

Mystics of the Church

The 14th Century English Mystics

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- Except for the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the English mystics of the 14th and early 15th century do not reflect much influence from the continent. Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich fit comfortably into the *Brautmystik* or *kataphatic* stream. It is quite surprising, then, to find the anonymous author of *The Cloud* espousing the apophatic tradition based on Pseudo-Dionysius and attempting to integrate it into the *kataphatic* tradition. It is worth noting that the Bubonic Plague or Black Death struck England as it did the most of Europe during the 14th century and influenced spiritual outlook.

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- I. Richard Rolle
 - Richard Rolle clearly belongs in the *Brautmystik* tradition. He wove much of his instruction around the Song of Songs. The title of his most widely read book was *The Fire of Love*. He summed up the mystical experience in the images of fire, song, and sweetness. His thought reflects deep indebtedness, above all, to Bernard of Clairvaux, the most outstanding exemplar of the *Brautmystik* tradition.

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- A. Life
 - There has been considerable debate about the facts of Rolle's life. He was born at Thornton, near Pickering in Yorkshire, around 1300 or shortly thereafter. The son of a tenant farmer, he studied at Oxford under patronage of Thomas Neville, Archdeacon of Durham, but he broke off his studies at age eighteen or nineteen and became a hermit. He lived first on the estate of a friend, John Dalton, and then in various other places. He established a contemplative regimen, wrote, and offered spiritual guidance to others. He spent his last years near the convent of Cistercian nuns at Hampole, where he died on September 29, 1349, the year the plague decimated the area, and was buried. Efforts to canonize him did not succeed, but he was highly revered up to the 17th century.

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– B. Writings

- Rolle preached only one sermon, soon after deciding to become a hermit. However, he wrote extensively on mystical and ascetical topics with the object of instructing the devout in the spiritual life. In the Prologue to *The Fire of Love* he made clear that he did not write for scholars. He offered the book, he said, “for consideration not by philosophers, not by the worldly-wise, not by great theologians ensnarled in infinite questionings, but by the unsophisticated and the untaught, who are trying to love God rather than to know many things. For He is known in doing and in loving, not in arguing.” (Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love and The Mending of Life*, trans. M. L. del Mastro [1981], 95). Elsewhere, he remonstrated with the academics. “Alas, the shame! That a little old lady could be more experienced in love of God (and less experienced in the pleasure of the world!) than a theologian, whose study is empty because he studies for the sake of vanity—that he may learn and appear glorious—and so that he may

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- acquire payments and dignities! Such a one deserves to be judged stupid, not learned.” (Ibid. 111). In addition to *The Fire of Love*, which probably offers the best introduction to his teaching, he did translations and commentaries on the Psalms, a Commentary on Job, Meditations on the Passion, lyric poems and prose, a sort of appeal to take the spiritual life seriously entitled *The Mending of Life*, a challenge for a nun of Yedington to attain the highest degree of love, and a basic treatise entitled *The Form of Living* for an anchoress named Margaret Kirkby. Notable influences on his thought besides Bernard include Augustine, Gregory the Great, Peter the Lombard, Richard of St. Victor, and Francis of Assisi.

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– C. Mystical Experience

- In Chapter 15 of *The Fire of Love* Rolle recounted his experience of God. It exerted obvious influence on his teaching, so I quote it in full.
 - For from the beginning of my alteration of life and spirit, up to the opening of the door of heaven (allowing the eye of my heart to contemplate heavenly beings with their beauty revealed, to see by which road it might seek its Beloved and to sigh continually for Him), there flowed past three years except for three or four months.
 - Almost one year passed with the door remaining opened, until the time in which the heat of eternal love was felt in reality in my heart. In fact, I was sitting in a certain chapel and while I was greatly delighting in the smoothness of prayer or meditation, suddenly I experienced within myself an unaccustomed and

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- joyous burning ardor. But, although at first doubting from where this might be coming, I have proved through a long period of time that it comes not from a creature but from the Creator, because I have found it more burning and more agreeable.
- Moreover, from that inestimably delightful heat blazing in my senses to the infusion and perception of the celestial or spiritual sound which belongs to the canticle of eternal praise and the smoothness of invisible melody (which cannot be known or heard except by him who receives it—who must be cleansed and separated from earth), there flowed past nine months and several weeks.
- For when I was sitting in that same chapel and I was singing the psalms in the evening before supper as well as I was able,

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– I jumped as if at the ringing, or rather, the playing of stringed instruments, above me. And further, when I strained toward these heavenly sounds by praying with all my desire, I do not know how soon I experienced the blending of melodies within myself and drew forth the most delightful harmony from heaven, which remained with me in my spirit. For my meditation was continually transformed into the song of harmony, and it is as if I have odes in meditating. And further, I have enjoyed that same sound in psalmody and in the prayers themselves. Then I have hastened before the flowing forth of that inward, indeed hidden, sweetness, to that singing I have described previously, because I have been hastening into the presence of my Creator alone. (Ibid. 147-8.)

