

Mystics of the Church 4

Mystics of the Middle Ages

1

Mystics of the Middle Ages

With some apologies but out of concern for time I will skip over important eastern mystics of the early middle ages such as John Climacus (c. 579-649), Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662), Isaac the Syrian (d. c. 700), and Symeon the New Theologian (942-1022) included in Egan's *Anthology of Christian Mysticism*. All are well worth thorough study. Western mystics such as Gregory the Great, John Scotus Erigena, William of St Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Aelred of Rielvaux, however, have contributed much more directly to the shaping of our own religious tradition and deserve more intensive examination if we are to get the most out of a study of later mystics.

2

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- I. Gregory the Great
 - Gregory (c. 540-604) ranks with Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine as one of four “doctors” (superlative teachers) of the Latin Church. He is remembered for establishing the authority of the Roman see, the noble example he set for the papacy (*servus servorum Dei*) and the clergy (*Pastoral Rule*), winning of England to the Roman Church, his impact on the Church’s worship, advancing Nicene Christianity versus Arianism, and laying a foundation for medieval theology. He deserves much credit for medieval theology being essentially an Augustinian brand of Platonism.

3

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- A. Life
 - Gregory was the son of a Roman senator. In 573 he became prefect of the city of Rome. Discontented with public life, he sold his vast properties and founded seven monasteries, six in Sicily and one in Rome. He entered the last one as a monk c. 574. After a few years, however, Pope Benedict I (575-579) drafted him as deacon of the seventh region of Rome. Soon afterwards, Pelagius II (579-590) dispatched him as *apocrisarius* (ambassador) to the imperial court in Constantinople. About 585 he returned from there and rejoined his monastery (St Andrew’s) as abbot. On the death of Pelagius the cry went up for him to become pope. He showed great skill in negotiations with the Lombards, who invaded Italy at this time, and secured virtual independence of the West from the Byzantine emperors. He spent vast monies for charity in administering the Church’s estates.

4

Mystics of the Middle Ages

– B. Writings

- Gregory wrote practical rather than speculative treatises. His most notable writings are: *The Book of Pastoral Rule* (c. 591), *Dialogues* (c. 593), *Exposition of the Book of Job* or *Moral Books*, *22 Homilies on Ezekiel*, *40 Homilies on the Gospels*, and 854 letters. He composed the *Pastoral Rule* to set forth a contemplative model for bishops. In his *Dialogues* he featured lives and miracles of Benedict of Nursia and other saints. In the *Moral Books* he treated Job in three senses—literal, mystical, and moral, giving special emphasis to the latter. His *Homilies on Ezekiel* contains some of his most profound mystical thought. *Homilies on the Gospels* were sermons he preached on various texts. Part of a *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and a *Commentary on 1 Kings* also survive.

5

Mystics of the Middle Ages

– C. Mystical Theology

- Gregory did not pretend to be an original thinker. He followed the teachings of Augustine and popularized the mystical doctrines of Pseudo-Dionysius. Nevertheless, he exerted a profound influence on western mysticism down to the 12th century. Jean Leclercq has said that Gregory is “more consistently mystical than Augustine.” (*Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, 6.) I will follow the lead of Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, in focusing on Gregory’s teaching as to how Christians, in this life, can attain the vision of God, that is, by contemplation.

6

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 1. He insisted that contemplation is possible only in and through study of the Bible. “For us to search out the depths of the scriptures is to contemplate the good things of eternity,” he declared. (*Pastoral Rule* 1.3.148.) “The more a saint progresses in understanding scripture, the more scripture progresses in him. . . . This is what happens—you sense that the words of sacred scripture are heavenly if you yourself, enkindled through the grace of contemplation are lifted up to heavenly things.” (*Homily in Ezekiel* 1.7.8.) Gregory used a vivid poetic imagination to show how scripture affects the lives of believers on every level—a door, a dense forest, a sea, a river, a mountain, flint, food and drink, a mirror. God intended the scriptures to lead to the salvation of all. It “surpasses all knowledge and teaching without any comparison.” (*Moral Books* 20.1.1.) Like

7

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- Augustine, he had much to say about the Bible’s relation to the reader. Understanding scripture is more divine gift than human effort. As for most Latin fathers, he used *mysticus* to refer almost exclusively to the hidden, deeper sense of scripture. Although God may give a private revelation, most of it comes from deeper insight into scriptures. In his second homily of book 2 on Ezekiel he talks about two forms divine enlightenment may take on the meaning of scripture. One is communal and liturgical, the other deep experiences of compunction. Regarding the three levels of interpretation, he recognized as Origen did that we sometimes have to abandon the literal meanings as erroneous or self-contradictory. He interpreted christocentrically.

