

## Meet the Mystics

Bonnie Beiswenger  
Centre Street Church, UCC  
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As many of you know, my spiritual journey started pulling me certainly not out of, but beyond the Christian faith by the time I reached the age of thirty. I became curious about other faith traditions and spiritual viewpoints. I eventually went so far as to become a Unitarian Universalist! In my searching, I kept seeing references to these people called mystics. They were present in all the major faith traditions I explored, including Christianity. What links all these mystics, I wondered, and caused them to come forth out of such a wide range of religions, cultures, and historical periods?

What is a mystic anyway? In his book *The Cloud of Unknowing, Distilled*, Daniel London refers to them as:

members of faith communities that have peered under the stones of their traditions' doctrines and dogmas to discover the rich soil of direct spiritual experience ... Although their faith traditions might appear to be drastically different on the surface, mystics all seem to drink from the same well. And that well is the direct, unmediated experience of the eternal Presence—transcending doctrines or any attempt to define—the universal Presence hungry to reveal itself and enter into direct communion with us, its own creation.<sup>1</sup>

In doing research for this message, I encountered so many forms of mysticism in so many cultures spread over centuries of time that I quickly became overwhelmed. I needed to condense and find the commonalities that bind mystics together. What did a mystic in late antiquity, like St Augustine, share with a modern-day mystic like Thomas Merton?

Here is some of what I learned—and believe me, this is Mysticism 101, merely scratching the surface. But I think that what I learned has real relevance to our current individual and collective faith journeys.

First of all, mystics were and are rooted in particular faith traditions. Here are some mystics from various faith traditions whose names you might recognize:

- From the Hindu tradition: Ramakrishna, the most important modern Hindu saint, who proclaimed the oneness of all religions and mystical paths.<sup>2</sup>
- From the Jewish faith: The kabbalah mystics, who saw God not as static but as dynamic, forever becoming in an evolving partnership with humans.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> London, Daniel. *The Cloud of Unknowing, Distilled*. Apocryphile Press (2021).

<sup>2</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1836–86).

<sup>3</sup> Matt, Daniel C. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. HarperOne (2009).

- From Islam: Rumi, the beloved Sufi poet who said. “Christian, Jew, Muslim, shaman, stone, mountain, river—each has a secret way of being with The Mystery and not to be judged.”<sup>4</sup>
- From Buddhism: The Buddha himself, who taught that the extinguishing of the false self leads to real life beyond limits, “indescribable, inconceivable, unutterable.”<sup>5</sup>

The Christian faith has produced countless mystics from the time of its inception until the present:

- The desert fathers, a group of hermits in the fourth and fifth centuries AD who withdrew to the desert and believed the only authority under God was the authority of wisdom, direct experience, and love.
- St. Augustine, who had a mystical experience soon after he became a Christian and wrote in his book *Confessions* of the methods by which a person can advance, step by step, to closer communion with God.
- Meister Eckhart, whose writings—highly controversial in his time and condemned by the Catholic church—were embraced by the early Christian mystics. He wrote, “Theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language.”<sup>6</sup>
- Julian of Norwich, an English mystic of the Middle Ages who became deathly ill at the age of thirty and, after a miraculous recovery, received sixteen revelations from God which she recorded in her book *Revelations of Divine Love*.
- St John of the Cross, the Spanish poet and Reformation mystic—known for his poem “The Dark Night of the Soul”—who said, “in order to know everything, seek to know nothing.”<sup>7</sup>
- Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century monk, mystic, social activist, scholar of comparative religions, and prolific writer. His well-known book *The Seven Storey Mountain* gives an account of his spiritual journey.<sup>8</sup>
- Simone Weil, also 20th century, a French political activist and philosopher who, though raised as an agnostic, drifted into mysticism after three pivotal spiritual religious experiences. She wrote many books that influenced the spiritual lives of people in the 1940s and '50s.
- Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan priest and one of the most popular spirituality authors and speakers of our time. He founded The Center for Action and Contemplation. His spirit is rooted in Christian mysticism, and Cindy led some of us in a study of his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

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<sup>4</sup> Harvey, Andrew. *The Way of Passion: A Celebration of Rumi*. Tarcherperigee Press (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Dalai Lama XIV, *Essential Teachings*. North Atlantic Books (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Eckhart, Meister. *Sermons and Treatises*. Trans. and ed. M. O'C. Walshe. Element Books Ltd. (1987).

<sup>7</sup> *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh. ICS Publications (1991).

<sup>8</sup> Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948).

