

Prayer and Meditation in Christian Mysticism

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Summary

This article explores Christian mysticism as a phenomenon distinct from the mysticism of other world religions, and as a branch of esotericism complementing occultism and esoteric philosophy. It focuses on the mystical path that leads through “dark nights” and/or ecstasy to loving union with God. The basis of mysticism is contemplative prayer, which may be kataphatic or, more commonly, apophatic: the one employing words and images, the other seeking to transcend them.

The article examines Christian mysticism’s origins and development in the contemplative traditions of East and West and notes its struggle to survive in denominations that rejected monasticism. The article discusses in greater detail the contemporary relevance of mysticism to people who “live in the world.” It concludes with comments on mysticism’s relationship to the discipleship training of modern esoteric schools.

Introduction

Mysticism (from the Greek *mystikos*, “a secret”) is a phenomenon involving deeply personal experiences, leading to what are believed to be encounters with God. Mystical states are qualitatively different from ordinary human experience and can be of an intensity that overwhelms the senses, emotions and intellect. Language loses much of its usefulness in describing them. Mystics struggle to capture the indescribable, the ineffable, the indefinable, the unnamable. The Apostle Paul reportedly “heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”¹ Mystics may use metaphor and allegory in the attempt to communicate what they have heard or seen. Or they may turn to poetry, song, dance, or the visual arts. The

mystic, the artist, and the visionary share certain instincts—though it would be naïve to equate or confuse one with another.

Mystics are not lost for words, however; we are confronted by what one commentator called their “copious eloquence.”² Writing in ordinary prose and employing commendable standards of logic, the world’s mystics created a vast literature discussing methodologies, providing at least minimal or peripheral accounts of their experiences, and sharing insights gained therefrom. That literature provides a basis for the academic discussion of mysticism. We should also note that mysticism has produced great teachers and scholars, and the field of mystical theology evolved when personal and collective insight was allowed to augment scripture and tradition as a legitimate source of authority.

This article addresses Christian mysticism as a phenomenon distinguishable from the mysticism of other religions. At its core the mystical experience may transcend religious boundaries.³ But it occurs in the context of the traditions, beliefs and expectations of a particular religion. No Jewish or Sufi mystic ever contemplated Christ’s passion or was rewarded with the stigmata, though many experienced physical manifestations of a more temporary nature. No Buddhist or Huna mystic ever permuted the letters in Hebrew divine names, but mystics from diverse back-

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grounds have used mantras as aids to concentration and meditation.

Christian mysticism developed in the context of belief in Christ's Incarnation: the descent of the Divine into the world of human affairs. It also developed in the context of devotion, liturgy, and the sacraments—and in the context of ascetic discipline. To quote a modern writer: "Much of Christian mysticism revolves around the experiential realization, embedded in prayer, ritual, ascetic practices, and contemplation, of what such a trinitarian and incarnate God was like, of how human beings could know God and of how they could be at their most intimate with him."⁴

Christ is sometimes described as a mystic, and the calendar of saints lists mystics from every period of Christian history. Yet institutional Christianity's attitude toward mysticism has been ambiguous. Mysticism seemed to threaten ecclesiastical authority or compete with pastoral ministry. Perhaps mystics' intimate relationship with God might encourage spiritual autonomy and undermine the church's self-concept as the sole intermediary between the faithful and God. The renowned Spanish mystic Theresa of Ávila went to considerable lengths to alleviate ecclesiastical fears.⁵ Her writings were scrutinized by the Inquisition, but eventually she was canonized. Significant parts of Meister Eckhart's mystical theology were condemned as heretical, but he died before the edict was issued; efforts continue to have the edict lifted so that canonization can be considered. Thirteenth-century Beguine Marguerite Porete, Joan of Arc (c.1412–1431), the outspoken hermeticist Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), and others went to the stake.

Christian mysticism was tolerated in monastic environments, away from centers of ecclesiastical power and contact with the masses. Fortuitously, seclusion provided the ideal environment where mysticism could flourish. In the silence of their isolation hermits, anchorites, and cloistered monks and nuns could hear the "still small voice" of God.⁶ Renunciants dominate the story of Christian mysticism, whereas denominations like Calvinism that did not embrace monasticism

produced few mystics. A rich contemplative tradition grew up out of sight of the everyday world.

Mysticism was not entirely confined to the cloister. Non-enclosed religious orders took mysticism "into the world" and gave it new meaning. Secular clergy⁷ and laypeople were drawn to mysticism, too. Quakers pursued the mystical path outside the framework of institutional religion. Over the last fifty years methodologies have emerged to meet growing interest among Christians at large. Contemplative practices of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and practices imported from South Asia provide further options.

Mysticism is a spirituality of love. Mystics seek God in the inner reaches of the self, hoping for glimpses of, and eventual union with, the Divine. Their vehicle is prayer: not petitionary or intercessory prayer, or even praise or thanksgiving, though those may play ancillary roles. The prayer of the mystics is *contemplative prayer*, often wordless and formless. How transformative—one might almost say how *worthwhile*—the mystics' prayer is depends not only on their inner experiences but on what they are able to share with others. Mystics throughout Christian history, even those in enclosed monasteries, have stressed their sense of communion with the whole of humanity. Love of God becomes love of one's neighbor, and many mystics have dedicated their lives to service.

This article addresses Christian mysticism as a branch of esotericism. Christianity's contemplative tradition is *esoteric*, contrasting with the exotericism of the church hierarchy, the liturgy, popular piety, and the various forms of outreach. Esoteric Christianity is to be found in its mysticism and the mystical theology that developed from it. Mysticism, with its emphasis on the heart, is one of the pillars of esotericism. It complements psychism, occultism, and esoteric philosophy, which emphasize perception, will and intellect, respectively. Mysticism has attracted little attention in the esoteric literature; and among the few studies of mysticism, Christian mysticism has attracted less attention than its counterparts in Hinduism, Bud-

dhism and Sufism. This article seeks to redress that imbalance by stimulating greater interest in Christian mysticism and encouraging participation in contemplative practices.

Historical Development

Church father Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215) first used the term *mystical* in a Christian context at the turn of the third century.⁸ We know from the Pauline epistles, the Gospels of John and Thomas, and other early writings that mysticism already existed in apostolic times. And within a century of Clement's death it was becoming a significant force in Christianity.

Thousands of men and women took to the Egyptian desert in the third and fourth centuries to escape Roman persecution. Many more followed to escape the secularization of post-Constantinian Christianity. They are referred to as the “desert fathers and mothers.” The earliest known desert father was Paul of Thebes (230–341 CE) who devoted his long life to penitence and prayer. More famous was Anthony of Egypt (c.251–356) who felt the call when he was about twenty years old and spent eighty-five years as a hermit.

The desert hermits began the practice of quiet, prayerful reading of scripture; eventually it evolved into the *Lectio Divina*. Along with the harsh conditions and ascetic lifestyles, “praying with scripture” fostered high levels of mysticism. The hermits had many spiritual experiences in which they heard voices or had angelic visions. But they also saw demons that mocked and tempted them. Although Anthony was a man of great sanctity, he reported ongoing temptations, anxieties, and spiritual assaults; “Who sits in silence,” he remarked, “has escaped three wars: hearing, speaking, seeing, yet against things shall he continually battle, that is his own heart.”⁹

Groups of neighboring hermitages eventually coalesced into communities, and new communities were established beyond the desert. *Rules* articulated shared ideals and governed community life. In some communities members took vows. From small beginnings

Christian monasticism grew to play a huge role in the medieval church.

Mysticism in the West

Mysticism flourished in both East and West but took on distinctive characteristics, reflecting differences in their monastic systems. Augustine of Hippo wrote a rule for a community of contemplative monks in North Africa in about 400 CE. Three decades later former desert father John Cassian founded the abbey of St Victor, near Marseilles in Gaul,¹⁰ and romanized Briton Patrick founded the abbey at Armagh, Ireland. The famous abbey on the island of Iona, Scotland, was founded by the Irish monk Columba in 563.

Early in the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia (480–547) established several communities, including the monastery of Monte Casino, Italy. He also wrote the rule that we know as the Rule of St Benedict. The Benedictine rule, embraced throughout the West, had at its heart the notion of *ora et labora* (“pray and work”). Monks worked to support their communities and provided religious and social services to local populations. They also spent long hours in prayer. Prayer in the Benedictine monasteries included liturgical prayer: primarily the daily offices and the Mass. It also included private prayer. The rule instructed monks to practice the *Lectio Divina* for at least two hours a day and longer on Sunday when the monks were not expected to work.¹¹

The *Lectio Divina* took on a fourfold structure, consisting of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*. *Lectio* was the quiet reading of a passage from scripture and selection of a word or phrase that seemed particularly meaningful. *Meditatio* was reflection on what had been read, letting the word or phrase “speak.”¹² *Oratio* (“prayer”) was a dialogue with God that the word or phrase might inspire. *Contemplatio* (“contemplation”) was a period of wordless “rest” in which the individual experienced the love of God—or if spiritual development was sufficient—a sense of union with God.

By the eleventh century, laxity in monastic discipline threatened the contemplative tradi-

tion. In response, reforms were initiated on several fronts. The Carthusian Order founded in 1084 by Bruno of Cologne required monks to spend most of the day in their cells, coming together only for daily Mass. They were permitted to talk to one another only once a week when they went on a communal hike.¹³ Needless to say, their lives of near-total silence provided rich opportunities for mysticism. Other monastic orders soon emerged. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) founded the famous Cistercian abbey of Clairvaux and another 65 houses throughout Europe. The Carmelite Order, dedicated to contemplative prayer, received its papal charter in 1226. Initially based on Mount Carmel, Palestine, it later flourished in Europe.

From the twelfth century onward, orders of mendicant friars offered further options for the religious life. Mendicants were not cloistered but traveled, usually on foot, caring for the sick and preaching. They relied on donations of food, clothing or money for their support; their name comes from the Latin *mendicus* (“beggar”). Though they had little time for quiet contemplation, their ascetic lifestyle encouraged mystical experiences, and mendicants had greater opportunities to share the benefits with others. The Order of Friars Preachers (Dominicans), founded by former crusader Dominic Guzmán (1170–1221), produced a number of renowned mystics, including Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler. Dominic’s close contemporary Francis of Assisi (c.1182–1226) embraced a life of extreme austerity and had profound spiritual experiences. He was the first person known to have received the stigmata: marks on his hands, feet and side, corresponding to the nail and spear wounds Jesus suffered on the cross. The several Franciscan orders that trace their origins to Francis produced many other mystics, including Bonaventure (1221–1274), the “seraphic doctor.”

