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Christian Mysticism: Early & Medieval

the best way to approach Christian Mysticism is by using a method of dealing with the mystics themselves, by becoming personally acquainted with certain of the great mystics.

this will be more or less chronologically since it would be impossible to do this any other way. Much more than either the Jewish or Islamic mystics, the Christians have to be taken as individuals.

I will therefore deal with the most important, mentioning others along the way as needed.

St. Augustine

Augustine is the proof that mystical experience and the life of the intellect, administrative duties, ecclesiastical authority and dealing with the practical affairs of everyday life can go together.

He has influenced the theology of the western church more than any other person besides Paul. actually, he has had more influence on the protestant tradition through Luther and Calvin than on the Catholic, who turned to aristotle through Aquinas.

he was born in North Africa in 354. It is his mother Monica who had a great influence on him for she was a devout christian who followed him around, prayed for him and yearned for his conversion, which happened when he was 32.

Before becoming a Christian he tried the Manichaeian dualistic philosophy which viewed evil as caused by a force of darkness contending eternally with the good in the universe and in the soul of humans. this dissatisfied him and he was plunged into a period of skepticism before trying Neoplatonism.

he adsorbed elements of the thought of Plotinus which never left him

Before going into his thought, it must be pointed out that he had a fairly wild sexual life before his conversion, having taken a mistress and fathering a son by her named Adeodatus or "gift of God".

when he converted and was ordained as a priest, he of course left her and the thought of marriage behind.

his conversion was in the summer of 386. His mother died 2 years later after a great mystical vision.

He epitomizes in his experience the most familiar of all his words from the first pages of the Confessions

"Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless , until it repose in Thee."

There are other pasages in the confesions which are both autobiographical and mystical and show clearly the influence of Plotinus.

in this passage, he blends Platonism with Christain insight.

"And being admonished to return to myself, I entered into my inward self, you being my Guide. . and I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul, (such as it was)above the

Same eye of my soul, above my mind, the light unchangeable.

Not this ordinary light, which all flesh may look upon, nor as it were greater of the same kind, as the brightness of this should be much brighter. Not such was this light, but other, yea far other from all these. Nor was it above my soul, as oil is above water, nor yet as heaven above earth: But above to my soul, because It made me; and I below it because I was made by It. He that knows the truth, knows what that Light is; and he that knows It, knows eternity.

a few pages further on, he describes this same experience from the angle of ascent from the ordinary channels of sense and reason to the Ultimate reality which he calls the Unchangeable.

he describes being led from the bodily senses inward until the soul was bathed in the unchangeable light and realized that "beyond all doubt the unchangeable is to be preferred to the changeable; whence also it knew That unchangeable: and thus with the flash of one trembling glance it arrived at THAT WHICH IS.

yet Augustine found no great difficulty in blending this note of Platonic realism with the Hebraic I AM THAT I AM.

in another treatise, "concerning the Nature of the Good" he states, "For He truly Is, because He is unchangeable; for all change causes that which was, not to Be. He then truly Is, who is unchangeable.

the most distinctly mystical passage in the Confessions is one shared with his mother at the port of Ostia shortly before her death.

he speaks of being ravished and absorbed with inward joy and felt it was like entering into the joy of the master.

all the most typical notes of mystical experience were here—the transcendence of sense experience, the entrance into one's deepest self, the hushed silence, the certainty of the Divine Presence, the inexpressible joy.

unless one is to limit the meaning of mysticism to the union of the human self with God in ontological identity, which Augustine nowhere affirms, it is one of the most authentically mystical passages in all literature.

Augustine's type of mysticism is both intellectual and devotional, with the two elements so closely blended that it is futile to try to separate them.

one more citation must suffice since it brings together his early struggles and his mature faith and in a sense gives the key to that which was to make him a foremost figure in history.

"Too late I loved you, O Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new! too late I loved you! and behold you were within, and I abroad, and there I searched for you; deformed I, plunging amid those fair forms, which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you. Things held me far from you, which, unless they were in you, were not at all. You called and shouted and burst my deafness. you flashed, shone and scattered my blindness. you breathed odors, and I drew in breath and panted for you. I tasted, and hungered and thirsted. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c.500 CE)

he was probably a Syrian monk who wrote in Greek, between 480 and 530 CE. treatise on the Divine names, Mystical Theology, and the Celestial Hierarchy and the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy as well as ten epistles.

he claimed to be the Dionysius converted by St. Paul in the Areopagus (Acts 17:34) and addressed his writings to St. Timothy and St. John . But these all are a literary device.