In looking at all these mystics I picked out three things that they seem to share:

- All are rooted in a particular faith tradition and honor its scriptures and sacraments. But they also see that God is beyond all that—universal, and beyond any religion’s attempt to define or claim authority.
- For mystics, God can never be grasped through knowledge. No matter how many books you’ve read, how steeped you are in scriptural studies, or what theological degrees you hold, God will always remain beyond your knowledge. Saint Augustine said, “If you think you understand, it is not God.”<sup>9</sup> St. John of the Cross described God as “nada, nada, nada”—nothing, as in no one thing. However, although God cannot be grasped through knowledge, mystics believe that God can be experienced. That is the quest for a mystic—not to understand with the mind, but to experience with the soul.
- How do mystics seek out that experience of God? Many of the mystics withdrew from society and lived monastic lives. Others, especially in more modern times, lived a kind of hybrid life—a mix of contemplation and social action, like Thomas Merton, Simone Weil, and Richard Rohr. But essential for mystics is that time of detachment from the world in order to be open to an experience of God.

The word *mystic* is intimidating to many people, because they feel that a mystical experience is attainable only by a chosen few. Not true at all—it is available to anyone who truly seeks it. I think we are all given, in the course of our lives, glimpses into a larger Reality that we can choose to either recognize or ignore. So many people think a mystical experience must involve some vision of God or the Virgin Mary or a Saint—some ethereal voice calling from afar. Again, not true.

A mystical experience is anything that breaks through your daily life and speaks to your soul. It might come through nature or music or poetry or art. It might come through an illness, a death, an adventure, the purity of a child’s joy, or the human touch—anything that pierces our hearts at that moment and awakens us to a deeper existence. Any such experience brings with it a sense of wonder, timelessness, and awareness that there is another deeper dimension out there. I think that is what Christ was telling us when he said in Luke 17:21, “The kingdom of heaven is among you.” And even more pointedly in the Gospel of Thomas: “The kingdom of heaven is spread upon the earth but men see it not.”

And right there is the crunch. The Mystery is around us all the time, coming right at us, but we just aren’t paying attention. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus charges us with just that—not opening our eyes to see or our ears to hear the Presence that is all around us—because we’re all so darn busy!

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<sup>9</sup> *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (397–400 AD).

Social media captures our attention every day, but God? Not so much. I recently heard on NPR that most Americans keep their cell phones within an arm's reach 24/7. Whatever do we fear we are going to miss? What *are* we missing when we keep tuning out the God channel?

Modern science has been recognizing that our brains are actually wired for God. In their book *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili write that certain areas of the brain that orient us to the “real” world get bypassed during meditation or prayer.<sup>10</sup> Our vagus nerve, often called the soul nerve, counterbalances our brain's fight or flight survival system and triggers a relaxation and mood-altering response. It conducts emotional, spiritual information from the brain to the body and vice versa. Scientists observed that the vagus nerve is stimulated through activities such as singing, dancing, chanting, time in nature, praying, hugging, rituals, and art. The research suggests that experiencing the sacred is part of being human—that it is part of our biological wiring. As it turns out, we are created to respond to God, but sadly we no longer live in a society that puts much value on spiritual experiences or “Aha!” moments. We are not encouraged to develop that part of our brain.

Maybe that is where the modern church can help. Fifty years ago, Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner made some startling predictions regarding the future of the Christian church: “The Christian of the future will either be a mystic or will not exist at all.”<sup>11</sup> (11) Rahner believed that if the Western church did not return to its mystical roots, they would be closing their doors for good. He preferred to refer to God as The Great Mystery and held that all human beings have latent experiences of God, which he called “the natural knowledge of God.” Rahner argued that God's self-communication is directly accessible to everyone, churched or unchurched, to either accept or reject. As Christ said, we either choose to open our eyes and ears—or not.

At this time when churches are indeed closing their doors at an alarming rate, maybe it is time to recognize that people are not looking for doctrines to attest to, creeds to recite, or commandments to memorize. They are not in need of an ecclesiastical hierarchy to determine their path. Instead, they are longing in their souls for their own direct encounter with divine Love. Longing for a place of peace and refuge from the world. Longing for a place where they can open their hearts to each other and sing, laugh, and cry together, a place where they can minister to each other as God's beloveds. People need a place that provides those unique experiences that will facilitate their own personal encounter with the divine Presence.

I subscribe to Diana Butler Bass's Substack podcast, “The Cottage.” I don't remember in which episode it was, but something she said stuck in my brain—and I think it sums it all up. She said,

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<sup>10</sup> Newberg, Andrew, and Eugene D'Aquili. *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. Ballantine Books (2002).

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, Karl. *Theological Investigations, Vol. 7*. Darton, Longman/Herder (1971).

“The best we humans can ever do to understand God is to just sink in the mystery of the divine Presence.”

Or as spiritual author Brian McLaren wrote, just "find that place of unknowing where something in us just sings." Spoken like a true mystic.