Women, particularly nuns, played a major role in western mysticism.¹⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich, Theresa of Ávila, and Catherine of Sienna were just a few of the many revered for their mystical attainments. Hildegard’s

(1098–1179) most famous mystical work, *Scivias*, detailed a number of visions and discussed their theological implications. Catherine (1347–1380), an extreme ascetic, received the stigmata. Her contemporary Julian (c.1342–c.1416) lived as an anchoress in a tiny cell in the wall of a church in Norwich, England. Julian’s *Showings*, which remains a best-seller of devotional literature, documented fifteen visions of Christ.

Medieval mysticism was by no means confined to official religious orders or even to mainstream Christianity. The Celtic church of the fourth–eleventh centuries operated independently from Rome. Based on a strong monastic system, it produced numerous mystics, as well as artists and scholars. The Cathar church of the eleventh–thirteenth centuries also sought independence. It produced many mystics before its members were condemned as heretics and exterminated.¹⁵

Before she entered a Cistercian convent, Mechthild (c.1207–c.1282) was a Beguine living in a women’s community that operated beyond the formal structure of religious orders. The fourteenth-century mystic known as the Friend of God from the Oberland (“high country,” the Alps) endured rigorous, ascetic training, after which he was told in a vision: “Only now have you trodden the right path of love. You have passed your time of probation.”¹⁶ His followers, the Friends of God, had considerable influence in Germany, operating outside episcopal control. In the same period Dutchman Gerald Groote founded the Brethren of the Common Life, whose members included Thomas à Kempis (c.1380–1471), probable author of *The Imitation of Christ*.

Religious orders continued to flourish and even expand in the Church of Rome after the Reformation. Basque nobleman Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) had a profound spiritual experience after being wounded in battle. He proceeded to develop his Spiritual Exercises, a structured program for month-long retreats. Retreatants began by contemplating their sins and spiritual weaknesses in relation to the passion of Christ, so as to foster a sense of shame and abhorrence for sin. Then they

were encouraged to commit themselves to Christ, to be thankful for forgiveness, and finally to share in the divine glory. In 1539 Ignatius and his followers founded the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) whose members submitted to rigorous training and discipline before serving as missionaries and teachers. The intensity of the Exercises led many participants to mystical experiences. But Ignatian spirituality was more will-oriented than earlier forms had been; union with God was sought primarily through submission to the divine will.

John of the Cross (1542–1591), the most famous Spanish mystic of his time, and his friend and mentor Theresa of Ávila founded the Order of Discalced (“barefoot”) Carmelites as part of a reform movement within the larger Carmelite Order. The new order was committed to strict asceticism. John’s poem “The Dark Night of the Soul”—possibly written while imprisoned in a windowless cell by opponents of reform—formed the basis of his most famous books: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*.¹⁷ A century later, Armand de Rancé reformed the Cistercian abbey of La Trappe, France, to place greater emphasis on austerity and penance. His monks became known as Trappists, and monasteries following a similar rule were founded in many countries.¹⁸ Trappist discipline includes silence for most of the day, except for the recitation of the daily offices and participation in the Mass.

Outside the Church of Rome, religious orders were suppressed and were only revived in the Anglican Communion in the nineteenth century. Correspondingly fewer opportunities existed for the contemplative life. Nevertheless, continuing a trend that began with the mendicant orders and the Jesuits, mysticism moved further into the world. Secular clergy and laypeople found ways to integrate contemplative prayer into family- and work-oriented life.

George Fox (1624–1691) founded the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers, whose collective worship involved extended periods of silent prayer.¹⁹ Some Quakers experienced ecstatic trembling during those periods, giv-

ing the Friends their popular name. Those who encouraged ecstatic behavior eventually left to form the “Shakers,” but the Quaker practice of silent prayer continues to the present.

The Church of England also produced the “metaphysical poets” of the seventeenth century, a loose-knit group of as many as seventeen men and women that included John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and Anne Bradstreet. Clergy within the group had opportunities to apply their talents to preaching and hymnody. Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) were famous Lutheran mystics—both persecuted by ecclesiastical authorities. Böhme influenced eighteenth-century Anglican clergyman William Law and Russian Orthodox mystics in the nineteenth century. Britain’s most famous mystic at the turn of the nineteenth century was the metaphysical artist and poet William Blake (1757–1827).

Mysticism in Eastern Orthodox Christianity

A separate monastic tradition developed in the Greek and Russian churches. Basil of Caesarea (330–379) developed a rule, which included the earliest known religious vows: love, obedience, poverty and chastity.²⁰ At about the same time monks began to settle on Mount Athos, on the coast of northern Greece. In 885, the Emperor Basil I reserved the area for monastic use. More than twenty monasteries were founded on “the Holy Mountain,” and Mount Athos retained its spiritual preeminence, despite the growing power and strong monastic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church.²¹

Several men stand out from among the numerous mystics of the Greek church. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662) built upon the teachings of the fourth-century church father Gregory of Nyssa and the fifth-century Syrian Neoplatonist known as the Pseudo-Dionysius. One of Maximus’ best-known works was *The Four-Hundred Texts on Love*. It and other works contain his contribution to the doctrine of *theosis*, or deification. *Theosis*, Maximus explained, involves the mutual

interpenetration of the human and divine natures, on a smaller scale but comparable with what occurred within the person of Jesus Christ.²² Man always had the latent potential to become divine, but as a result of the redemption theosis became attainable. Maximus was charged with heresy and met a gruesome death at the hands of the Byzantine emperor. The doctrine of theosis survived, however, and became an important component of Orthodox mystical theology.²³

Symeon the New Theologian (949–1032) served as abbot of the monastery of St Mamas in Constantinople. He promoted the notion of union with God through the divine light, a concept that also contributed to the understanding of theosis. Unusual for his time, Symeon saw the potential for laypeople as well as renunciants to pursue a mystical path.

Monasticism spread to Russia soon after Vladimir I's conversion to Christianity. Antony, a monk from Mount Athos, founded the Petchersky Lavra, or Monastery of the Caves, in Kiev. Sergius of Radonezh (c.1314–1392) established the first of a number of monasteries in the forests of northern Russia. The fifteenth-century Russian hermit Nilus of Sora combined his mysticism with social activism. Three centuries later Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833), who had spent many years as a recluse, embarked on a public ministry, gaining wide recognition as a teacher, counselor and healer. Seraphim's teachings emphasized the transformation of the whole human entity, body and soul, by the influx of divine light. Often compared with Francis of Assisi, he became one of Russia's best-loved saints.

Eastern Orthodoxy never permitted the establishment of religious orders like the Benedictines or Jesuits; all monasteries were under local episcopal control. And although monas-

teries were established for both men and women, the eastern churches never produced significant numbers of female mystics. An interesting feature of eastern Christianity, however, was the work of "elders": monks, nuns and hermits who provided spiritual counseling to other religious, secular clergy, and laypeople. Known as *gerontes* in the Greek church and *startsy* in Russia (singular: *gerontas* and *staretz*), the elders combined service with mysticism. Seraphim of Sarov was a famous staretz.

Eastern Orthodoxy's greatest contribution to contemplative practice was *hesychastic* prayer. Hesychasm (from the Greek: *hesychia*, "stillness" or "silence") may have originated on Mount Athos as early as the fourth

century. It involved extended periods of solitary meditation, intended to bring heart and mind together in a synthesis of the whole being. Participants often spoke of being filled with a bright light, which they identified with the divine presence. Hesychastic prayer came under attack in the fourteenth century from critics who argued that only intellectual pursuits had value and that claims to have seen the divine light were blasphemous. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), a monk of Mount Athos and later archbishop of Thessaloniki, defended the hesychasts:

Through the practice of the life of stillness they devote their attention undistractedly to themselves and to God, and by transcending themselves through sincere prayer and by establishing themselves in God through their mystical and supra-intellectual union with Him they have been initiated into what surpasses the intellect.²⁴

Hesychastic practice was finally approved by the Councils of Constantinople of 1341 and 1351, and many people came to see it as the royal road to theosis.

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Hesychasm enjoyed a revival in the eighteenth century, and it survives today as a significant practice in Orthodox mysticism. Contributing to the revival, the *Philokalia* (Greek: “Love of the Beautiful”) was published in 1782. It was a collection of hesychastic and other texts written between the fourth and fifteenth centuries. Compiled by Nikodemos of Mount Athos and Makarios of Corinth, it was intended as a manual for contemplative monks. Over time it acquired broader influence, and English translations became available in the twentieth century. The *Philokalia* preserved many ancient texts that otherwise might have been lost.

An important element of hesychastic practice was the Jesus Prayer. Attributed to the fifth-century Bishop Diadochos of Photiki, Greece, the words are: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”²⁵ According to Hesychios the Priest, who lived in a monastery on Mount Sinai in the eighth or ninth century:

In great watchfulness and fervent desire travel along it with the Jesus Prayer, with humility and concentration, keeping the lips of both the senses and the intellect silent . . . travel along it with a mind trained in understanding, and with God’s help it will teach you things you had not hoped for; it will give you knowledge, enlightenment and instruction of a kind to which your intellect was impervious.²⁶

Another writer cited in the *Philokalia* was Ilias the Presbyter who commented that the seeker who uses the Jesus Prayer attentively “has glimpsed the holy of holies who, with his natural thoughts at rest, contemplates that which transcends every intellect, and who has in this way been granted to some extent a vision of the divine light.”²⁷

Recitation of the Jesus Prayer, hour after hour, was often synchronized with inhalation and exhalation of the breath and even with the heartbeat, recalling yogic disciplines of *pranayama* and *mantra yoga*. As the prayer session continued, hesychastic prayer became silent, automatic, and centered on the heart. Eastern Orthodoxy has always attached great importance to the Apostle Paul’s admonition

to “pray without ceasing.”²⁸ Laypeople as well as monks are urged to pray as they go about their everyday business—even when they sleep. Church father John Chrysostom is credited with saying: “Everywhere, wherever you may find yourself, you can set up an altar to God in your mind by means of prayer.”²⁹

Concepts and Terminology

Mystics continually speak of the soul: how it yearns for God, how the divine light illuminates the inner reaches of the soul, and so forth. But “the soul” is not defined in Christian doctrine as precisely as it was in Greek philosophy or is in modern trans-Himalayan teachings. According to Plato the *nous* (“mind”) was the eternal *Form*, and the *soma* (“body”) its “shadow” on the earthly plane. The *psyche* (literally “soul”) was an intermediate principle that animated the *soma*. In the third century CE Neoplatonists introduced the *pneuma* (“spirit”), equivalent to, or possibly transcending, the *nous*. The *pneuma* was a divine emanation, a divine “spark,” that affirmed humanity’s divine origin and destiny.

Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy had a strong influence on early Christianity, but that influence declined over time. The Second Council of Constantinople (553 CE) rejected suggestions that the soul preexisted the body,³⁰ implying that each soul is individually created by God. The Fourth Council of Constantinople (869) rejected any notion of a divine spark and conflated the *nous* and *psyche* into a single entity. It decreed that man “has one rational and intellectual soul” which “animates the flesh.”³¹

With the rise of scholasticism, Aristotelian concepts of the soul came to dominate western Christian thought. The Aristotelian revival’s most famous exponent, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), built upon the Constantinople decrees, declaring that humanity’s rational, intellectual soul embraces and transcends the “vegetative” soul, shared with plants, and the “sensitive” soul, shared with animals.³² Aquinas still spoke of the soul’s “essence” and regarded it as the form of the body. But

the soul was no longer an autonomous entity; it was more like a collection of faculties. Aquinas declared that the soul was immortal because the intellect was superior to physical matter,³³ but it was “incomplete substance” and “connaturally related to the body.” After death it remains in an incomplete state until the resurrection of the body. The scholastics listed the soul’s faculties as imagination, memory, understanding and will; love featured only as an application of will.

To the mystics, the soul’s principal faculty was to love God. Mystics have always regarded the soul as the ethical component of the human constitution, the part that yearns for union with God. Mystics also expressed continuing belief in a divine spark, even as an emanation from God. Meister Eckhart described the spark, or *Seelenfünklein*, as the “citadel of the soul” and the “light of the soul.”³⁴ In his words: “There is something in the soul which is only God . . . For herein the soul takes its whole life and being and from this source it draws its life and being.”³⁵ His views on the spark contributed to his condemnation by Rome, but other mystics agreed with him. Theresa of Ávila spoke of “the spirit in the soul.”³⁶ And William Law wrote of the hidden “pearl of eternity” in the center of the soul.³⁷

The word “meditation” has changed in meaning over the centuries, causing considerable confusion. The Latin word *meditatio*, as used in medieval writings, referred to the thoughtful reflection on scripture. In the twelfth century, Carthusian monk Guigo II assigned each element of the *Lectio Divina* to a different stage on the mystical path: *lectio* was for “beginners,” *meditatio* and *oratio* became appropriate in turn as experience increased, and *contemplatio* was for seasoned mystics.³⁸ Many contemplatives disagreed, insisting that they used all four elements to great benefit. In recent times, the low status accorded to *meditatio* has led to claims that Christianity places prayer—perhaps identified in critics’ minds with petitionary prayer—ahead of meditation. The problem is one of semantics.

In modern usage, influenced by the literature of Asian spirituality, “meditation,” has be-

come a catch-all term for a variety of techniques designed to relax the body, calm the mind, induce subjective experiences, access higher states of consciousness, or sense higher realities. Except in monastic circles, where traditional terminology persists, contemplative prayer now is commonly classified as a form of meditation. Whether that classification is valid depends, of course, on how flexible “meditation” is allowed to be. Some would argue that it ignores the qualitative difference that contemplative prayer is more than a self-improvement technique; it is an encounter with God.

The Mystical Path

Contemplative Prayer

Christian contemplatives distinguish between *kataphatic* and *apophatic* prayer. *Kataphatic* (or *cataphatic*) prayer, from the Greek *kataphatikos* (“positive”), employs words, concepts and images in the belief that they assist our understanding of the divine nature and orient us—thinking and feeling creatures—toward God. *Apophatic* prayer, from the Greek *apophatikos* (“negative”), stems from the assertion that God is unknowable, whereupon words and images are unhelpful and distracting. It seeks, to the extent possible, to transcend discursive thought. Corresponding branches of theology are *kataphatic* theology, which seeks to describe the divine nature, and *apophatic* theology, which asserts that the divine nature is so far removed from human understanding that we can only say what it is *not*. *Apophatic* Christian theology has its equivalent in the *neti neti* of jnana yoga and Advaita Vedanta.

Kataphatic prayer, often referred to as the “way of affirmation,” forms the basis of the liturgy and public worship. Virtually all types of popular devotional prayer also are *kataphatic*.³⁹ For example, the Lord’s Prayer uses prescribed words and also concepts or images like “father,” “kingdom,” and “daily bread.” Prayers of thanksgiving articulate what the individual or group is thankful for. Petitionary and intercessory prayers spell out what is needed or desired. *Kataphatic* prayer is “talking” to God and also “listen-

ing” to God, hoping for a message, image or vision.

Kataphatic prayer is employed by some contemplatives. The *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* provide one of its most complete expressions. Ignatius, to quote Jesuit priest Frederick McLeod, had a three-fold intent:

First, he employs it not only to provoke faith experiences but to specify the kind of experience. By carefully building up an affective setting and mood and presenting appropriate material, he influences the form that an experience will take. Secondly, when an experience does occur, he wants a person to stay with the thoughts, images and feelings and to share them with Christ. This helps to develop and deepen one's relationship with Christ. Thirdly, he sees that *kataphatic prayer* can aid a person in knowing how to live out what has been experienced.⁴⁰

Most other mystics have practiced apophatic prayer, or the “way of negation.” Apophatic prayer is formless, seeking God without the use—or distraction—of words, images or thoughts. The Pseudo-Dionysius spoke of seekers “who leave behind them every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven, and who plunge into the darkness where . . . there dwells the One who is beyond all things.”⁴¹ He went on to speak of the “darkness so far above light.”⁴² Maximus the Confessor wrote: “It is said that the highest state of prayer is reached when the intellect goes beyond the flesh and the World, and while praying is utterly free from matter and form. He who maintains this state has truly attained unceasing prayer.”⁴³ Apophatic prayer is inner silence, “echoing” the outer silence of the hermit's cave or monk's cell. That inner silence is likened to the primeval silence into which the Elohim spoke the words of creation.

The Pseudo-Dionysius' influence is seen in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous fourteenth-century English work to which all later commentators on apophatic prayer have referred. Its author insisted that God lies beyond a “cloud” that is impervious to the hu-

man mind. However, the cloud can be penetrated by love: “So lift up your love to that cloud. Or, more accurately, let God draw your love up to that cloud.”⁴⁴ The writer advocated use of a monosyllabic mantra, like “God.”⁴⁵

Henry Vaughan contrasted kataphatic and apophatic prayer in his metaphysical poetry. *The World* portrayed God and creation in images of light and brightness:

I saw eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright,
And round beneath it, Time in hours,
days, years Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow moved, In which the
world And all her train were hurled.⁴⁶

In another poem *The Night*, God was seen as hidden, invisible, or “dark”:

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men
here Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear O for that night!
where I in him Might live invisible and
dim.⁴⁷

Frederick McLeod discussed the relative merits of kataphatic and apophatic prayer but stopped short of identifying one as superior to the other. “Much depends,” he explained, “on how the Lord calls one, and on what kind of experience one is looking for. What really matters is whether one encounters the Lord in a prayer experience.”⁴⁸

In practice, kataphatic and apophatic prayer are not stark alternatives but define a spectrum of possibilities in which discursive thought is of greater or lesser importance. For example, a prayer session may begin with words but become wordless as the experience deepens. Indeed the *Lectio Divina* moves from reading to kataphatic prayer, to apophatic prayer. And to quote an Eastern Orthodox writer, contemplative prayer moves “from the frequent vocal prayer to prayers of the mind and from that to prayer of the heart.”⁴⁹ The “heart,” in that context, is more than the physical organ, more even than the seat of emotion; it is the conscious link with

the soul—the individual human soul and perhaps also the collective soul of the Mystical Church.

The Mystical Journey

Fourth-century church father Gregory of Nyssa compared the mystical path to the biblical story of the Exodus. Milestones on the path corresponded to Moses' encounter with the burning bush, ascent into the dark cloud on Mount Sinai, and return with the tablets of the Law. The journey is ongoing, and the mystical and the moral must always go together.⁵⁰

A century later, the Pseudo-Dionysius divided the mystical journey into three stages: purgation, illumination and unity.⁵¹ The purgative stage—richly illustrated by the desert fathers and mothers—consists of renunciation of the things of this world. It is intended to instill a sense of detachment, rid the self of passions, and focus attention on God. The illuminative stage allows the light of God to shine into the soul; it encourages the increase of virtue, particularly love. Intensely rewarding, this stage may involve ecstatic experiences. In the third stage of the journey, the individual achieves loving union with God. Ecstatic and unitive states will be discussed in more detail later.

John of the Cross is credited with coining the term “dark night of the soul,” the title of his poem and book mentioned earlier. The dark night is a long purgative stage—or series of stages—in which the seeker may experience “aridity” in prayer and a sense of abandonment by God. Through that experience the soul is purged of its weaknesses and prepared for the journey that lies ahead. John identified “two kinds of darkness and purgation correspondingly to the two parts of man's nature—the sensual and the spiritual.”⁵² Correspondingly, there is a “night of the sense” and a “night of the spirit.” John also referred to the “active night,” in which the seeker strives to overcome his or her own weaknesses, and the more painful “passive night,” in which God completes the process of purgation. The latter, despite its harshness, is a blessing in disguise; the darkness humbles

the soul and makes it miserable “only to give it light in everything.”⁵³ God demands total renunciation in preparation for the glory of the unitive state.