His Christology is post-Chalcedonian (451 was the council) and he depended on a Newo platonic philosopher Prolus (d. 485) so he is accurately placed at the end of the fifth cent.

he was probbably coiner of the word Hierarchy which he defined as "a sacred order and knowledge and operation tending to the analogous imitation of God according to the enlightenment given by Him. It is correlative with "thearchy" whihc means Gos id the source of our sanctification.

as a neo-platonist he is concerned with the "divine progression " from the Godhead to the world, the chain which links ordinary mortals to God.

there are three orders of angelic beings. In the highest are the "great intelligences" who stand at the vestibule of the Godhead. They act as prisms conveying the Divine light in such intensity as those below can stand. for it is impossible that the beams of the divine source can shine upon us unless they are shrouded in the maifold texture of sacred veils

tese great intelligences are tdhe Seraphim , Cherubim and thrones.

the second order and Dominions, virtues, powers and in the third, principalities, archangels and angels.

the divine light is carried on from the heavenly hierarchy to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, another nine-fold order of symbols and ministers headed by Christ.

so in one sense, God is all.

all is not God, however. There is a celestial ladder which leads souls back to God which must be climbed. the paradox is as one thinks he/she is climbing it they are really being drawn back to God

the goal is unity with the divine "to be made divine is to be made like God, as far as may be, and to be made one with Him."

Dionysius follows through the principle of the via negativa, that is the idea that no predicates attach to God and no words may properly be used to describe him.

he speaks of God as the "divine darkness" or says that God as made DARKNESS beyond LIGHT, the super-essential darkness.

one can only come to God in "unknowing" for as he says:

. . . for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to it (ie. God), we are not applying to It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the preeminence of its simple and absolute nature" (mystical theology).

however, as a Christian, Dionysius finds it impossible to escape entirely from an account of God in terms of love, righteousness and wisdom.

in the Divine Names he tries to reconcile his Christian Biblicism with his mystical understanding.

His answer is that God is in Himself unknowable, and every affirmation about Him is false in absolute terms. But we may loosely attribute qualities to God because He is the cause and origin of those qualities in the empirical world.

thus, it is misleading to speak of the goodness of God but He is the source of goodness in others.

Dionysius is very important because, tho ignored in the east, he was the basis for most of the western developed mysticism and theology with influence on Aquinas (hierarchys of angels, creation, theology of evil, and his respect for the negative theology)

the book the Cloud of Unknowing and St. John of the Cross, both to be talked about in later lectures, relied heavily on him.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (12th cent.) - 1090 - aug 20, 1153

the 12th cent. was a great century, in spite of the crusades which threw a shadow over it. for it was the beginning of the rennesaince, with the rise of important towns, the beginnings of Gothic architgecture, the founding of the first universities, the beginnings of literature written in the vernacular, the revoverly of Greek philosophyt through Moslem contacts.

even today, almost every church hymnal contains the words attributed to him

Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts! / Thou found of life!
Thou light of men! / from the best bliss that earth imparts, /
We turn unfilled to thee again.

these words epitomize the undergirding of his life.

he was born into a noble family in France, his father being in the military and his mother in personal service to the poor.

after the death of both parents he went at 22 into a small isolated benedictine monastery at Citeaux.

his great ability soon became apparent and he was sent after 3 years with 12 other monks to found a new monastery at Clairvaux. he remained there the rest of his life as abbot extending the outreach of the church until 68 daughter monasteries were formed.

he preached widely, served as a counselor to popes and kings and wrote lasting treatises on the inner life, as well as being a poet of ability.

the public activity he is remembered best for is his extensive preaching in support of the second crusade. Its failure caused him deep unhappiness.

all this would be irrelevant except to show that like Augustine it was possible to combine a very active public life with a deeply devotional spirit.

unlike Augustine, he was not an original thinker, but he was orthodox. Yet he had a deep sense of the nature and fruits of the love of God, of the need of combining humility with charity, and of the primacy of Jesus, which have not always been found in either theological orthodoxy or ecclesiastical statesmanship.

his major writing is found in a collection of 86 sermons on the Song of Songs, the old Test. book now regarded by biblical scholars as a collection of romantic wedding lyrics. yet it was long regarded as an allegory foreshadowing the church as the Bride of Christ.

with this background, Jesus Christ throughout the sermons of Bernard is the Bridegroom. He does not use the term "spiritual marriage" as freely as did some of the later mystics, but its imagery is there.

taking up the opening words of the Song of Songs "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." (1:2) he describes the three stages of spiritual progression, the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive, as the kiss of the Feet, the kiss of the Hand, and the kiss of the Mouth of Christ.

the first involves penitence and pardon; it is the conversion stage.

