"*Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* provides strong nourishment for those who are just beginning or have long journeys to take. Based on fifty years of classroom experience in teaching mysticism, Egan casts a wider net—more than seventy entries—than is usual in surveys of this kind. His effort is an important contribution to the burgeoning interest in mysticism."

—Paul Lachance, OFM
Adjunct Professor of Spirituality
Catholic Theological Union

"This book is a fitting culmination to Harvey Egan's fifty years of reading, writing, and lecturing about the Christian mystics. A particular value of the work is his inclusion of not only the best-known mystics but also those whom he has found to be undeservedly neglected. Readers of these *Soundings* will surely be drawn to read the full texts of many of these mystics and so let themselves be 'sounded' in return."

—James A. Wiseman, OSB
Professor of Theology and Religious Studies
The Catholic University of America
Monk of St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC

"*Soundings* comes together here to offer an overview of Christian spiritualities ranging from the Old Testament to Mother Teresa. Several dozen well-known and less-known theologians of mystical communion take the reader on a journey through approaches to Christian life and prayer. Locating them concretely in their own times and cultures, Harvey Egan presents these men and women with vitality and insight."

—Thomas O'Meara, OP
Warren Professor Emeritus
University of Notre Dame

"This is one of the finest books I have ever read on Christian mysticism. Harvey Egan, SJ, with his usual careful scholarship and clear writing style, leads us through the lives of the great Christian mystics in a way that makes mysticism and prayer accessible and inviting even to the most non-saintly among us. Father Egan, a master of the spiritual masters, brings to bear a lifetime of experience and erudition to a topic that can seem far removed from our daily lives, but is in fact at its heart: the way we relate to God. I can think of no better introduction to the Christian mystic tradition than *Soundings*."

—James Martin, SJ
Author of *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything*
Culture Editor, *America Magazine*

"Harvey Egan's *Soundings* are the distillation of a lifetime of theological research into the deeper reaches of Christian experience. His book, in style, format, and content, is a perfect resource for theological teachers and students eager to make their own the deep creativity and catholicity of Christian faith. Professor Egan has made a wide-ranging selection of the long-recognized (Gregory of Nyssa, Teresa of Avila), too little appreciated (Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola), and of the sometimes all-but-forgotten (Guigo Ii, Ramon Llull, Christina of St Trond), remarkable men and women who have been living witnesses to the mystical depth of Christian life. There is a benign provocation in this: readers will inevitably ask, How can you leave out this or that radiant mystical presence? But that is a good problem to have: the cloud of witnesses—over seventy, in fact, here presented—that will keep reminding us that there is so much in need of discovery, recovery, and celebration in the life of the Church itself, and in its growing dialogue with the great religious traditions of humankind. A wise book, deeply theological, methodologically alert (Rahner and Lonergan), spiritually inspiring, and widely attractive to any reader in search of the sacred heart of the Christian tradition."

—Anthony J. Kelly, CSsR
Professor of Theology
Australian Catholic University
Member of the International
Theological Commission

"Harvey Egan is an eminent scholar of Christian mysticism. This present volume reflects fifty years of engagement with those major figures who have experienced, in the words of Saint John of the Cross, that 'hidden wisdom which comes through love.' This eminently readable book would be of enormous value both for the individual reader and for use in a classroom setting. I highly recommend it to both audiences."

—Lawrence S. Cunningham
John A. O'Brien Professor of
Theology
University of Notre Dame

Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition

Harvey D. Egan, S.J.

A Michael Glazier Book

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

Cover design by David Manahan, O.S.B. Photo courtesy of Photos.com.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Egan, Harvey D.
Soundings in the Christian mystical tradition / Harvey D. Egan.
p. cm.
"A Michael Glazier Book."
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 978-0-8146-5613-6 — ISBN 978-0-8146-8003-2 (e-book)
1. Mysticism. 2. Mystics. I. Title.

BV5082.3.E36 2010
248.2'2—dc22 2010020551

To
Joyce, David, Donna, Denise,
Brian, Erin, Wrangler, Odis—
and in memory of my mother and father.

Contents

Preface

In a survey taken in the United States many years ago, a simple question was asked: "Who are you?" As expected, some responded with their name or profession; others became angry or laughed; still others just walked away. However, a small percentage replied, "I am a child of God." When this question was asked in an undergraduate class here at Boston College, a perceptive student offered a remarkable answer: "Isn't that the question Moses asked God and to which only God can say, 'I AM'?"

The Christian mystics raise the question of human identity in a striking manner and receive an arresting response. In a variety of ways, they not only know but also experience that the human person is made in God's image, an image that contains what it images. They also experience themselves as an infinite question to which only God is the answer; an immense longing that only Love can quench; an endless desire that finds "dissatisfied satisfaction" only in God's incomprehensible Mystery; a nothing in the face of the No-thing; and an abyss whose bottom is the Abyss, into which "even the soul of Christ vanishes." These God-haunted, God-possessed, God-illuminated, and God-transformed persons—"theologians," in the profoundest sense of the word—know that human identity is rooted in God.

