident that Fox's understandings came from God.⁴¹³ Just being around Fox, one could see the weight of his spirit and the closeness of his relationship with God. Penn continued to share that Fox's words were few but were full, with a deep understanding that touched those he ministered to.⁴¹⁴ God showed Fox new ways of understanding through "openings"—both visual and intellectual—as he came to understand God differently than the religious leaders in his time. He boldly taught others about the possibility of an experiential relationship with God, traveling around the world, and healing those who were inflicted.

⁴¹⁰ Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 110.

⁴¹¹ Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Journals: Varieties of Religious Experiences Among Friends*, 10.

⁴¹² Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, 58, 114.

⁴¹³ William Penn, "The Testimony of William Penn Concerning That Faithful Servant: George Fox," in *George Fox, an Autobiography*, ed. Rufus M. Jones (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1903), 52.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

It is impossible to speak to all the aspects of George Fox's ministry or of the efforts of his followers. It was a movement that spread from living out the implications of what Jesus lived out among us. This goes well beyond what we know to be right by allowing the effect of God's gaze of love to impact those around us. For Fox, and those who were affected by his life and teaching, it made a difference. They lived out that difference in ways that had harsh implications for their own lives. Yet, they lived out precisely what they believed. They did not follow rules or debates over doctrine but stood courageously in knowing that there is "that of God" in every human and that that statement of truth matters.

Quakerism has struggled since this time to remember this truth and to live in a non-hierarchical understanding of leadership and worship. Throughout history, Quakers, like other denominations, have split and split again. We all still struggle with perceptions that have impacted Christianity all through history. What is the authority of Scripture as we understand who God is, who we are, and who the "other" is? Are some on the outside based on our understanding of Scripture? William Penn suggested that Quakerism was "primitive Christianity revived."⁴¹⁵ It is thought of as a way of life in contrast to living out a set of beliefs, theology, or doctrine.

⁴¹⁵ Wilmer A. Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs*, 2.

Chapter 9: Dorothy Day

Chapter 9

Dorothy Day

1897-1980

*Community – that was the social answer to the long loneliness.*⁴¹⁶

Dorothy Day authentically lived out her faith in tangible ways that mattered. Yet, she faced opposition at almost every turn by the society she served. Her contribution has been recognized by those who had distanced themselves from her and her work during her lifetime. In 2015, Pope Francis singled her out as one of four prominent Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day.⁴¹⁷

Even though Dorothy had no theological training and no positional authority in the church, she has become one of the most significant and influential people in American Catholicism.⁴¹⁸ She had walked away from all that mattered in American culture—family, education, prestige, power—and purposely lived among the poor.⁴¹⁹ Her life before her acceptance of the Catholic faith was one fueled by a love for social activism and a struggle to be in a place where she could love and be loved. Her journey through life was one of struggle, loss, pain, and searching.

Dorothy defined herself as a Bohemian. “She was an unwed mother, a disillusioned citizen, a poor woman, a disaffected churchgoer, an unemployed observer of the human race.”⁴²⁰ It was through this intense loneliness of searching that she discovered that love

⁴¹⁶ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (Chicago, IL: Thomas More Press, 1989), 261.

⁴¹⁷ Joan Chittister, “Dorothy Day,” *Tamarak Press: Society for Study of Myth and Tradition* 41, no. 1 (2016): 70–75.

⁴¹⁸ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 514–15.

⁴¹⁹ Chittister, “Dorothy Day,” 71.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

was the answer for the long loneliness all humans experience. This love, she understood, was made possible by living life in community.⁴²¹

The Beginnings...