In the second the fruits of piety appear thru grace, and good works are possible.

in the third, more rarely experienced, one feels the presence of Christ Himself.

in a beautiful passage, he describes how christ, the bridegroom came to his own soul.

"But now let me try to tell you of my own experience. I speak as a fool; and yet I must admit that the Word has come even to me, and that many times. But never, when He has thus entered into me, have I perceived the actual moment of His coming. I have felt that He was present; I remember afterwards that He was then with me; ;and sometimes I have sensed his coming in advance. But never have I been aware of the particular moment when He came or went."

He then talks about the fact that none of his senses could discern his coming or his presence. he goes on:

"How, when, did He come in? or did He not come in, perhaps, because He never was outside? for he is not one of

the things that exist exteriorly to us. and yet how can I say that He comes from within me, when I know that in me there is nothing that is Good? I have ascended to the highest in myself, and lo ! the Word was towering far above it. My curiosity has led me to explore my lowest depths as well, only to find that He went deeper yet. If I looked out from myself, I saw Him stretching farther than the farthest I could see; and if I looked within, He was more inward still. So I recognized the truth of the apostles words, "in Him we live and move and are."

Bernard found that one cannot find God through the senses but it is the inward assurance which bears fruit in life as he continues:

"You ask, then, how I knew that He was present, since His ways are past finding out? Because the Word is living and effective, and as soon as ever He has entered into me, He has aroused my sleeping soul, and stirred and softened and pricked my heart, that hitherto was sick and hard as stone. He has begun to pluck up and destroy, to build and to plant, to water the dry places and shed light upon the dark, to open what was shut, to warm the chill, to make the crooked straight and the rough places plain; so that my soul has blessed the Lord and all that is within me praised His holy Name. Thus has the Bridegroom entered into me; my senses told me nothing of His coming, I knew that He was present only by the movement of my heart; I perceived His power, because it put my sins to flight and exercised a strong control on all my impulses. I have been moved to

wonder at His wisdom too, uncovering my secret faults and teaching me to see their sinfulness; and I have experienced his gentleness and kindness in such small measure of amendment as I have achieved and in the renewal and remaking of the spirit of my mind--that is, my inmost being. I have beheld to some degree the beauty of His glory and have been filled with awe as I gazed at His manifold greatness.

seldom has there been a more eloquent, and at the same time humble, witness to the moral and spiritual effects of companionship with Christ.

in many passages in Bernard's writings he stresses the humanity of Jesus and calls upon Christians to imitate him.

it is this which he regards as the center of the Christian life. far more than his predecessors, he put the imitation of Christ in the foreground of his preaching.

the traits he most emphasized were the humility and love of Jesus and these two notes are sounded again and again in his preaching and writing until they have been regarded as summing up his message.

his ability to combine psychological with spiritual discernment appears in full force in his on the Love of God

this love appears in the Christian in four stages, though he doubts the fourth is fully possible in this mortal life.

First is that in which one loves himself for his own sake, encumbered with the cares of the body and its carnal desires. yet, even so, one must listen to the command of God to love his neighbor, and try to love him "in God" as one whom God has made to share our human nature.

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second stage, emerges after we find ourselves unable to cope with the tribulations of life, is to love God for one's own sake in order to secure the deliverance and mastery that the love of God makes possible.

the third, a more exalted and truly Christian stage, is to love God for his sake. at this point it will no longer be hard to fulfill the commandment of loving one's neighbor, for one truly loves God and in this way also loves the things which are God's. this is as far as most Christians ever get in this life, but in heaven and possibly for a brief moment on earth, one may love himself only for God's sake.