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- The distinctive feature of Rolle's experience is the triad love, song, sweetness. He proceeded to note afterward that "this gift is given to no one because of merit, but gratuitously, to whomever Christ shall will." (Ibid. 148). The experience occurred some time after his conversion. "Now from the beginning of the change of soul up to the final degree of love of Christ which I had the God-given strength to attain—the step in which I resounded divine praises with the melody of jubilant song—I lived through four years and around three months." (Ibid. 148-9).

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– D. Rolle’s Instruction for Others

- 1. Richard Rolle wrote in English as well as Latin with a view to reaching a wider audience. Curiously, although he reflected the low view of women characteristic in his day, he addressed most of his writing to women. Perhaps understandably for his day he thought of life on earth as “a valley of tears” and looked longingly toward death as an opening to the final experience of love.
- 2. Rolle underscored some of the typical spiritual disciplines. Like his mentor Bernard of Clairvaux, he stressed humility. He listed three steps toward contemplation: (1) praying and meditating, (2) fasting and keeping vigil, and (3) melodious singing. But he insisted that love is the main thing, and it is not hard to understand why Quietists would have an affinity

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- for him. Somewhat reluctantly he admitted, “Certainly the man turned with his whole heart to Christ is first influenced through true penitence, and thus, leaving behind all things that pertain to vanity, after a taste of internal delight, he will be snatched up by heaven to sing in resounding rejoicing.” (Ibid. 155). No matter how much we do, however, it is what God does that matters. “For the contemplative life (even a small portion of it) is not completely acquired by anyone in this valley of tears unless his heart is first set on fire at its foundation by the torches of eternal love, so that he experiences his very heart burning with the fire of love and recognizes his conscience being melted by that honey-like delight.” (Ibid. 163). The fire of love purges sins, although it doesn’t make one sinless. It transforms the heart. “For the most part, God pours His ineffable jubilation into His lovers.” (Ibid. 182). Love of God should intermingle everything. Whatever we do, we should keep our minds and hearts on God.

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- 3. In *The Form of Living* that he wrote for the anchoress Margaret Kirkby he stressed attentiveness to God and burning with love for Christ. “. . . I believe most sincerely that the consolation of Jesus Christ, and the sweetness of his love, with the fire of the Holy Spirit who cleanses all sin, shall be in you and with you, leading you and instructing you how you are to meditate, how you are to pray, and what you are to do, so that after a few years you shall certainly have more delight in being yourself and speaking with your beloved and your spouse, Jesus Christ, who is high in Heaven, than in the possibility of being a lady in command of the population of the whole earth a thousand times multiplied.” (Richard Rolle, *The Form of Living*, chapter 2, in *Classics of Western Spirituality*, 157). Later he instructed,

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- “At the outset turn yourself absolutely to your Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ibid. 162). Margaret should keep four things in mind: (1) the brevity of life, (2) the certainty of the end, (3) God’s judgment, and (4) the joy of those who persevere. Yet her key concern should be Jesus. “I want you to be constantly climbing toward Jesus, and intensifying your love and your attendance on him.” (Ibid. 163). As in the Song of Songs, her heart should “languish for love.”
- 4. Rolle offers two different schemes for growth in love. In *The Form of Living* he lists (1) insuperable, (2) inseparable, and (3) singular. “Insuperable” means that nothing can overcome love. “Inseparable” is when love is fixed on Christ

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- entirely. “Singular” is “where all comfort and consolation are excluded from your heart except those of Jesus Christ alone.” Rolle gives a practical tip on loving Jesus. “If you wish to be on good terms with God, and have his grace direct your life, and come to the joy of love,” he advises, “then fix this name ‘Jesus’ so firmly in your heart that it never leaves your thought. . . . If you think of the name ‘Jesus’ continually and cling to it devotedly, then it will cleanse you from sin and set your heart aflame; it will enlighten your soul, remove turbulence and eliminate lethargy; it will give the wound of love and fill the soul to overflowing with love; it will chase off the devil and eliminate terror, open heaven and create a mystic.” (Ibid. 173). I am reminded here of the Prayer of the Heart or Jesus Prayer.

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- 5. Rolle anticipated that Margaret Kirkby would raise some questions and responded to five. (1) *What is love?* He answered that “love is an ardent yearning for God, with a wonderful delight and security. . . . Love is a device through which God loves us and we God and each of us one another.” (Ibid. 174). He went on to urge, “We must strive to clothe ourselves in love, as iron or as charcoal do in fire, as the air does in sun, and as the wool does in the dye.” (Ibid.). (2) *Where is love?* “Love is in a person’s heart and will, not in his hand nor in his mouth; which means: not in his actions but in his soul.” (3) *How am I really to love God?* “Real love is loving him with all your strength valiantly, with all your heart attentively, with all your soul devotedly and sweetly. . . . Where does the Holy Spirit settle? On the soul which is humble.” (Ibid. 174). (4) *How*

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- *might you recognize that you were in a state of love and charity?* One can only know by grace, but there are seven criteria: (a) obliteration of all worldly craving, (b) burning longing for heaven, (c) speaking of God and the life that lasts forever, (d) activity with spiritual benefit, (e) when an intrinsically difficult thing is done easily, (f) boldness of mind to endure afflictions, and (g) exultation of soul in a time of great trial. (5) *In what situation are people best able to love God?* Where they enjoy the greatest physical and spiritual repose, that is, in solitude.