Twentieth-century scholar Evelyn Underhill sought to accommodate the work of John of the Cross by expanding Dionysius' three stages of the mystical path to five. In her description the soul first awakens to new possibilities and then progresses through purgation, illumination, and the “dark night,” to the final stage of loving union.⁵⁴ Underhill's five stages can be correlated with events in the life of Christ. Awakening corresponds to Christ's nativity; purgation to the baptism and temptation in the wilderness; illumination to the transfiguration; the “dark night” to the passion and crucifixion; and union to the resurrection and ascension. Later in the article we shall see that the five stages can also be correlated with the planetary initiations discussed in trans-Himalayan teachings.

Separate from Dionysius' three stages, and Underhill's five, the ladder became a popular metaphor for spiritual ascent, recalling Jacob's ladder described in *Genesis*. John Climacus (“John of the Ladder”), a seventh-century monk at the monastery on Mount Sinai, acquired his name (*klimax* is the Greek for “ladder”) from his work called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Seven hundred years later, Englishman Walter Hilton wrote *The Ladder of Perfection*.⁵⁵ John of the Cross wrote of a “mystic ladder of love” consisting of ten steps.⁵⁶

Theresa of Ávila had a vision of the soul as like “a diamond of very clear crystal in which there are many rooms.”⁵⁷ That vision inspired her to conceive of the mystical path as progress through seven mansions, the innermost being the sanctuary of God. If we detect influence of Merkabah mysticism, in which the seeker ascended through seven palaces to the throne-world,⁵⁸ that would not be surprising since Theresa was of mixed Christian and Jewish ancestry. Like the Merkabah mystics, she recognized that to move from one mansion/palace to the next requires progressively greater effort and brings increasing risk of failure. But at least in Theresa's description,

divine grace helps the seeker overcome demonic efforts to impede progress.

Francis of Assisi and fellow Franciscan Bonaventure both had visions of a crucified seraph with three pairs of wings.⁵⁹ Bonaventure interpreted the six wings as stages on the mystical journey. A seventh and final stage: a “stage of repose and illumination by supreme wisdom,” lies beyond human effort but is “made possible through Christ and mediator.”⁶⁰ Perhaps the seraph’s tiered wings can be compared with the petals of the Egoic Lotus of trans-Himalayan teachings.⁶¹

For some Christian mystics opportunities to express their love of God occurred not only in prayer but also in the sacraments. The Eucharist was considered particularly important in that regard. Thomas à Kempis (c.1380–1471) shared sentiments with which he approached the sacrament:

O Lord God, my Creator and my Redeemer, I long to receive You this day with such reverence, praise, and honor, with such gratitude, worthiness and love, with such faith, hope, and purity Therefore I offer and present to You the gladness of all devout hearts, their ardent affection, their mental raptures, their supernatural illuminations and heavenly visions together with all the virtues and praises which have been or shall be celebrated by all creatures in heaven and on earth, for myself and all commended to my prayers, that You may be worthily praised and glorified forever.⁶²

Numerous others have written mystical devotions to the Eucharist, some enshrined in the liturgy.

A life of solitude avoids the distractions of everyday life and allows more time to devote to mystical pursuits, but it does not automatically lead to inner peace. The desert fathers were tormented by demons, and numerous mystics complained that they were constantly tempted to sin. Until comparatively recently the autobiographies of mystics, even those revered as great saints, invariably proclaimed abject wickedness; the standards of self-

judgment clearly rise along the path to sanctity. Mystics struggled valiantly to overcome temptation and sought forgiveness. Theresa of Avila prayed: “God of mercy, have mercy upon this poor sinner, this miserable worm . . . Behold . . . the tears with which I beg this of Thee.”⁶³ The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* declared that “whoever would work at becoming a contemplative must first cleanse his conscience, and then, after he has made due amends, he can give himself, boldly, but humbly, to contemplation.”⁶⁴

Self-incrimination has become less common in recent times, but contemplatives still complain of exasperating distractions. In the words of a contemporary Trappist abbot: “The monastic tradition sees . . . tranquility as a short-lived consolation to encourage beginners, which will dissipate once the search for God is pursued with real determination and the demons get to work to prevent any further progress.”⁶⁵

One might think that with enough effort any person who loved God above all else and surrendered completely to God—anyone, for instance, who joined a strict-observance monastery—could eventually attain the unitive state. Yet some writers have declared that success depends on God’s blessing, a blessing that may be delayed or even permanently withheld. They distinguish between “acquired prayer,” the product of human effort, and “infused prayer,” a divine blessing on those “called by God” to be mystics. Individuals who never receive the call are doomed to fail, no matter how great their efforts. Perhaps that was a ploy by ecclesiastical authorities to limit the number of Christian mystics. On the other hand, a more general awareness exists that the mystical path is very much under God’s guidance and that unity with God is a gift bestowed only on a small elect.

Ecstatic and Unitive States

Contemplative prayer can be interrupted by distractions. It can be bogged down for months or years in purgative states. It can be blessed with feelings of great peace and love.

Occasionally it can induce states of ecstasy.⁶⁶ In an ecstatic state the mystic may hear voices, see visions, become aware of love on a new level, or understand reality in an entirely new light. He or she may lose a sense of time, location, and even separate existence. The individual's body may writhe on the ground, tremble uncontrollably—or become comatose. Cases have been reported in which an ecstatic's body levitated or bilocated. Medieval mystics were fond of quoting the Latin dictum: *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, freely translated as “the terrifying mystery that is also irresistible.” It recalls the psalmist's words: “For the Lord most high is terrible; he is a great King over all the earth.”⁶⁷ The mystic yearns to see God, but even a brief glimpse is overwhelming.

Theresa of Ávila commented: “the soul . . . loses its power of breathing, with the result that . . . it cannot possibly speak. At other times it loses all its powers at once, and the hands and the body grow so cold that the body seems no longer to have a soul.”⁶⁸ She pointed out that “[c]omplete ecstasy . . . does not last long.” But it can produce profound and long-lasting aftereffects.

Ecstatic experiences may yield new insights into complex truths or new synthesis of previously disparate ideas. Hildegard of Bingen reported: “[I]mmediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel, and of the other catholic volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments.”⁶⁹ Alternatively, the mystic may question previous knowledge. After a vision of Christ in the last months of his life, Thomas Aquinas exclaimed: “everything I have written seems as worthless straw.” Thomas abandoned the theological work for which he is renowned and allegedly wrote a book on alchemy.⁷⁰

German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich meditated for years on Christ's passion and death. During an ecstatic experience on December 29, 1812 she received the stigmata. Her scribe recorded the event:

She . . . saw a light descending toward her, and distinguished in the midst of it

the resplendent form of her crucified Savior, whose wounds shone like so many furnaces of light. Her heart was overflowing with joy and sorrow, and, at the sight of the sacred Wounds, her desire to suffer with her Lord became intensely violent. Then triple rays, pointed like arrows of the color of blood, darted forth from the hands, feet, and right side of the sacred apparition, and struck her . . . The moment these rays touched her, drops of blood flowed from the wounds . . . Long did she remain in a state of insensibility.⁷¹

In addition to the marks on her hands and feet, Anne Catherine had the mark of a cross on her breast and marks on her head corresponding to the crown of thorns. Transcripts of her “meditations,” which describe the lives of Christ and other biblical figures in great detail, fill 40 volumes.⁷²

Many Christian mystics experienced ecstasy during the Mass. Hildegard had visions of angels:

Heaven was suddenly opened and a fiery and inestimable brilliance descended over that offering and irradiated it completely with light, as the sun illumines anything its rays shine through. And, thus illuminating it, the brilliance bore it on high into the sacred places of Heaven and then replaced it on the altar, as a person draws in a breath and lets it out again.⁷³

French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) described an ecstatic experience during adoration of the reserved Sacrament:

[T]he flow of whiteness enveloped me, passed beyond me, overran everything. At the same time everything, though drowned in this whiteness, preserved its own proper shape, its own autonomous movement; for the whiteness did not efface the features or change the nature of anything, but penetrated objects at the core of their being, at a level more profound even than their own life. It was as though a milky brightness were illuminating the universe from within, and every-

thing were fashioned of the same kind of translucent flesh.⁷⁴

As the vision faded, Chardin remarked, “I heard then the *Ave verum* being sung.

Protestant mystics also had ecstatic experiences. Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, a bishop in the Moravian Church, established a religious community at Herrnhut, Saxony, which witnessed a bout of visions, prophecy and healings in the 1720s. In England the “Shakers” routinely participated in ecstatic dancing and exhibited the trademark convulsions at worship services. Their leader, Ann Lee, had a vision in 1774 in which she was told to move to Niskeyuna, New York. From there Shaker communities sprang up throughout the northeast United States. The Shakers form one of the roots of modern charismatic Christianity.

Psychologists classify ecstasy as an altered state of consciousness. Neuroscientists claim that similar experiences can be produced by sensory deprivation, psychedelic drugs, or magnetic stimulation of the temporal lobe in the brain.⁷⁵ Renunciants experience some degree of sensory deprivation but usually not enough to explain the scope of their experiences. Mystics dismiss the relevance of artificially induced ecstatic states. While they may agree that mystical states correlate with patterns of brain activity, they strongly dispute notions of a neural basis for their experiences.

Ecstatic phenomena can be euphoric and can provide—at least for the individual involved—the most convincing evidence of higher realities. But few Christian mystics regard ecstasy as an end in itself. Rather, the only worthwhile goal is loving union with God—or, in the writings of Mechtilde of Magdeburg, the soul’s “return to its original being in God.”⁷⁶

According to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, love—even an individual’s love of God—can break through the cloud. “[O]ne loving soul by itself,” he wrote, “through its love, may know for itself Him who is incomparably more than sufficient to fill all souls that exist. This is the everlasting miracle of love.”⁷⁷ Elsewhere he declared that the “way

to real union with God [lies] in the sweet simplicity of perfect love.”⁷⁸ Union with God may seem complete from the mystic’s viewpoint. According to *The Cloud*’s author, however, the creature-Creator divide cannot actually be broached: “[God] is your being, but you are not His.”⁷⁹

Theresa of Ávila was more confident about real, lasting union. In her account, the soul is “betrothed” in the sixth mansion and becomes the “Bride of Christ” in the seventh.⁸⁰ Betrothal does not result in continuous union, however, and during interludes of separation the individual can experience great pain. Finally, however, Christ takes the soul “to be His bride, He brings her into [the seventh] Mansion . . . before consummating the Spiritual Marriage.”⁸¹ Thereafter the soul and Christ “have become like two who cannot be separated from one another.” Theresa described the experience thus: “The Lord is pleased to manifest to the soul at that moment the glory that is in Heaven, in a sublimer manner than in possible through any vision of spiritual consolation.”⁸²

Christian mystics often resort to erotic metaphor to describe the intensity of their love of God. Mechtilde wrote poetry in the style of the troubadours to express her insatiable love for Christ.⁸³ Bernard of Clairvaux wrote no fewer than 86 sermons on the *Song of Solomon*, many of them containing erotic images. Bernard nevertheless felt compelled to ask: “[W]hat human affections have you ever experienced . . . that are sweeter than is now experienced from the heart of the Most High?”⁸⁴ Bernard is remembered, among much else, for promoting the Marian cult in western Christianity. Mary is recognized as the patroness of contemplatives.

