

Christ Episcopal Church
Adult Formation 2020

Spring Foundations Course 2020

Three Medieval Women Mystics

What is mysticism?

First, it's important to note that no one and no religion or spiritual tradition holds a monopoly on mystical experience. It seems to be present throughout the globe and throughout most of known history. Thus, there are Daoist, Jewish, Hellenistic, Hindu, Native American, and Neo-Platonic forms of mysticism – to mention but a few. While it would be fascinating to explore mystical traditions in a variety of religions and cultures, our purpose is to consider mystical experience within the Christian tradition, in western Europe, during a particular epoch of western Christian history: the high (1050-1350) and late (1350-1500) medieval periods.

Second, it is good to remember that there are various understandings of mystical experience and that seeking a definitive description might lead one to despair of ever grasping its meaning and significance. In order to hold off despair (!), let us consider the understanding offered by Elizabeth Petroff, a scholar of women's mystical experience. Petroff writes that mystical experience is "a succession of insights and revelations about God that gradually transform the recipient in love ... it is the direct and [frequently] unmediated experience of God" (*Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*, Oxford University Press, 1994). The 14th century poet, reformer, and scholar of mysticism, Jean Gerson, wrote something similar: "Mysticism is the knowledge of God through experience, received in the embrace of unifying love."

Hildegard of Bingen wrote this: *Love abounds in all things from the depths to high above the highest stars, and is most loving to all things; for to the high king it has given the kiss of peace.*

Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote this: *Lord, what shall this book be called, for your glory? It shall be called The Flowing Light of the Godhead. It is called this because your flowing light and love flood all hearts that dwell in your mystery.*

Julian of Norwich dictated this: *Our Lord showed me a spiritual vision of his familiar love. I saw that for us he is our clothing, wrapping and enveloping us for love, hanging about us in tender love.*

Why did women mystics flourish in the high and late medieval ages?

There are a number of responses to this question depending upon one's starting point. A Christian theologian might say: *It was the work of the Spirit* and, as

Scripture notes, the Spirit cannot be controlled: “In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions, and your elders shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28). A sociologist might argue that after 500 years of social chaos – from the disintegration of the Roman Empire and subsequent invasions with economic and political turmoil – *the renewal of society* opened up some opportunities for women that did not previously exist. As the tectonic plates of cultural change took hold, cultural shifts “erupted” in new forms of expression. Some church historians have suggested that *communities of religious women provided nuns, anchorites, and sisters “safe” places* in which their visionary experiences could be expressed. Or was it this: that one mystic’s experience – communicated through *letters or other writings* – gave other women mystics permission to articulate their experiences as well? Or perhaps all these conditions – and perhaps others – came together.

Why was it a challenge for women mystics to be “heard” in their society?

It is good to remember that patriarchy, the rule of men, antedates the emergence of the Christian movement. It has been and remains a cultural phenomenon. Scholars of the New Testament point to three different views of women in the Christian tradition. The first, proposed by the historical Paul, is the *fundamental equality* of women and men due to their baptism in which the oppressive values of the dominant society (“the sin of the world”) are washed away (Galatians 3:27-29). It is not for nothing that the historical Paul promoted women in positions of leadership in the early Christian movement (Romans 16). After the death of the historical Paul, other people wrote to the Christian communities in Ephesus and Colossae, and they used Paul’s name as if the historical Paul were the author – but he was not. These authors *revised* Paul’s view of the equality between women and men in Christ and agreed with the subordination of women to men – although they argued against the dominant patriarchal culture that husbands should love their wives, something unheard of in Greco-Roman culture (Ephesians 5:25-22; Colossians 3:18-4:1). Still others wrote *against the historical Paul* and his promotion of a fundamental equality between women and men. Though they used Paul’s name as the author, they were actually intending to subvert his theology of Christian equality and, in turn, fully agreed with the patriarchal values of the dominant culture: women must be silent, subject to men, modest in dress, tending to childbirth and raising children, never teaching (1 Timothy 2:8-15). Equality – subservience with love – silence and subjection of women to men: which one prevailed? Clearly, by the early medieval period (500 – 1050), the last view was prevailing among Christians. It was a church and a society shaped by the exhortation of 1 Timothy 2 in which medieval women lived. Who would care about their experience of God, that is, unless it could be verified as orthodox in teaching?

Why are there a profusion of books, courses, and retreats on women mystics?

Well, their experience was never lost in Roman Catholic circles and was restored among Anglicans in the Anglo-Catholic reform movement of the early 19th century. And there were Lutheran poets and hymn writers who composed texts that speak of mystical experience. Mysticism and cultivating mystical experience has not been a strong suit among Protestants who have tended to hold closely to the primacy of the Word of God (scripture shaping human experience) and have been suspicious of human experience as the locus of God's presence.

Over the past fifty years, feminist Christian scholars, in their great effort to recover the voices of women in the Christian tradition, have been instrumental in translating critical editions of their works, teaching courses and publishing books on them, performing their music, and studying their art. Of course, it helps to have a medieval mystic canonized as a saint: Bridget of Sweden (1391), Catherine of Siena (1491), Gertrud the Great (1606), Julian of Norwich (1980: Anglican calendar), Hildegard of Bingen (2012). Among Roman Catholics, four women mystics have been proclaimed "doctors of the church," thus recognizing their writings as part of the "authentic teaching authority" of the church: Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux. Consider also the lop-sided nature of this honorific: 4 women and 32 men. Neither Anglicans nor Protestants bestow such an honorific.

Hildegard of Bingen

Illuminations from *Scivias*



1. A burning light coming from heaven poured into my mind. Like a flame that does not burn but rather enkindles, it inflamed my heart and breast, just as the sun warms something with its rays.



2. The storms tried to bend the burning sphere that was in the body of the person ... but that sphere worked vigorously to renew the person. For Hildegard, the person is the microcosm of the cosmos: earth, water, air, and fire.



3. *I saw a very bright light. Inside it was a person who was the color of sapphire. The bright light signifies God ... the person signifies the Word who is without blemish ... The person was surrounded by a reddish color ... this fire signifies the Holy Spirit ... all of these exist as one in the divine Majesty.*



4. *O most honored Viriditas, most honored Greening Force, you who root in the Sun; You who lights up, in shining serenity, within a wheel that earthly excellence fails to comprehend. You are enfolded in the weaving of divine mysteries. You redden like the dawn and you burn: flame of the Sun.*

Listen to a selection of Hildegard's musical compositions here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8gK0_PglgY

May 8
JULIAN OF NORWICH

Collect

Triune God, Father and Mother to us all, who showed your servant Julian revelations of your nurturing and sustaining love: Move our hearts, like hers, to seek you above all things, for in giving us yourself you give us all. Amen.

Readings

Hebrews 10:19–24

Psalm 27:1–9

John 4:23–26

September 17
HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Collect

God of all times and seasons: Give us grace that we, following your servant Hildegard, may both know and make known the joy and jubilation of being part of your creation, and show forth your glory, not only with our lips but in our lives; through our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Readings

Sirach 43:1–12

Psalm 104:25–34

John 3:16–21

November 19
MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG

Collect

Draw the souls of your people into your love, O God, that with your servant Mechthild, we may yearn to be fully yours, for you know us better than we can know ourselves; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen.

Readings

Song of Songs 3:1–5

Psalm 119:41–48

Mark 8:22–26