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- 6. Rolle insisted that contemplative life is superior to active. Contemplative life has two levels: (1) meditating on scriptures and (2) "beholding and longing for the things of heaven, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit." (Ibid. 182). In *The Fire of Love* he contended that the solitary life is superior to community life. "Certainly the perfect solitary burns intensely in divine love, and while he is snatched away, beyond himself, in the going forth of his spirit through contemplation, he is lifted up, rejoicing, to the jubilant song of the singers and their heavenly music. . . . His heart is transfigured by divine fire, burning and shining with extreme fervor, he is carried into his Beloved." (*The Fire of Love*, 138).

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- II. Walter Hilton

- Walter Hilton also fits into the *Brautmystik* tradition, but he did not share Richard Rolle's enthusiasm for the images of fire, song, and sweetness. Indeed, it is quite clear that, without naming him, he sought to correct the hermit of Hampole at several points. Notwithstanding that, however, he did not go to the opposite extreme and embrace the *Wesenmystik* tradition articulated by Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Moses* or Dionysius in his *Heavenly Mysteries*, as his anonymous contemporary who penned *The Cloud of Unknowing* did. He, too, followed in the track blazed by Augustine, Anselm, the Victorines, Bernard of Clairvaux, and others, but in scriptures he made more of Paul than he did of the Song of Songs.

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- A. Life

- Walter Hilton began his studies at Cambridge University in 1357. That date would place his birth in or before 1343 because the universities did not admit students until they were fourteen. He received a Bachelor of Civil Law in 1370 and was a candidate (Inceptor) for a doctorate in Canon Law in 1381 or 1382, but he did not obtain the degree. He entered the Augustinian Priory of Thurgarton located between Nottingham and Newark several years later and became a Canon there. He died March 24, 1396.

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– B. Writings

- Hilton was much sought after as a spiritual guide, and many of his writings were letters to persons seeking his counsel. He addressed his first known essay, *On the Image of Sin*, to a solitary. In 1386, at about the same time he entered Thurgarton Priory, he penned a treatise *On the Usefulness and Prerogatives of Religion* to encourage Adam Horsley to enter religious life. In 1388 he started cranking out a series of letters on the spiritual life: *Conclusions concerning Images*, a defense of statuary and stained glass windows against the iconoclastic Lollards; a letter *On Reading, Intention, Prayer, Meditation, etc.* revealing that he was now established as a spiritual guide; *Of Angels' Song*; an *Epistle on Utility*; and an *Epistle on Reading*. About this time he wrote Book 1 of *The Scale of Perfection*, which one early manuscript titled *Reforming of Man's Soul*, and a treatise

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- with much the same content and objective entitled *The Mixed Life* or *The Pricking of Love* that defended the active life as well as the contemplative (that Rolle had favored so strongly). He composed a *Letter to Someone Wanting to Renounce the World*, a lawyer who had experienced a religious awakening. Between 1391 and 1393 or 1392 and 1394 he wrote *Eight Chapters on Perfection* and Book 2 of *The Scale of Perfection*. There is some debate about his authorship of English commentaries on Psalms 90 and 91. Indicative of the high esteem in which he was held, someone translated *The Scale of Perfection* into Latin in 1400.

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– C. Sources of Thought

- 1. Having obtained a university baccalaureate and done all of the work for a doctorate, Hilton reflected much wider reading and greater appreciation for scholarship than Richard Rolle did. He cited the Bible more frequently than the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* or Julian of Norwich did and had a deep interest in Paul's letters. As was customary at the time, he could have relied on collections of excerpts (*florilegia*), but, among the Church Fathers, he quotes or alludes to John Cassian; *The Lives of the Fathers*; Augustine, especially *On the Trinity*, and Gregory the Great's *Homilies on Ezekiel*, *The Moral Books on Job*, and *Pastoral Rule*. Among medieval writers he, like Rolle, reflected heavy dependence on Bernard of Clairvaux' *On the Ladder of Humility*, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, and *On the Love of God*. In addition, he made reference to Hugo of St Victor's *On the Ark of Noah*, Richard of St. Victor, William of Saint Thierry's *Epistle on*

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- *the Mount of God*, Aelred of Rielvaux, Guigo II the Carthusian, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, and Richard Rolle, of course, critically. He also seems to have known the writings of German and Dutch mystics such as Henry Suso.
- 2. Some late medieval and even modern scholars have attributed to Walter Hilton *The Cloud of Unknowing*. There are some agreements between them, for instance, in their emphasis on meekness as a true understanding of oneself. But they differ quite markedly in style and in their attitude to the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius. The author of *The Cloud* obviously based his views on that work, which he had translated into English, but Hilton did not integrate the *Wesenmystik* or apophatic model with his own *Brautmystik* or kataphatic model. The author of *The Cloud* was highly intelligent and educated but not at Hilton's level.