8

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 2. Gregory said little about the Trinity, and he held the modified Augustinian concept of grace adopted at the Synod of Orange in 529. Grace is prevenient but not irresistible. He held a high view of the Church, and evidently applied the Song of Songs mostly to Church. The Church is Christ's body that creates harmony in diversity. Clergy and monks are higher orders than the married, but all have the same faith and live by the same hope of reward.
- 3. Gregory did not have great interest in the steps by which a soul makes its way to God, but he emphasized conversion and the necessity of continuing struggle. He used experientially dialectical language to give his teaching a concrete character. Among his important contributions to the human situation was a profound pessimism balanced by

9

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- a conviction that, for the elect, even the world of trial and suffering has a purpose. Alongside all of the passages of doom and gloom stand a sense of joy and peace. He is a theologian of patient acceptance of suffering and not voluntary, induced suffering. He had trouble reconciling ambiguities. For instance, he thought the relation between body and soul would remain askew until Christ returned and the body would be resurrected. Life on earth is a warfare. The battle is not between the body and the soul but between worldly and celestial forces. Here is where he underscored the importance of compunction. McGinn has said, "Gregory is the 'Doctor of Compunction' precisely because of his deeply felt sense of the radical insufficiency of all terrestrial goods in relation to those of the heavenly world." (*Growth*, 48.) He distinguished two kinds of compunction—of fear and of love. Compunction is not just sorrow for sin but, much more, what draws the soul toward its heavenly home. Without compunction we cannot attain contemplation.

10

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 4. Gregory gave a richer and more complete understanding of contemplation than Augustine and Cassian. The concern pervades all of his writing. (a) **He rooted his understanding in the history of salvation.** In the fall Adam lost the ability to contemplate God in interior loving sight. The reason for the Incarnation was God's loving desire to restore Adam's contemplative vision. Christ himself possessed perfect standing with God, but the redemption he wrought did not restore it perfectly but partially. (b) **Believers have access to the contemplative vision of God only through Christ.** The Holy Spirit acting in our lives enables us to begin to enjoy contemplation. The Spirit is our internal teacher. (c) **What is contemplation?** Broadly speaking, it is "attentive regard for God alone." We cannot attain it perfectly in this life because of God's incomprehensibility. Thus it is the impossible ideal. Our fundamental preparation is devoutly

11

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- to live the Christian life through the power of the Holy Spirit expressed in the virtues of faith, hope, and love and the increasing activity of the sevenfold gift. Some specific practices help: reading and study of scriptures, cultivation of humility and other virtues, and, above all, withdrawal from exterior distractions to the inner self (a clearly Augustinian emphasis). Gregory made a significant contribution to the discussion of the relation between love and knowledge. Both loving and knowing are necessary in contemplation. "Love itself is a form of knowledge," is a phrase he coined. Jean Leclercq has called him "Doctor of desire," for he gave great weight to "longing" and "desiring" in his discussion of love. He used a variety of images expressive of desire, especially related to fire. We talk to God in the languages of love and desire. Although Gregory applied the language of the Song of Songs mostly to the Church, he also applied it to the individual soul. On the relation of love and knowledge the pope insisted on the priority of love but also that knowing plays a necessary if subordinate role. Knowledge has its limits.