Erotic imagery appears in John of the Cross’ poem “The Dark Night of the Soul,” part of which is as follows:

In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me, Nor I beheld aught, Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart.

This light guided me More surely than the light of noonday, To the place where he

(well I knew who!) was awaiting me—A place where none appeared.

Oh, night that guided me, Oh, night more lovely than the dawn, Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!

Upon my flowery breast, Kept wholly for himself alone, There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him, And the fanning of the cedars made a breeze.

The breeze blew from the turret As I parted his locks; With his gentle hand he wounded my neck And caused all my senses to be suspended.

I remained, lost in oblivion; My face I reclined on the Beloved. All ceased and I abandoned myself, Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.⁸⁵

For female mystics, like Mechtild, the use of sexual imagery to describe their love for Christ—or for a God customarily given male attributes—is understandable; nuns, after all, typically view themselves as brides of Christ. On the other hand, people of heterosexual orientation may find the use of such imagery by male mystics, like Bernard and John, discomforting.

John of the Cross explained that the unitive state was possible after “all that is unlike God and unconformed to Him is cast out,” whereupon “the soul may receive the likeness of God . . . and it will thus be transformed.”⁸⁶ “The soul,” he continued, “is at once illumined and transformed in God.”⁸⁷ The unitive experience is often compared to the Beatific Vision, which theologians promise the righteous after death. In heaven, scripture asserts, we shall “see God face to face” and will dwell “in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see.”⁸⁸ Biblical Judaism did not envision an afterlife in heaven, so a passage in *Isaiah* may have referred to the unitive mystical experience: “men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him.”⁸⁹

Eastern Orthodox teachers equate the unitive

state with theosis, and a few western mystics have discussed it in similar terms. The fifteenth-century Catherine of Genoa exclaimed: “My being is God, not by simple participation but by a true transformation of my being.”⁹⁰ And John of the Cross declared that union with the Divine “comes to pass when God grants the soul this supernatural favor, that all the things of God and the soul are one in participant transformation; and the soul seems to be God rather than a soul, and is indeed God by participation.” Like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, however, John cautioned that, despite transformation, the soul remains “as distinct from the Being of God as it was before.”⁹¹ Theosis in the West has normally been interpreted as becoming *like* God.

Mysticism in Modern Times

The Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution all had dampening effects on the contemplative life. Nevertheless, men and women continued to be attracted to the cloister. Anne Catherine Emmerich, whose long practice of kataphatic prayer led to the stigmata, has already been mentioned. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) had a profound spiritual experience on her fourteenth birthday and, the following year, entered a Carmelite convent at Lisieux, France. Thérèse, known as “the Little Flower,” impressed everyone with her simplicity of spirit. Although she died of tuberculosis at the young age of 24, she contributed much to western spirituality and was canonized in 1925.

The Padre Pio (1887–1968), the famous Capuchin monk and ascetic of San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, was ordained in 1910. Eight years later he received the stigmata and bore the wounds for half a century.⁹² He is said to have been capable of levitation and bilocation, and many miraculous healings were attributed to him. Although controversy over the authenticity of his gifts raged through much of his life and beyond, Pio was canonized in 2002.

One of the best-known mystics of the twentieth century was the Trappist monk Thomas

Merton (1915–1968). He described how he “received the call” to the contemplative life in 1941. Upon taking his vows at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, he imagined God explaining to him: “[Y]ou shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you . . . to the Cistercian Abbey of poor men who labor in Gethsemani.”⁹³ Merton was a strong proponent of apophatic prayer. The contemplative, he wrote, “waits on the Word of God in silence, and when he is ‘answered,’ it is . . . by his silence itself, suddenly, inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great power, full of the voice of God.”⁹⁴ Merton became an admirer of Asian religions and died a few months after a famous meeting with the Dalai Lama.

Merton was not the only individual to take an interest in Asian religions. Several individuals pursued the contemplative life in a synthesis of traditions. French Benedictine monk Henri le Saux embraced the life of an Indian holy man, taking the name Swami Abhishiktananda and spending the latter part of his life as a hermit. Le Saux founded an ashram, one of whose members was the English Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths who wrote twelve books, including *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (1967).

Eastern Orthodox Christianity has continued to produce accomplished mystics. Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov (1853–1900) had three visions of Sophia, which he captured in his poetry. Solovyov’s sensitive writings revealed a relationship with the Divine Feminine not unlike that of the troubadour for his *domna* or Dante Alighieri for Beatrice. Another notable Russian mystic was Daniel Andreev (1906–1959) who spent ten years in a Soviet labor camp. While incarcerated he managed to write much of *Rose of the World* (1991) expressing his vision of a unified Christianity.⁹⁵

The anonymous nineteenth-century Russian story *The Way of the Pilgrim* and its sequel *The Pilgrim Continues his Way* provides an important glimpse into the innocent, childlike

devotion that pervades much of Orthodox spirituality.⁹⁶ The main character is a handicapped Russian pilgrim who followed the advice of a staretz and became an itinerant holy man; walking through the steppes of Russia he promoted the Jesus Prayer and the *Philokalia*. The books’ popularity in the West led to widespread use of the Jesus Prayer. On the surface, continuous recitation of the prayer would seem to be kataphatic, but the prayer becomes progressively quieter and almost disappears into the inner self. Proponents say that the Jesus Prayer begins on the lips, becomes a prayer of the mind, and finally becomes a prayer of the heart.⁹⁷

A staretz, Father Amvrosii, comforted Fyodor Dostoevsky after the death of his young son and subsequently became a model for the character Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁹⁸ Today, startsy and gerontes provide psychological as well as spiritual counseling, including the exorcism of *logismoi*, or negative thoughtforms.⁹⁹

Contemplative Practices for the Modern World

Devotional practices, like the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, and walking a labyrinth long provided opportunities for laypeople, as well as clergy, to explore the initial stages of the mystical path. Further options opened up in the West with the development of new contemplative techniques—inspired by western monastic practice or by Asian traditions—that could be learned without extensive training. The Jesus Prayer, imported from Eastern Orthodox Christianity, provided yet another option.

The whole notion of meditation is more familiar to the general public now than it was fifty years ago. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation gained popularity in the 1960s and ’70s, with an estimated five million adherents, including the Beatles. Groups sprang up exploring the various types of yoga. Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* became required reading for people interested in raja yoga and Indian mysticism. Buddhist, particularly Zen, meditation acquired a strong following among people who sought spirit-

uality elsewhere than in traditional western religion.

Several Christian meditative techniques were developed with the layperson in mind. All encourage a daily rhythm of meditation in which practitioners withdraw to a quiet location, adopt a comfortable sitting position, and seek to still the mind. The intent is to draw nearer to God or Christ and, as a result, to live better, service-oriented lives. Many people practice meditation at home, others meet in groups, still others attend meditation-intensive retreats.

Centering Prayer was developed in the 1970s by three Trappist monks: William Meninger, Basil Pennington, and Thomas Keating. Its name was suggested by the notion of contacting the divine center of our being. Centering Prayer follows in the tradition of apophatic prayer, dating back to the Pseudo-Dionysius and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Its simple methodology involves the use of a simple mantra, or “sacred word,” of individual choice; examples might be “peace,” “Father,” or “be still.” The mantra is recited not continuously but as needed to bring the wandering mind back to the apophatic state.

Keating commented that in contemplation our everyday faculties “are at rest so that our intuitive faculties, the passive intellect, and the will-to-God, may access the ‘still point,’ the place where our personal identity is rooted in God as an abiding presence.” He added: “the divine presence has always been with us, but we think it is absent. That thought is the monumental illusion of the human condition. The spiritual journey is designed to heal it.”¹⁰⁰ Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault explained that Centering Prayer “bypasses our capacities for reason, imagination, visualization, emotion, and memory” but makes

use of “spiritual awareness.”¹⁰¹ The ego, she continued, is transcended in a quest for pure union with God. Keating and others insist that Centering Prayer is not “true” contemplative prayer—*infused* prayer that depends on divine grace—but can lead to it. Centering

The distinction between occult and mystical meditation is not as clear as might be supposed. Mystics exercise will in spiritual discipline, notably in the determination to endure “dark nights” in anticipation of eventual dawn. Renunciants demonstrate strong will in rejecting the things of this world. They would agree with Bailey’s comment that renunciation imitates, in a small way and in “many lesser renunciations,” the great renunciation Christ made at the crucifixion...

Prayer groups typically combine the *Lectio Divina* with 20–30 minutes of silent meditation, which expresses the ideal of *contemplatio*.