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- D. Hilton as Spiritual Director
 - 1. As Julia Gatta has shown in her study of Walter Hilton, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich as spiritual directors, all three “have tried to transmit something of their experience of living on close terms with God in the form of ordered spiritual counsel.” (Julia Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time* [1987], 11). They agreed on three aspects of spiritual guidance: (1) The ultimate aim is engagement with God. (2) Spiritual growth is slow and depends in part on “our gradual appropriation of our common religious heritage.” (Ibid. 12). (3) Direction requires discernment. All three gave serious attention to the problem of sin. In an age when people felt overwhelmed with guilt they took sin more seriously than we do today. They were keenly aware of human helplessness before it. In their view sin impedes union with God and must be dealt with. Hence, they focused on purgation and assumed that readers would practice regular prayer, reflection on conscience, and sacramental

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- confession. However, they spent more time on the next step: What to do when our striving falls short of the goal. Their answer was: Recognize the signs of God’s activity with us, that is, GRACE. The goal is transformation, the restoration of the image of God in humankind.
- 2. Walter Hilton focused on religious emotion. In his *Letter to Someone Wanting to Renounce the World* he displayed the major elements of his approach. (1) He attended carefully to the correspondent’s own testimony about his inner state. (2) He practiced theological discernment of the working of grace in his friend’s life. (3) He exhorted his reader to cooperate with grace.

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- 3. The central function of spiritual direction is discernment of spirits. Hilton believed that human emotions are ambiguous, and he neither endorsed them uncritically nor rejected them. Basing his approach on Augustine's psychology of mind, reason, and will (the human analogy to the Trinity) that can orient our lives to love, he stressed self-knowledge as critical to spiritual growth. He noted even Augustine's opening prayer in his *Soliloquies*: "Teach me to know myself. Teach me to know Thee." Interpreting emotion properly begins with denying its ultimacy. On this Hilton recommended detachment, "accepting provisionally at least, what we cannot change about ourselves." In this he wanted to dampen the excesses of followers of Richard Rolle and cautioned against seeking physical sensations. Perfection lies in "union of God with the human soul through perfect charity." Moral consequences will show whether extraordinary phenomena are of God or of sinister influences. To counterbalance undue emphasis on

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- experience, Hilton counseled attention to other factors: (1) the corporate foundation in the Church versus individualism (of Lollards, *et al.*); (2) the Creed, in which we find the content of Christian faith; and (3) the sacraments. This sounds strikingly close to Baron Friedrich von Hügel's insistence on balancing four factors in healthy spirituality—experiential, intellectual, social, and institutional.
- 4. Hilton sought transformation of emotions. He made the following points: (1) "Reformation in faith and feeling" is a work of grace. Our role is sometimes active and at other times passive. (2) Transformation begins with conversion. (3) Grace fuels affective prayer that directs emotion toward God. The chief mark of spiritual progress is increased desire for Jesus.

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- (4) We have to pass through the “night of the soul”—distractedness. We can’t force prayer. Passing through this spiritual “night” purifies prayer. (5) Contemplation comes by degrees. This does not allow us to see *what* God is but *that* God is. The gift of love is the gift of contemplation. In sum, spiritual and emotional states are not the same. To uncover the meaning of emotional states, we must subject them to theological discernment. Holiness depends, in the last analysis, on grace. “Salvation has to affect the whole personality.” (Ibid. 45).

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- E. *The Scale (or Stairway) of Perfection*
 - The word *Scale* in the traditional title of Walter Hilton’s chief work is somewhat misleading in our day. It meant “ladder” in the 14th century. But as M. L. Del Maestro has pointed out in an introduction to his edition, we should not imagine a ladder going straight up step by step. Better to think in terms of a circular staircase in which Hilton leads the reader around and upward. Book 2 continues the upward climb. The title attached to one of the manuscripts, *Reforming of Man’s Soul*, moreover, may express more accurately what Hilton sought to do with the two books. Near the end of Book 1, he stated a twofold purpose: to “first rouse myself from my own negligence that I might do better than I have done” and “to stir you (or any other man or woman who has taken

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- on the contemplative state of life) to labor more diligently and more meekly in that way of life, using such simple words as God has given me grace to say.” (Walter Hilton, *The Stairway of Perfection*, translated by M. L. Del Maestro [1979], 1.92; p. 187). In introducing Book 2 he framed his purpose somewhat differently. “It is my intention in this book to tell you, by God’s grace, how this image can be reformed, and how it is reformed again to its original likeness by Him Who first formed it.” (Ibid. 2.2; p. 192). His Augustinian and Pauline perspective stands out here. He preceded this purpose statement with the assertion that “No one could ever do enough to help himself, let alone anyone else. Therefore the reforming had to be done by someone who was more than a man—that is, only by God.” (Ibid.)