Dorothy Day was born in Brooklyn in 1897 as the middle child of five siblings. Her father was a sportswriter, covering horseracing and her mother was a homemaker. Her father was a confirmed atheist who, oddly enough, also carried around a Bible. Her family moved to California before the 1906 earthquake shook the area. In the midst of this great tragedy, Dorothy and her family experienced such kindness among their neighbors and community. As she reflected back on this experience, the kindnesses they encountered had a longstanding impact throughout her life.⁴²²

Since Dorothy's father's job was gone, the family moved to Chicago. They lived next door to a religious family who had a daughter that became a playmate for Dorothy. This Catholic family introduced Dorothy to a lived form of Christianity. As Dorothy reflected on her experience through the earthquake and this family's religious lifestyle, she became more aware of her own desire to know that God was a reality.⁴²³

She left home at sixteen. This move was difficult due to leaving her youngest brother John, with whom she had developed a close maternal relationship as his main caregiver. Even though she felt that college studies were not necessary, preferring to go and do instead of learn, she enrolled in college.⁴²⁴ Dorothy's time there impacted her view of God based on a beloved professor's statement that religion was for the weak.⁴²⁵ She still reflected on her experience with the earthquake in California and her neighbor in Chicago, in the midst of this professor's harsh statement.

The Seeking

In college, Dorothy became involved with social justice, anti-war, and the socialist party. During this time, her family moved to New York, so Dorothy left college and joined them.⁴²⁶ Against her father's wishes, she pursued a position as a journalist. She wanted to experience the life of those in poverty. So, she intentionally lived on five dollars a

⁴²¹ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (Chicago, IL: Thomas More Press, 1989), 326.

⁴²² Albert J. Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 64.

⁴²³ Ibid., 65.

⁴²⁴ William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 33.

⁴²⁵ Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, 66.

⁴²⁶ Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*, 4.

month and then wrote about it as a means to experience life from this place of hardship.⁴²⁷

Something about the kindness of people Dorothy witnessed after the California earthquake and her desire for social justice drew her to know God and to live authentically with the people she experienced in life. In this desire, she pursued many different journalist assignments. She often joined others on picket lines in her concern for social justice. The first time was in support of the suffragists in Washington, D.C. Women arrested earlier were treated as ordinary prisoners, instead of political activists, and taken to a workhouse. Dorothy, along with 34 other women, decided to protest their unfair treatment. Dorothy's group was arrested and sentenced for 30 days. They made a pact to engage in a hunger strike to influence fairer treatment. As they reacted to the harsh treatment they received, it was falsely reported that the women were combative.⁴²⁸

They continued steadfast in their hunger strike. The lack of food combined with the harsh treatment and isolation caused Dorothy to go in and out of consciousness. During this difficult time, she personally identified with the other prisoners and felt a deep need to escape her situation. Yet, she persisted and chose to endure until her 30 days were over. On day six, she was taken to the hospital due to the severe impact on her body. After a full ten days, these persistent women achieved their goal and their demands were met. The women were moved from the workhouse back to the city jail.⁴²⁹

Dorothy began to believe from this experience that it didn't matter if you willed yourself to see the best in someone, they always showed their worst. As she struggled, she would place herself in places of prayer, even though she didn't believe in prayer or religion. Dorothy experienced prayer as peace. She felt that prayer was often where the "life of nature warred against the life of grace."⁴³⁰

Through this understanding of the warring within, Dorothy felt convicted in realizing her own hypocrisy and the hypocrisy of her fellow activists; they lived among the poor ostensibly to help the poor, yet they did not personally give up anything. This was not a true philosophy of poverty. They had good intentions and were motivated by a sense of justice but were not embracing a life of poverty.⁴³¹ So, she signed up for a nursing training program during WWI and the Spanish flu epidemic.⁴³² She wanted to help the

⁴²⁷ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 73.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 95–97.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 100–105.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 110–11.