Christian Meditation, developed by Benedictine monk John Main, stemmed from an encounter in Malaysia with the yoga master Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Satyananda taught Main mantra yoga but urged him to use a mantra with Christian significance. Main chose the Aramaic word

Maranatha (“Come, Lord”).¹⁰² Whereas Centering Prayer uses a mantra only as needed, Christian Meditation requires it to be used throughout the meditation sessions. Commitment to twice-daily meditations on those lines, in Main’s words, “will bring you into deeper and deeper realms of silence. It is in the silence that we are led into the mystery of the eternal silence of God.”¹⁰³ Main declared that the essence of Christian prayer is “oneness discovered within ourselves but which leads use to oneness with God and to oneness with all.”¹⁰⁴

Asian influence is even more conspicuous in Christian Zen, a practice promoted by Jesuit priest William Johnston, who lived for many years in Japan. It does not use a mantra but advises participants simply to ignore stray thoughts. Johnston went so far as to advocate sitting in a lotus position and felt comfortable describing the unitive state as “Christian *samadhi*.”¹⁰⁵ Zen, Johnston explained, involves detachment “from everything, even from oneself . . . detachment from the very process

of thinking.” Indeed, “the subject–object relationship disappears.” Johnston rejected criticisms that, at such levels of apophatism, his method can no longer be called Christian prayer. He also dismissed suggestions that it implies “Christian atheism or denial of God.” Rather, he wrote, it is “simply another way of experiencing God.”¹⁰⁶

The prominent role played by Roman Catholic religious in the development of these meditative techniques has not discouraged people of other persuasions from using them. Centering Prayer, in particular, has been embraced on a substantial scale—and with no greater controversy—by Lutherans, Anglicans/Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others.¹⁰⁷

How many lay practitioners have visions, experience ecstasy, or achieve union with the Divine has not been recorded. Most participants probably have more modest goals; few would welcome the stigmata. Some people undoubtedly get discouraged by “dark nights” and abandon the practices. Those who commit themselves to regular meditation and weather the storms recognize both the intrinsic rewards and the positive effects on their lives. They also find that contemplative prayer reveals its own purpose. *The Way of the Pilgrim* reminds us that: “Ceaseless interior prayer is a continual yearning of the human spirit toward God. To succeed . . . we must pray more often to God to teach us to pray It is prayer itself which will reveal to you how it can be achieved unceasingly.”¹⁰⁸

Mysticism and Service

Modern spirituality places great emphasis on service. The ethics of seeking a personal union with God inevitably come into question at a time when work is urgently needed to relieve suffering and improve the human condition. Laypeople are unlikely to face significant criticism because they live “in the world,” and everyday activities provide cover for their part-time mysticism. Like the mendicant friars, the Jesuits, and the Quakers, they need periods of solitude and silence for contemplation, but they also have a wealth of

opportunities to share the blessings they receive through service.

More serious criticism is sometimes leveled at people who withdraw from the world to become hermits or join enclosed religious orders. The contemplative life is depicted as self-serving. Evelyn Underhill criticized the path of a seeker who cuts “off of all contacts with the ‘unreal’ world of things [and goes] up alone to meet God on the mountain.”¹⁰⁹ Yet she acknowledged that the contemplative life is not necessarily isolationist. She praised a path in which “the life of spirit [involves] the whole man in all his activities and correspondences.” “The mounting soul,” she continued,

carries the whole world with it; the cosmic crossbearer is its true type. It does not abandon, it remakes: declaring that the “glory of the lighted mind” once he has attained to it, will flood the totality of man’s nature, lighting up the World of Becoming, and exhibiting not merely the unknowable character of “the Origin of all that is,” but the knowable and immediate presence of that Immanent Spirit in Whom “we live and move and have our being.”¹¹⁰

Christian monastic institutions typically served the populations or surrounding areas. The rule of Basil of Caesarea required monks to operate guest houses and schools and to care for the poor and sick. When parish churches were still rare, monasteries served the religious needs of local people. Monasteries provided welfare services throughout the Middle Ages, and, when they were suppressed in Protestant countries, disadvantaged people faced enormous hardship. The monasteries established by Sergius of Radonezh brought both Christianity and social services to northern Russia.

Service extends beyond the physical plane. Cloister walls are not impervious to love and light. The Carthusian rule of Bruno of Cologne asserted: “Separated from all, we are united to all.”¹¹¹ And the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* assured his readers—presumably who were aspiring mystics—that

“the whole of mankind is wonderfully helped by what you are doing.”¹¹² A Russian Orthodox writer declared: “The man who lives in silent solitude . . . is in the highest degree active, even more so than the one who takes part in the life of society For he who watches in silence, by communicating his inward experiences . . . promotes the spiritual advantage and the salvation of his brethren . . . His experience and teaching pass on from generation to generation.”¹¹³

Participants at a conference on Centering Prayer collectively declared: “The contemplative consciousness bonds each person in a union with God and with all other persons. It enables them to find God present in all things.”¹¹⁴ Bearing in mind the interconnectedness of all life, spiritual blessings are shared whether or not there is physical communication with the outside world. Individuals and groups engaged in contemplative prayer are beacons of love and light serving to raise the consciousness of the planet.

Mysticism and the Paths of Discipleship and Initiation

Meditation, often based on Asian precedents, is taught by esoteric schools and teachers as an essential element in training programs. Theosophist Geoffrey Hodson promoted yoga, as understood in the *Bhagavad Gita*, as “a carefully ordered regime of self-training” for discipleship and initiation.¹¹⁵ As a starting point he recommended

the chanting of a single effective mantram, the skillful establishment of the center of thought and knowledge in the three-fold spiritual Self within, and bodily stillness. The mind, too, must be rendered reasonably still, mental activities concerned with space, time, and forms reduced to a minimum.¹¹⁶

Yoga is the Sanskrit for “union,” and Hodson explained that the committed practitioner can attain a sense of profound oneness: “The yogi or yogini consciously melts, knowing himself or herself forever merged into that nameless Principle, which can only be referred to as Beingness.”¹¹⁷ Commitment must be strong, but the results can be far-reaching: “The suc-

cessful yogi and yogini must become ablaze with the Fire of God A kind of divine rest is the real result of yoga, a deepening of consciousness as if a way had been found into the deeper recesses of the Soul into which at any time one could retire.”¹¹⁸

Hodson was a priest in the Liberal Catholic Church and reported ecstatic experiences while celebrating the Mass.¹¹⁹ Unlike William Johnston, who sought to Christianize Zen, Hodson made no attempt to put a Christian face on his yoga. But he did offer a theological interpretation of the famous passage in *John*: “God so loved the world,” relating it to the “wondrous and divine love . . . which the Solar Logos [has] for all parts and beings of His Solar System.”¹²⁰

Alice Bailey, whose Arcane School—and derivative organizations like the School for Esoteric Studies—offer extensive programs for discipleship training, carefully distinguished between mystical and occult meditation. She emphasized the importance of reaching the third of Patanjali’s three stages of “meditation”: concentration (*dhāranā*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and contemplation (*samādhi*). But her interpretation of *samādhi* was different from Johnston’s:

[I]t is essential that all disciples in an Ashram should be contemplatives, but contemplatives in the occult sense and not the mystical. In any meditation work which you are doing or may in the future do, your aim should be to achieve as rapidly as possible the highest point in the meditation process, passing quickly through the stages of concentration, alignment and meditation to contemplation.¹²¹

Occult meditation—in its threefold sense—is driven by the mind and will. Pitfalls are the potentially separative aspects of mind and the ambitious, self-centered aspects of will. To avoid them, emphasis is placed on the group nature of meditation and its fulfillment in service. Occult meditation also proceeds according to “law,” or scientific principles, and is goal-driven.¹²² Mystical meditation, by

contrast, is driven by the heart, without concern for specific outcomes.

The distinction between occult and mystical meditation is not as clear as might be supposed. Mystics exercise will in spiritual discipline, notably in the determination to endure “dark nights” in anticipation of eventual dawn. Renunciants demonstrate strong will in rejecting the things of this world. They would agree with Bailey’s comment that renunciation imitates, in a small way and in “many lesser renunciations,” the great renunciation Christ made at the crucifixion and which all must make at the fourth initiation.¹²³ The very process of meditation, Cynthia Bourgeault remarked, “is an experience of dying to self When we enter meditation, it is like a ‘mini-death,’ at least from the perspective of the ego.”¹²⁴ Contemplative prayer, however, is passive. Perhaps mystics over-emphasize passivity; the desert fathers might have seen fewer demons if they had protected themselves from below, while opening themselves to higher impressions.

For its part, occult meditation has a passive dimension. Bailey explained that it “puts a man into an attitude of equilibrium, neither utterly receptive and negative [that is, passive], nor utterly positive, but at the point of balance.”¹²⁵ She proceeded to explain that the receptive attitude affords “opportunity to the Ego, and later to the Master, to disturb [the attitude of] equilibrium.”¹²⁶ Christian mystics would not be averse to God or Christ creating similar disturbances.

Bailey declared that mystical meditation “marks the point of the highest emotional aspiration.” Christian mystics would agree that mysticism flows from the affective faculties rather than the intellect, but they would reject suggestions that it is confined to the emotions. Mystics clearly access the abstract mental levels, and their insight into complex truths and ability to integrate seemingly divergent truths suggest significant buddhic consciousness. The buddhic plane is the plane of intuition, synthesis and wisdom. Theosophist Annie Besant commented: “[T]he mystic gazes on the Beatific Vision, . . . the sage rests in the calm of the Wisdom

that is beyond knowledge, . . . the saint reaches the purity wherein God is seen.”¹²⁷

Mysticism and occultism form a complementary polarity. In their approach to the higher reaches of the human constitution, mystics move from the emotional (“astral”) plane to the abstract mental subplanes, to the buddhic plane. Occultists move from the concrete to the abstract mental subplanes, to the buddhic plane. At the buddhic level, where polarities are resolved, mysticism and occultism merge. Meanwhile, both are important, and to develop one at the expense of the other causes imbalance.

Mystics speak of “the heart” in much the same way as do esoteric teachers. Helena Roerich’s comment would win broad assent:

To behold with the eyes of the heart; to listen with the ears of the heart to the roar of the world; to peer into the future with the comprehension of the heart; to remember the cumulations of the past through the heart; thus must one impetuously advance on the path of ascent.¹²⁸

With a slight change of wording, Bernard of Clairvaux would also agree with her comment that “the Era of the Mother of the World is based on realization of the heart.”¹²⁹

Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Anthroposophical movement, listed purification as a requirement in his programs of meditation and study: “The heart must be purified. Love must lose all unchaste qualities and become divine.”¹³⁰ By “heart,” presumably he meant the emotions. Steiner continued: “The understanding must be clear and the will, where it is selfish, must be extinguished; but where it serves as the toll of the master, it must be kindled.”

Steiner offered programs geared to each of several esoteric traditions. One, which recalled the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, focused on events in the life of Christ, particularly his passion, crucifixion and resurrection. In the sixth of seven steps, called “Internment and Resurrection,” the seeker “feels as though he were laid within and belonged to the whole earth planet. His life has been extended into a planetary exist-

ence.”¹³¹ Steiner added: “When the pupil has surrendered himself to these experiences, they act so strongly on the astral body that, in the night, inner sense-organs are developed, are plastically formed.”¹³² Throughout the program the seeker is urged to meditate, in a kind of *lectio divina*, on the *Gospel of John*.

