

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

The background of the cover is a medieval painting. It depicts a woman with her eyes closed, wearing a green cloak over a white and purple dress, reading an open book. A large peacock feather is positioned behind her. In the upper left corner, a small figure of a person in a blue robe stands near a tree. The painting has a cracked, aged texture.

Issue 127

## Medieval lay mystics

Dear friends, let us love  
one another, for love comes  
from God. 1 John 4:7a (NIV)





**GREATEST HITS** Flagellants thought the end times were at hand and called Christians to repentance.

### THE REST OF THE STORY

We often think of the Middle Ages as a dry, dead millenium—sandwiched between the enthusiastic piety of the early church and Reformation renewal, and characterized by illiterate priests and poverty-stricken people with little access to the Scriptures. But in the twelfth century, renewal winds began to blow. Read on to find out how.

### WHOSE CHURCH IS IT?

- By the 1200s virtually all Christians lived in a geographically defined parish—an area of land where the priest was responsible for the spiritual welfare of everyone there.
- Wealthy laymen, monasteries, or bishops owned many medieval churches. They appointed the priest, had him ordained, and paid him. Laypeople often brought *their* offerings to church in material form: bread at Communion; wax, candles, and eggs at Easter; fowls at Christmas.

### FEMALE FIRSTS

Even though medieval thought viewed women as naturally passive, as literacy spread female creativity flowered:

- Hrotsvita of Gandersheim (935–1002) wrote Europe's first dramas in centuries. Also Germany's first female poet and historian, she adapted pagan Roman tales into Christian stories with moral heroines.
- The first known morality play, a popular form of drama, came from twelfth-century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen and starred a soul and the devil.
- Julian of Norwich wrote *Showings*, the first book in English by a woman, around 1395.
- Margery Kempe (c. 1373–c. 1438) dictated the first autobiography in English to her son. In the back of the only known manuscript is a recipe that involves sugar, aniseed, fennel seed, nutmeg, cinnamon and ginger, possibly a cure for her “flux” (dysentery).

### HOT OFF THE PRESSES

- Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* was hand-copied so often that over 700 manuscripts exist today. One of the earliest printed books (1471), over 100 different printed editions existed by 1500.
- The first Bibles translated from Latin came from the Reformation, right? Wrong! In the thirteenth century, the church allowed limited translations for personal use—although it often rebuffed the resulting calls for reform.

**HOW MUCH?** In this illustration from a 12th-c. canon law code, merchants exchange money.

# Did you know?

WHAT DID IT FEEL LIKE TO LIVE AT THE TIME OF THE MOST FAMOUS MEDIEVAL MYSTICS?







**HOUSE OF PRAYER** Above: Some laywomen became Beguines to serve Jesus, living in rooms like this one in Brussels. You'll read more about them in this issue.

**SEAT OF WISDOM** Left: Mystic Henry Suso and his biographer Elsbeth Stägel worship Christ in this illustration from Suso's *Clock of Wisdom*.

## THE NIÑA, THE PRINTER, AND THE FRIARS

Did you know Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) was a Franciscan? As a “tertiary” he followed part of their rule of life while living “in the world.” Printer Johannes Gutenberg (d. 1468) may have been one as well.

## LISTEN UP, POPE

Bernard of Clairvaux combined his monastic life with political involvement, choosing Innocent II as

rightful pope over rival Anacletus II and mentoring future pope Eugene III. He also preached on behalf of the Second Crusade.

Later two mystics helped end the papacy’s 70-year exile in France. In the 1350s Bridget of Sweden strongly urged Clement VI to leave Avignon for Rome, and in 1376 Catherine of Siena wrote to Gregory XI:

Why not give your life a thousand times, if necessary, for God’s honor and the salvation of his creatures? That is what he did, and you, his vicar, ought to be carrying on his work. It is to be expected that as long as you are his vicar you will follow your Lord’s ways and example. ☞

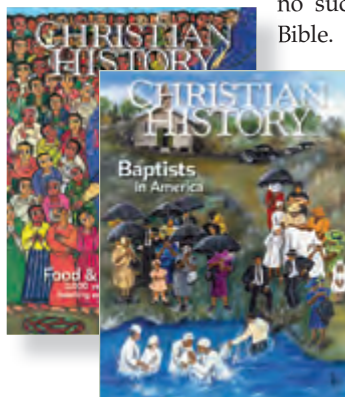
**SO MANY GRAVES** Friends and relatives sadly bury plague victims in 14th-c. Tournai, Belgium.



# Letters to the editor

Readers respond to *Christian History*

## FROM MEDIEVAL FAITH TO PRISON FAITH



Before the fourteenth century there was essentially no such thing as having a personal Bible. How did people know God's word? How did they become believers? What was the level of spirituality in the millennium between Constantine and Luther? What influence did wars and plagues have on personal faith in Christ? Was there sufficient literacy to support any sort of Christian literature...hand-scribed though it had to be? I'd love to read

*Christian History's* take on this. Of course I know that your topics are already selected for the next however long, but I'm only 74 and can wait...for a while. — Arne Tieglend

*We told Arne that his timing was actually perfect, as this issue addresses many of these topics. To learn more about medieval approaches to faith, you can also read issues #30 (Women in the Medieval Church) and #49 (Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages) and our guide The History of Worship from Constantine to the Reformation. As for Arne, he responded with another note:*

I am just now finishing issue #123 [*Captive Faith*]. I help out at a weekly Bible study at our county jail and will order a copy for its library as well as one for our leader and one for my attorney son. I can't imagine how you keep going on a donation basis. So I end with a prayer for your continued financial health. You are laborers most worthy of your hire.—Arne Tieglend

*For more on faith in prison, check out <http://www.captive-faith.org/> and issue #123.*

## INCLUDING ALL THE BAPTISTS

Although your current issue on Baptists is very fine, providing valuable historical developments, it is sadly lacking on the current status of Baptists that were the divisions of the theological wars of the period from the 1920s to the 1940s. My book *The Twelve Baptist Tribes in the USA* (2007) describes 53 distinct Baptist bodies in the USA and places them in 12 groups....

Today the American Baptist Convention is the dominant Baptist body only in New England and the Middle

Atlantic when at one time it dominated from Maine to California outside the South. Why don't you include the current status of Primitive Baptists, Landmark Baptists, Free Will Baptists, etc.?—Albert Wardin, Nashville, TN

*As with all of our issues on specific denominations and movements, we wrestle with how to condense centuries of history into 48 pages. We commend Dr. Wardin's book, published by the Baptist History and Heritage Society, and his other works, all of which explore the whole range of Baptist witness in the US.*

## STILL REFORMING, STILL LEARNING

I just wanted to let you know how helpful the video series *This Changed Everything* was in teaching a class on the Reformation. A group of about 20 people attended the 6-week course, and I used the video series as the main way to introduce the topics that were important concerning the Reformation.

In addition, I gave extra copies of the Reformation timeline out to the class participants; everyone agreed they were very helpful and professionally done. I just wanted to say a big thank-you for all your hard work on both the video series and the magazines. May God continue to bless your efforts.

—Joe Cantello, Marietta, GA

I recently taught an 8-week adult Sunday School class on the Reformation using issues #115, #118, #120, and the DVD *This Changed Everything*. Within the next year I hope to teach Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, as well as a course on the history of evangelicalism. Looking forward to using more of your magazines.

Any future DVD's coming out like *This Changed Everything*? It was outstanding....I've been a fan of your magazine from the beginning. Thank you for all that you do.—Larry Kendrick, Chester, CA

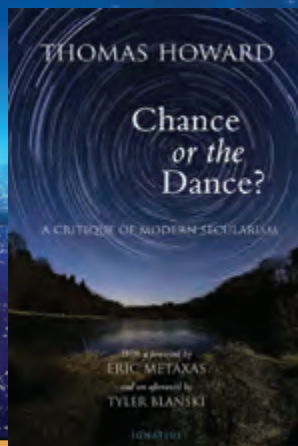
*We are working on a follow-up DVD tentatively titled Christian Unity: A New Way Forward. It will explore this controversial subject from a historical and biblical basis through interviews with experts and stories of how Christians around the world are promoting unity through love in action.*

## THE RIGHT CONVENTION

Sandy Williams, pastor emeritus of the First Baptist Church of Freeport, Maine, reminded us that Helen Barrett Montgomery, featured in issue 126, was the first woman president of the Northern Baptist Convention, not the National Baptist Convention (p. 36). Thanks, Sandy!



# THE COMPLETE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF HUMAN EXISTENCE



## ◆ TWO WINGS Integrating Faith & Reason Brian Clayton & Douglas Kries

Based on the efforts of two college professors to explain to their new students how believing and reasoning are integrated to form a complete Christian view of our existence, this work shows how the human spirit rises on the two wings of faith and reason to stretch toward truth. It addresses arguments supporting and opposing its own viewpoint, and abounds in analogies designed to speak to non-specialists. Today all Christians need to be familiar with such clear philosophical and theological arguments.

TWWP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$18.95

"A powerful, wide-ranging response to the view that faith and reason are mere opposites—and not both vital powers of a well-formed heart, mind, and soul."

— **Robert Royal**, President, Faith & Reason Institute; Author, *A Deeper Vision*

"This thoughtful introduction to the integration of Christian faith with human reason is illuminating without being dogmatic, exploratory without being indecisive, simple without being simplistic."

— **Michael Augros, Ph.D.**,  
Author, *Who Designed the Designer?*

## ◆ CHANCE OR THE DANCE? A Critique of Modern Secularism Thomas Howard

This new edition of a modern classic contrasts the Christian and secular worldviews, refreshing our minds with the illuminated view of Christianity as it imbued the world in times past—showing that we cannot live meaningful lives without this Christian understanding of things. Howard explains in clear and beautiful prose the way materialism robs us of beauty, depth, and truth. With laser precision and lyrical ponderings he takes us through the dismal reductionist view of the world to the shimmering significance of the world as sign and sacrament. This is an inspiring apology for Christianity and a stirring critique of secularism.

COD2P . . . Sewn Softcover, \$15.95

"Simply among the very best books of the latter half of the 20th century."

— **Eric Metaxas**, NY Times Best-Selling Author, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*

"If I could have everyone read just ten books, this would be one of them!"

— **Peter Kreeft, Ph.D.**, Boston College;  
Author, *I Burned for Your Peace*

## ◆ AFTER THE NATURAL LAW John Lawrence Hill

This work traces the natural law tradition from Plato and Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. It describes how modern philosophers such as Descartes and Locke began to chip away at this foundation. This tradition holds that the world is ordered, intelligible and good, that there are objective moral truths which we can know and that human beings can achieve true happiness only by following our inborn nature, which draws us toward our own perfection. This work argues that natural law is a necessary foundation for our most important moral and political values—freedom, human rights, equality, responsibility and human dignity, among others. Without a theory of natural law, these values lose their coherence—we literally cannot make sense of them given the assumptions of modern philosophy.

ANLP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$22.95

"A stimulating and erudite book."

— **J. Budziszewski, Ph.D.**,  
Author, *What We Can't Not Know*



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# Editor's note

IN THE SPRING OF 1991, I went to my college's wall of mailboxes, twisted the little knob on the combination lock, and pulled out my first-ever issue of *Christian History*. I marveled at the beautiful cover of #30, *Women in the Medieval Church*. Little did I know that 27 years later, I would be writing to you as the magazine's editor about an issue with a very similar theme.

That issue, along with issue #49, *Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*, attempted to answer the question: what did it look like to be a medieval Christian? Kevin Miller's words from issue #30's editorial still ring true:

People danced around the Maypole, and built soaring cathedrals. They walked thousands of miles to view holy relics, and lit bonfires to ward off dragons. They illuminated some of the most beautiful books ever made, and fought plagues by carrying bouquets of flowers. They bathed in barrels, and saw visions of angels. And—impossible for us to understand—a massive Christendom ruled over all: kings and queens, abbots and abbesses, and countless peasant women and men.

Because the cultural differences are so great, it's easy for us to question the faith of these believers. . . . We like things rational and orderly, so their emphasis on mystical visions perplexes us. We emphasize the individual, so their stress on communal life makes us blink. We live in an age of The Playboy Channel [*we could now add the Internet*], so their radical commitment to virginity strikes us as quaint.

## NEW OPTIONS FOR A NEW ERA

In this issue we've taken yet another path to understand these Christians, focusing on many of the most famous medieval mystics of the later Middle Ages, especially

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Don't miss our next issue on George Müller and the Brethren. This evangelist and orphanage director left us a profound example of living by prayer and faith.



those who were not ordained. Scholars agree that around the twelfth century, a variety of forces led to a renewal of lay faith. Three centuries before the Reformation, the Bible began to be translated into vernacular languages (the everyday languages of a territory). Preaching in the vernacular became more common, and itinerant preachers traveled across Europe to reach new audiences with their sermons, calling people to a life of repentance.

Whereas many prior generations of serious seekers had joined religious orders to pursue a deeper spiritual life, now different movements sprang up giving laypeople new options.

Many people went on pilgrimages. Some women joined beguinages (see "A Spiritual Awakening for the Laity," pp. 6–12). Some men became Franciscans or Dominicans, new kinds of religious orders that traveled around helping the poor and preaching rather than remaining behind monastery walls. Men and women alike became members of "third orders," groups following part of the rule of a religious order while still living in the world.

And people from all these groups penned timeless devotional classics, many still popular, writing of their desire to reach a mystical oneness with the Christ they loved so much.

Here, I think, is the point where we can connect their lives with ours. We don't bathe in barrels, and most of us don't see visions. But we want to learn how to be more devoted to Jesus. Whatever the faults and misunderstandings of these medieval mystics, they did too. I responded to their call to be sold out to Jesus when I read issue #30 all those years ago, and I hope they will have a similar impact on you. ☛



Jennifer Woodruff Tait  
Managing editor

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# A spiritual awakening for the laity

FOR 300 YEARS, RENEWAL SWEEPED EUROPE

Glenn E. Myers

FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS in the Middle Ages, common people labored long hours to earn little, unable to read or write. Local priests were often illiterate as well, and sermons were few. Copies of the Scriptures were virtually unavailable, except in church. While monks and nuns had access to education and the Bible, the vast majority of the laity had neither.