⁴³² Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, 67.

poor and she began to understand that people—the sick and the poor—wanted and deserved to be respected and that this mattered more than love.⁴³³

Dorothy worked at the hospital for one year and then left to follow her true vocation of journalism. In a time when the newspapers communicated that the worker strikes were unjust for the workers because they did not allow the workers to work, Dorothy saw the reality in the workers' real life.⁴³⁴ This real-life experience in contrast to the propaganda written about in the newspapers helped to shape Dorothy's social justice stand in life and eventually her ministry. She continued writing for newspapers and being involved in social justice protests. Another imprisonment experience continued to shape her understanding of the oppressed.⁴³⁵ She began to understand that it was not prudent to believe what people said but to judge their actions.⁴³⁶

A primary driving force for Dorothy was seeing those who were oppressed in the systemic divide created during the industrial revolution and the economic depression. The world experienced great suffering as the gap grew between those in power—business owners—and their workers. Unions were viewed as an affront, linking them to feared socialism. This was a tumultuous time where people were either thrown into poverty or looked out for their own self-interests. Those who were different from others were seen as the enemy. The church navigated this growing divide between the haves and the have-nots with a thrust toward evangelism, “saving souls” over taking care of basic needs.⁴³⁷

Dorothy continued fighting for social justice through journalism and protests. This mission in her life gave her purpose, but she desired to love and be loved. She became involved in a controlling romantic relationship, but when she became pregnant, her boyfriend wanted to end it. Dorothy had an abortion to try to keep him, but he ended the relationship anyway. Dorothy became depressed and suicidal. As she looked back over her life, she could see that her desire to love and be loved was a guiding influence in her search for God. After her abortion, she continued to have gynecological problems and feared she would never be able to become pregnant again.⁴³⁸

Dorothy moved to Staten Island after selling the movie rights to her first book.⁴³⁹ She sought a restful space to continue to write. During this time, she met and fell in love with

⁴³³ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 113.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 118, 124.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 125.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁴³⁷ Nancy Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, Kindle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), loc. 4892-4916.

⁴³⁸ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 135.

⁴³⁹ William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 163.

Forster, an anarchist and biologist. Forster did not want to commit fully, so they were never married. He cared for Dorothy yet lived as if he was single. He would come and go as he pleased, without much notice to her. In spite of this, Dorothy experienced a greater happiness than she had understood was possible. Living with Forster awakened in Dorothy an understanding of her desire to be loved, leading her to pray.⁴⁴⁰ It seemed living with Forster awakened her desire for more of God. Forster was against religion and argued that Dorothy's preoccupation with faith was "morbid escapism."⁴⁴¹

Dorothy accepted this living arrangement until she became pregnant. At 29, she felt she would never be able to become pregnant again, so she experienced this pregnancy as a precious gift, differently than last time. She wanted to raise her child with religion, and she was also aware of the cost if she did so. She didn't want this baby to wonder and wander through life, as she had, without knowing about God.⁴⁴²

After Tamar Teresa, named after Teresa of Avila, was born, Dorothy felt such conflict over what to do. Yet, she also knew all along what choice she would make.⁴⁴³ A nun helped her go through the process to have her baby baptized, learn about Catholicism, and to become baptized herself. Forster left her many times as she became more drawn to religion. Dorothy became sick with the stress of wanting two things that couldn't coexist, following her desire toward God and living with Forster.⁴⁴⁴ Leaving one love but knowing there was another. She was falling in love with God and desired to be united to her Love, as obedient, chaste, and poor.⁴⁴⁵

The Ministry

After Forster left, Dorothy left Staten Island and took up journalism jobs once again. She became incredibly lonely, realizing that neither child nor husband met her need for deep community. Through this time, her spiritual life deepened.⁴⁴⁶ She discovered that women, even all of humankind, desired community. One experience that supported this understanding was becoming severely ill with the flu in Chicago. There wasn't a supportive community available to her as a single parent in illness.⁴⁴⁷

Dorothy continued to be passionate in her stand against social justice issues and was bothered by the absence of Catholics in the struggle. She participated in a hunger strike in

⁴⁴⁰ Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography*, 139–42.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁴² Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 165.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 165–67.

⁴⁴⁴ Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography*, 190.

⁴⁴⁵ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 177–78.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 187–88.