The meditative practices recommended by Bailey and Steiner, like Ignatius’, are almost entirely kataphatic, at least until their later stages. Training programs include recommended readings, prescribed seed thoughts, and scripted mental exercises to raise the consciousness. Breathing exercises may also be included, reminiscent of practices in pranayama.¹³³ The purpose of meditation, in Bailey’s words, “is to assist alignment [of the lower vehicles] and so permit of contact with the Higher Self.” She placed great emphasis on soul contact and on the “soul-infused personality.” Because the soul is more narrowly defined in esoteric teachings, the notions of its relationship to the personality are clearer. Most Christian mystics would accept the proposition that meditation draws the individual closer to those aspects of the human constitution that they identify with the soul, though they would insist that love of God, and the experience of God’s love, is the overriding objective.

As noted earlier, prominent mystics insisted—official doctrine to the contrary—that there is a divine spark within each of us. Esotericists refer to the divine spark, the fragment of divine essence, as the monad. Hodson explained:

[T]he Monad is an immensely powerful concentration of divine power. In terms of consciousness this will be experienced as stimulation, occult tonic, and the enfiring of the will. . . . To reach the Monad . . . one really penetrates in thought deeper and deeper into the innermost recesses, depths of one’s nature, into the very heart, which is the Monad itself.¹³⁴

Bailey’s teachings regard meditation, study

and service as interlocking foundations for building the *antahkarana*—the link, or bridge, in “mind-stuff” between the lower, concrete mind and the higher, abstract mind.¹³⁵ Constructing the bridge runs parallel with and interacts with discipleship work to the point where “antahkarana” and “path of discipleship” become metaphors for each other. Bailey commented that the disciple builds the antahkarana “[t]hrough the expansion of his consciousness . . . thereby demonstrating the truth of the statement that in order to tread the Path he must become that Path itself.”¹³⁶ Christian mystics would certainly find meaning in a parallel between advancing to higher states of consciousness and becoming more effective in service. Perhaps an analogy can also be drawn between penetrating “the cloud of unknowing” and building the all-important span of the antahkarana from the fourth to the third mental subplane.¹³⁷

Evelyn Underhill’s five stages on the mystical path were correlated earlier with events in the life of Christ. They also have a striking resemblance to the five planetary initiations described in esoteric teachings (Table 1). The first stage, “awakening” clearly can be correlated with the nativity and the first initiation: “the birth of the Christ in the cave of the heart.”¹³⁸ The second stage, “purgation” corresponds to Christ’s baptism and temptation and to the second initiation: mastery of the emotional nature.

The third stage, “illumination,” corresponds to the transfiguration and to the third initiation. By the third initiation, the antahkarana extends to the first mental subplane: that is, to the mental permanent atom, the anchor of the spiritual triad.¹³⁹ Routine access to the buddhic plane then becomes possible. Moreover, the soul-infused personality begins to develop conscious contact with the monad. Christian mystics who experience awakening of the intuitive faculties and definite encounters with “God” may well have attained the third initiation. The precise terminology offered by esoteric teachings would help mys-

Table 1. Correspondences with Evelyn Underhill’s Stages on the Mystical Path

Stage on Mystical Path	Event in Life of Jesus Christ	Planetary Initiation
1. Awakening	Nativity	First initiation: mastery of the physical nature
2. Purgation, self-discipline	Baptism/temptation in the wilderness	Second initiation: mastery of the emotional nature
3. Illumination, receipt of divine grace	Transfiguration	Third initiation: mastery of the mental nature
4. Dark night of the soul, renunciation of the will, apparent absence of God	Passion/crucifixion	Fourth initiation: arhatship, renunciation of the lower self, departure of the solar angel
5. Union with the Divine, theosis	Resurrection/ascension	Fifth initiation: adeptship, (relative) human perfection

tics understand the significance of their experiences and spiritual progress.

The “dark night of the soul,” in which the individual experiences abandonment by God corresponds to the fourth initiation—the “crucifixion” initiation. The fourth initiation is marked not only by great suffering but also by the wrenching departure of the solar angel.¹⁴⁰ The final, unitive stage resembles the fifth, “resurrection/ascension,” initiation, the stage of (relative) human perfection. The resemblance is especially close if the unitive stage is interpreted as theosis. These correspondences are meaningful and significant, but no claim is being made here that the “dark night” can be equated to the fourth initiation. Further work may establish that theosis is equivalent to the fifth initiation, but no statement should currently be made to that effect.

Mystics no doubt can attain adeptship, but once consciousness rises above the mental level the mystical and occult paths are no longer distinct. On the latter stages of planetary initiation, the activities individuals engage in probably have less to do with their orientation to mysticism or occultism and more to do with their monadic and soul rays

and with the work of the ashrams to which they belong.

Concluding Remarks

Mystics seek the divine presence in the Minner reaches of their being. Whereas mainstream Christianity teaches that the human constitution consists only of body and soul, some mystics have affirmed that the divine presence is localized in a divine spark, equivalent to what esotericists call the monad. Thus the human constitution is triune, more precisely expressing the notion that man is created in the image of God.

The mystic’s challenge, to cite the imagery of a medieval work, is to traverse the “cloud of unknowing” that shrouds the divine presence. The cloud is said to be impenetrable to the intellect but penetrable by the power of love. The famous mystics of history all spoke of their unquenchable love of God, a love transcending anything on a human level. Mysticism is a spirituality of the heart, contrasting with—but also complementing—occultism, which emphasizes will, and esoteric philosophy, which emphasizes the intellect.

Contemplative prayer has long been the private prayer of the cloister, but efforts contin-

ue to make it accessible to laypeople. Centering Prayer offers western seekers an effective meditative technique entirely in the Christian tradition. Christianized versions of Asian meditative traditions are also available. Whether or not participation in various practices constitutes “mysticism,” at the very least it provides relief from the intellectual focus of western Christianity and western culture. For people willing to make a serious commitment to regular meditation, the practices open up avenues to an expanded expression of Christianity in which mystical states may be attainable.

Contemplative prayer is selfless, quiet and intense. It may also be formless and wordless; some of the greatest mystics have promoted apophatic prayer, which transcends language and mental images. In apophatic prayer, the individual seeks God in the silence, listening for the “still small voice.” Even neophytes soon becomes aware that apophatic prayer is not just the absence of thought but the *presence* of something, something real and potent—love—that draws the practitioner to the center of his or her being. From a psychological perspective apophatic prayer qualifies as a distinct state of consciousness.

The mystical path offers experiences ranging from distractions, to “dark nights,” to ecstasy states, to union with God—even theosis. Yet mystics set aside expectations, and certainly ambition, and feel blessed wherever the path may take them. They also recognize that the blessings are not personal but are to be shared. Mystics affirm that love of God leads to increasing love for humanity and provides a strong basis for service. While laypeople may not progress as far along the path as cloistered monks and nuns can, they have opportunities to serve in immediate and practical ways. Modern contemplative practices appropriately emphasize service.

Humanity—and perhaps individuals—should develop both the mystical and the occult faculties, the heart as well as the mind and will. Occultists have much to gain from learning more about mysticism, and hopefully this article will stimulate interest. They could also

benefit from allowing the heart and silence to play larger roles in their own meditations. Mystics, for their part, might overcome distractions in prayer more easily by raising the consciousness by an act of will. And they would benefit from embracing the precision that esoteric philosophy brings to concepts like personality, soul, spirit and God. Conceptual precision would not diminish the sense of mystery that surrounds transcendent reality; rather it could provide a framework to help mystics understand and evaluate their experiences.

Improved knowledge and understanding would also help overcome negative stereotypes. Occultism has a bad name in Christian circles because of confusion with sorcery. Many esotericists characterize mysticism as “astral”—a pejorative term always readily at hand. With healthier attitudes on both sides we can work toward our individual and collective goal for the immediate future: to attain buddhic consciousness where mysticism and occultism are synthesized.

¹ 2 *Corinthians* 12:4 (All scriptural citations are from the King James Version.)
² Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923/1958), 2.
³ Trappist monk Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama found, in their contemplative experiences, an unexpected understanding of each other’s faith. Merton died in 1968, a few months after his third meeting with the Dalai Lama.
⁴ Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2001), 12.
⁵ Theresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, trans. E. A. Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1946/2007), 14.
⁶ *1 Kings* 19:12.
⁷ “Secular clergy” includes all clergy who have not taken monastic or similar vows.
⁸ King, *Christian Mystics*, 31.
⁹ Frances M. Young, *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 58.
¹⁰ The abbey complex included facilities for both men and women.
¹¹ Source: Order of St Benedict, <http://www.osb.org/lectio/rbonld.html> (accessed June 6, 2011).