12

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- Gregory spoke of the experiential aspects of contemplation more often and in more detail than his predecessors. He used a variety of terms almost interchangeably: love, desire, seeking, knowledge, vision, and contemplation. His mysticism has often been described as a mysticism of light. In various texts he referred to it as a vision of “uncircumscribed” or “unencircled” light. Yet his is also a mysticism of darkness. He speaks about the “nocturnal vision. Sound and silence constituted another way he thought of the poles of mystical experience. Other polarities include joy and fear, elevation and temptation, and satisfaction and hunger. He made few references to union with God, but he spoke often about consciousness of the presence of God. Commenting on Paul’s statement in I Cor 13:12, “Then I will know as I am known,” he explained that this is “because after hard labors, after floods of compunctions, the soul is often suspended in ecstasy (*in excessu*) so that it can contemplate the knowledge of the divine presence, a presence that it can feel (*sentire*) but it cannot exhaust. And

13

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- rightly after so many labors can we say of someone so tempted, ‘He will see God’s face in jubilation.’” (*Moral Books* 24.6.12.) Gregory’s writings, McGinn argues, “display a greater interest in the exploration of contemplative consciousness than was typical among earlier patristic authors.” (*Growth*, 71.) Some passages seem to substantiate personal experience.
 - To the soul that sees the Creator every creature is *limited*. To anyone who sees even a *little of the light of the Creator* everything created will become small, because in the *very light of the intimate vision the inner reaches of the mind are opened up*. It is so expanded in God that it stands above the world. The soul of someone who sees in this way is also above itself. *When the soul is rapt above itself in God’s light, it is enlarged in its interior;*

14

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- while it gazes beneath it, in its high state it comprehends how small that is which it could not comprehend when it was in a lowly state. Therefore, the man who, looking at the fiery globe also saw the angels returning to heaven, without doubt was able to do so *only in the light of God*. What wonder is it then if he saw the world gathered together before him, he who was lifted up outside the world *in the light of the mind*? That the world is said to have been gathered together before his eyes is not because heaven and earth was contracted but because *the intellectual soul of the one who saw was enlarged*. He who is *rapt in God* can see everything that is beneath God without difficulty. In that light which shone on his external eyes there was *an interior light in the mind* which showed the intellectual soul or the one seeing (because he had been rapt to higher things) just how limited was everything beneath it. (*Dialogues* 2.35; in McGinn, *Growth*, 72. Italics his.)

15

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 5. **A number of texts indicate that Gregory believed that contemplation is open to all Christians.** “The grace of contemplation is not given to the highest [clergy] and not to the least, but frequently the highest, frequently the least, more frequently to ‘those set apart’ (monks) and sometimes even the married receive it. Therefore, there is no Christian state from which the grace of contemplation can be excluded.” (*Homily in Ezekiel* 2.5.19.) But he felt some tension about the matter. “The active life belongs to many, the contemplative to few.” (*Moral Books* 32.3.4.) **How did he relate active and contemplative lives?** He believed the contemplative life a higher calling, but he thought of both as valid. The active life entails an exercise of love toward neighbor; the contemplative focuses on unrestricted desire for the vision of God. All Christians should practice both. Like predecessors, he used Mary and Martha and Leah and Rachel as types. He was no Cassian, valuing only monastic life, but he did hold it in high regard. Monks, too, should combine action and contemplation. McGinn labels him the “Doctor of the Mixed Life.”

16

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- II. John Scotus Erigena
 - Some note should be taken of the brilliant Irishman who introduced dialectical mysticism, John Scotus Erigena (c. 810-c. 877). He stands out as the most original thinker in the West between Augustine and Anselm.
 - A. Life
 - Little is known of his early life except that he was born in Ireland. He probably received his education in Ireland, but he first came to notice in the Frankish Kingdom. Charles the Bald, Charlemagne's grandson, brought him to his court c. 845. Although not a monk or priest, he took part in the theological controversies raging at the time concerning the eucharist (Radbertus and Ratramnus) and concerning predestination (Gottschalk). He lived at least until the death of Charles in 877 and perhaps beyond.