All of this began to change, however, in the twelfth century—a change that can only be explained as a fresh move of God’s Spirit. Devout monks and hermits came out of seclusion and began to preach in towns and villages across Europe. Proclaiming the gospel in vernacular languages so that common people could understand it, they called laypeople and clergy to repent and enter a genuine relationship with the Lord—ultimately leading toward intimate oneness with Christ. This spiritual progress culminating in inner, mystical union became known as *mysticism*.

**WOMEN OF THE CHURCH** This 15th-c. altarpiece shows female virgins and martyrs worshipping Christ the Lamb in heaven.

First by the thousands, then by the tens of thousands, laypeople responded to the gospel. Thirsty for a vital Christian life, they joined various movements within the church that offered them the opportunity to grow spiritually. This led to 300 years of remarkable waves of spiritual renewal across Western Europe, spanning from roughly 1200 to 1500.

## RADICAL BRIDES OF CHRIST

One of the key centers of this spiritual vitality was northwestern Europe, encompassing present-day Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and northern Switzerland. These lands witnessed three centuries of unprecedented spiritual flourishing. In fact the Rhine River, which flows through the heart of this part of the



continent, experienced such revival that it became known as the “spiritual artery of the German people.”

Although many groups were part of this renewal, three key lay movements particularly flooded these territories along the Rhine: Beguines in the thirteenth century, Friends of God in the fourteenth, and Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life in the fifteenth.

First, the Beguines. Responding to itinerant preachers just before the year 1200, women by the thousands gave their lives to Christ and flocked into various convents. Soon, however, overflowing convents could hold no more newcomers. At that point many laywomen from towns in the Lowlands and Germany started something new; they joined together to form their own communities for spiritual growth. Pooling their resources they purchased large houses as well as copies of the Scriptures.

Known as Beguines, these women formed small households of widows and single women. During the early years, married women also joined the community for study, Scripture reading, and prayer during the day, returning to their families in the evening.

Some scholars believe the name “Beguine” derived from a word for “beige,” as the women wore plain-colored, simple clothes. Others think it may have come from “to babble,” since the women were known to do open-air preaching. Whatever its origin, it was originally a pejorative. Townspeople did not know what to make of these laywomen who lived together in Christian community but took no formal vows to become nuns.

A few of the early Beguines had independent financial means, but most women who joined the movement worked with their hands to support themselves. Some served as nannies for the wealthier citizens of the town; others started schools for girls. The majority worked in the booming Lowlands textile industry. Because many processes related to cloth required ample water, the majority of the beguinages (as their houses were called) were built on the edge of the city walls along streams or rivers.

As well as supporting themselves, the Beguines sought to earn enough money so they could give to the poor and infirm in the cities. Some gave of their



**COMMITTED TO COMMUNITY** Above: This beguinage in Leuven, Belgium, and this statue of a Beguine (*left*) in Amsterdam, Holland, demonstrate the spread of the movement.

meager incomes; others gave of their time, serving as nurses in leper houses or city infirmaries. Indeed some of the first beguinages formed around newly founded infirmaries. Christian women serving as nurses would simply organize themselves as a Beguine community.

### SPINNING AND STUDYING

Because some of these women had basic education in their local languages, they were able to read and study the Bible, which was then (several centuries before Luther) being translated into Middle German, Dutch, and French. The church allowed these translations of the Bible

for laypeople to use for their own devotional reading, as well as for evangelistic preaching and exhorting others to follow a godly lifestyle.

After meeting corporately in the morning for prayer, Beguines returned to their rooms where they spun and sewed in solitude while meditating on Scripture throughout the day. Not only did Beguines read the Bible and spiritual works that had been translated into the vernacular, they also wrote their own devotional books. In fact many of the earliest vernacular Dutch and German works came from the Beguines. Of these authors two remarkable women stand out





(see p. 10): Hadewijch from Brabant (d. 1248) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207–c. 1282).

The Beguines received verbal support from the papacy in 1215 and formal approval from Pope Gregory IX in 1233. Over the next few years, Countess Johanna of Flanders and Hainaut and her sister Margaret donated substantial funds to establish nearly a dozen very large Beguine complexes.

These *Begijnhoven*, as they were called in Flemish, became walled-off sections of town for the safety of the women living there. Some complexes had narrow winding cobblestone streets, just like the town. Others were built around a large open courtyard that could be several acres in size. It served as a common garden, supplying the women with grains, vegetables, and herbs.

During the next half-century, over 60 Beguine complexes with more than 100 women each sprang up across Belgium. Some housed more than 500. In Germany, the Lowlands, and northern France, women who committed their lives to God in this fashion numbered in the tens of thousands.

Beguines always remained laywomen. As long as they lived in the beguinage, they committed themselves to chastity and obeyed the community's leadership. However they never took permanent vows and were always free to leave if they chose to marry. Likewise women owned their own property in the beguinage. Often sisters and cousins and aunts would pool their resources to purchase one of the townhomes in the community. Those who chose to



**ETERNAL TRUTHS** Johannes Tauler's sermons (shown above in an edition from 1500) and Henry Suso's *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* (left) served as serious spiritual reading for laypeople wanting to go deeper.

leave the beguinage forfeited their property, which reverted to the community as a whole.

Thus Beguines bridged the gap between the "active" life of laywomen and what was referred to as the "religious" life of nuns. As they supported themselves and served the sick and needy in their towns, the Beguines intentionally lived in community with like-minded believers; praying together, studying Scripture, and reading devotional works in their common language. Radically in love with Jesus, these women saw themselves as brides of Christ and gave their lives to the pursuit of the Lord and service to him.

### GOD'S FRIENDS

The fourteenth century saw a further spread of mysticism through people from many walks of life. Laymen and laywomen in towns and villages across Europe sought to come into the closest possible union with God. A number of factors contributed to this fresh wave of renewal. Laypeople were more and more able to obtain a basic education and to read Scripture and devotional works on their own. With the increase of trade,



**WEB OF PRAYER** Spinning and weaving, as these women are doing, was one occupation of Beguines.

townspeople prospered enough to afford Bibles or portions thereof; meanwhile the Bible was being translated into many new Western European languages, making it more accessible than ever before.

Townspeople also had more leisure from manual work to read and cultivate a life of prayer. At the same time, significant crises marked the era: the devastating spread of the bubonic plague, peasant uprisings, and political unrest may have spurred people of all classes to seek God in an unprecedented way.

In the German-speaking territories, a loose association of devout Christians, known as the *Gottesfreunde* (Friends of God), began to form. Taking their name from several passages in Scripture referring to believers as God's friends, the movement consisted of pockets of laypeople, Beguines, nuns, priests, and traveling Dominican preachers (from the order founded by Dominic of Caleruega in 1216).

Laypeople and those belonging to religious orders alike wanted to move deeper in their relationship with God and experience mystical union with him, as much as possible in this life. A network emerged; people kept in contact via mail, by visits, and through key traveling preachers. Amazingly the laity were part of this spiritual conversation, held to be on a par with men and women who had taken religious vows.

Two centers of the Friends of God were Basel in Switzerland and the free city of Strasbourg (now in France), both along the Rhine River. One of the lead figures in Basel was priest Henry of Nördlingen (d. 14th c.), who traveled and preached around Basel and across southern Germany.

In his preaching, spiritual direction, and friendships, Henry sought to draw others closer to Christ and to experience deeper oneness with the Lord. He carried letters from enclave to enclave among the Friends of God. At one point he secured a copy of Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead* (written c. 1250–1280) and helped to translate it into a southern German dialect as a resource for the Friends of God.

#### FOUR STEPS TO HOLINESS

Into this milieu of spiritual renewal came the great preacher Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361). As a Dominican friar, he heard confessions, provided spiritual direction, preached, and offered the Eucharist to Dominican nuns around his native Strasbourg. He did the same for households of Beguines and lay audiences, especially in Cologne. From 1338 to 1343, Tauler and his fellow Dominican preachers were exiled from Strasbourg and went to Basel. Already famous, Tauler became even better known as he



connected with Henry of Nördlingen and the Friends of God in the area.

Tauler affirmed that all Christians are called to grow spiritually and that laypeople who take marriage vows can progress as far as those who take religious vows. Additionally he called all to read Scripture and meditate on it. Tauler continually exhorted his hearers to live out what they believed. "There is a great difference between those who live the Scriptures," he preached, "and those who only read them."

Throughout his sermons Tauler called people to become more holy. His guidance for spiritual formation could be summarized in four overarching movements; no matter what stage an individual might be in, he invited him or her to move to the next step.

First, if we are to draw close to God, we must become detached from temporal things. We are inclined to cling to three kinds of created things: material possessions, other people, and self-will. As long as our hearts are full of these, there is no room for the Lord. Quoting Saint Augustine, Tauler exhorted: "Empty yourself, so that you can be filled!"

The problem is that, by our own power, we cannot let go of these things. So, Tauler argued, God frees us from our clinging by bringing hardship into our lives; trials develop character, as Paul asserts in Romans 5. Tauler criticized monks and nuns who tried to beat their bodies into submission through severe fasting,





## Everyone a bride of Christ

**T**he Song of Songs, or “Canticle” as it was called, was the most written-about book of the Bible in the Middle Ages. It served as the “John 3:16” of the day. Many medieval preachers and writers used the Song of Songs to welcome people into a personal relationship with Christ. Following a tradition in use since the beginning of the church, they portrayed the bridegroom as Christ and the bride as the church. By extension, each Christian was a “bride of Christ.”

Known as “bridal mysticism,” this form of devotion invited men and women into spiritual oneness with Christ. Two Beguine writers—one from Belgium and the other from Germany—highlighted this bridal mysticism in their writing. Their prose and poetry are filled with echoes of the bride’s desire for her lover and the lover’s delight in his bride.

### ENGULFED IN THE ABYSS

Hadewijch, one of the first authors to write in Dutch, lived in the first half of the thirteenth century in Brabant, probably around Antwerp. Chivalry was in bloom, and like the *minnesingers* of her day who performed courtly love poetry, Hadewijch stressed love—*minne* in Middle Dutch—and called her readers into a deep relationship with the Lord: “O beloved, why has not Love sufficiently overwhelmed you and engulfed you in her abyss?” wrote Hadewijch.

Alas! When Love is so sweet, why do you not fall deep into her? And why do you not touch God

“O LET ME KISS YOU” This illustration graces a 12th-c. manuscript of the Song of Songs.

deeply enough in the abyss of his Nature, which is so unfathomable? Sweet love, give yourself for Love’s sake fully to God in love.

Traveling troubadours sang of knights in shining armor who were willing to suffer anything for the love of their noble ladies. Hadewijch employed this imagery but reversed the roles for the women she led, charging them to become strong knights enduring hardship for their love of God, who is “noble love”:

He whom Love by all this proves to be noble  
Becomes, thanks to the pains of love, so bold  
That he proclaims: “Love, I am all yours!  
I have nothing but you to revive me.  
O noble Love, be all mine!”

Hadewijch knew sweet feelings would not last forever. The fading of these emotions, however, can bring Christians into a mature love for and understanding of God. So Hadewijch urged her sisters to remain steadfast in the Lord during dry times and to be “content to be deprived of sweet repose for the sake of this great totality of God!”

Around the same time, a 12-year-old German girl named Mechthild began to have wonderful encounters of God’s presence in her life. In her early twenties, she made her way to the city of Magdeburg where she joined a group of Beguines. Mechthild rose to a position of leadership among these women for a season but then seems to have been ousted by those in the community, much as Hadewijch had been.

A creative combination of autobiography, theology, poetry, and prose, Mechthild’s book *Flowing Light of the Godhead* depicts God’s love ever pouring out to the world and then the persons of the Godhead flowing back together in unity. By extension, wrote Mechthild, Christians are to flow out to the world in service of the sick and poor, then back to God in the solitude of prayer where they can be renewed in the love and unity of the Godhead. Above all Mechthild invited those around her into a bridal relationship with the Divine:

O Lord, if it could ever happen to me that I might gaze upon you as my heart desires and hold you in my arms, then the divine pleasures of your love would needs permeate my soul to the degree possible for people on earth. What I would be willing to suffer thereafter has never been seen by human eyes. Indeed, a thousand deaths were too little. Such, Lord, is my painful longing for you!—Glenn E. Myers



all-night prayer vigils, and the like. Rather, he thought, God himself brings into each life enough struggle.

In sermons Tauler emphasized his second point: the trials that laypeople face and the daily challenges of life are opportunities. Some “poor people” in a given village, Tauler asserted, advance a hundred times further in their faith than those in religious orders by “shoveling manure and earning their bread by hard, bitter work.”

Third, Tauler said, we must embrace whatever suffering God sends, whether mistreatment or physical ailment. When the suffering is great, it can become a dark night where we wonder where God has gone. However, he assured, God is at work in us. We can yield completely to the Almighty. In this *Gelassenheit* (surrendered-ness), our hearts become at peace, even in the midst of affliction. Here we “count it all joy” as we encounter the various trials of life (James 1:2–4).

Finally, he said, the Lord brings us safely to the other side of the great darkness and long desert. There we experience oneness with God—mystical union—as never before. Because we have been made “open, receptive, and free” by God’s painful work in our lives, we are able to be filled with the fullness of God.

### A RETREAT CENTER AND NINE ROCKS

Upon Tauler’s death in 1361, Rulman Merswin (c. 1307–1382) and his wife, Gertrude, rose to leadership among the Friends of God in Germany. A wealthy banker in Strasbourg, Merswin had become part of the *Gottesfreunde* under Tauler, who helped direct Merswin away from severe asceticism. Merswin also described being influenced by a great “Friend of God from the Highlands”; many historians think this was a fictional persona Merswin used to write some of his own works.

Merswin emphasized the progression necessary for spiritual maturation. In his most influential work,

**THE GOSPEL OF THE LORD** A preacher shares an open-air sermon in this 14th-c. woodcut.

*Book of the Nine Rocks*, he described what he saw to be nine stages of spiritual growth, culminating in union with Christ. He highlighted the fact that laypeople can move toward union with Christ in this lifetime just as much as those who had taken religious vows.

The Merswins purchased an abandoned convent on an island in the Ill River that flowed through Strasbourg. They restored it and established it as a center for the Friends of God, envisioning a place of retreat and contemplation. They placed it under the care of the Knights of Saint John, but little came of it after the Merswins passed away.