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- **Book One**
- 1. Hilton begins with an exhortation to cultivate the virtues of “meekness” and “charity” in imitation of Christ as the key to the reforming of the divine image. In some contrast to Rolle, he values the active life as well as the contemplative. In the active life believers show love and charity by physical good deeds, fulfillment of God’s commandments, and doing physical and spiritual works of mercy (1.2). In the contemplative life they experience love and charity inwardly “by spiritual values and by the reliably true knowledge and sight of God and spiritual things.” (1.3) The contemplative life has three stages: (1) knowing God and spiritual things “through reason, human teachings, and the study of Holy Scripture,” the way of educated people and scholars (1.4); (2) knowing God and spiritual things “through affection, without light for the understanding of spiritual things” (1.5), the approach both of people in active life

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- and in religious life; and (3) “. . . as perfect as contemplation can be on earth, [it] consists both in cognition and affection, that is, in knowing God and loving Him perfectly.” Hilton added, “This can happen only when a man’s [or woman’s] soul has first been reformed by the fullness of virtues in the image of Jesus.” (1.8) After this the soul is “ravished” and “taken out of its physical senses.” Then it is “illuminated in understanding, so that it sees the essential Truth which is God and spiritual things. This illumination is so perfectly accompanied by a soft, sweet burning love in Him that the soul, for the time being is made one with God and conformed to the image of the Trinity by this ravishing of love. The beginning of this kind of contemplation can be experienced in this life, but its fullness is reserved for the bliss of Heaven.” (1.8)

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- 2. Hilton warned that visions and physical experiences (such as Rolle reported) could be both good and evil (1.10). You can differentiate them by whether they increase virtues and love for God and fellow human beings and lower your own self-estimate (1.11). The key is to knit Jesus to your soul by good will, desire for him, prayer, and charity (1.12). The contemplative should be occupied with spiritual things, as Phil 2:13-14 (1.13), and pursue virtue. We may cultivate virtue by reading Holy Scriptures and holy teachings, spiritual meditation, and diligent prayer (1.14-15).

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- 3. Hilton projected a three-stage process. I—The key is to “practice meekness.” Ask, “What am I?” and judge no one (1.16-17). The meek should honor others. “You must have this part of meekness as you begin contemplative life; by it, and by grace, you shall come to the fullness of meekness and so to the fullness of all other virtues; for whoever has one virtue has all other virtues. As much as you have of meekness, so much will you have of charity, patience, and the other virtues, though they may not show outwardly.” (1.18) If you don’t feel meek, “Humble yourself in will by the power of reason.” (1.19) II—The second thing is to have faith in the articles of the Church and in the sacraments (1.21). III—The third is to exercise stability of intentions and discretion (1.22).

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- 4. In the next section of Book 1 Hilton focused on prayer. You pray “to make yourself able and ready, like a clean container, to receive the grace our Lord will freely give you.” (1.24) When you pray, do not set your heart on earthly things, “for prayer is nothing else but the desire of the heart rising to God by being withdrawn from all earthly thoughts.” (1.25) There are three kinds of prayer: (1) vocal prayer ordained by God and the Church, best for those bound by a rule or new to devotion; (2) vocal prayer not according to a set formula “but as devotion stirs the heart” (1.26); and (3) prayer that “emerges from the heart alone, without words.” (1.32) Expect distractions. There is no set rule for meditation. “For meditations come from the free gift of our Lord to chosen souls.” (1.34) How do you recognize when it is of God? When it is made vivid in your heart, “For it is an opening of the spiritual eye into Christ’s manhood.” (1.35) We should meditate often on Christ’s Passion (1.36).

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- 5. The devil often tries to get the faithful to revert to their sin (1.37). Counter-measures to that are (1) trust in the Lord, (2) refusing to fear, and (3) not yielding to depression (1.38). God allows temptation, but afterwards comforts and confirms believers in grace (1.39). We should not let go of the grace in us (1.40), always aware of the limits of our gifts but waiting on God to give us better ones. “But he who works with such grace as he has and desires more by meek and persistent prayer, and then feels his heart moved to follow the grace which he has been desiring, he may safely run after it, provided he guards his meekness.” (1.41) Yet we should labor to know our own soul and its powers and to break down the ground of sin in it (1.42). The soul has three powers analogous to the Trinity—mind, reason, and will (1.43). However wretched, anyone can be saved by Christ’s

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- Passion if he or she asks. Just call on the Name of Jesus (1.44). We should work diligently to recover our worthiness and to reform the image of the Trinity within (1.45). Above all, we should seek, desire, and find Jesus (1.46). There is great profit in having a desire for him (1.47), but seeking is not easy. We have to be diligent (1.48). “You need not run to Rome or Jerusalem in order to seek Him there. Just turn your thoughts inward, to your own soul, where He is hidden.” (1.49) What keeps us from hearing? Not listening. “Bring into your heart a love of virtues and complete charity, and then you shall hear your Lord speak to you.” (1.50) Meekness and charity are “the special livery of Jesus,” and we prepare ourselves by being like him (1.51). Draw your thoughts away from the physical senses into yourself and then fix your attention on Jesus (1.52).