17

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- B. Writings
 - In *Periphyseon* or *On the Division of Nature* he attempted to reconcile Christian thought with Neoplatonism. The treatise was condemned at Paris in 1210 and again by Pope Honorius III at Sens in 1225. In a treatise *On Predestination* he took a strong stand against the determinism of Gottschalk. He perhaps made his most notable contribution in translating Pseudo-Dionysius's writings into Latin (c. 860-862). He wrote a *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy* of Dionysius. He also translated Maximus the Confessor's *Ambigua* and Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Offering of Man* and *On the Image*. He wrote a number of exegetical works, including a *Homily on the Prologue of John* and an unfinished *Commentary on John* (up to 6:14).

18

Mystics of the Middle Ages

– C. Mystical Theology

- 1. Erigena played a key role in originating the dialectical mysticism found in Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa. He evinces Celtic, Latin, and Greek influences. Among Latin sources the most important were the Neoplatonist Marius Victorinus, Ambrose, and Augustine; among Greek sources the Dionysian corpus exerted the greatest influence. He sought to explain how the cosmos, through the mediation of human subjects, returns to its fullest possible unification with the hidden God. He wanted to show how spiritual means permit us to transcend the temporal and created conditions and gain timeless participation in the oneness of God's infinite nothingness.

19

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 2. McGinn argues that Erigena's mystical theology had a biblical base. Although he emphasized "right reason," he also insisted that "the authority of Holy Scripture must be followed in all things." (*Periphyseon* 1.) Scripture is God's speech about Godself and must therefore be properly understood by anyone who wants to know God. Both creation and scripture witness to the hidden God. Scripture came into being because of the "fall." In his exegesis Erigena rarely touches on the moral meaning. He concentrates rather on the physical and especially the theological meanings. Like others since Origen, he recognized that some biblical texts can't be read literally and that all are capable of many meanings. Truth and right reason are the proper criteria for correct interpretation. Like Origen, Erigena believed that mystical transformation takes place in the very exercise of interpreting scripture.

20

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 3. McGinn has outlined the foundations of Erigena's mysticism under three headings: (1) **He adapted a Neoplatonic dynamic of procession and return to a Christian understanding of creation and salvation.** God is within the world as its deepest reality but at the same time not in the world, being *above* and *beyond* it. Affirmations about God must be counterbalanced by negations. God is the essence of all things, but God is not goodness, not wisdom, No-thing. This dialectical structure underlies the divisions of the *Periphyseon*: "that which creates and is not created; that which is created and also creates; that which is created and does not create; and that which neither creates nor is created." Although accused of Pantheism, he clearly was not guilty. Yet McGinn does not want to label him a Panentheist either.

21

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 2) **For Erigena Creation is the illuminating divine manifestation.** Among his primary metaphors for creation are light and darkness. In his view all things are lights because created by a luminous Father and because they light our way back to God. Creation not only diffuses the invisible light; it also manifests the unmanifested Word of God. In creation God comes to know Godself by speaking Godself. The universal goal of the entire creation is the Word of God. If all things are God manifested, then humanity is God manifested in a special way. Humankind, therefore, must have a special role in the "procession" of all things from God.

22

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- **(3) Union with God occurs through deifying contemplation.** Erigena viewed the garden of paradise as pure symbol. The “fall” is only human inability to grasp our true relationship with God. Restoration of the relationship will occur through the conquest of ignorance and illusion. The goal of the universe of lights that the unknowable God creates out of divine nothingness is to restore all multiplicity into the “simple unity of the concentrating and deifying Father.” (IE) Because God made all things in the Word, insofar as they possess the Word, they lead to eternal life. In his return to the Father he elevates the whole human race and the material universe contained in it. He lifts us not only to the primordial state of humanity but to the level of divinity itself. Erigena lay great stress on the saving mysteries of Christ’s life in the return. His resurrection has particular importance because it marks the beginning of humanity’s

23

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- existence in a higher spiritual state. We are incorporated into Christ in two ways—through our humanity and through baptism, eucharist, and other sacraments. The work of return begun by Christ depends on the cooperation of both nature and grace. On grace Erigena was closer to eastern Christian sources than to Augustine. Like Origen, Erigena held a universalistic understanding of the return of all things to God. His answer to the problem created by this was the idea of a double reward—a general and a special return. In the special return some will not only be restored to their primordial state but “shall achieve the consummation of their return beyond every rank in the hierarchy of nature, in the Cause of all things, which is God.” (*Periphyseon* 5.) Hell, in his view, is not a place or a limitation on the general return; God punishes the crime, not the nature.