The Friends of God movement produced other famous devotional material. Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328) preceded the movement, but his sermons and treatises laid the foundation for many of its emphases. Henry Suso (1295–1366), a contemporary of Tauler and fellow Dominican preacher, wrote several works; his *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* (1328–1330) and its modified Latin version, the *Clock of Wisdom* (1334–1337), became among the most published medieval works on spiritual formation.

In addition the anonymous work *Theologia Germanica* (German Theology) of the late fourteenth century came out of the Friends of God. This was not a systematic theology, but rather a work on spiritual progress and mystical union with God, built upon the writings of early sixth-century author Pseudo-Dionysius (see “Like and unlike God,” pp. 14–16).

These works would influence even more laypeople in the fifteenth century among the followers of Geert de Groote (1340–1384), a Paris-trained theologian



who converted to Christianity in 1374. He served as a preacher in the diocese of Utrecht, calling people—especially clergy—to a godly lifestyle. Because many priests maintained “housekeepers” (actually mistresses), de Groote’s message was not well received, and his license to preach was revoked in 1383. The following year, at age 40, he died of the bubonic plague.

### A COMMON LIFE AND A COMMON PURSE

Before his untimely death, however, he lit the fire of a third new renewal movement, the *Devotio Moderna*. This renewal included households of laymen and laywomen called the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, as well as convents of nuns and monks. Much like the Beguines, the Brothers and Sisters were laypeople who sought to live deeper spiritual lives. Taking no permanent vows, they committed themselves to godly living, daily prayer, and Bible reading. Unlike the Beguines, they owned no private property. Each single-sex household maintained a common purse, and all income from their work went to sustain their houses and provide the necessities of life.

In the women’s homes, Sisters worked at making lace and cloth as well as at other forms of manual labor, such as brewing beer and copying texts. The Brothers’ main employment was copying devotional books. They produced hand-made copies of works of the church fathers, Christian classics, and vernacular translations of the Bible.

This work provided spiritual reading for their households, spread renewal across northern Europe, and provided adequate income. After the invention of the printing press in 1453, the Brothers printed Bibles



and spiritual works, publishing an amazing *three-quarters* of all devotional works printed in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. One, *The Imitation of Christ*, has become one of the most widely read books of all time. (Learn more on pp. 24–28 of this issue, and in CH #116, *25 Writings that Changed the Church and the World*.)

In time the Brothers began orphanages and schools for boys, teaching them the Bible and forming their Christian character. Two boys who received such an education were Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) and Martin Luther (1483–1546)—who would soon help to reach even more laity across Europe with the concept of a personal and transformative relationship with God.

Luther was also personally influenced by Tauler’s sermons, receiving encouragement during dark times. He published several editions of the *Theologia Germanica*, making this devotional work available across Germany during the Reformation.

Both Protestants and Roman Catholics have appreciated these three waves of spiritual renewal. These mystics’ invitation—especially to laity—to enter a deeper personal oneness with Christ resounds still in our day. ☛



**STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS** Above: This book of hours, translated into Dutch by Geert de Groote, includes works of Henry Suso and other mystics.

**KNEEL HERE** Top: Laypeople worship in church around 1500 in this wooden carving.

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# Mystic women's voices in the Middle Ages

**M**ysticism has been called “the science of the love of God,” and “the life which aims at union with God.” Mystics are found in nearly every world religion; their tendency to map out new experiences of the divine often leads people to view them with suspicion and relegate them to the sidelines. But during some historical periods, mysticism seems more prevalent and more authoritative, and mystics are more needed by their communities.

One such period was the High Middle Ages in Europe (1100–1450), a time of great social change as the feudal system gave way to the beginnings of capitalism, cities, and a new middle class.

We think of the Middle Ages as an age of faith, and so it was, but it was also an age of crisis. In such a context, mysticism was not a retreat from the negative aspects of reality, but instead a creative marshaling of energy to transform reality.

Medieval mysticism was often visual and affective; the mystic *saw* and *felt* truth, saw visions of God or Christ or the saints, and was flooded with love for what he or she saw. So powerful was this love that she or he felt compelled to share it with others.

## A WOMAN'S PLACE

Women outnumbered men in medieval mysticism, unlike in other periods of mystical revival. No one knows why, but we can speculate on some of the factors involved.

Medieval men with religious vocations and leadership ability had a number of choices—they could be active or contemplative in their roles as priests, friars, monks, or hermits. Women who felt called to a religious life had one main option, a contemplative one: to join a convent or a community of pious lay women. Medieval society believed women must be protected from violence and from expressing their own sexuality. Furthermore women were thought to be “naturally” passive, meditative, and receptive.

Some aspects of convent life probably encouraged women to develop both mystical and leadership abilities. Before the fourteenth century, women in religious communities were generally the only ones who learned to read and write, had access to libraries, and associated with other scholars. It was also the only place a woman had any privacy.

The vow of celibacy exempted women from pregnancy and childbirth, and thus granted them much longer lives than those of their married counterparts. Convents also provided opportunities for leadership and teaching, whether in bookkeeping, tending the sick, or instructing children.



**THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST** In this English book of hours from the 15th c., Jesus carries his cross.

Medieval women mystics came from different classes, lived in different parts of Europe, and experienced spiritual awakenings at different ages. Many did not become great teachers until they reached middle age. As children many were marked by precocious piety, and their rebellion often took the form of asceticism.

From adolescence through their thirties, they often lived withdrawn or secluded lives; those who were married were absorbed in family responsibilities and childbearing. When children grew up, or when these women had reached a position of more prominence in religious communities, they finally had the freedom to be visible, active leaders and effectively offer spiritual advice to others.

Today we can still hear and heed the emphasis of both male and female medieval mystics on the spiritual life as a progressive climb—sometimes a steep and arduous one. In the writings of these men and women, God always teaches through love and always stresses the self-worth of humans in Christ.—*Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, professor of comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and author of Medieval Women's Visionary Literature. This is excerpted from a longer article in CH issue #30.*





# Like and unlike God

MUCH MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM HAD AN UNLIKELY SOURCE: THE WRITINGS OF AN ANONYMOUS MONK

*Edwin Woodruff Tait*

OPEN THE AVERAGE SET of medieval mystical treatises, and you'll start seeing certain themes appear and reappear, like variations on a musical motif. The world is a hierarchy, these writers tell us: a sacred order in which each level of creation receives the divine glory and pours it out to the level below, like a cascading fountain. The world thus reflects God in its beauty and order—but at the same time, God ultimately surpasses any description we make of him. And how do we reach God? Step by step we cultivate virtue, contemplate God's goodness, and ultimately are unified with him in adoration and love.

These ideas formed the minds and hearts of most educated medieval thinkers for hundreds of years. And they came primarily from one man.

## WHICH DIONYSIUS?

About the year 500, an anonymous Syrian monk set pen to vellum under the name "Dionysius the Areopagite." Did he dwell in a mountaintop monastery, or one overlooking the green coastland, or one along the banks of the Euphrates? These details are lost, but his books remain: *Divine Names*, *Celestial Hierarchy*, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and *Mystical Theology*.

**FAN CLUB** Dante and Beatrice meet Aquinas and others in heaven, including Dionysius, one of the ten wise men seated in a semicircle beneath the flying figures.

Our mystery monk adopted his pseudonym from Acts 17, which tells of the apostle Paul in Athens, preaching on the Areopagus (a rocky outcropping) to the council meeting there. Paul used the threefold Platonic outline of the world that his pagan hearers would have known well: all things come from the One (17:24), are sustained by that One (17:25), and will return to the One (17:31). On that day a member of the council named Dionysius became a believer (17:34).

Until the Renaissance the writings of the new Syrian "Dionysius" were accepted as authentic works of the Acts 17 Dionysius. Eventually scholars realized that these writings show influences much later than those of Paul's day. The second Dionysius ("Pseudo-Dionysius," as he is often called) had drunk deeply of the intellectual framework known as Neo-Platonism and its understanding of the universe, which had a huge impact on other early Christian authors, such as Augustine (354–430).

Dionysius took the idea of the world as sacred order from his reading. He coined the new word "hierarchy"



**EACH ACCORDING TO HIS KIND** This 15th-c. image represents the hierarchy of medieval society as a tree.

to describe it, and he came up with the nine “choirs” of angels, putting together scattered biblical references into an ordered list: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and garden-variety angels.

For him the “ecclesiastical hierarchy”—the ordered ranks of the clergy—also reflected this heavenly hierarchy, as did the biological realm, from humans down to inanimate things. None of these various hierarchies was about power. Higher levels did not dominate the lower ones by force, but showed the heavenly glory to them in a way that enabled them to achieve their own unique perfection.

Beyond this ordered hierarchy of created glory, one found the infinite beauty and goodness of God—the “One,” in terminology Dionysius borrowed from Platonism. Like earlier Christian Platonist Gregory of Nyssa (335–394), he saw God as infinite—the fundamental difference between God and all creatures, however glorious those creatures might be. Dionysius believed God reveals himself through his Word and creation, but he also thought that we cannot comprehend God beyond his given revelation. No created being can fully understand God or adequately represent God.

This understanding of God as fundamentally beyond the reach of human language and concepts became central to both Eastern and Western theological traditions. In the West the concept of the “Great Chain of Being,” integral to medieval thought and heavily influenced by Aristotle, fit Dionysius’s system well. Dionysius’s concept of hierarchy supported the social order of medieval Europe while also pointing to God’s utter transcendence of all such hierarchy. This vision focused on the sharing of glory rather than on the exertion of power.

Medieval Europeans believed that all things flow forth from God through the Logos in an orderly hierarchy and that in the end, God will draw all things back to himself through Christ. But even in this life, they thought, we can mystically experience that ascent, especially through contemplation and the liturgy of the church.

### TALK AMONGST YOURSELVES

While we may not fully understand God, we still talk about him. Dionysius called the two ways we do so *kataphatic* (asserting) and *apophatic* (denying). *Kataphatic* language looks at the created world and affirms that everything good found there reflects the infinite goodness of God. Though this language is true, it is hopelessly inadequate because all created things are infinitely more *unlike* God than they are *like* God.

*Apophatic* language, on the other hand, looks at the limitations found in all created things and denies that



those limitations apply to God. It is true to say that God is good, but it is truer to say that God is not good in the same way creatures are good. God surpasses any concept we might have of him:

Nor has [the Divine nature] imagination, opinion, reason or understanding; nor can it be expressed or conceived . . . nor is it science nor truth, nor kingship nor wisdom . . . nor is it spirit according to our understanding, nor [sonship], nor paternity . . . neither can the reason attain to it, nor name it, nor know it; neither is it darkness nor light, nor the false nor the true. . . .

Ninth-century theologian John Scotus Eriugena (815–877) translated Dionysius’s work from Greek into Latin and constructed an elaborate account of the relationship between God and creation based on Dionysian ideas. The Council of Paris in 1225 condemned the view, taught by Eriugena, that no one ever, even in heaven, sees God “as he is.” But medieval scholastic theologians frequently treated Dionysius as an authority on the unknowability of God and the ultimate inadequacy of





all human language—whether the institutional church liked it or not.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) cited Dionysius more often than he cited any other author except for Aristotle. Aquinas argued that we will, in heaven, *see* God, but will not fully *understand* him. On earth our language can only single out aspects of God’s being (“goodness” or “justice” or “love”), which are actually one indivisible, infinite reality. When Aquinas, late in life, experienced a vision of God that caused him to say everything he had written was “like straw,” he was not renouncing his earlier teachings; it had always been part of his theology that his theology, and all theology, was hopelessly inadequate.

This Dionysian theme of human inability to grasp and describe the infinite reality of God shows up in a number of later medieval writers. The “Rhineland mystics” of the fourteenth century (see “A spiritual awakening for the laity,” pp. 6–12) show a particularly strong Dionysian element. Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and Henry Suso all taught that the ultimate divine reality is an “abyss” or “nothingness” to which no human concepts apply—the “desert of the Godhead.”

### A CLOUD OF FORGETTING

An anonymous translator rendered Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology* into English in the fourteenth century and probably also wrote the treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which develops Dionysius’s ideas into spiritual disciplines for contemplatives.

Because of God’s infinite transcendence, a “cloud of unknowing” separates all creatures from him. To seek to know God, one must eventually deny all images or mental concepts or pious feelings associated with God. Even though these things are good in themselves, they cannot give true knowledge of God. Yet this mystery, unknown to the intellect, *is* perceptible by love:

For of all other creatures and their works, yea, and of the works of God’s self, may a man through grace have fullhead of knowing . . . but of God Himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love



**IT’S A PARADOX** Above: Malcolm Muggeridge once said that medieval cathedrals had spires reaching toward God and gargoyles laughing at the folly of the attempt.

**SPENDING THEOLOGY** Left: Dionysius’s disciple Eriugena adorns an Irish banknote from the 1990s.

that thing that I cannot think. . . . He may well be loved, but not thought. By love may He be gotten and holden; but by thought never. . . . Although it be good sometime to think of the kindness and the worthiness of God . . . nevertheless yet in this work it shall be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting.

This dichotomy between head and heart is characteristic of the medieval Western movements that aimed at bringing laypeople into a more intense and vibrant relationship with God. Even though the *Cloud* is directed to contemplatives, its vernacular language made it available to laypeople. Later Pietist movements in Protestantism drew on writings like these (particularly Tauler and Eckhart) and transmitted them to modern evangelicalism.

Some have sneered at this understanding of God as overly simplified and “anti-intellectual.” But its roots grow from appreciating that human concepts can never truly capture the reality of God. Perhaps its flaw is the failure to recognize that human emotional experience is similarly inadequate—a premise that even the good Dionysian, Aquinas himself, accepted.

All creation shouts out God’s glory, cascading splendor from one level to another, and yet all of it is infinitely unlike God. That is the central paradox at the heart of medieval piety, placed there by an anonymous Syrian monk: all of our thoughts and feelings about God are “straw” compared to the infinite reality of God himself. ☒

Edwin Woodruff Tait is contributing editor at Christian History.

# Seeing Christ crucified in her soul

MARGERY KEMPE'S STORY GIVES US A WINDOW INTO THE DAILY LIVES OF MANY DEVOUT MEDIEVAL PEOPLE

Joseph Lynch

**MARGERY KEMPE** was anything but typical. She became known for visions, vigorous weeping, and unusual practices such as vegetarianism and wearing pure white clothing. Some thought she was demon-possessed, epileptic, or a heretic. Others defended her visions and tears as genuine gifts from God. Her extreme devotion still helps us glimpse everyday faith in the late Middle Ages.