⁴⁴⁷ Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography*, 211, 208.

1932, a march organized by the Communist-led Unemployed Councils; demanding relief and condemning evictions.⁴⁴⁸

During this time of confusion, Dorothy met Peter Maurin. He had been told that Dorothy was someone he needed to meet, and he became a teacher and mentor for Dorothy. In reality, they were a gift to one another. Peter brought the background Dorothy needed in Catholic history and a vision forward for the Catholic Worker Movement, which they created together. Dorothy brought the energy and perseverance necessary for the work ahead.⁴⁴⁹ Peter saw Dorothy as a modern St. Catherine of Siena sensing she could move mountains and impact the world.⁴⁵⁰

Peter's vision was "building a new society within the shell of the old."⁴⁵¹ He saw the pain and suffering in the world and felt that it could be different for everyone, believing that the way to God was through humankind. Humankind could do great things, if only it was open toward God. Both Peter and Dorothy understood deeply the gift of seeing and loving the Christ in the other.⁴⁵²

Together they formed the Catholic Worker Movement, developing a paper to help inform the worker and the unemployed.⁴⁵³ They taught the importance of living in community like Jesus did with individual action for social justice, pacifism, and voluntary poverty. In their teaching they spoke against many of the political issues facing twentieth century America, such as the great divide between those who had and those who didn't and the horrible working conditions so evident in the factories.

In the first issue, Dorothy wrote that the purpose of this paper was to inform the reader that there was a social program in the Catholic Church concerned not only about the readers' spiritual but also their material welfare. Dorothy continued to ask, "Was possible to be politically radical and still have a belief in God? Would one become an atheist if one cared about others? This was a concern in a society that believed any link to socialist policies—caring for the poor—was connected to the feared communist philosophy.

⁴⁴⁸ Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, 71.

⁴⁴⁹ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 202.

⁴⁵⁰ Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, 73.

⁴⁵¹ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 203.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 203–4.

⁴⁵³ William Dow, "Dorothy Day and Joseph Kessel: 'A Literature of Urgency,'" *Prose Studies* 33, no. 2 (August 1, 2011): 135, Taylor & Francis Online.

The first edition was published by donations and scrimping from their monthly expenses.⁴⁵⁴ The paper to this day is still run on donations and a copy may be purchased for a penny.⁴⁵⁵ In 1933, when the paper started, there were 13,000,000 unemployed people.⁴⁵⁶ This was the main focus as they got started.

In a short amount of time, the paper started speaking to the social movement issues of the day, focusing on the reasons behind the poverty and the need to help.⁴⁵⁷ This emphasis caused an argument between Peter and Dorothy as Peter wanted to focus on the solution and Dorothy's desire was to inform the readers about the problems.⁴⁵⁸ Dorothy felt it important to write from eyewitness accounts and not to take information from other newspapers. She wanted to create followers through her writing by grounding it in radical politics and Catholic theology toward the cause of social justice.⁴⁵⁹

Peter and Dorothy understood that government charity created victims of the system. Peter's vision was to form "Houses of Hospitality" for those unemployed by the growing technology of the industrial age. His main goal was to create farming communes to care for people while teaching them to care for themselves and one another. These places grew with the distinct need at the time. When quarrelling in the communities became a problem, the solution was to assign manual labor. In this understanding people all lived and worked together to make a way forward.⁴⁶⁰

Due to the Catholic Worker's view of living life in community the FBI wondered if the paper was a front for Communism. One worried citizen complained about the writing and pointed out the sickle on the side of the farming communes' article. In the 1930s, J. Edgar Hoover started investigating the movement to discover if there were sinister motives behind the paper. They even suspected that Dorothy was actually born in Russia. Hoover wanted Dorothy arrested, but after six months they could find nothing. She was categorized as one of the least dangerous suspects. Dorothy and the Catholic Worker Movement continued to be investigated by the FBI until the 1960s.⁴⁶¹

The goal of the Catholic Worker was more than just writing about history, it was also about making history by influencing society. This was accomplished by providing

⁴⁵⁴ Dorothy Day, "To Our Readers," Catholic Worker Movement, May 1933, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/12.html>.