- ¹² As will be noted later, *meditatio* had a meaning quite different from what today we call “meditation.”
- ¹³ Christopher Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 40.
- ¹⁴ Roughly 80 percent of known stigmatics have been women. Stigmata is unknown in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, possibly because less devotion is focused on Christ’s passion and death.
- ¹⁵ See for example Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 1998).
- ¹⁶ William Rath, *The Friend of God* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Hawthorn Press, 1991), 32.
- ¹⁷ *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is an obvious reference to the Carmelite Order.
- ¹⁸ In 1902 the Trappists took the name The Order of Cistercians of Strict Observance.
- ¹⁹ The Quakers rejected organized religion, refused to swear oaths, and refused to serve in the armed forces. But they embraced social causes like the abolition of slavery.
- ²⁰ *Ascetic Discourses*, 31: 877. The work, traditionally attributed to Basil of Caesarea, is now believed to have been written by later followers
- ²¹ Kyriacos C. Markides, *The Mountain of Silence* (New York: Image Books, 2002).
- ²² King, *Christian Mystics*, 198-199.
- ²³ For a detailed discussion of theosis see John F. Nash, “Theosis: a Christian Perspective on Human Destiny,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Spring 2011) 15-35.
- ²⁴ Gregory Palamas, *The Declaration of the Holy Mountain in Defense of Those who Devoutly Practice A Life of Stillness*, *Philokalia*, trans. G. Palmer et al, vol. 4 (Thatcham, UK: Eling Trust, 1977), 419.
- ²⁵ The prayer is sometimes expanded to: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
- ²⁶ Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, §116, *Philokalia*, vol.4, 182.
- ²⁷ Ilias the Presbyter, *A Gnostic Anthology*, I, §104, *Philokalia*, vol. 3, 46.
- ²⁸ *1 Thessalonians* 5:17.
- ²⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Prayer*, quoted in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, trans. R. M. French (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 174-175
- ³⁰ That declaration, initiated by the Emperor Justinian and vague in its application, does not appear in the Council’s official proceedings. Yet denial of the soul’s pre-existence passed into mainstream Christian teachings.
- ³¹ Fourth Council of Constantinople, canon 11 and preamble. Online: http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0869-0869_Concilium_Constantinopolitenum_IV_Documenta-Omnia_EN.pdf (accessed June 7, 2001).
- ³² Thomas Aquinas, *Shorter Summa*, trans. C. Vollert (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1993), §90, 89-90.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, §84, 79.
- ³⁴ King, *Christian Mystics*, 109.
- ³⁵ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 6, “The Greatness of the Human Person,” reproduced in Matthew Fox, *Passion for Creation* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1990), 103.
- ³⁶ Theresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 152.
- ³⁷ William Law, *The Spirit of Prayer*, part I (London: Ogles, et al., 1816), 51.
- ³⁸ Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1981).
- ³⁹ It could possibly be argued that *glossolalia* (“speaking in tongues”) transcends discursive thought.
- ⁴⁰ Frederick G. McLeod, “Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?” *Spirituality Today* (Spring 1986, vol. 38), 41-52.
- ⁴¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, §1:3, in *The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 136.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, §2:1, 138.
- ⁴³ Maximus the Confessor, *Four Hundred Texts on Love*, II, §61, *Philokalia*, vol. 2, 76.
- ⁴⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. C. Wolters (London: Penguin, 1961), §9, 66. The work’s title seems to have been suggested by a passage in the Pseudo-Dionysius’ *The Mystical Theology*. 1:3.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, §36, 95. Another recommended mantra was “sin.”
- ⁴⁶ Reproduced in Colin Burrow (ed.), *Metaphysical Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2006), 220. Another relevant poem is “They Are All Gone into the World of Light,” *ibid.*, 226-227.
- ⁴⁷ Benedictine monk Luke Dysinger provides a detailed discussion of these poems at: http://www.ldysinger.com/@themes/apoph-kat-01_apo-kata.htm (accessed June 12, 2011).
- ⁴⁸ McLeod, “Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?,” 41-52.
- ⁴⁹ *The Pilgrim Continues his Way*, trans. R. M. French (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 175.

- ⁵⁰ King, *Christian Mystics*, 46-49.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19-20, 54-56.
- ⁵² John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. A. Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 19.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ⁵⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystic Way* (Atlanta, GA: Ariel Press, 1913/1992), 52ff.
- ⁵⁵ King, *Christian Mystics*, 130.
- ⁵⁶ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 90-96.
- ⁵⁷ Theresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 15.
- ⁵⁸ *Ezekiel* 10:1 referred to “a sapphire stone, as the appearance of the likeness of a throne.”
- ⁵⁹ King, *Christian Mystics*, 74, 76-78.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ⁶¹ See for example Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (New York: Lucis, 1925), 538ff.
- ⁶² Thomas à Kempis (attributed to), *The Imitation of Christ*, book 4, §7. Online at <http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/imitation/imitation.html> (accessed June 21, 2011).
- ⁶³ Theresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. E. A. Peers (New York: Doubleday, 1964/2004), 22.
- ⁶⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, §28, 88.
- ⁶⁵ Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary*, 42.
- ⁶⁶ Not all ecstatics are mystics. Ecstatic experiences are common at Pentecostal churches.
- ⁶⁷ *Psalms* 47:2.
- ⁶⁸ Theresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 108.
- ⁶⁹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. C. Hart & J. Bishop (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1990), 59.
- ⁷⁰ See for example Marie-Louise von Franz (ed.), *Aurora Consurgens* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 2000), 425. The *Aurora Consurgens* bears signs of Thomas’ authorship, though the work is anonymous.
- ⁷¹ Clemens Brentano, Introduction to Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, trans. anon. (Charlotte, NC: Tan Book, 1983), 19.
- ⁷² Some of the material has been published. In addition to *The Dolorous Passion*, an interesting book is *The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Book, 1970).
- ⁷³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 237.
- ⁷⁴ P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, trans: G. Vann (London: Collins, 1965), 45. De Chardin attributed the experience to “a friend,” but it is generally assumed to have been his own.
- ⁷⁵ For discussion of the effects of LSD see Walter N. Pahnke & William A. Richards, “Implications of LSD and Experimental Mysticism,” *Altered States of Consciousness* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1969), 409-439.
- ⁷⁶ King, *Christian Mystics*, 93. Emphasis added.
- ⁷⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, §4, 55.
- ⁷⁸ *The Book of Privy Counsel*, §2.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, §1.
- ⁸⁰ Not surprisingly, suggestions that an individual soul could become the “bride of Christ” raised the Inquisition’s hackles; that accolade was normally reserved for the church.
- ⁸¹ Theresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 147
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 152.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 92-95.
- ⁸⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 52, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs*, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 50.
- ⁸⁵ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, trans. E. A. Peers, 3/e (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2008), 10.
- ⁸⁶ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 80.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁸⁸ *1 Corinthians* 13:12; *1 Timothy* 6:16.
- ⁸⁹ *Isaiah* 64:4. See also *1 Corinthians* 2:9.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87. Catherine of Genoa is not to be confused with her more-famous namesake from Sienna.
- ⁹¹ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 82.
- ⁹² Physicians examined Padre Pio’s stigmata, verifying the symptoms but finding no physical cause. Yet the wounds completely healed on his deathbed, leaving no scars.
- ⁹³ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: an Autobiography of Faith*, San Diego (CA: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 462. Merton’s master’s thesis was concerned with the art of William Blake.
- ⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Shannon: Irish Univ. Press, 1969), 123.
- ⁹⁵ Daniel Andreev, *Rose of the World* (Moscow: Andreev Charity Foundation), 1997.
- ⁹⁶ *The Way of a Pilgrim* and *The Pilgrim Continues his Way*, trans. R. M. French (Harper-Collins, San Francisco, 1991). Some commentators claim that the sequel was written by a different author.
- ⁹⁷ King, *Christian Mystics*, 196.
- ⁹⁸ Solovyov provided the model for Alyosha.

- ⁹⁹ Stephen Muse (ed.), *Raising Lazarus* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004), 8-9, 38, 68-83, 102-104.
- ¹⁰⁰ Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York, Continuum, 2010), 90.
- ¹⁰¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Lanham MD: Cowley Publications, 2004), 32-33.
- ¹⁰² John Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 21. The word *Maranatha* appears in *1 Corinthians* 16:22 and *Revelation* 22:20.
- ¹⁰³ Main, *Moment of Christ*, 21-22.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁰⁵ William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1997), 46.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 17, 23.
- ¹⁰⁷ The present author participates in a Centering Prayer group at an Episcopal church. Contemplative practices are still controversial, and a few vocal critics can be found in every major denomination.
- ¹⁰⁸ *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 4.
- ¹⁰⁹ Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 25.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ¹¹¹ Carthusian Rule, Statute 34.2.
- ¹¹² *The Cloud of Unknowing*, §3, 53.
- ¹¹³ *The Pilgrim Continues his Way*, 199.
- ¹¹⁴ Quoted in Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 156.
- ¹¹⁵ Geoffrey Hodson. *Call to the Heights* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1976), 77. The *Bhagavad Gita* identifies several yogas, including *karma yoga*, the yoga of work; *jnana yoga*, the yoga of knowledge; *bhakti yoga*, the yoga of devotion; and *raja yoga*, the integrative, “kingly” yoga.
- ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹¹⁸ Sandra Hodson (ed.), *Illuminations of the Mystery Tradition* (Manila, Philippines: Theosophical Publishers, 1992), 218.
- ¹¹⁹ Sandra Hodson (ed.), *Light of the Sanctuary* (Manila, Philippines: Theosophical Publishers, 1988), 162, 174.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.
- ¹²¹ Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. 1, 11.
- ¹²² Bailey, *Letters on Occult Meditation*, 12.
- ¹²³ Alice A. Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. 1 (New York: Lucis, 1944), 312.
- ¹²⁴ Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 81. Bourgeault is referring here to the lower ego, the focus of identity in the personality.
- ¹²⁵ Alice A. Bailey, *Letters on Occult Meditation* (New York: Lucis, 1920), 10.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁷ Annie W. Besant, *Esoteric Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1901/1953), pp. 201-202.
- ¹²⁸ Helena I. Roerich, *Heart* (New York: Agni Yoga Society), §1, 7. Roerich served as amanuensis to the Master Morya.
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, §106, 72.
- ¹³⁰ Rudolf Steiner, lecture, 1905. Reproduced in *Start Now* (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2004), 59.
- ¹³¹ Rudolf Steiner, lecture, May 1908. Reproduced in *The Gospel of St. John* (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 1940), 172.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, 172. When Steiner spoke of the “astral body” it is not always clear whether he was referring to the emotional/sentient body, considered in trans-Himalayan teachings, or to the more inclusive astral body of the western mystery tradition; the latter extends up to mental levels.
- ¹³³ Percussive breathing, which can prematurely stimulate the kundalini, is carefully avoided.
- ¹³⁴ Sandra Hodson, *Illuminations of the Mystery Tradition*, 192.
- ¹³⁵ See for example Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology*, vol. 2 (New York: Lucis, 1942), 69-74.
- ¹³⁶ Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 399. “Antaskarana,” the spelling used in Bailey’s books, is replaced here by the more-familiar “antahkarana.”
- ¹³⁷ See for example John F. Nash, *The Soul and Its Destiny* (Bloomington, IL: Authorhouse, 2004), 201-204. Higher mind extends over the first three mental subplanes, lower mind over the latter four. Note that the subplanes conventionally are numbered from above.
- ¹³⁸ Alice A. Bailey, *The Light of the Soul* (New York: Lucis, 1927), 308.
- ¹³⁹ The triad, consisting of higher mind, *buddhi* and *atma*, is the vehicle of the monad, while the personality, consisting of body (dense physical and etheric), emotions, and lower mind, is the vehicle of the soul.
- ¹⁴⁰ See for example Nash, *The Soul and Its Destiny*, 254-257.