24

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 4. With reference to the return to God Erigena adapted a scheme of Maximus Confessor that consisted of five stages. They were: (1) the dissolution of the body into the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water) at death; (2) the restoration of the body from the elements at the general resurrection; (3) the transmutation of the body into a spiritual reality following the model of the risen body of Christ; (4) the return of the entire human nature to the primordial causes; and (5) “finally, the universal creature shall be unified with its Creator, and shall be in him and with him one.” (*Periphyseon* 5.) Erigena introduces a more complex model with three steps to level five and a sevenfold path for the fifth.

25

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 5. Is union with God or deification possible in this life? Erigena constantly emphasized that, by grace, it is. Like Augustine, he clearly differentiated being God by nature and becoming God by the adoptive sonship of deification. He connects deification closely with contemplation and union. He made much of Paul’s experience of being seized up to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2-3). Paul experienced the celestial hierarchy of Dionysius. Such experiences, however, will not match the final *adunation* (ultimate union). For Erigena God always remains “God beyond God” so that human direct contact with God remains impossible. This ultimate union will result in changing the awareness of all humanity, which will reach final differentiation in unity of the cosmic Christ. Like Gregory of Nyssa, so too Erigena ends with *epektasis*, constant and ever-deepening movement into the mystery that God is. God can never be attained directly but only through theophanies.

26

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- III. Bernard of Clairvaux
 - The *Brautmystik* tradition reached its acme with Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians William of St Thierry and Aelred of Rielvaux. The 12th century was an era when love got lots of attention in the *minnesingers*, the troubadours, and the courtesans. Not surprisingly, it offered an occasion for deep reflection about the love of God with the Song of Songs as a stimulus. Not even popes surpassed Bernard (1090-1153) in influence during the 12th century. Dante featured Bernard as his own teacher and model.

27

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- A. Life
 - Born in 1090 of noble parents at Fontaines near Dijon, in 1112 he led thirty other young noblemen of Burgundy, including his brothers, to the newly founded monastery of Citeaux. Three years later, Abbot Stephen Harding asked him to found a new monastery, and he chose Clairvaux. Under his direction Clairvaux soon became one of the chief centers of the Cistercian Order. In 1128 he acted as secretary of the Synod of Troyes that recognized the new order of Knights Templar. In a disputed papal election following the death of Honorius II in 1130, he successfully backed Innocent II against Anacletus. As a result, the pope showered favors on the Cistercian Order. In 1140 Bernard led an attack on Peter Abelard at the Council of Sens. In 1145 a former student of his became Pope Eugenius III. He preached the Second Crusade, whose failure deeply saddened him. He was canonized in 1174 and made a Doctor of the Church in 1830.

28

Mystics of the Middle Ages

– B. Writings

- Bernard began his writing about 1125 with *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, an apology in defense of Cistercians against Cluniacs, and his first letters and sermons. He wrote a theological treatise *On Grace and Free Will* and his chief mystical treatise *On the Love of God* around 1128. In 1135 he began his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, leaving 86 at his death. He also preached 125 *Sermons on the Liturgical Year* and *Sermons on Diverse Topics*. From his last years he left treatises *On Precept and Dispensation* (c. 1141-1144) and *On Consideration* (c. 1148-1153) plus numerous letters.

29

Mystics of the Middle Ages

– C. Mystical Theology

- 1. McGinn has observed that “Bernard’s mystical theology is solidly rooted in, indeed inseparable from its doctrinal foundations.” (*Growth*, 165.) As an Augustinian, Bernard had a profound sense of human sinfulness and the misery of human daily experience. Self-knowledge must begin with an awareness of our sinfulness and “carnality.” Recognition of our plight should result in humility as the essential starting point of the spiritual life. The humility and hope that will lead us from sin and back to God are not our own effort, however; they are the work of the Incarnate Word within us. The sweetness of the carnal love of Jesus is needed to drive out the sweetness of illicit loves. By contrast with Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard insisted that we must accept this carnal love and redirect it to the carnal love of Christ’s