Bernard does not claim to have attained to this fourth stage but he gives a description of it in familiar mystical terms:

" Blessed and holy, I would say, is he to whom it has been given to experience such a thing in this mortal life at rare intervals or even once, and this suddenly and scarcely for the space of a single moment. In a certain manner to lose yourself as though you were not, and to be utterly unconscious of yourself and to be emptied of yourself and, as it were, brought to nothing, this pertains to heavenly intercourse, not to human affection

what Bernard is far more certain of is that the human will can come into union with the will of God. he uses vivid symbolism to illustrate this.

Just as a little drop of water mixed with a lot of wine seems entirely to lose its own identity, while it takes on the taste of wine and its color; just as iron, heated and glowing, looks very much like fire, having divested itself of its original and characteristic appearance; and just as air flooded with the light of the sun is transformed into the same splendor of light so that it appears not so much lighted up as to be light itself; so it will inevitably happen that in saints every human affection will then, in some ineffable manner, melt away from self and be entirely transfused into the will of God."

to sum up: Bernard had an extraordinary sense of what the presence of Christ can mean in human experience.

He saw and enjoined the demands of humility and love as these come to persons in Jesus

he discerned clearly both the limits of the human spirit in its natural state and its possibilities when lifted by and in response to the love of God.

he found the mystical experience most attainably and most fully expressed in a sense of divine presence within a union of the human will with the will of God.

HILDEGARDE OF BINGEN (1098-1179)

As the 10th child of a noble family, Hildegarde was "tithed" to the church, a benedictine monastery, according to the custom of the day at age 8.

Tho she had visions from age 3 she was fearful and embarrassed by them and people's reactions. The result was she spent the first half of her life (till she was 42) fighting any sign of the divine within herself.

The turning point came in one of her visions (at 42) in which she was clearly commanded to honor her inner light and to "say and write what you see and hear". She still refused to write, and in fact became severely ill. Only when she began to write was she again healthy.

She spent the next 10 years writing SCIVIAS, a complex collection of visions and their interpretations. She wrote two other mystical treatises as well as works on medicine and the natural sciences, autobiographical writings, hundreds of letters, sermons and musical pieces, ^{69 as then} as well.

W/in Hildegarde's visions are many images of a strong and powerful Divine Feminine. This helped her to transcend the social norms of her day, tho she still agreed women were the weaker vessel and should not be priests.

DIVINE FEMININE- the purpose of the feminine was to manifest God in the world. She speaks of her as Sophia, Ecclesia, the Virgin, the virtues, etc. It is the feminine that gives birth to the numinous in human consciousness.

God the Father and Wisdom (Sophia) the Mother embrace in a dance of love and thru this interreaction creation is made manifest. Like wood and fire, one cannot produce heat and energy w/o the other.

For Hildegarde, the Virgin Mary is the link between the divine and human. she makes the incarnation possible. More an image of the archtypal virgin mother than a historical person.

In her images, the divine females are virgins, while exalted human women are also virgins. This causes some problems to women today who see virginity as psychological, while Hild. saw it as literal.

The Virgin as archetype, is the feminine principle of surrendering to and being enraptured by the divine. This is the virgin of Hildegarde's visions. This is the birthright of every human being according to her.

Striving toward harmony in the world is the physical manifestation of divine grace because God, who is in every facet of creation, IS its harmony. She sees humans as the microcosm of the greater whole. They thus have a responsibility to reflect the Macrocosm, which is God.

The idea of "As above, so below" is most clearly seen in her music for it was the primary example of and vehicle for harmony. Symponia, the blending of voices and instruments, recalled the harmony of paradise. She composed a great deal of music and lyrics and insisted on its importance for her nuns.

It was vitally important to Hildegarde that the Light she perceived in herself and in everyone wear a feminine face, because the feminine principle is the way to the interior, the enabling force for spiritual birth and inner transformation.

St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Francis was very different from anyone we have discussed and really unlike anyone since his time, he was unique.

he left little written material, his canticle to Brother sun being the most famous, but what he left was an enduring message in the joyous simplicity, the utter dedication, and the fragrance of his life of prayer and service.

his last testament, pleading for his rule to be maintained was the only other authentic writing.

the prayer attributed to him, tho it certainly captures the spirit of his life, was written early this century and attributed to him, but is not his.

born in Assisi in 1182, christened Giovanni Bernadone, but renamed Francesco by his father. His mother, Pica, was from France.

he was spoiled, had many friends and was a party animal up until he went to war. He was captured and held prisoner in Perugia for at least a year. He became ill, and was let go but spent a long time in recovery from illness, both physical and mental.

when age 25 he was praying one day at the church of St. Damian and felt the figure on the crucifix above him was calling him to a new way of life.

the image spoke to him calling him by name saying:
"Francis, go repair My house, which as yhou see is falling into decay."

he soon felt impelled to kiss the hands of lepers, whom he had formerly detested, and traded his garments for those of a begger.