## UNSATISFIED HUNGER

In the 1200s a widespread hunger for religious experience spread. Devout lay people found parish life humdrum and spiritually undemanding. In unprecedented numbers they began seeking a more intense religious life while staying married and working in secular vocations.

Kempe (c. 1373–c. 1438) was one of those people. Born in Norfolk, England, to a respected merchant and public official, she married merchant John Kempe and had 14 children. In her younger years, she went frequently to her parish church, heard sermons, confessed often, weekly sought the Eucharist, fasted, wore a hair shirt for a time, said her rosary, and gave alms. But she still wanted something more.

In her twenties she began having visions in which she talked on a friendly basis with Jesus, Mary, and some saints. She claimed Christ told her that her religious practices were good, but they were for “beginners” and she should go deeper. Thus began her remarkable religious quest. At about age 60, the illiterate Kempe dictated her memories to scribes who put together the first autobiography ever written in English, the *Book of Margery Kempe*, from which we know her story.

## DISCOVERING THE GOSPELS

Between the 500s and 900s in Western Europe, the Old Testament had loomed large in religious consciousness. It inspired early medieval clergy to use incense in



**HERE ARE YOUR ROOM KEYS** A 14th-c. Italian painting shows people welcoming pilgrims.

worship, anoint people with oil, encourage tithing, and observe the Sabbath strictly.

After Viking invasions ended in the eleventh century, Western Europe gradually became settled, urbanized, literate, populous, and prosperous. Under these conditions Europe “discovered” the Gospels, fostering an emotional spirituality. Everyone yearned to learn more about Jesus, his mother, and his apostles.





Coupled with wider literacy, this encouraged the use of personal prayer books: lavish “books of hours” for the rich and plainer books for the less wealthy. Vernacular translations flourished—not only of the Gospels but also the Psalms, devotional tracts, and sermons of early church fathers.

Kempe gained religious knowledge from confessors, preachers, and those who read to her. In her autobiography, she says (referring to herself in the third person) of one priest, “He read to her many a good book of high contemplation and other books, such as the Bible with . . . commentaries on it.” On one occasion Kempe chastised an archbishop about his swearing. She noted,

In a most meek and kindly way, he allowed her to say what was on her mind and gave her a handsome answer. And so their conversation continued until stars appeared in the sky.

### PASSION FOR PREACHING

The late Middle Ages witnessed an increased interest in preaching that spoke to people personally. Good preachers became celebrities. Kempe’s main source of



**MARGERY’S PEW** Above: A wooden carving of Kempe adorns a pew in St. Margaret’s, King’s Lynn, England.

**DEATH’S DOOR** Left: In thousands of late medieval wills we find legacies for prayer and masses for the dead, like the service pictured here.

gospel knowledge came from preaching; she loved sermons. Preachers generally tolerated her loud sobbing, but on one occasion, her outbursts annoyed a renowned Franciscan preacher, who barred her from his sermons.

She expressed her great sorrow, “for she was excluded from the sermon, which was to her the highest comfort on earth when she could hear it, and equally the greatest pain on earth, when she could not hear it.”

Medieval theologians generally taught that Jesus’s hard sayings were advice or “evangelical counsels,” not commands applicable to everyone. For centuries only monks and nuns had embraced these sayings—abandoning wealth, sex, family, vengeance, pride, and ambition. But as revival spread, some laypeople, including Kempe, felt called to observe the hard sayings as best they could. At one point Kempe and her husband took vows of chastity.

In the early 1200s, Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and Dominic of Caleruega (1170–1221) had created a radically new form of monastic life attempting to imitate the life of Jesus and his apostles. In response to Luke 9:36, they wandered about in poverty—preaching in a lively, emotional fashion in town squares, fields, and churches. Unlike cloistered monks these friars lived and worked in the world as theologians, businessmen, and missionaries. They were also popular confessors,

sought out especially by growing numbers of devout women like Kempe for the advice they could give.

### GOOD FRIDAY AND CHRISTMAS MEET

In early Christianity the central religious festival was Easter, celebrating the risen Christ. But medieval devotion emphasized the suffering Christ of Good Friday: scourged with whips, crowned with thorns, pierced with nails. These acts were represented in art, mulled over in prayer, and even imitated in life. Crucifixes became increasingly realistic, even grotesque. To medieval Christians they were inspirational.

People also gained a new appreciation for Christmas; Francis of Assisi created what may have been the first Christmas creche in 1223 to show Christ's humanity as a real baby. Likewise Mary grew in prominence in art and devotion; a real baby needed a real mother. Kempe meditated on Christ's birth so long and intensely that she imaginatively entered biblical scenes. In one vision she was Mary's maid, caring like a medieval servant girl: bringing food, doing chores, and changing diapers.

Religious pilgrimages were also astonishingly popular during this era. Many medieval Christians wanted to see with their own eyes the holy places and holy people that figured so prominently in their religion. Most adults probably went on pilgrimage, if only a day trip to a regional saint's shrine.

The tireless pilgrim Kempe began in a modest way by visiting (with her husband) local shrines in England. But in one astounding burst of energy, she visited Assisi, Rome, Jerusalem, and Compostela (in Spain) over the course of three years. She then went to shrines in Norway, Prussia, and Charlemagne's old capital, Aachen.

At the parish church in front of relatives, friends, and neighbors, pilgrims were invested with a distinctive outfit consisting of a broad-brimmed hat, a sort of knapsack, and a walking staff. On their pilgrimages they paid debts, forgave enemies, and asked pardon of those they had offended. Before Kempe entered Jerusalem, she asked forgiveness of her fellow pilgrims, with whom she had much friction due to her religious talk.

When Kempe was in Jerusalem, the Franciscan guides described how Christ had suffered in various places. At the Mount of Calvary, "she fell down . . . and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would have burst apart, for in the city of her soul, she saw truly and freshly how our Lord was crucified."

Between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, hundreds of thousands made such pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Pilgrimages were considered penitential, requiring a sacrifice of time, money, and even health. Many pilgrims died of disease or shipwreck or at the hands of robbers; some were enslaved. But to the medieval pilgrim, the risks were worth the reward.



**BENEATH THE CROSS OF JESUS** Kempe told of viewing a crucifix like this one from Genoa. "Piteously portrayed and lamentable to behold;" it made her "utterly dissolve with tears of pity and compassion."

Medieval pilgrimage was also rooted in the veneration of saints and their relics (*relicta*, "things left behind"). Medieval Christians believed the barrier between this life and the next is porous: saints were not dead any more than Jesus was, and people could ask saints, God's friends, to intercede for them from any locale.

But many thought that at shrines saints were present in a special way. The bodily remains or personal effects of saints were taken from their graves in solemn ceremony and placed in receptacles called reliquaries, often magnificent works of art. Many medieval Christians found it deeply satisfying to kneel, touch the saint's remains, and ask the saint to intercede with God.

### HELPING THE DEAD

Concern for the dead and the developing doctrine of purgatory deeply influenced late medieval religion. Medieval Christians believed they could help deceased parents, spouses, or children. They asked God to be merciful and to shorten their time of purgation.

Kempe believed she was chosen as a special intercessor for all in need, including those in purgatory. Sometimes she would continue weeping for hours when in mind of our Lord's Passion, sometimes for her





**KEEPING VIGIL** This book of hours shows people praying in a medieval church.

own sin, sometimes for the sin of the people, sometimes for the souls in purgatory, sometimes for those in poverty or in any distress. She wanted to comfort them all.

Masses for the dead also featured centrally in popular faith. People of middling wealth might arrange for a Mass on the day of their death, for 30 days thereafter, and on the first anniversary of their death. The rich created perpetual endowments, called chantries, in which a priest was to say Mass daily for them, their kinsfolk, and if they were generous, for all Christians in purgatory, until the end of time.

#### LIFT HIGH THE BREAD

In the 1100s and 1200s, some heretical groups called Cathars, or Albigensians, taught that all material things are essentially evil and attacked the belief that Jesus can really be present in the bread and wine of the sacrament. In reaction the church defended Jesus's presence in the elements through the doctrine of transubstantiation: while bread and wine appear unchanged to the senses, they taught, the priest's consecration in fact makes them Jesus's real body and

real blood. By partaking of the bread (laypeople didn't receive the cup), people felt they could be physically united with him. The awesomeness of this discouraged casual participation, so receiving the Eucharist was rare.

The church demanded people receive at least once a year during Easter—but only after confession, penance, sexual abstinence, and fasting had prepared them to receive worthily. Kempe secured permission from the archbishop of Canterbury to receive the bread every Sunday, an unusual practice for a layperson and one for which she was criticized.

Most Christians were content merely to observe the consecrated host. Some laypeople, in fact, called out for the priest to raise the host so they could see it, a practice eventually incorporated into the official Mass. Nonetheless some found it difficult to believe the church's teaching that what looked and tasted like ordinary food is really the body of Christ. To refute heretics and console doubters, the church sanctioned the festival of Corpus Christi (the body of Christ).

It began in church with a special Mass in front of the kneeling faithful; then clergy, town officials, members of guilds and confraternities, and others followed the consecrated host, displayed in a magnificent vessel, into the streets. They moved through throngs of people who decorated their houses with tapestries, flowers, and branches. Sometimes public plays enacted the account of salvation from Creation to the Last Judgment.

While most medieval believers did not take their faith as far as did Kempe, her life reveals the central threads of late-medieval Catholicism—a rediscovery of the Gospels; an identification with Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and the saints; and a desire to see, touch, and emotionally experience the truths of the Christian faith. As is recorded in the *Book of Margery Kempe*,

On a night, as this creature lay in her bed with her husband, she heard a sound of melody so sweet and delectable . . . as if she had been in paradise. And therewith she started out of her bed and said, "Alas, that ever I did sin, it is full merry in heaven." ¶

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# Paths of influence

The spirituality of medieval mystics inspired Christians for centuries

## Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500) and *The Cloud of Unknowing* (late 1300s)

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–1274) cited Dionysius more than he cited anyone besides Aristotle. **Johannes Tauler** also quoted him extensively. **Evelyn Underhill** (1875–1941) edited an important modern edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. **C. S. Lewis** (1898–1963) frequently cited Dionysius.

## Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

Bernard penned famous **hymns**: “O sacred head, now wounded,” “Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts,” and “Jesus, the very thought of thee.” **Dante** (1265–1321) had Bernard lead him into the last level of heaven. **Tauler** quoted Bernard often. **Martin Luther** (1483–1546) called Bernard “superior to all the doctors [of the church] in his sermons, even to Augustine himself, because he preaches Christ most excellently.” **John Calvin** (1509–1564) called him the major witness to truth between Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) and the sixteenth century. **Johann Arndt** (1555–1621), author of *True Christianity* and a major influence on Pietism, counted Bernard among his influences; so did **Lewis**.



Luther

## Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207–c. 1294)

Some scholars think **Dante** based his descriptions of hell on Mechthild’s works and that Matelda in *Purgatorio* is a tribute to her. The **Friends of God** translated Mechthild into their German dialect.



Calvin

## Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373)

**Margery Kempe** (c. 1373–c. 1438) claimed Jesus said in one of her visions, “For I tell thee forsooth right as I spoke to Saint Bridget, right so I speak to thee, daughter, and I tell thee truly it is true every word that is written in Bridget’s book.”

## Friends of God and *Theologia Germanica*

**Luther** published a copy of the *Theologia*, stating “next to the Bible and St. Augustine, no other book has

come to my attention from which I have learned—and desired to learn—more concerning God, Christ, man, and what all things are.”

## Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361)

**Luther** is known to have read Tauler’s sermons and appreciated their emphasis on salvation by grace. **Arndt** also referenced Tauler. **Catherine Winkworth** (1827–1878), to whom we owe English translations of many German hymns, translated Tauler’s sermons.

## Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416)

**Lewis** quoted Julian more than he did any other medieval mystic. **Thomas Merton** (1915–1968) called her “the greatest of the English mystics.”

## Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)

**Dorothy Day** (1897–1980) and **Peter Maurin** (1877–1949), founders of the Catholic Worker movement, shared an interest in the life of Catherine.

## Brethren of the Common Life and Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380–1471)

Thomas à Kempis wrote a biography of his predecessor **Geert de Groote** (1340–1384). Around 10 **hymns** still used are attributed to à Kempis, including “O love, how deep, how broad, how high” and “Light’s abode, celestial Salem.” **Erasmus** (1466–1536) and **Luther** received some education from the Brethren of the Common Life. During the Reformation a house of the Brethren in Hereford, Germany, became a Lutheran religious community. **Ignatius of Loyola** (1491–1556), founder of the Jesuits, reread à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* constantly. **Arndt** referred to him as well. **John Newton**’s (1725–1807) conversion was due in part to reading *Imitation*. **Lewis** referenced the book. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** (1906–1945) read *Imitation* the night before his execution.



Day

## Brother Lawrence (1614–1691)

**John Wesley** (1703–1791) published *The Practice of the Presence of God* in his *Christian Library*, a series containing “extracts from and abridgments of the choicest pieces of practical divinity.”

## Doctor in the house?

Bernard of Clairvaux was named a **Doctor of the Church** by the Roman Catholic Church in 1830, Catherine of Siena in 1970, and Hildegard of Bingen in 2012. ☐



Wesley



# Four vivid centuries

- **Mid-1000s** Pilgrimages to Rome, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and the Holy Land grow in popularity.
- **1046** Queen Margaret of Scotland undertakes reform in the Scottish church.
- **1088** University of Bologna is founded.
- **1098** Cistercians are founded as a reform of the Benedictine order.
- **1095** Pope Urban II calls for a crusade to aid Eastern Christians threatened by Muslims.



**Thomas Aquinas  
(1225–1274)**

- **1096** Peter the Hermit leads the “People’s Crusade” to disaster.
- **1115** Bernard of Clairvaux builds an abbey that becomes a center of Cistercian reform.
- **c. 1128** Bernard of Clairvaux writes *On Loving God*.
- **1141** Hildegard of Bingen first writes of her visions.