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- 6. What does sin look like? “NOTHING but an absence of God.” (1.53) Whoever would find Jesus must labor diligently with the spiritual mark of this image of sin (1.54). What is the image of sin? “This image is a false, misruled love of yourself.” From this arise the seven deadly sins—pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lechery (1.55). Hilton dwells at length on **pride** as our greatest challenge. The answer to it, of course, is **meekness**. Who is meek? “He is meek who truly knows and judges himself as he is.” (1.68) All of the other sins require self-scrutiny in light of the example of Jesus (1.70). Looking at ourselves alongside Jesus, we will know our sins for what they are. Hilton does not advocate excessive penances by fasting, etc. “And therefore, if you want to come to purity of heart, you must resist the unreasonable movements of fleshly desires, but you must not rise up against their ground, as I have said before. For the ground here is need, natural hunger, which you will, of necessity, experience.” (1.75)

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- Avoid excess of food and drink but don't use too little either (1.76). By desiring and striving for meekness and charity you will attain the other virtues sooner than if you worked for them directly (1.77). We won't overcome sin by turning outward but rather by focusing on our own souls, asking from Jesus what they need within (1.79).
- 7. Hilton could have had himself in mind when he asked how a person should behave toward those who consult him. “Like every man and woman, you are principally bound to love your fellow-Christians in your heart and in your deeds as well. Governed by reason, you are to show them signs of charity up to the limits of your strength and your intelligence.” (1.83) We should place the image of Jesus over against the image of sin, which has a dark and false image. “The image of Jesus is made from virtues—meekness,

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- perfect love, and charity.” (1.86) We must crucify the image of sin and bring the image of Jesus to life (1.87). Break down the image of sin by lifting up desires of the heart to Jesus (1.89). As to destroying sin, “You’ll be able to do this better and more readily if you are diligent in setting your heart most on one thing. That one thing is nothing else but our Lord Jesus Christ, that blessed Person, God, and man. You should establish Him through the deliberately chosen intention of your soul, as the light of your heart.” (1.91) The reforming of the divine image depends in the final analysis on following Jesus. “You will be shaped again in the image of Jesus the man through meekness and charity. Then you will be fully shaped to this same image of Jesus as God, in a shadow, through contemplation, while you are here in this life, and through the fullness of essential truth when you have come to the bliss of Heaven.” (1.92)

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- **Book Two**
- 1. Hilton began Book 2 underscoring that Christ’s Passion was the only means to restore the image of God in humankind. “But our Lord couldn’t do this deed in His godhead, . . . Therefore He had to take on Himself the same human nature that had sinned and to become man.” Becoming human, he suffered death and thus “made amends to the Father of Heaven for man’s guilt. This Passion of our Lord and this precious death is the ground of all reforming of man’s [or woman’s] soul.” (2.2) Two types not reformed by the Passion are (1) those who don’t believe it and (2) those who don’t love it (2.3).

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- 2. The image can be reformed either in fullness or in part, but in this life it can't be reformed in fullness (2.4). Partial reform can be of two types—in faith or in experience. Reform in faith alone “is sufficient for salvation.” Reform in experience “is worthy to receive a surpassing reward in the bliss of Heaven.” (2.5) The image is reformed from Original (Inherited) Sin through baptism and from Actual Sin through Penance (2.6-7). God doesn't demand excessive penance for forgiveness, but contrition and love must exceed the debt (2.7). The sacrament gives grace to fight sin (2.8). We should believe steadfastly that God has restored the image when our conscience testifies to our full forsaking of sin and true turning of our will to good living (2.9). All persons who live meekly in the faith of the Church and have their faith brought to life in love and charity can have confidence in

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- their baptism even though they do not experience the gift of devotion or of spiritual experience. Those who assume that God will automatically save them and do not amend their lives, however, should worry (2.10). Reforming souls should fight against sin in this life. “I believe that a soul, reformed in experience by the ravishing of love and drawn into the contemplation of God, can be so freed from sensuality and foolish imagination and so far drawn out and separated from his flesh-centered experiences for a time that he will experience nothing but God. That doesn't last, however.” (2.11)