His father was really disturbed and actually imprisoned him in his home for some time, until he went on a business trip and his mother let him out.

His father dragged him before the bishop of Assisi where Francis stripped off all his clothing and gave all back to his father, including all money (he never touched money again) and declared that henceforth his sole allegiance was to his Father in heaven.

his first idea of his call was literally to start rebuilding churches, which he did for a few years. But the call that shaped the direction of his later life came to him at Mass in the church of St. Mary of the angels when he heard the priest read the opening words of the 9th chap of Luke.

This spoke of going out to preach the Kingdom of God and carry nothing with them. He took this as his mission until his death at age 44.

the mandate was preaching the gospel, serving those in need, living in poverty, loving God and man and all God's creatures, gathering followers about him and living in joyous, holy obedience.

His faith lent courage to his actions so he went to Rome to get the blessing of Pope Innocent III for his rule .

He later went to Egypt to try to convert the Moslem Soldan to Christianity, tho he failed. He did pick up Malaria and Trachoma of the eyes, while there, however that probably contributed to an early death.

Rivalry and sharp differences of opinion broke out between Francis and some of his trusted followers. the movement split apart into two groups.

the Spirituali who wished to keep to the original vows of simplicity and poverty and the

Conventuali led by Friar Elias, who wished to make of the order a more lax and worldly institution.

the deep sorrow which this caused Francis probably hastened his death.

a more joyous feature of the movement was the establishment of the sisterhood known then and today as the Poor Clares.

under the leadership of Lady Clare, a wealthy girl of noble birth who under Francis preaching renounced a life of prestige and comfort and with his help established a convent near St. Damians's chapel, his first building program.

this is the second order of Francis and still is growing (there is a convent of them in Roswell).

the third order of Francis was formed for all those who heard his message but could not leave their homes and ordinary occupations to join him. These are married people, both male and female, who were originally called penitents (the Penitents of NM are based on this order)

these are lay people who agree to live a life as close to Francis Ideal as possible. their vows have been summed up like this:

"The Penitent vowed to make restitution of all ill-gotten gain, to become reconciled with his enemies, to live in peace and concord with all men, to pass his life in prayer and works of charity, to keep certain fasts and vigils, to pay tithes regularly to the church, to take no oath save under exceptional conditions, never to wear arms, to use no foul language, and to practice piety to the dead."

these vows epitomize the moral and social aspects of Francis' preaching, all centered in conversion or fresh commitment to the Christian life.

among these requirements he was deeply concerned with peace making and the ministry of reconciliation.

in 1224 Francis was wearing out. He not only had malaria, but dropsy, and bleeding ulcers, not to mention the eye infection.

He retired to La Verna, a hermitage given to him by a wealthy nobleman. It was here he received the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ, on Sept. 20, 1224. He is the first person ever to have these wounds become visible that we know of however, it has occurred over 300 times since then, mostly to women, but several men, including Padre Pio, a Franciscan who died in 1968 after bearing the stigmata for 50 years.

This phenomena is not real common, but much more so to those on the path in the Christian tradition. It is no telling how many experience this invisibly.

he has been called the most tender winsome and Christlike of all the saints

centuries before the terms were coined Francis advocated and called on his followers to practice "the priesthood of all believers" and "the ministry of the laity."

he did this with no aspersions on the priesthood of the church, but with a great sense of the mission Christ sets before every Christian. In this he is the Protestants saint as well as the Catholics. In fact, he is the only western

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saint with an order in the Greek Orthodox church as well as Catholic and Anglican.

if people don't know anything else about Francis, they know he preached to the birds. and as Matthew Fox says its time to get him out of the birdbath and let him be taken seriously.

his sense of complete kinship with nature never led him, as it has often led others, to identify nature with God or to forsake the church, its Christian imperatives or its sacraments.

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suffice it to say, he can't be classified. there has not been another quite like him before or since