⁴⁵⁵ Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, 77.

⁴⁵⁶ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 218.

⁴⁵⁷ Dow, "Dorothy Day and Joseph Kessel: 'A Literature of Urgency,'" 135.

⁴⁵⁸ Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*, 35.

⁴⁵⁹ Dow, "Dorothy Day and Joseph Kessel: 'A Literature of Urgency,'" 136, 143.

⁴⁶⁰ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 218–19.

⁴⁶¹ Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*, 131.

community and informing community. Finances were an important component of meeting these goals. Dorothy refused the capitalistic approach of advertising, high subscription rates, or even government grants. Money was not a neutral commodity. There was always a cost to accepting funds, so small contributions were the main resource keeping the paper in print.⁴⁶²

Dorothy's stand on money also came with a push back from the government. She felt it was inappropriate, given her pacifist views, that she would contribute to the purchase of items for war, so she protested by not paying war taxes. In the early 1970s, the IRS demanded \$300,000 in fines, penalties, and unpaid taxes over six years. Previously, she had not registered as a non-profit because she felt that it went against the Catholic Worker principles. When the New York Times heard of the IRS's demands they wrote about the issue stating that the IRS must have genuine frauds to chase. The IRS eventually dropped the case. This issue highlights the contrast between the Catholic Worker movement of personal simplicity and the bureaucracy of the modern government.⁴⁶³

The Legacy

When you love people, you see all the good in them, all the Christ in them. God sees Christ, His Son, in us and loves us. And we should see Christ in others, **and nothing else**, and love them. There can never be enough of it. There can never be enough thinking about it. St. John of the Cross said that where there was no love, put love and you would take out love.⁴⁶⁴

In 1948, Dorothy wrote this statement in her journal while helping her daughter Tamar through her pregnancy and delivery of her third child. It was a guiding principle throughout Dorothy's life. Her work was influenced deeply by her understanding that everyone has that of God in them, every person has value. As we look back on Dorothy's life, we can see how her humility developed and how the influence of life experience impacted her view of others. Her understanding of the world and how it worked influenced both her audience and those she lived and worked alongside.

Dorothy believed it was not enough to help, to give what you have, to pledge yourself to voluntary poverty. She felt that one must live with suffering – to share in others' suffering – to give up privacy, mental, spiritual comforts as well as physical.⁴⁶⁵ It was this belief and her understanding of the Christ in everyone that drove Dorothy to walk a different kind of life with the Love of her life, God. She valued people and she

⁴⁶² Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*, 41.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁶⁴ Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 124.

⁴⁶⁵ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 250.

wholeheartedly became one with them. She wasn't afraid of their suffering and put herself *with* them.

The Catholic Worker was the first publication advocating civil disobedience as a legitimate means to protest war. They encouraged burning draft cards and withholding war taxes. Dorothy viewed jail time as a badge of honor.⁴⁶⁶ It was walking alongside others, while not distancing themselves from others' suffering that drew them out to picket alongside other protestors.⁴⁶⁷ This kind of action was greatly encouraged. During this time many felt that organizations for workers were connected to Communism. The Catholic Worker Movement didn't follow society's fear but stepped right into the fray of valuing those who were oppressed by the system. Dorothy was not afraid to step into the conflict and encouraged others to do so as well.

