

The Christian Mystical Tradition

This course will inspire your heart and stir your spirit. Called in a special way to listen to God's whispers, the mystics show us the deepest recesses of the human spirit. As great masters of the interior life, they reveal the art of loving God, neighbor, self, and the world.

We will explore the passionate varieties of the mystical life by focusing upon eleven significant figures. We will begin with Ignatius of Loyola and his finding of God in all things before looking at the apophatic mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing. Next, we will explore the classical mysticisms of Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Catherine of Siena, whom many consider to be the apex of the Christian mystical tradition. We will also encounter the intriguing, optimistic, and visionary mysticism of Julian of Norwich.

As we move along this mystical journey, we will discover the captivating mysticism of Francis de Sales and Angela of Foligno. We will then explore Karl Rahner's mysticism of everyday life, the masses, and the classical masters. Finally, after considering Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's transposition of mysticism into cosmic and evolutionary terms, we will be moved by the astonishing suffering servant mysticism of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Each of these mystics will deepen your relationship with God. With Fr. Egan as your guide, you will unlock the mystery of mysticism. His teaching is truly outstanding. Let the great mystics of our tradition speak to you today. We shall eleven mystical giants. Before it makes sense to examine individual mystics, it behooves us to first examine Christian mysticism, its goal, its context, and common - but erroneous - conceptions of mysticism in our culture.

I. The Goal of Christian Mysticism - Illustrative quotation: "Thus the lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." (Exodus 33:11) The focus of these lectures is the Christian mystics - in some ways as intimate with God as was Moses. An analogy: Human love, being sick with love,

II. Song of Songs: Origen was the first to use Song of Songs to describe the intimate love relationship between God and the human soul. It is used by many Christian mystics to describe their intercourse with the Trinity and Christ: Mechthild of Magdeburg: explicitly erotic quotation. Gemma Galgani: absorbed in God. Luis de Leon: burning with secret fire. Catherine of Genoa: a drop of love destroys hell. Jacopone da Todi confessed: mad love of Christ. Anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing: a tiny flame of love arising at the soul's fine point

Ignatius of Loyola: subtle, ineffable inner joy pervades the person. Simon Weil: reverses the madness of love. Mother Teresa: the saint of God's thirst to love and be loved by humanity, spoke in a similar fashion in.

III. The Nature of Christian Mystics - Christian mystics: God-haunted, God-possessed, God-illuminated, and God-transformed persons. They are true theologians. Their Trinity-Christ love consciousness often became flesh in service to the poor, the orphaned, the sick, and the uneducated. The early meaning of the word "mystical" comes from an understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of Jesus Christ.

The term was then applied to the sacraments, mysteries of the faith, the liturgy itself. The term has since been defined by numerous individuals: Pseudo-Dionysius: "mystical theology" that permitted a person to know - by way of unknowing - God as the "divine and dazzling darkness." Jean Gerson: the perduring definition "mysticism is an experiential knowledge of God gained through the embrace of unitive love." John of the Cross: the loving-knowledge of God attained by direct, immediate, and ineffable contemplation. 17th-century: infused vs. acquired contemplation.

Bernard McGinn: emphasis on mystical consciousness of the immediate or direct presence of God. God as the direct and transforming center of one's life. Painful awareness of the mystic's disorder, sinfulness, nothingness, and his or her great distance from God, then to ecstatic experiences and states of illumination and rapturous love. Richard of St. Victor: presence/absence. The excruciating "absence" of the beloved is also a salient feature of mystical consciousness: God is sometimes most present to the mystic by his absence and most absent by his presence.

My view of a "mystic": someone who is explicitly conscious of, directly aware of, the immediate or direct presence of the Trinity and/or Christ. Mystical consciousness and the mystical life. It is a charism given only to some.

IV. Erroneous Views of Mysticism ; A number of erroneous views and misunderstandings of mysticism can muddy our perception, so it is good to point out some problematic conceptions:

- "Mystic" or "mysticism" to depict the "spooky," the irrational, the paranormal, or superstition at its worst.
- Carlos Castenadas: psychic mysticism.
- Oxford English dictionary incorrectly defines mysticism: Desire for

"transcendence without dogma," a so-called "unchurched" mysticism.
Spiritual consumerism.

- New Age spirituality and peak experiences.
- Reductionist psychological studies.
- Any altered state of consciousness.
- Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, Peter Matthiessen: ingesting psychedelic drugs.
- Christian Fundamentalists and many continental Protestant theologians: Catholic mysticism allegedly is a short-circuiting of scripture; Greek-infested, heretical Christianity.
- Anne Fremantle: reduces all Catholic mysticism travel to an easily identifiable three-stage journey of purgation, illumination, and union. False!
- Gershom Scholem: false assumption that the experience of undifferentiated unity (atman is brahman), or the fusion experience of monism, is the hallmark of all mysticism.
- Thomas Merton and "yogic suicide."
- Yves Raguin: lost in oneself.
- Martin Buber: experience of the "pre-biographical unity" of his soul.

V. A Necessary Distinction: The Christian mystic claims to be aware of something great enough to be God, yet intimate enough to be the mystic's own self. Some do emphasize the mystical path as consisting of the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive ways, with "union with God" long considered to be the goal of the mystical life.

However, many Christian mystics avoided unitive language and expressed their Godconsciousness differently. Instead of "unity" or "oneness with God," the Christian mystics use terms such as "contemplation," "vision," "ecstasy," the "birth of God in the soul," "endless desire," "fusion," and the "abyss flowing into the abyss" to express the ultimate relationship of the mystic with god. Another paradox of the mystical life: mediation of an awareness of God's mystical presence. God/soul one yet not one.

VI. The True Nature of Mysticism: Carl Jung argued that the mystic is necessarily a heretic. Better scholarship: that mysticism arises out of a lived tradition which fosters and nourishes the seeking and finding of God-consciousness, which the genuine Christian mystics uphold and enrich. Tensions with Church authorities.

What do these extraordinary figures have to offer so-called "average" Christians? The older response. My current approach - a chess analogy. Christian mystics highlight the true depths of the human person and amplify what it means to be baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Love, not mysticism, is the essence of Christian life. Christ was no yogi teaching higher forms of consciousness.

The desert fathers valued the higher stages of prayer, but emphasized much more the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The Church canonizes saints for their heroic virtue, not for their mystical consciousness. To my way of thinking, mysticism is only one of many ways to deepen the life of Christian faith, hope, and love.

Reflection Questions

1. How have you heard mysticism defined? Do you consider it to be correct or incorrect?
2. What role does mysticism play in your life?
3. What do you hope to take from this course?