- **Mid-1100s** Cathar and Waldensian movements spread.
- **1198–1216** Innocent III raises the papacy’s power to its height.
- **c. 1200** University of Paris founded; the doctrine of purgatory takes shape; the Beguine movement begins.
- **1204** Fourth Crusade sacks Constantinople.
- **1209** Franciscans are founded.
- **1212** Poor Clares are founded as a Franciscan order for women.
- **1215** Fourth Lateran Council declares the doctrine of transubstantiation, obliges Christians to confess sins



**Women spinning and weaving, 1400s**

and receive Communion once a year, and proclaims a crusade against Cathars; Magna Carta is signed in England.

- **1216** Dominicans are founded.
- **1223** Elizabeth of Hungary first encounters Franciscans; she will eventually become a member of the Franciscan Third Order.
- **1233** Pope approves the rapidly spreading Beguine movement.
- **Mid-1200s** Flagellant processions spread and inspire lay religious societies called confraternities; Mechthild of Magdeburg writes *Flowing Light of the Godhead*.



**Book of hours, 1453**

- **1260** Chartres Cathedral is consecrated.
- **1264** Feast of Corpus Christi is established.
- **1265** Thomas Aquinas begins writing the *Summa Theologica*.
- **1300** Pope Boniface VIII offers plenary indulgence to pilgrims who come to Rome.
- **Early 1300s** Friends of God movement begins in Basel and Strasbourg.
- **1305** Dante begins *Divine Comedy*.

# The world in which medieval mystics worshiped and wrote

By Daniel Bornstein, Thomas O. Kay, and the editors.  
Daniel Bornstein is professor of history, religious studies, and Catholic studies at Washington University in St. Louis; Thomas O. Kay is emeritus associate professor of history at Wheaton College.

- **1309~1377** The “Babylonian Captivity” (the pope resides at Avignon, France).
- **c. 1330** Henry Suso publishes *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*.
- **1337** Hundred Years’ War begins.
- **1338** Johannes Tauler is exiled to Basel and connects with the Friends of God movement there.



Woman praying, painted by Lucas Cranach, c. 1508

- **Early 1340s** Richard Rolle writes *The Fire of Love*.
- **1344** Bridget of Sweden’s husband dies and she becomes a Franciscan tertiary.
- **1347~1350** Black Death kills one-third of Europe, sparking flagellant processions and attacks on Jews.
- **1370** Pope Urban V approves the Bridgettines.
- **1374** Geert de Groote, who will inspire the *Devotio Moderna*, begins to follow Christ seriously.
- **1377** John Wycliffe is censured for the first time. His followers will develop into the Lollard movement.
- **1378** The Great Papal Schism begins. Christendom is divided between two (and, after 1409, three) rival popes; Catherine of Siena finishes dictating *Dialogue of Divine Providence*.
- **1380** John Wycliffe supervises a translation of the Bible into English.
- **1381** Peasants’ Revolt takes place in England, in part sparked by Lollard views.
- **1386** Chaucer begins *Canterbury Tales*.

- **c. 1395** Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love* is published; Windesheim Congregation receives papal approval.

- **1414~1418** The Council of Constance restores church unity, burns Jan Hus for heresy, and declares Wycliffe a heretic posthumously, ordering his bones burned.

- **1418** Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* is first published.

- **c. 1430** Margery Kempe dictates *The Book of Margery Kempe* to scribes, recording the story of her life and journeys.

- **1431** Joan of Arc is burned at the stake.

- **1455** First Bible printed by Gutenberg is published.

- **1473** Catherine of Genoa has her first mystical experience.

- **Late 1600s** *The Practice of the Presence of God* is published, detailing the life and thought of Brother Lawrence.



Image of death from a prayer book, c. 1500



Henry Suso (1295–1366)





# Imitating Christ

THOMAS À KEMPIS AND THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE COMMON LIFE

Greg Peters

IT'S BEEN CITED AS AN INFLUENCE on everyone from Thomas More to Thomas Merton, John Wesley to John Newton. Over 2,000 editions have been printed around the world. Its popularity rivals the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*—in fact only the Bible has been translated into more languages. The heart of its message is the theme of conversion: “Turn to (*Convertete*) the Lord with all your heart, forsake this sorry world, and your soul shall find rest.”

What is it? It's the little book *The Imitation of Christ*, which emerged from the pen of an initially obscure priest in his forties who was participating in an early fifteenth-century revival. Who was Thomas à Kempis, and how did his book come to take the Christian devotional life by storm?

## A LIFE UNCLEAN

To answer that question, we must step back about 80 years before the *Imitation* burst on the scene. By the late Middle Ages, a number of experimental forms of religious life were emerging across Europe, some successful and some less so. One of the most successful experiments was the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, the so-called *Devotio Moderna*

**“YOUR SOUL SHALL FIND REST”** Thomas à Kempis sits in front of the monastery he made famous; at left the artist has placed à Kempis's 17th-c. admirer, Arnoldus Waeijer.

(Modern-Day Devout, as the rest of this article will call them), who sought to appropriate in their age (*moderna*) the piety (*devotio*) of Christians from earlier days.

Flourishing primarily in the Low Countries, this movement can be traced to fourteenth-century churchman Gerard or Geert de Groote (d. 1384). De Groote was born in 1340 in Deventer, now in the Netherlands.

Orphaned at age nine, de Groote made his way to France where he earned a master's degree and served at the University of Paris. In his midtwenties, he studied law and obtained ecclesiastical benefices (what we would now call church stipends) in Aachen and Utrecht, making a career out of conducting business for the church.

But by 1374 de Groote considered his life “unclean” and in need of a conversion. He resolved to “order his life” and soon turned his house in Deventer into a hospice for the dying and resigned his benefices. He also began a reading program that ranged from the Gospels to the lives and sayings of the Desert Fathers. He spent



time with Carthusian monks (an order that had been founded about 300 years previous by Bruno of Cologne) but chose not to join any particular religious order.

De Groote was living the kind of religious life already being practiced by thousands of women who had collectively come to be called Beguines (see “A spiritual awakening for the laity,” pp. 6–12). Many of these women for different reasons could not become “normal” nuns—quite a few could not afford the entry “dowry” required by many monasteries—so they lived as recluses, serving in hospices, alms-houses, and other places.

In time these women moved into houses together called beguinages, mostly in cities, so that they could engage in communal contemplation of God away from the distraction of others. Different houses had different practices, but many Beguines chose to live chaste, virginal lives coupled with voluntary poverty and ongoing penitential acts.

The Beguines were neither in nor out: not proper members of religious orders nor fully laypeople. This was a new form of the Christian life that occasionally received papal approval but at the same time drew the ire of many churchmen and city councils. De Groote was in the same boat. Soon others joined him.

In September 1374 de Groote gave use of his house to some poor women. Five years later he drew up a constitution for the now-growing community, clearly stating that this was neither the beginning of a monastic order nor a beguinage. Rather he sought to provide a place for Modern-Day Devout women to worship God peacefully and to be free to come and go as God led them, though once they left they could not return.

These women remained members of the local parish church like all laypersons. They wore no distinctive dress, and those who sought to join this society did not need to live at de Groote’s house. Instead they could become members while living in their own households.

For the community to run properly, two women were appointed matrons, overseeing the finances and



**IT TAKES ALL KINDS** Above: A beguinage in Brussels housed laywomen participating in a wave of spiritual renewal, a movement à Kempis (left) would eventually join before becoming a priest.

communal discipline when necessary. Thus began the Sisters of the Common Life.

About the same time that de Groote was setting up the Sisters’ constitution, a man named Florentius (or Florens) Radewijns (d. 1400) moved to Deventer to be near de Groote, having heard of de Groote’s fame as a preacher. De Groote’s early male followers met in Radewijns’s residence, and some of them lived together in his house.

In time these male followers merged their finances and made de Groote their leader and teacher, founding the Brothers of the Common Life. As he had for the women, de Groote drew up a set of rules including a schedule for the men’s daily tasks and religious exercises.

Before his sudden death from the plague on August 20, 1384, de Groote, concerned for the men’s temporal possessions, advised that those fit for the monastic life should found a monastery; those not called to the monastic life could remain in the “world,” under the protection of the newfound community. When asked what kind of monastery they should found, de Groote recommended the Augustinians, as their rule was not as harsh as those of the Carthusians and Cistercians.

#### FATHER OF THE DEVOUT

Radewijns became director of the community in 1384, coming, in time, to be seen as the “father and patron of the Devout.” His house in Deventer continued as the center of the movement, but following





de Groote's deathbed direction, Radewijns oversaw the foundation of an Augustinian house of canons (priests who lived together under a rule of religious life) in 1386. With episcopal approval he selected a site at Windesheim and dedicated a chapel and basic buildings in October 1387.

This new religious order gained approval from Rome in May 1395, formally establishing the Windesheim Congregation of canons and, in time, canonesses—reaching at its height approximately 100 houses with about 2,000 members.

### ENTER HAMMERKEN

This milieu attracted a young man named Thomas Hammerken (c. 1379–1471). Born in Kempen (which is why we now call him “à Kempis”), near Düsseldorf in the Rhineland, at the age of 13 he joined his older brother John at a school run by the Brothers of the Common Life in Deventer. In 1399 he moved into the Brothers’ house in Zwolle.

However the Brothers also had a home in Mount-St.-Agnes, strategically positioned outside the town away from noise and distractions. There Thomas made his final profession in 1407 and was ordained a priest just a few years later at around age 34.

In addition to his more famous works, Thomas would eventually write *The Chronicle of the Canons Regular of Mount St. Agnes*, providing a history of the monastery up to his death in 1471. In fact Thomas devoted his life in the monastery primarily to writing, preaching, and copying manuscripts (including a copy of the Bible), though he also served briefly as subprior and novice master.

He became the author of a number of devotional and spiritual works including *Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ*, *Meditation on the Incarnation of Christ*, *The Elevation of the Mind*, *On Solitude and Silence*, *On the Discipline of the Cloister*, *The Soliloquy of the Soul*,



**“I CAN DO NOTHING WITHOUT YOU”** Above: In a French edition of the *Imitation*, attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, Charles d’Angoulême prays to the suffering Christ.

**A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION** Left: German pilgrims journey, perhaps to Spain or Jerusalem.

*Concerning the Three Tabernacles* (a treatment of poverty, humility, and patience), and *On True Compunction of Heart*. He also wrote biographical works on de Groote, Radewijns (who was Thomas’s spiritual father), and a number of early Modern-Day Devout “fathers.”

Thomas’s most influential work, however, remains *The Imitation of Christ*, written in Latin in the 1420s; it was first fully translated into English by Richard Whytford in 1556. Thomas’s authorship of *The Imitation* has been debated since the publication of the first printed edition at Augsburg in 1471, but most scholars today have concluded that Thomas authored the work (as opposed to other possible candidates such as de Groote, Jean Gerson, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Walter Hilton).

The book is heavily indebted to the thought and influence of Augustine of Hippo and Bernard of Clairvaux—not to mention the Bible: it includes more than 1,000 direct biblical references. It began as four different pamphlets meant for use in Modern-Day Devout houses.

The first part (“Admonitions Useful for Spiritual Life”) presents a call to conversion, directed especially to young students. The second section (“Admonitions Drawing to Things Inward”), says



**"IF WE ARE UNITED AMONGST EACH OTHER"** Above: This plaque honors Radewijns's role in giving birth to the Brothers of the Common Life in Deventer. His predecessor de Groote's house in Deventer (at right) is now a museum explaining the growth of the movement.

that the end of a converted life depends on constructing an "interior person," becoming a "person of peace" so focused on self and God as to be unmoved by what goes on around one. The third (and longest) part, "On Inward Consolation/Solace," continues the theme of peace from the second part, and the fourth and final section, "Blessed Sacrament," discusses the Eucharist. The book is subdivided into a total of 114 chapters.

*The Imitation* was likely intended as an instruction manual for young novices because it considers topics of special importance to the followers of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life: religious devotion, humility, denial of the world, silence, and meditation on the sufferings of Christ.

The work also serves as a brief manual on the monastic life—especially a kind of interior monasticism, in which outward appearance does not make the monk, but rather "the transformation of one's way of life" characterizes the true monk and separates him from the false monk. This harmonizes with Thomas's conviction that one's "inner goodness" is always more important than one's outward behavior, since God searches the heart.

### LIVE LIKE THE ANGELS

Because the canons of the Windesheim Congregation were priests, Thomas took time to address their specific concerns. He insisted that the priest's "life should not be like that of worldly men, but like that of the Angels."

Likewise he understood God's admonition to "Be holy as I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16) to be directed particularly to priests. Perhaps because he was a priest,

Thomas was a strong advocate of frequent Communion, believing that infrequent reception resulted in "sloth and spiritual dryness." For those unable to commune in person, Thomas promoted a "spiritual communion with Christ."

The main theme of the work, nonetheless, was a topic close to the heart of everyone involved with the Modern-Day Devout: how to practice spiritual disciplines while remaining in the world, most often as a layperson. Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life held in balance a tension between those members of the community who remained in the cities (either in Devout homes or in their own homes) and those who became Augustinian canons and canonesses. They were exceptional; no other late medieval movement blended so well monastic and lay forms of the Christian life.

*The Imitation* is an excellent example of the kind of spiritual writing that bridges these two forms of life. Though it is relevant to novice canons and canonesses and to priests, it is exceedingly practical for lay readers as well. Thomas believed that only the "true, inward lover of Jesus and the Truth . . . can turn (*convertere*) freely to God, rise above self, and joyfully rest in God." Conversion is the first and necessary step on the pilgrimage to God, for when one converts, he "loses his sloth and becomes transformed into a new creature." Without a conversion there is no spiritual progress.

This conversion is not simply an intellectual assent to propositional truth claims, nor is it merely submission to the fact of one's baptism. No it is a conversion away from one's self by looking into one's self: "the deeper [a man] descends into himself the lower he regards himself, the higher he ascends toward God."

Radically Thomas asserted that a person must annihilate himself or herself to receive the grace of God: "If you know to annihilate yourself perfectly and to empty yourself of every created love, then I [Christ] may grow into you with great grace." For Thomas conversion was





a momentous turning away from oneself and toward God.

At the same time, he thought that one must also turn from the “wretched world,” the so-called created loves—not just from the material things of the world, but also from vain, worldly learning and from pride. In life,

Man is defiled by many sins, ensnared by many passions, a prey to countless fears. Racked by many cares, and distracted by many strange things, he is entangled in many vanities. He is hedged in by many errors, worn out by many labors, burdened by temptations, enervated by pleasures, tormented by want.