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- 3. Though reformed, the image is both fair and foul in this life (2.12). There are three kinds of persons: (1) unreformed, (2) reformed only in faith, and (3) reformed in faith and experience (2.13). The unreformed are lovers of the world (2.14) and do not reform, for “the light of grace cannot shine for them nor rest in their hearts.” (2.15) Reform in faith and experience can’t be obtained quickly but only by grace and after a long time by much effort and diligence (2.17). “But reforming in experience is the highest state a soul may come to in this life.” (2.18) There are reasons why so few reform in experience: (1) Many reformed in faith “do not set their hearts to increase in grace nor to experience any higher state of good living through diligent labor in prayer and meditation and other spiritual works.” (2.18) (2) Many hold to deliberately chosen

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- physical custom that prevents the soul from experiencing more grace (2.19). Without a great deal of physical and spiritual diligence, abundant grace, and meekness, souls can neither be reformed in experience nor preserved in that state. Not effort alone nor grace alone. “But the one joined to the other—that is, grace joined to work—brings into a soul the blessed experience of perfect love.” (2.20)
- 4. Once again, Hilton insisted, meekness is the key. “The man [or woman] who cannot experience himself as he truly is does not have complete meekness.” “For what is meekness but essential truth?” “Therefore, I say that such a person who doesn’t have true meekness in working with his [or her] whole heart either inwardly alone (through great

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- fervor, permanent desire, diligent prayer, and meditation on God) or both inwardly and outwardly, cannot come to the spiritual reforming of the image of God in him [or her]." (2.20) One coming to this reforming of the image of God should behave in intention and action like a pilgrim going to Jerusalem, "Jerusalem" symbolizing "contemplation in perfect love of God" (2.21). The road begins in faith and continues in meekness and love. "Whatever work it is that you should do, physical or spiritual, because of your rank or your state in life, if it increases this grace-giving desire that you have to love Jesus and makes it more complete, more pleasant, and more powerful in obtaining all virtues, all kinds of goodness, I judge that work to be best for you." (2.21) You will confront temptations from spiritual enemies on the way. Just ignore what they say and desire only to love Jesus (2.22). Say, "I am nothing, I have nothing, I seek nothing, and nothing do I covet but only the love of Jesus." (2.23)

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- 5. Love of the world is, in scriptures, an "evil day" and love of God a "good night." Desire only Jesus. "For he creates this desire in you. He meditates on it in you, and He it is who is desired. He is everything, if you could see Him. You do nothing but allow Him to work in your soul and assent to Him, with great gladness of heart that He has condescended to do this work in you." The "night" is painful, so you "must wait for grace and endure patiently." (2.24) "This 'essential nothingness' I define thus: When a soul, through grace, has been gathered into itself and stands still within itself, freely and wholly, so that it is not driven against its will nor drawn down by force to think about, or delight in, or love with clinging affection any sin or, foolishly, an earthly thing, then the soul meditates on essential nothingness." This is a rich "nothing" and "night." "What, then, does this darkness create? Truly, nothing else but a grace-giving desire to have the love of Jesus—to see Him and possess Him." (2.24) Desire for Jesus in this darkness slays all movements of sin and enables the soul spiritually to experience flashes of light from the Heavenly Jerusalem, i.e., Jesus (2.25).

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- 6. How does one distinguish the false illuminations of the devil from the true light of knowing that comes from Jesus? By unwillingness to know yourself meekly, thence by pride, presumption, unsubmitiveness, indignation, backbiting, and other such sins. "For unless a soul has first been struck down from the heights of himself by dread and been well-tested and burnt in the fire of desire and, as it were, purified of all spiritual filth through a long time spent in devout prayer and other spiritual exercises, he is not able to endure the shinings of spiritual light nor to receive the precious liquor of the perfect love of Jesus. But when he has thus been purified and made subtle through this fire, then he can receive the grace-giving light of spiritual knowing and the perfection of love that is the true 'sun.'" "For I believe this counterfeit light never comes after true darkness." (2.26) How does one prepare for the great grace brought in by this light-shot darkness? "As much as he [or she] can, he [or she] should put aside all hindrances that block grace. He [or she] must

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- learn to die to the world and genuinely forsake the love of it." "For a man [or woman] cannot live fully for God unless he [or she] first dies to the world." One dies to the world "through the grace of meekness." (2.27)
- 7. Jesus' work in reforming the soul entails four parts: calling, making just, magnifying, and glorifying. He alone can reform us if we cooperate (2.28). Sometimes souls just beginning to grow in grace seem to have more fervor than advanced contemplatives, but, in fact, do not (2.29). The main thing is to know your own soul. "That happens when the soul is so gathered within itself and separated from attention to all earthly things and from the use of the body's senses that it experiences itself as it is in its own nature without the body." (2.30) The love of God operates within us in three ways: (1) "through faith alone, without grace-filled imagination or the spiritual knowing of God," (2) "through faith and by imagining Jesus in His manhood," and (3) "through