30

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- humanity. That is the necessary starting point on the way to spiritual love of his divinity. The Incarnate Word supplies the will and the ability to pursue the way of salvation. If we conform to the Word, we will be transformed into the image and likeness in which God created us (as 2 Cor 3:18). In line with Irenaeus, Bernard would say, "He became man in order that we might become divine." We can pass from the lower to the higher stages of love as we share in the mysteries of Christ's life. Bernard here played a major role in the development of devotion to the sacred humanity of Christ, especially the mysteries of the nativity as well as the passion. He fostered devotion to the *name* of Jesus. This transition from carnal to spiritual love achieved in the risen

31

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- and ascended Christ, however, was much more than literal imitation. To Bernard the Church is basic in all of this. He renewed the tradition of applying the Song of Songs both to the individual soul and to the Church. The Church and Christ exist in perfect oneness just as the Bride and the Bridegroom in the Song of Songs. Bernard envisioned a hypostatic union of Church and Word parallel to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the Incarnation. Whereas other medieval writers found the center of contact with Christ in the sacraments, Bernard found it in the sacrament of marriage of Christ with the Church.

32

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 2. Bernard did not distinguish his dogmatic from his mystical theology, but McGinn has summarized his thought in a systematic way. Two features stand out: Bernard emphasized the universality of the call to contemplation. He had a dynamic and progressive view of this invitation—one grand continuum of love stretching from earthly and carnal love of fallen humanity to the heights of the heavenly love in which progress comes only slowly.
- 3. **Stages on the road to perfection.** Bernard presents different schemes. In *The Steps of Humility and Pride* he gives twelve, in the 18th *Sermon on the Song of Songs* seven steps to fullness of love. He also wrote of the threefold division—purification, illumination, and loving union. He introduced these with biblical images.

33

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 4. **The role of experience and the spiritual senses.** Bernard was less reticent to report experiences of the presence of God than earlier mystics. He spoke about “the book of experience,” though he did not develop it in a systematic way. One of his ways of effecting a transition from the book of scriptures to the book of experience was by investigation of the spiritual senses of the soul. He used a variety of images: the sensation of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.
- 5. **The presence of God.** At the heart of Bernard’s mystical theology was the intimate relationship of love and contemplation with the presence of God. He

34

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- focused upon the presence throughout his writings. God dwells in every good soul as a special “heaven.” As the soul enlarges, it becomes a more commodious home for the divine guest and becomes more sensitive to the interior experience of his presence. In early works he stressed the Trinitarian dimension of the divine indwelling, but in later ones he underscored the Word made flesh. Characteristically he speaks of the visit as a sensation of the fire of divine love. The most famous account is in *Sermon 74 on the Song of Songs* (in Egan, 174). The test of authenticity is what effect the Word has on one’s way of living and acting.

35

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- **6. Love as the center of Bernard’s mysticism.** Bernard repeatedly returns to the words *amor*, *caritas*, and *desiderium* to describe the experience of God. I summarize McGinn’s main points. (1) Love has priority over everything. No passage of scripture meant more to Bernard than I John 4:8, “God is love.” Love is the “law” of God’s being. (2) Human love is of God. “God is the reason for loving God; the measure of loving him is to love without measure.” (*On the Love of God* (1.1.) The problem of fallen humanity is that we can no longer see the real reason for loving God. Hence, God must take the initiative to meet fallen humanity at the level of selfish, carnal love. (3) The best illustration of the selfless love that we need to develop is bridal love. Spousal love has the following features: (a) It is pure or sweet. (b) It consists of both knowing and loving. Intellect alone blocks

36

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- our return to God. Cooperation of these two enable us to attain the goal. Although love alone can attain God in this life, knowledge has an important role to play. Contemplation is both affective and cognitive. (c) Love is not only rational or prudent; it is also vehement, violent even. Bernard sought to cultivate this kind of vehemence in the relationship with God. (d) Love is mutual and reciprocal. Love permits humans in some measure to give back to God. Bernard here spoke especially about love in a marriage and illustrated with sexual intercourse. Ecstasy is akin to orgasm. (e) Bernard often spoke of vision, contemplation, and ecstasy as expressions of union. The fact that they happen in this life does not take away from God's transcendence. Bernard named three ways in which God can be "seen" in this life: in all creatures, in the days of the patriarchs in exterior images or spoken words, and by "a