He added,

The weakness of sinful human nature will at times compel you to descend to lesser things, and bear with sorrow the burdens of this present life.

In short the “inner life of man is greatly hindered in this life by the needs of the body.” Thus, to draw close to God, Thomas argued that the disciple must crucify the desires of the flesh and “lament the burden of the body,” asking God to “make possible . . . by grace what is impossible . . . by nature.” For who is “more free than she who desires nothing upon earth”?

### THINGS THAT BRING PEACE

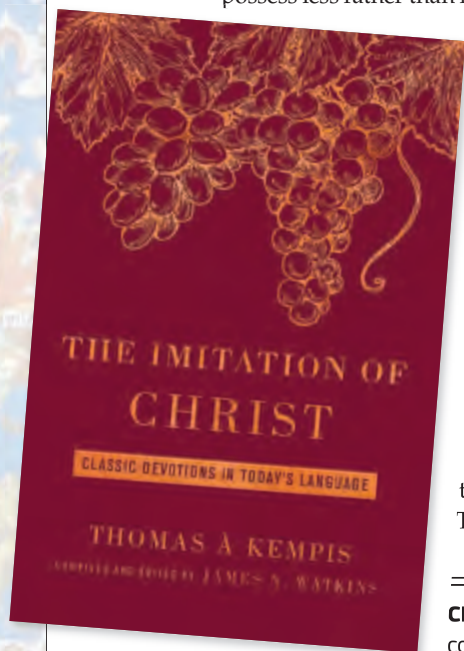
Lastly, Thomas thought, one who wished to imitate Christ must enjoy the rest given by God. Thomas identified four things that bring peace and tranquility of soul: 1) to do the will of others, not one’s own will; 2) to possess less rather than more; 3) to take the lowest place

and regard oneself less than others; and 4) to desire and pray for God’s will to be perfectly fulfilled in you.

As the disciple descends into herself, she cares less for the things of the world and finds great consolation in the things of God, and this consolation brings peace. For a disciple “who is free from inordinate desires, can turn freely to God, rise above self, and joyfully rest in God.”

Many were hungry for this message. Not only did Thomas’s writings spread like

**CLASSIC YET NEW** *The Imitation* continues to be popular today.



**HANDMAIDEN OF THE LORD** Images like this one of the Annunciation in a 14th-c. Flemish book of hours would have been familiar to Thomas and his friends.

wildfire, but the entire movement transformed thousands of lives. Scholar John Van Engen believes that the Windesheim Congregation was “the most successful new religious order in the fifteenth century.” If true it is because the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life offered the kind of religious life that those converted to Christ in the Low Countries were seeking: a brilliant arrangement that allowed men and women, monastics and lay, to coexist and benefit from each other’s unique charisms.

The Modern-Day Devout continue to offer a model to twenty-first-century Christians of how to pursue God wholeheartedly. They give the church a paradigm for holding together the many different ways in which Christians seek to make spiritual progress. There is much to learn from this late medieval work of God’s Spirit. ☐

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# The agony and the ecstasy

CATHERINE OF SIENA INVITED OTHERS INTO A PASSIONATE, PHYSICAL DEVOTION

**F. Tyler Sergent**

**“LET HIM KISS ME** with the kisses of his mouth.” (Song of Sol. 1:2) Many moderns view the Song of Songs as a suggestive love poem inappropriate for mixed company. But medieval Christians would not have blushed at its explicit references. Many twelfth-century mystics read it as a grand allegory depicting the spiritual romance between God and the Christian monastic soul.

These mystics stripped the sensual language of passages such as 1:2 of any physical sensuality—for physical senses could not be trusted, nor could they lead the spiritual soul to the spiritual, divine God. The passages became metaphors to describe the path toward spiritual union with God. Although by the grace of God one might experience a glimpse or a foretaste of divine presence and even divine union in this life, the true fruition and ultimate enjoyment of God in spiritual unity was wholly otherworldly and held for the next life.

## **TAKING IT TO THE STREETS**

Taking this a step further, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) and other mystics of the fourteenth century transformed these spiritualized senses and sensual

**WOUNDED FOR LOVE** One favorite subject for painters was Catherine’s story of receiving the stigmata (imprints corresponding to Jesus’s wounds).

language into physical manifestations in their spiritual practice. The Neo-Platonic worldview that permeated twelfth-century Christian thought (see “Like and unlike God,” pp. 14–16) was, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, being challenged by, and synthesized with, a renaissance of Aristotle. His metaphysics convinced Christians that physical realities and physical experiences—ecstasy and agony—also illuminate the pathway to God.

Christ’s Passion, the physical agony that Jesus experienced along the *via dolorosa*, or “way of suffering,” culminating in the Crucifixion, became the new centerpiece for late medieval Christian devotion.

Even artwork reflected this shift as the crucifix evolved into a bloody carcass hanging in anguish from the cross. As the physical suffering of Jesus came to the fore of spirituality, so too did the idea that the physical suffering of the Christian mystic would lead to union with the suffering God.





**TAKE A LETTER** In this 15th-c. image, Catherine dictates her *Dialogues* to a scribe.

Catherine of Siena (born Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa in Siena) grew up in a tumultuous Italy and in an equally tumultuous church. The Italian city-states were battling over influence, territory, and control of the papacy. The shocking aftermath of the Black Death still lingered, and the devastation remained palpable.

In 1309 the papacy moved from its historical seat in Rome to Avignon, France, where it remained until 1377. Petrarch, an Italian poet and catalyst of the Renaissance, later described the period as “the Babylonian Captivity.” The name stuck.

Much demanded young Catherine’s attention and devotion: the turmoil in her beloved Italy characterized

Then divine Goodness looked with the eye of his mercy upon that soul’s hungry longing and said, “My dearest daughter, I am not scornful of desire. No, I am the one who answers holy longings.”  
—Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*

by conflict between the city-state of Florence and the Avignon popes; the needs of the poor, sick, and suffering; and her longing to unite with God in spiritual love. Consequently Catherine became a member of the Third Order of Saint Dominic from age 18 until her death only 15 years later at age 33.

Third orders, which still exist, are Christian laity—men and women—associated with an established religious order such as Dominicans, Franciscans, or

Augustinians. They are distinguished from the “first order” (monks or friars) and the “second order” (nuns) who usually live in community and are bound by lifelong vows. Members of third orders are often laypeople, do not take lifelong vows, may be married, and may or may not wear some aspect of distinctive religious dress.

The Third Order of Saint Dominic originated in the thirteenth century; by Catherine’s day it was widely recognized in Italy where the Dominicans, known as the Order of Preachers, enjoyed extensive influence. This included Siena, where Catherine’s family lived near the Church of San Domenico, an important center of Dominican education and work.

Because of her frequent visits to the church as a child, Dominican formation came at an early age to Catherine. Her first confessor and spiritual mentor, Tomaso della Fonte, was a Dominican friar.

Equally influential on Catherine’s sense of spiritual life and Christian charity were women of Siena called Mantellate. These women were members of the Third Order of Saint Dominic, and their work involved serving the needs of the poor and sick in the city. Although they did not live in community together (they appear to have been widows), they wore a monastic habit and followed the guidance of a prioress.

Catherine joined these women and their work, taking the habit herself in 1365. Although remaining in her family’s home, Catherine spent most of her time in silence and solitude, only venturing out from her self-imposed cloister for Mass at San Domenico.

### KEEPING THE POPE ON TRACK

As a member of the Third Order of Saint Dominic, Catherine was taught to read and write. In her third year of religious life, according to the *Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (1395), she had a vision in which Jesus declared, “I marry you to me in faith.”

After this mystical marriage to Christ, she felt called to leave her homebound physical cloister to serve the world actively while remaining contemplative in what she called her interior “cell of self-knowledge.”

Unapologetically Catherine combined a contemplative life of prayer and meditation with an active life of service and care for the poor and suffering. Her wedding of these two traditional vocations of religious life proved compelling to her contemporaries, and other men and women rushed to join her.

Catherine’s work also brought her into the center of religious and political issues of her time, the most pressing of which was the papacy’s location in Avignon since 1309 and the conflict this caused with Italian city-states. Her influence on Pope Gregory XI



**TRUTH TO POWER** Above: Raymond of Capua, Catherine's biographer, wrote of her spirituality *and* her political involvement—such as her reprimand of Pope Gregory XI (at left).

(1370–1378) in no small way resulted in the papacy's return to Rome in 1377.

Writing nearly 400 letters, 26 prayers, and her magnificent work, *The Dialogue* (c. 1378), Catherine herself provided source material for her life, personality, and spiritual path to God. These works in Italian—some dictated, others written by her—demonstrated her devotion to divine truth and an unwavering desire for mystical union with God.

Raymond of Capua, her first biographer as well as her third Dominican confessor-mentor, described the composition of the *Dialogue*:

Thus about two years before her death, such a clarity of truth was revealed to her from heaven that Catherine was constrained to spread it abroad by means of writing...

Thus in a short time was composed a certain book that contains a dialogue between a soul who asks the Lord four questions, and the Lord himself who replies to the soul, enlightening her with many useful truths.

Called *The Dialogue* or *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*, this work is Catherine's mystical masterpiece, which, through spiritual insight and experience, teaches the reader of love, suffering, desire, and union with God.

wrote her *own* Song of Songs, her own dialogue of personal, sensual, spiritual romance between God and her own soul.

She put into the mouth of God the statement: "The soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I created her."

#### "AFLAME WITH LOVE"

Catherine also picked up on other common themes of medieval Christian spirituality. One, the idea that thirsting for self-knowledge ultimately leads to knowing God, runs through Catherine's *Dialogue* as it had other mystical works.

Christian mystics, informed especially by Augustine, understood the "image of God" (Genesis 1:26) to be impressed on the human soul. Therefore true self-knowledge through contemplation of one's own soul could lead to knowledge of God. One must be cautious, however, and not confuse the image with the object—the human soul is not God but has the image of God (see "Like and unlike God," pp. 14–16).

But as with viewing God in a mirror, self-knowledge leads one to greater understanding of and connection with the true object of that image: God. Catherine wrote in the *Dialogue* in the voice of God:





**COME TIRED AND POOR** Healers care for the sick in 15th-c. Siena.

except in suffering, and patience is one with love, as has been said. Endure courageously then.

Here Catherine connected the mystic's suffering with divine love, which for her was most profoundly expressed by God in the Crucifixion of Christ. Love, suffering, desire—each of which is mutual between the soul and God—formed the foundation for Catherine's path toward God and hope for spiritual union with him.

Through daily meditative devotional practice and continual prayer, Catherine believed that the soul's love, suffering, and desire reach and connect with God. She wrote, "This is why I told you that holy desire, that is, having a good and holy will, is continual prayer."


Catherine closed her *Dialogue* describing, in her own words, that which all mystics seek—God's gracious response in fulfillment of the soul's longing:

You responded Lord; you yourself have given and you yourself answered and satisfied me by flooding me with a gracious light so that with that light I may return thanks to you.

Clothe, clothe me with yourself, eternal truth, so that I may run the course of this mortal life in true obedience and in the light of most holy faith. With that light I sense my soul once again becoming drunk! Thanks be to God. Amen.

### CONTEMPLATIVE BUT ACTIVE

Catherine, only 33 when she died of a massive stroke, became one of the most extraordinary women of the Middle Ages. Her participation in male-dominated politics and religious conflict, her unrelenting work with the poor and suffering in her local community, and, most notably, the depth of her own writings and their subsequent centuries of influence on Christian devotion assure her place in history.

Though a laywoman without formal education in a tertiary order, she parallels in striking ways the most famous mystic of the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux (see "The fires of love," pp. 37–41). Both Catherine and Bernard dynamically combined contemplative and active life; greatly influenced religious and political issues of their day; and encountered God in profound mystical experience. That experience together with their ascetic discipline resulted in writings that have inspired and nourished countless spiritual seekers over many centuries from their day to ours. 

F. Tyler Sergent is assistant professor of history at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky.

But [the soul] grows and exercises herself in the light of self-knowledge. . . . From this she draws a bit of knowledge of my goodness, aflame with love, and she begins to conform her will with mine.

Mystics were also much concerned with understanding how loving God leads to God. Reflecting on passages like I John 4:8 and Romans 5:5, many have written that since God is love, one comes to know and experience God by loving God.

For the Christian mystic, we reciprocate the love of God for us with the very love God has given us to love God in return. Expressing this in her own words, attributed to God in the *Dialogue*, Catherine wrote:

See, then, with what affectionate love you ought to love and desire both the gift and the giver. If you do, your love will be pure and genuine and not mercenary. This is how it is with those who keep themselves always enclosed in the house of self-knowledge.

### "ENDURE COURAGEOUSLY"

For late medieval mystics, suffering also played a central role in the path toward God. Just as God suffered in the crucified Christ, so the human person can come to know and understand God through suffering "in spirit or in body." Catherine has God explain in one place in the *Dialogue*,

Because those who have such sorrow have infinite desire and are one with me in loving affection . . . every suffering they bear from any source at all, in spirit or in body, is of infinite worth.

In another place she writes, again speaking on behalf of God,

For I have already told you that suffering and sorrow increase in proportion to love: when love grows, so does sorrow. . . . Patience is not proved

# “A little thing like a nut”

In the flourishing late medieval town of Norwich, a small room known as an anchorite's cell is built onto the parish church of St. Julian. A number of medieval churches had such “cells” attached.

The anchorites who lived in these cells were usually female (often called anchoresses) and had taken vows to spend their lives in solitude and prayer. While they attempted to withdraw from the world, they lived in the heart of the community and thus often became centers of pilgrimage and sources of spiritual advice.

The most famous of the late medieval anchorites lived in this cell next to St. Julian's Church; she succeeded in obliterating her original identity so completely that we know her only as “Lady Julian of Norwich” after the parish church. Yet “Julian” (c. 1342–c. 1416) was not only a famous spiritual advisor in her own day—people traveled miles to see her—but is known to posterity as one of the greatest spiritual writers in Christian history.

Her fame rests on a single book, existing in a longer and a shorter version: the *Showings or Revelations of Divine Love* (c. 1395). This book, written down by a male cleric, records a series of visions Julian received during a severe illness.