Community – that was the social answer to the long loneliness. That was one of the attractions of religious life and why couldn't lay people share in it? Not just the basic community of the family, but also a community of families, with a combination of private and communal property.⁴⁶⁸

Dorothy understood the long loneliness throughout her life as seeking to be loved by God, not finding that safe place with the people she encountered early in life. Once she discovered the true love of God, she invited others to share in that experience by loving them, suffering with them, and walking alongside. She stressed the importance of living in community like Jesus modeled, with a belief that people matter, as did pacifism and voluntary poverty. Hers was a radical approach, back to the roots, and based in critically thinking through the impact of her thoughts and actions.⁴⁶⁹ She remained on the Catholic Worker staff until 1975, with her last speaking engagement in 1976. She stopped being as engaged due to ill health and once she slowed down, she suffered three minor heart attacks, became too tired for visitors, spent quality time with her daughter, and died in 1980.⁴⁷⁰

During her lifetime, Dorothy wrote against war, and people in the government and the church thought she was crazy, subversive, seditious, and traitorous. Subscriptions for the paper took a steep drop when she wrote against the Vietnam War from a pacifist perspective. Unfortunately, many were able to be merciful with the poor but loving your enemy was unacceptable. Yet her writing showed that a Catholic social policy could be lived out authentically. What people discounted her for, was eventually proven right. Her conscientious objections to war were once an embarrassment for the church and now the

⁴⁶⁶ Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*, 159.

⁴⁶⁷ Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, 241.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁴⁶⁹ Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*, 7.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

Catholic Church holds space for that political stand.⁴⁷¹ The Catholic Worker now has 90,000 subscriptions and still sells for a penny a copy, and funded by small donations.⁴⁷² There are currently 216 communities in the States and 33 international communities following the Catholic Worker Movement.⁴⁷³

Conclusion

The way Dorothy lived out her faith showed a firm belief in the “mystical body of Christ,” all are members of one another.⁴⁷⁴ It was this deep conviction that gave her the inner authority to stand in what she believed. She was known for a controlled strength in her presence, as a force to be reckoned with for those who crossed her (such as the FBI or tax collectors), but she used that force in an unobtrusive way.⁴⁷⁵

Dorothy believed in Scripture and her reading of it shaped her view of the world, people, and herself. She read the Gospel words and put that above the systemic evils she saw in the structures that hurt those she ministered to. The Protestant churches during this period wanted to make people good by obedience and rules. The Catholic churches saw that the way forward to save people was in the liturgical practices. Dorothy knew that she could not make people good and that the only one she could make good was herself. And then she could make her neighbor happy instead of good. She saw the devastation around her as people lost all they had through economic depression, wars, and poverty. The suffering was unbearable, but the joy was yet to come. She believed that prayer was what helps us get to the joy as we live by the faith that God is good.⁴⁷⁶

Dorothy was led by the desire to make the world a place “where it is easier for people to love, to stand in that relationship to each other.”⁴⁷⁷ She believed the phrase often quoted by St. John of the Cross that stated “where there is no love, put love and you would take out love.”⁴⁷⁸ This understanding of love—the basis of everything as we live for one another above ourselves—propelled her life ministry. Her understanding of that love was from a place of equality, always. “The love of God and [humankind] becomes the love of

⁴⁷¹ Chittister, “Dorothy Day,” 74–75.

⁴⁷² Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, 71.

⁴⁷³ “Catholic Worker Movement,” accessed August 4, 2018, <http://www.catholicworker.org/communities/directory.html>.

⁴⁷⁴ Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 9.

⁴⁷⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 92.

⁴⁷⁶ Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 85.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

equals, as the love of the bride and the bridegroom is the love of equals, and not the love of the sheep for the shepherd or the servant for the master, or the son for the father.”⁴⁷⁹

Dorothy’s life and writings portray a mystical theology that was very much lived out in the world. She believed that God loved everyone and that everyone had that of God in them. This meant everyone mattered. She desired love above all, and her faith compelled her to live out this love in tangible ways in an unjust society where many were taken advantage of.

⁴⁷⁹ Day, *On Pilgrimage*, 235.

APPENDIX B: RUBLEV'S TRINITY ICON



The Trinity is an icon created by Russian iconographer Andrei Rublyov in the 15th century.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁸⁰ Rohr, *Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*.

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