37

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- divine gaze more different than these as it is more interior when God deigns through himself to visit the soul seeking him." (*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 31.3-4.) God is seen in interior vision. Such vision always has limitations; yet it is attainable in this life. A vision may result in our transformation, the restoration of the divine likeness. "The *caritas* that is the restored likeness in us forms the height of contemplative vision," says McGinn (*Growth*, 211.) In Bernard **contemplation** expressed "a continuum of the experience of God's presence symbolized in visual form." (McGinn, *Growth*, 211.) He was sure that it is imperfect and brief in this life and always emphasized that it is a gift of God. At every stage God takes initiative. He spoke of contemplation at the highest stage as "rest" but also referred to it as *excessus*, "passing beyond," or *ecstasis*, "standing outside," or *raptus*, "rapture." Bernard also thought humans could be "deified" in the mystical union. In union the soul who adheres to

38

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- to God feels both that it is in God and God is in it. This mutuality of God in us and we in God occurs when we begin to love God after being loved by God from all eternity. Bernard compiled lists of analogies to this union. (f) The form in which we experience the love of God always leaves us dissatisfied and yearning in this life. We always stretch forward for something more (as in Gregory of Nyssa's *epektasis*). (g) Spousal love is an ordered love in the sense that we need to put our affections and desires in proper relation. In their interaction contemplative and active love must arrange affections hierarchically in relation to God. Both active and contemplative orders of love exist here below, but the contemplative should have priority, as in the Mary/Martha story.

39

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- IV. William of St. Thierry
 - William of St Thierry (c. 1085-1148) has not gotten the recognition Bernard has, but he too contributed significantly to the Cistercian mystical tradition. Originally a Benedictine, his admiration of Bernard caused him to switch his affiliation as Bernard criticized the laxity of Cluny and other monasteries. His writings displayed wide knowledge of the Bible and the fathers of both East and West.

40

Mystics of the Middle Ages

– A. Life

- William was born to noble parents at Liège. Probably educated at Laon, he entered the Benedictine Abbey of St Nicasius at Reims in 1113. In 1119 or 1120 he was elected abbot of St Thierry near Reims. He met Bernard before his election as abbot and formed a close friendship. Although he wanted to join the Cistercians for a long time, Bernard himself dissuaded him until 1135, when he resigned his abbacy and joined Cistercian monks forming a house at Signy. He died September 8, 1148.

41

Mystics of the Middle Ages

– B. Writings

- Although drawn to contemplative life, William devoted much energy to theological study. His first two treatises, *On God Being Contemplated* and *On the Nature and Worth of Love*, discussed the rapport between knowledge and love. After completing the first version of his exposition of the Song of Songs, he turned to Romans and the problem of grace: How does God give us love and how do we receive it? In 1128 he dedicated a treatise *On the Sacrament of the Altar* to Bernard, addressing how one encounters God in the Eucharist. Before departing from St Thierry he tried to synthesize eastern and western thinking *On the Nature of the Soul and the Body*. In 1138 he took up the pen against Peter Abelard and William of Conches. He followed these polemical writings with treatises on faith—*The Mirror of Faith* and *The Enigma of Faith*.

42

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- After moving to Signy he composed a more individualistic commentary on the Song of Songs and completed his *Meditative Orations*. In his last years he synthesized his doctrine and experience in his famous *Epistle to Brothers of the Mountain of God on the Solitary Life*. His final work was a life of Bernard, which he did not complete.
- C. Mystical Theology
 - 1. William of St Thierry has stood in the shadow of Bernard of Clairvaux until a recent surge of interest in him. Although his thought paralleled Bernard's, he was an independent and sophisticated theorist of mysticism in his own right. The main source of his thought was Augustine, but he showed familiarity with numerous other fathers of both East and West. Because of the affinity of his thought for Bernard's, I will mention here some points at which he diverged from his mentor.