## LOOK TOWARD THE CROSS

Julian's visions, like many others in the late Middle Ages, focus on a graphic portrayal of the physical sufferings of Christ. But what makes Julian's book so remarkable is the vivid and radical way she draws out the implications of Jesus's sacrificial love for the nature of God. At one point, tempted by a “friendly suggestion” in her heart to look away from the cross that appears in her vision, she responded by saying to the crucified Jesus, “You are my heaven.”

This is why Julian refers to Jesus as “mother,” a move that endears her to modern feminists. (Like many other elements of her spirituality, this wasn't entirely new; medieval mystics from the twelfth century on often referred to Jesus this way.) For Julian this wasn't a rejection of traditional masculine language, but rather a dramatic way of highlighting Jesus's nurturing love as central to God's character. One of her most memorable metaphors, summing up her spirituality—literally—in a nutshell, is her vision of the whole universe as “a little thing like a nut” held in the protecting and nurturing hand of God.

Julian has been understood as a universalist based on her repeated statement that her visions revealed “nothing about hell” and her insistence that “all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” She always said that she adhered to church teaching on damnation,



**HIDDEN SAINT** Julian of Norwich focused her entire understanding of God around the love of the crucified, suffering Christ. This statue at Norwich Cathedral imagines what she might have looked like.

but she clearly struggled with reconciling this teaching with the unconditional love of God; the closest she came to resolving this tension was claiming that God will “do a deed” at the end of time that will be unimpeded by human sin.

I first encountered Julian's writings in a college class on medieval mysticism, and they have been one of the most powerful spiritual influences on me ever since. I find in Julian a rich, imaginative, and profoundly orthodox presentation of the heart of the Christian faith, all the more compelling because she is so thoroughly medieval even as she transcends so radically the flaws and limitations of much of medieval popular piety.

When modern “progressives” tell me that God is all love, they are saying what their culture requires them to say if they are to be respectable believers at all. But when a medieval ascetic, shut up in a tiny cell attached to a stone church, has lurid visions of the discolored body of Christ on the cross, and on the basis of those visions tells me that the self-giving, all-forgiving love of Jesus is the ultimate truth about the universe... then I dare to believe that it just might be true. —Edwin Woodruff Tait, contributing editor, *Christian History*. A shorter version of this article appeared in CH #116.





# A medieval mystic untimely born?

IN BROTHER LAWRENCE THE DESIRES THAT HAD MOTIVATED MEDIEVAL MYSTICS FOUND FRESH EXPRESSION

*Kathleen Mulhern*

BY THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, the faith-haunted world that had birthed the great medieval mystics had given way to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. Yet Brother Lawrence (c. 1614–1691) quietly practiced a spiritual discipline that continues to shine, inviting everyone into mystical depths.

Because his life was so ordinary and his practice so simple, Brother Lawrence bridges the medieval-modern divide; he had no interest in or capacity for theological nuances or complicated devotions. Like his medieval precursors, he sought only to know God better and serve him more. Removed from the religious tumult of his day, he became one of the most accessible mystics of any age.

## FROM BATTLES TO THE RESURRECTION

Nicholas Herman was born to a peasant couple in the Lorraine region of France. Like many young men who lived in poverty and sought a steady source of food and shelter, he joined the army. French religious wars between Catholics and Protestants were still a recent

**A TROUBLED CITY** Paris, pictured here in 1580 just before Nicholas Herman's birth, suffered through tumult and war in his lifetime.

memory, and the 1600s soon developed into a century of violence too—including a civil war and the shattering Thirty Years War (1618–1648). Louis XIV, king of France, had plenty of military ambitions; soldiers were a critical component of his vision.

Herman, however, didn't have a particularly successful military career. According to his biographer, Fr. Joseph de Beaufort, the German enemy captured and ill-treated him. After his release he returned to battle; but he was then injured by the Swedes, leaving him permanently disabled. No doubt Herman also suffered from what today we call post-traumatic stress; his biographer mentions, "He often relived the perils of military service." He returned home and tried the life of a footman to the rich, but apparently he was such a blundering fellow that he soon lost that job as well.



**GOD IS STILL SOVEREIGN** *Left:* A bare French tree in winter (like this one in Charcenne) prompted the spiritual journey that led Herman to the thoughts that formed his *Practice of the Presence* (below).

his assigned work in the monastery was itself the channel of devotion:

Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do.... We can do little things for God. I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for the love of Him; and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before Him Who has given me grace to work. Afterwards I rise happier than a king.

This interior practice of constantly turning the attention of the heart to the loving presence of God became a spiritual rhythm that, through much effort and mental creativity, brought Brother Lawrence into a transforming relationship with God. He explored all the ways he could give himself to the presence of God.

Shortly before becoming a soldier, Herman had had his first direct encounter with the overwhelming love of God. His biographer tells us that a simple vision of a tree, bare in the cold season, kindled in him a profound understanding of God's sovereign and steadfast love:

Considering that within a little time, the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear, he received a high view of the providence and power of God, which has never since been effaced from his soul. This view had perfectly set him loose from the world, and kindled in him such a love for God, that he could not tell whether it had increased in above forty years that he had lived since.

According to Brother Lawrence, this was a gift from God, not a formula for everyone's spiritual awakening. Others could stare at a tree in winter for days on end and not receive this revelation. Just as many other well-known Christian mystics had ordinary experiences—illness or a sudden recognition of the presence of Jesus in art or an encounter with the poor—so this “seeing” of God's presence through the barren tree was a divine word to Brother Lawrence. That tree “first flashed in upon my soul the fact of God,” he said. The power of this vision never left him.

The vision of the barren tree had served as the beginning of Brother Lawrence's mystic journey, but it was through great and unceasing effort that

Herman then resolved to dedicate the rest of his life to prayer and service to God. He entered the monastery of the Discalced Carmelites in Paris, making his profession as a lay brother in 1642. He became Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, choosing as his patron St. Lawrence (225–258), a third-century deacon and martyr of the church in Rome. He added “of the Resurrection” to honor his new life.

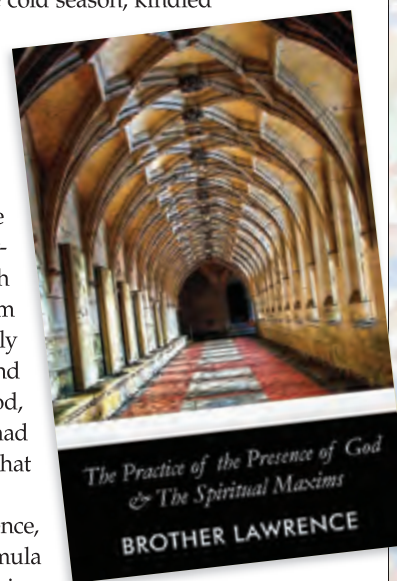
That new life was not heroic or prestigious in any way. Brother Lawrence's name is known to us today not because of great theological teaching or inspiring social engagement or lyrical writings—but because of a simple, singular spiritual practice. As a member of a religious order, Lawrence was naturally exposed to the community's rhythms and practices. Yet he found many of the prescribed devotions confusing and distracting, and eventually simplified them to a single focus: directing all his love and attention to the presence of God.

In the second of his letters collected in the famous book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he wrote:

I make it my business only to persevere in His holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an actual presence of God; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God.

### FRYING CAKES FOR GOD

This silent, secret conversation did not even require solitude or stillness. Assigned to the monastery's kitchen, Brother Lawrence took up the life of community cook and dishwasher—a job he disliked intensely but embraced thoroughly for 30 years. He found that







he continued to plumb the depths of revelation, pursuing the interior life with ferocious tenacity. He shared this characteristic passion with mystics throughout church history. In fact he testified that the first 10 years of his practice were a great struggle: "During this time I fell often, and rose again presently." He advised:

Be not discouraged by the repugnance which you may find in [the practice] from nature; you must do yourself violence. At the first, one often thinks it lost time; but you must go on, and resolve to persevere in it to death, notwithstanding all the difficulties that may occur.

He described those years as fraught with suffering, fears, guilt, and despair. Yet he persisted until one day God gave him another grace:

When I thought of nothing but to end my days in these troubles (which did not at all diminish the trust I had in God, and which served only to increase my faith), I found myself changed all at once; and my soul, which till that time was in trouble, felt a profound inward peace, as if she were in her center and place of rest.

A spirit of willing service complemented these gifts of God—the early vision that sustained him throughout his life and the later grace given after years of struggle—and his resolute response of faithful effort.

### THE MALICE OF SINNERS

Finally, and perhaps most critically, Brother Lawrence, like every Christian mystic, derived his energy from and spent it on one thing: the love of God. In the second letter collected in *Presence*, he wrote:

I have no will but that of God, which I endeavor to accomplish in all things, and to which I am so resigned, that I would not take up a straw from the ground against His order, or from any other motive but purely that of love to Him.

Living in Paris, a city rife with insurrections, barricades, and street violence, Brother Lawrence was well



**SEEKING THE FACE OF GOD** Brother Lawrence shared his tumultuous era with other famous mystics (from l-r): Blaise Pascal, Madame Guyon, and Francis de Sales. Pascal's *Pensées*, Guyon's autobiography, and de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life* have helped many seekers.

aware of the chaos around him. His biographer marveled at his serenity:

As for the miseries and sins he heard of daily in the world, he was so far from wondering at them, that, on the contrary, he was surprised there were not more, considering the malice sinners were capable of: that for his part, he prayed for them . . . knowing that God could remedy the mischiefs they did.

While Brother Lawrence did nothing to outwardly change the world, his life and witness have done so as, soul by soul, others take his advice and practice the presence of God. His more well-known contemporaries—Francis de Sales (1567–1622); Blaise Pascal (1623–1662); Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte-Guyon or “Madame Guyon” (1648–1717); and François Fénelon (1651–1715)—had their own experiences of the love of God, and their stories, too, powerfully encourage the life of faith. None of them, though, are quite as pure and unpretentious as this gentle reminder from Brother Lawrence: “Lift up your heart to Him, the least little thought of Him will be acceptable. You need not cry very loud; He is nearer to us than we are aware of.” ☩

*Kathleen Mulhern teaches church history and Christian formation at Denver Seminary.*



# The fires of love

FROM THE HIGHEST NOBILITY TO THE LOWEST WORKING CLASS, MEDIEVALS HEARD THE CALL OF GOD OVER FOUR CENTURIES

**Matt Forster**

## **BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)**

“There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is Curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others; that is Vanity. There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve; that is Love.”—attributed; similar phrasing is found in his *On Loving God*

Bernard was born in 1090 into the Burgundian nobility. He was very fond of his parents, who encouraged their children to live moral lives. When his mother died, Bernard, only 19 years old, honored the influence she had on his development by leaving his studies and entering a Benedictine abbey called Cîteaux near Dijon.

The abbey had been established in 1098 as part of a movement to return the Benedictines to the *Rule* originally set down by Benedict. This new movement would eventually take the name Cistercian after the abbey (sometimes spelled Cisteaux). As a reform movement, the Cistercians attracted many young men.

**VOICE OF GOD** Bernard of Clairvaux composes a sermon in this 12th-c. woodcut.

Three years later Bernard was asked to establish a new Cistercian abbey a little north of Cîteaux, which was completed in 1115. Tradition has it that he named the abbey “Claire Vallée” (Clear Valley) after its location; this became Clairvaux.

As the abbey grew and members were sent out to establish even more abbeys, Bernard’s influence increased. He was eventually ordained a priest, though it may have been after he was appointed abbot!

In 1128 Bernard was asked to participate in the Council of Troyes, a church council that, among other things, established the Knights Templar. There he served as the council secretary. Soon he was making his voice heard beyond his little valley. He vocally defended the church in the ongoing struggle between the church and secular authorities.





When two popes were elected in 1130—Anacletus II in Rome and Innocent II who was banished to France—the bishops asked Bernard to judge who was the rightful successor to the papacy. His decision to back Innocent swayed the great powers of Europe to support Innocent as well.

Bernard continued to play a role in church politics for the remainder of his life. He also wrote several great mystical classics: *On Loving God* (c. 1128) and *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (which he began in 1136 and was still writing when he died almost 20 years later).

In the former he famously described four degrees of love the soul goes through as it seeks union with God: loving self for self's sake, loving God for self's sake, loving God for God's sake, and loving self for God's sake. Published widely for centuries, these books spread the concept of bridal mysticism (see p. 10), which invited untold numbers of men and women into an intimate relationship with Jesus.

In response to the defeat of Christian armies in the Holy Land in 1144, Pope Eugene III asked Bernard to promote enrollment in the Second Crusade through his preaching. Thanks to his powerful message, a reluctant public soon enlisted in great numbers. Even royalty responded to his call.

The eventual failure of the Second Crusade turned sentiment against Bernard. He tried to call a new crusade, but eventually quit and retired to Clairvaux, where he died in 1153. The pope canonized him in 1174, and in 1830 he was made a Doctor of the Church.

#### HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098–1179)

"I am the fiery life of the essence of God; I am the flame above the beauty in the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars.



**THE CIRCLE OF LIFE** Above: This page from Hildegard's *Scivias* shows God (represented as a golden circle) creating the world in six days and giving Adam a flower of obedience. A modern representation of Hildegard is at left.

And with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life."—*Book of Divine Works* (c. 1170–1173)

Few saints can claim to be as accomplished as Hildegard. She was an influential Benedictine abbess, a writer of visionary theology, a composer of liturgical music, the author of a musical morality play (perhaps the earliest one in history), a philosopher, and a mystic. She also studied and wrote on natural history and medicine. And at some point, she invented her own alphabet!

Hildegard was born in Germany around 1098 into a family of lower nobility. She was the youngest of a lengthy line of siblings—eight or ten, depending on who you ask—and was said to have been a sickly child. Early on, however, she began to experience visions.

At 14 she became an oblate of the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg on the Rhine River along with Jutta, an older woman who was the daughter of Count Stephan II of Sponheim. Hildegard may have been in Jutta's care since she was eight. She later wrote that Jutta had taught her to read and write.

At the monastery Hildegard continued to have visions. She possibly learned to read music as well as







Eventually she recovered the dowry and used it to build a hospital, where she helped care for the sick, even as she continued caring for the poor. She died in 1231 after a brief illness at the age of 24 and was canonized by the church only four years later, in 1235. Another quote often attributed to her is the haunting "How could I bear a crown of gold when the Lord bears a crown of thorns? And bears it for me!"