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- the spiritual sight of the godhead in the manhood of Jesus.” Although the first two are good, we should desire the third. Hilton had some reservations about imagination, but conceded that it has its place. “Nevertheless, it is good for other souls who are not subtle in nature and have not yet been made spiritual through grace, to continue on with their own working in imagination with human affection until more grace comes freely to them.” (2.30) Here, however, he interjected his most explicit caution about Rolle’s approach. “One can say the same thing about other kinds of feelings that are similar to these bodily ones—for instance, the hearing of delightful music or the feeling of a comforting heat in the body, or the seeing of light or the sweetness of physical savors. These are not spiritual experiences, for spiritual experiences are felt in the powers of the soul, chiefly in the understanding and in love, and little in the imagination.” (2.30)

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- Hilton was not prepared to limit God’s reforming activity to one way. “What I’m doing is saying, from my simple experience, that our Lord Jesus works in this way in some creatures, as I believe. And I believe He works in other ways as well, which go beyond my intelligence and experience.” The soul has two kinds of experiences: (1) through the five senses and (2) through the spiritual senses—mind, reason, and will (the powers of the soul). So also, there are two ways of knowing God. The first is “principally in the imagination and little in the understanding,” the second “principally in the understanding when it is comforted and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and little in imagination.” (2.31)

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- **8. How does this reforming in experience take place?**
 God opens the inner eye of the soul to see God, not all at once but gradually. “He opens the soul’s inner eye, when He enlightens the reason through the touching and shining of His blessed light, so that the soul can see Him and know Him. He does not do this completely, all at once, but little by little, at various times, as the soul allows Him to. “The soul does not see what [God] is, for no creature in Heaven or on earth can do that. . . . But the soul does see God insofar as He is an unchangeable Being, a sovereign Power, sovereign Essential Truth, sovereign Goodness, a blessed Life, and endless Bliss.”

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- **9.** “Such a soul does not see God blindly, nakedly, and without savor, . . . Instead, this soul sees Him in his understanding so that he is comforted and enlightened by the gift of the Holy Spirit with a wonderful reverence and a secret burning love, with spiritual savor and heavenly delight, more clearly and more fully than may be written or spoken.” This reforming in experience surpasses reforming in faith. “For this soul knows something of the nature of Jesus as God through this grace-filled vision, but the soul reformed only in faith knows nothing and only believes this truth.” (2.32)
 Above all, the soul must seek Jesus above and within itself; Jesus is heaven to the soul.

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- 10. God is “Love Unformed.” The affection of the soul is “Love Formed.” God is the cause of all of this formation. We are bound to love Jesus for creating, redeeming, and saving us through the gift of love. “This love is nothing else but Jesus Himself, Who, for love, does all this in man’s soul and reforms it in experience to His image, . . .” (2.34) Some love Jesus with physical fervor and by human affection stirred by grace and reason. Others love him more peacefully with spiritual affections alone, stirred inwardly by the special grace of the Holy Spirit (2.35). The gift of love is the worthiest and most profitable of Jesus’ gifts. The gift of love is the Holy Spirit, who saves us (2.36).

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- 11. There are two kinds of meekness—one through the working of reason, the other as a special gift of love. “A soul experiences perfect meekness through the sight and spiritual knowing of Jesus.” “Therefore, when Love opens the inner eyes of the soul so that he can see this essential truth [nothingness of the creature] with the other circumstances which rise from it, then he begins to be genuinely meek.” (2.37) Love slays all movements of wrath and envy and reforms in the soul the virtues of peace, patience and perfect charity toward fellow Christians (2.38). Love gently slays greed, lechery, gluttony, and flesh-centered savors and delights for all five physical senses through grace-filled contemplation of Jesus (2.39). “This opening of the spiritual eyes is that ‘light-shot darkness’ and that ‘rich nothingness’ that I have spoken about before. It

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- may be called: *purity of spirit and spiritual rest, inward stillness and peace of conscience, loftiness of thought and solitude of soul, a lively experience of grace and a privacy of heart, the waking sleep of the spouse and the tasting of heavenly savor, a burning in love and a shining in light, the entryway to contemplation and the reforming in experience.*” The purer the soul and the farther from the world, the more powerful grace is. “Show me, then, a soul who through the inspiration of grace has had his spiritual eyes opened to beholding Jesus, who has been separated and drawn out from the love of the world . . . and I dare boldly declare that this soul *burns entirely with love and shines with spiritual light* and is worthy to receive the name and honor of the spouse. For this soul has been *reformed in experience made able and ready for contemplation.*” (2.41)

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- 12. Grace, however, can be withdrawn from souls who fall back into the flesh-governed state. “Blessed is that soul who is always fed by the experiencing of love in His presence, or is buoyed up by desire for Him in His absence.” Such changes occur in mature souls as well as beginners. “For just as the soul is the life of the body, so Jesus is the life of the soul through His grace-giving presence.” (2.41) So we should persist in prayer, especially the Our Father (2.42). Jesus, hidden, reveals himself to lovers (2.43).

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