43

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- One of those was in his **anthropology**. Because of his study of eastern fathers, he distinguished between "image" and "likeness." The "image" emphasizes the essential or original share in the divine nature which makes each of us open to God. The "likeness" concerns primarily the participative or perfecting activity by which we do or do not choose to resemble God in how we love and act. The "image" cannot be lost, but the "likeness" has been lost through sin. Like Augustine, William held that Christ is the only true "image" of God, so that we are "the image of the image." Like Gregory of Nyssa, he saw our challenge as to gain self-knowledge of the "image of the Trinity" in ourselves. The more we become like Christ and love him, the more the image will be restored.

44

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- Another had to do with **the dynamics of progress**. William connected this with three stages of prayer: animal, rational, and spiritual. The animal stage, like Bernard's "carnal love of Christ," starts us in the right direction. The rational stage enables us to begin to know God as God really is while the intellect and the will are cleansed by the Holy Spirit. The spiritual stage begins as reason's judgment gives way to "the affect of the mind." Those who reach this stage are the "perfect," who are led by and fully enlightened by the Holy Spirit. William also distinguished three degrees of faith and of believers.

45

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- 2. William's central mystical themes differed somewhat from Bernard's, but he, like Bernard, had a "theology of experience." (1) His mysticism was Spirit-centered, though he did not minimize the essential role of the Incarnate Word. The Word assures us of returning to the relationship Adam had with God. In the *Mirror of Faith* he insisted, "There is no way of coming to 'That Which Is,' unless he who is sought runs out to meet us and shines his face upon us, and brightens his face so that in its light we may know which way to proceed" (120-121). He paid more attention to the sacraments than Bernard did. (2) He connected love and intellect. Like Bernard, he would say, "Love is itself understanding." He perceived three stages in the progression of love: (a) the soul loving God, (b) and perceiving God in the act of loving, (c) is transformed suddenly and totally (*Mirror of Perfection* 101.) Love is what carries the soul to its goal. Like Bernard,

46

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- William insisted that we can only love God because God first loves us, and he provides a number of itineraries of love. (3) “The path that leads to the *similitudo Dei* regained through the *intellectus amoris* is also a contemplative vision bringing us to ecstatic union with God.” (McGinn, *Growth*, 260.) William used contemplation often, but his more characteristic expression was “vision of God” or “faces of God.” Face-to-face vision is our eschatological hope. He gave more precise attention to union with God than Bernard did and differed from Bernard in the way he concentrated on “unity of likeness” and tied it to the “consubstantial unity” of the Trinity. For him the union goes well beyond what Bernard and other medieval writers would affirm.

47

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- (4) William also underscored the role of the Spirit in the Trinity and in the mystical life. McGinn has concluded, “William’s was a Spirit-centered mysticism.” (*Growth*, 268.) The Holy Spirit is the source of community in the Trinity. This community is communicated to humanity in the unity of the Spirit. This does not mean he played down the roles of Father and Son; they serve as co-principle of the Spirit. The Word made flesh reveals the central mystery of faith, but the Spirit in our hearts draws us up into the mystery itself.

48

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- V. Aelred of Rievaulx
 - Aelred or Ailred of Rievaulx (1109-1167) was known as the “Bernard of the North.” He is remembered particularly for his treatise *On Friendship*.
 - A. Life
 - The son of a Saxon priest of Hexham, he lived for some years at the court of King David of Scotland. Around 1133 he entered the Cistercian convent at Rievaulx. In 1143 he became Abbot of Revesby, in 1147 Abbot of Rievaulx.

49

Mystics of the Middle Ages

- B. Writings
 - At the invitation of Bernard of Clairvaux he wrote his first important work, *The Mirror of Love*, in 1142-1143. His extensive writings show marked similarity to Bernard’s and William of St Thierry’s. His most widely cited work was *On Spiritual Friendship*, a rewriting of Cicero’s *On Friendship*. Whether monks should cultivate friendships was a matter of debate in the 12th century. Ailred answered in the affirmative and set forth guidelines for such friendship. He wrote, too, a biography of Edward the Confessor.

50