#### **BRIDGET OF SWEDEN (1303–1373)**

"The world would have peace if only men of politics would follow the Gospels."—attributed

Bridget of Sweden was born Birgitta Birgersdotter in 1303 into a rich landowning family in Uppland. Through her mother's side, she was related to Sweden's royal family. At a young age, she had a dream of the "Man of Sorrows"—Jesus on the cross. She asked him who put him on the cross, and he replied, "They who despise me, and spurn my love for them."

She would continue to have visions throughout her life. A record of many of her visions was later published beginning in the 1340s as *Revelationes coelestes*, or *Celestial Revelations*.

When she was 14, Bridget married Ulf Gudmarsson. They had eight children. Six survived infancy, including a daughter who would become St. Catherine of Sweden (c. 1330–1381). Bridget developed a reputation for caring for unwed mothers and their children.

When Magnus Eriksson, the king of Sweden, married Belgian noblewoman Blanche of Namur, he asked Bridget to be the new queen's principal lady-in-waiting. In 1341, after years of serving in court, Bridget

**VISIONS OF PEACE** In this 14th-c. manuscript, Bridget of Sweden receives visions from Christ and the Virgin Mary.

and Ulf made a pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela (in modern-day Spain). On the return trip, Ulf became seriously ill.

While praying at Ulf's bedside, Bridget was met in a vision by a bishop who declared that Ulf would recover. She asked the bishop who he was, and he said he was Denis, the patron saint of France. Ulf did recover but died several years later.

Ulf's death devastated Bridget. She joined the Third Order of St. Francis and embarked on a life of caring for the poor and the sick. Eventually she established her own order, the Order of the Most Holy Savior, or the Bridgettines.

Later Bridget made a pilgrimage to Rome to secure authorization for her order (which she got in 1370). She stayed on in Rome for the rest of her life—aside from a few pilgrimages—becoming known for her acts of charity. She also championed ecclesiastical reform, calling out the church for low morals and abuse of position and power. In 1391—less than 20 years after her death—the church canonized her.

#### **RICHARD ROLLE (C. 1305–1349)**

"I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth, too, not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire. . . . [O]nce I realized that it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted, and wanted my love to be even greater."—*The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters

Born into a farming family around 1305 in Thornton-le-Dale, a village in North Yorkshire, Richard Rolle went on to become one of the most widely read English writers of his day. He studied for a time at the University of Oxford, but he left school at around 18 years old to become a hermit and later began to have mystical experiences of God's love.

He lived for a few years with a squire in Pickering, but scholars do not know what happened to him for some years after that. By 1348 he had made the acquaintance of Margaret Kirkby, an anchoress in Yorkshire who became his disciple (see p. 33 for more on anchoresses). Rolle's written works include commentaries, epistles, and treatises. The chronology of his books is unclear, but it is significant that he wrote many in English and in a style more accessible to laypeople.

For example he wrote a *Commentary on the Psalter* in Latin—then another in English. The latter included his English translation of the Psalms; for 200 years, it



was the only English translation of any portion of the Bible approved for use in the Roman Catholic Church.

Rolle may have written these English-language books to aid Kirkby. He is perhaps best known for *Incendium Amoris* (*The Fire of Love*), where he recorded his mystical experiences. In late September 1349, he died at the Cistercian nunnery at Hampole, a town in present-day South Yorkshire. It is unlikely he was ever ordained. Rolle has never been canonized in the Catholic tradition, but several groups of Anglicans venerate him.

#### CATHERINE OF GENOA (1447–1510)

**"I am so submerged in the sweet fire of love that I cannot grasp anything except the whole of love, which melts all the marrow of my soul and body."**  
—*The Life and Doctrine of Saint Catherine of Genoa* (1551), excerpt trans. Martin Buber in *Ecstatic Confessions*

Caterina (Catherine) Fieschi was born into a noble Italian family in 1447. As a girl she wanted to join a convent but was denied admittance because of her age. At 16 years old, she was married off to Giuliano Adorno, a nobleman from Genoa. Adorno was neither a kind man nor a faithful one, and Catherine was married for 10 unhappy years before she had her first mystical experience in 1473.

One day while in the confessional, a deep sense of God's love for her overwhelmed Catherine; she left without even finishing her confession. That marked the beginning of a lifelong desire for a closer union

**SUBMERGED IN FIRE** Above: An Italian artisan made this image of Catherine of Genoa in 1837 on behalf of the Adorno family for the 100th anniversary of her canonization.

**TEACHING WORDS OF LOVE** Left: The illustrator of this 15th-c. manuscript may have based this image of Richard Rolle on earlier death effigies.

with God. She prayed, received Communion daily (an unusual activity for a layperson, as Margery Kempe had earlier proved), and began caring for the sick.

After years of mispending the family fortune, her husband repented his ways under her influence. He joined her in caring for the infirm and eventually became a Franciscan tertiary. The couple moved into Pammatone, a Genoese hospital, and gave themselves to caring for others.

When the plague swept through Genoa in 1497 and 1501, Catherine became a local hero, known for her unselfish efforts to comfort the diseased and dying. She died in 1510.

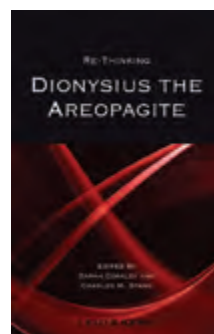
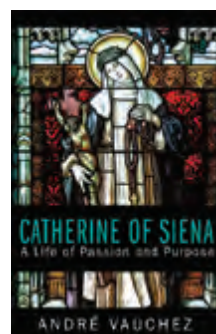
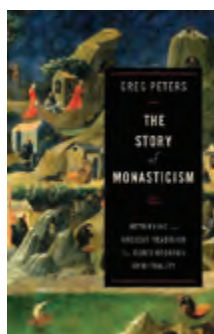
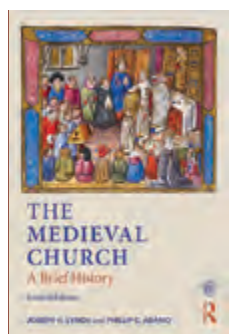
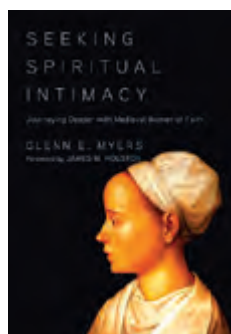
While Catherine's reputation was already celebrated in Genoa, the publication of *The Life and Doctrine of Saint Catherine of Genoa* in 1551 established her reputation abroad. This book contained her teachings, including her "Treatise on Purgatory." When the book was examined by the Holy Office, they said that her doctrine alone made her worthy of beatification. She was eventually canonized in 1737. ☐

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# Recommended resources

HERE ARE SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FROM *CH* EDITORIAL STAFF AND THIS ISSUE'S AUTHORS TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND MEDIEVAL MYSTICS AND THEIR WORLD.



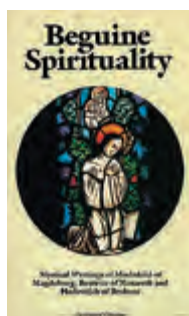
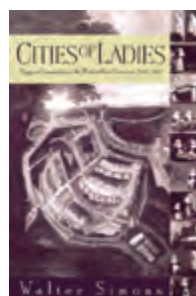
## BOOKS

For a **general introduction** to the mystics, check out Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls* (1984); Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (1986); Herbert Grundmann, trans., Steven Rowan, *Religious Movements of the Middle Ages* (1995); Joan Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety* (2001); Patricia Ranft, *Women in Western Intellectual Culture, 600–1500* (2002); Oliver Davies, *God Within* (2006); Joseph Howard Lynch and Phillip Adamo, *The Medieval Church* (2013); Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism* (2015); and vols. 3–5 of Bernard McGinn's classic *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, covering the years 1200–1500.

Find out more about the **Beguines** in Fiona Bowie, ed., *Beguine Spirituality* (1990); Glenn E. Myers, *Seeking Spiritual Intimacy: Journeying Deeper with Medieval Women of Faith* (2011); Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies* (2001); and Saskia Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert* (2004); and about the **Friends of God** in James M. Clark, *The Great German Mystics: Eckhart, Tauler and Suso* (1970).

**Pseudo-Dionysius** is covered in Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (1993); Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (2001); and Sarah Coakley and Charles Stang, eds., *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (2009). **Biographies** of other people we've discussed include A. E. Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World* and André Vauchez, *Catherine of Siena* (2018).

Modern critical editions of many of the individual **writings** discussed in this issue are available. In particular, volumes in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series cover Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Genoa, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the *Devotio Moderna*, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Hadewijch, Richard Rolle, Henry Suso, Johannes Tauler, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and the *Theologia Germanica*. In each case the volume excerpts writings and gives biographical information.



## CHRISTIAN HISTORY ISSUES



Read these past issues of *Christian History* online. Some are still available for purchase:

- 24: Bernard of Clairvaux
- 30: Women in the Medieval Church
- 42: Francis of Assisi
- 49: Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages
- 70: Dante
- 73: Aquinas
- 93: A Devoted Life
- 116: 25 Writings that Changed the Church and the World
- 119: The Wonder of Creation

In addition read more about the mystics' world of worship in our guide *The History of Worship from Constantine to the Reformation*. The book *In Context* (2012) has entries on sayings of Bernard, Julian, and à Kempis; and *Great Women in Christian History* (2004) has stories of Elizabeth and Hildegard. Both books are by A. Kenneth Curtis and Dan Graves. Our senior editor Chris Armstrong has authored *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians* (2016).



## VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO

Videos on the theme of this issue include *Hildegard*; *Joan of Arc*; *The Passion of Christ According to St. Francis*; *St. Clare of Assisi and the Poor Clares*; and *Pioneers of the Spirit* episodes *Hildegard* and *Julian of Norwich*.

## WEBSITES




As always many public-domain primary source documents by people referenced in this issue can be found at the [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#). It's worth checking out the [Internet Medieval Sourcebook](#) as well. (Incidentally the number of online editions of *The Imitation of Christ* may equal those in print!)



The [University of Rochester](#) has critical editions of many medieval English texts online, including *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and a lot of religious poetry from this era. The [Julian Centre](#) (next door to Julian of Norwich's cell) posts information on her. Find a short introduction to Bernard of Clairvaux at the [Order of St. Benedict site](#) and introductions to Henry Suso at numerous Dominican



websites. The interreligious [Meister Eckhart Society](#) considers Eckhart mainly as a philosopher. Finally, Julia Holloway maintains an idiosyncratic but image-rich site devoted to the [works of medieval mystics](#). 



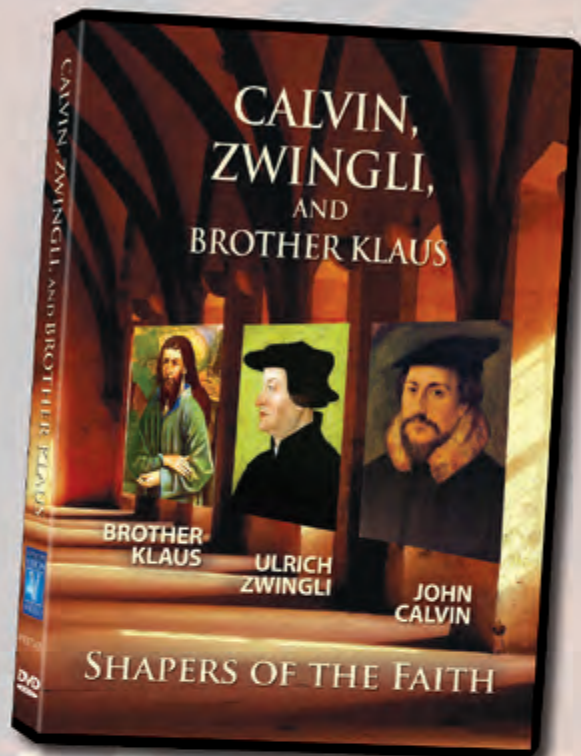
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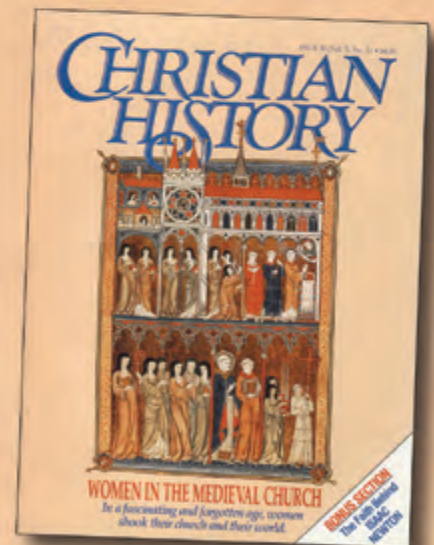
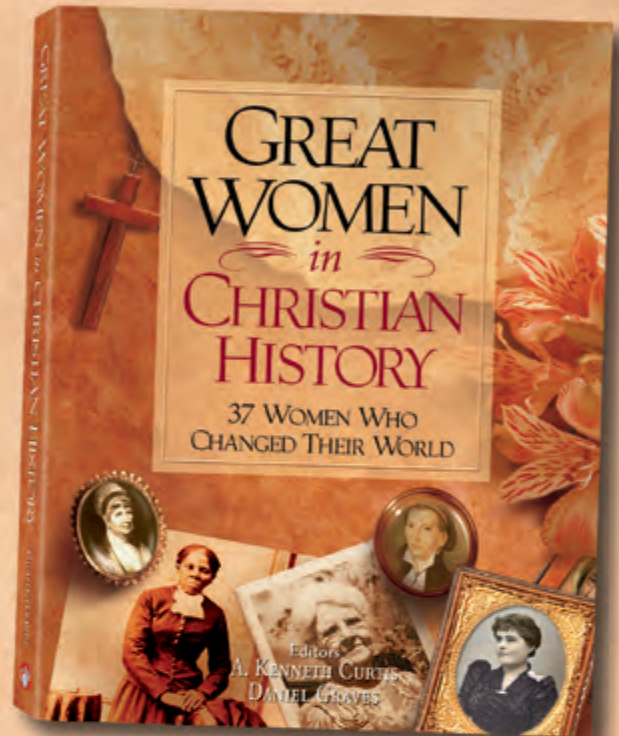
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