Plunged into the Father's Mystery, addressed and illuminated by the Father's Word, and burning with the fire of the Holy Spirit, many mystics stress the trinitarian dimension of their identity. Others, on the other hand, emphasize their identity in relationship to Christ, as sons or daughters in the Son, redeemed sinners, who are called to share eternally in divine life because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Many sought to hang with Christ on the cross for the world's redemption and were explicitly conscious as "hiding in Christ's wounds" and as having his wounds engraved on both spirit and body.

Alert to the least prompting of the Holy Spirit, many mystics discovered their identity through a contemplation in apostolic action. More recent mystics were conscious of themselves as "living cells" in the cosmic Christ—the Alpha and the Omega of an evolving world. Other Christian explorers of the human spirit found their identity by reconciling in themselves the worlds of science or of Eastern mysticisms. All were conscious, in some way, of the paradox of human identity—supremely and unsurpassably manifested in the God-Man—that the genuinely human is disclosed only through surrender to God and that the search for God cannot bypass the genuinely human.

As pioneers of a transformed and fully authentic humanity, the mystics give dramatic testimony to God's grace and to heroic human achievement. Called in a special way to listen to the whispers of God in every human heart, they become the loudspeakers of what is deepest in the human spirit. The Christian mystics also amplify what it means to be baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and to have the Trinity living in them.

Revealing original and often paradoxical modes of expressing and imaging the divine-human relationship, the mystics teach innovative ways of knowing (often a "learned ignorance") and loving God, neighbor, self, and the world. Unusual forms of consciousness—such as visions, locutions, ecstasies—sometimes fill their lives. Others, however, reject such phenomena as distractions and temptations against life's real purpose: total surrender to God's love. They are God's fools, troubadours—the great explorers, thinkers, artists, and poets of the interior life who explain the art of loving God, neighbor, self, and the world.

It is customary for Jesuit provincials on their annual meeting with their men to ask, "And how is your spiritual life?" My recent answer—half-jokingly—was, "I have been reading and writing about the Christian mystics for the past fifty years." A half century of intense conversation with these remarkable figures has led to this book.

In 1959, I read my first mystical text, St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*. I was at the time an electrical engineer, who had read almost nothing religious since my grammar school catechisms. His text, however, has marked me to this day. My interest in the mystics deepened when I was exposed, on entering the Society of Jesus in 1960, to the profound spirituality and mysticism of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

During my final year of formal philosophical studies in 1965, I read Elmer O'Brien's *The Varieties of Mystic Experience*,[1] an anthology—the right book at the right time—that opened up a wider world of the Christian mystical tradition. In 1969, I began doctoral studies in theology as one of Karl Rahner's students because he was one of the few theologians with an unabashed interest in the writings of mystics as theological sources.

My doctoral dissertation, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon*,[2] attempted to translate the mystical wisdom of St. Ignatius of Loyola into a contemporary framework by using Rahner's theological method. The fascination with Ignatius Loyola as mystic culminated in a 1987 book, *Ignatius Loyola the Mystic*,[3] in which I argued that Ignatius's pragmatic successes in asceticism, spirituality, and humanism obscured appreciating him as one of the tradition's most profound trinitarian, Christocentric, and apostolic mystics.

At Santa Clara University in 1973, I began teaching courses in Eastern and Western mysticisms. During this period, I gave a series of talks on Christian spirituality and mysticism to an American Buddhist community—only to discover, to my astonishment, that most of the members were former Christians who knew little about their own Christian mystical heritage. Retreat work, liturgies, and conferences with the impressive community of Carmelite nuns in Santa Clara furthered my desire to study the Christian mystics more extensively.

Since 1975, when I began teaching at Boston College, I have written *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?*,[4] *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition*,[5] *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*[6] (small parts of which have found their way into this volume), and *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Daily Life*.[7] I count as one of the great blessings of my life to have at my disposal the excellent Paulist Press series The Classics of Western Spirituality, and the standard-setting scholarship of Bernard McGinn of the University of Chicago and of Kurt Ruh (d. 2002) of the University of Würzburg.

The classics of the Christian mystical tradition are never fully understood, no matter how often they are read and reread. Over and above broadening the horizon of the readers, they also demand an intellectual, moral, religious conversion. The texts are never fully comprehended because interpreters can never fully comprehend either the cultural horizon of the writers or their own cultural horizon

of understanding. Another problem arises because the writers of mystical texts—analogous to biblical authors—wrote primarily for mystagogical reasons. Writing this book has been for me a spiritual exercise more than an academic one. I hope that I have undergone to some degree the "conversions" required to do justice to mystical texts.

The psalmist wrote of "the deep calling to the deep." I have titled this book *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* because "soundings" can mean both the action of measuring depth and the acoustical vibrations emanating from an object. My experience has been that one cannot take "soundings" of mystical texts without being "sounded" in return. These texts have a paradoxical way of taking the measure of those who measure them. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (d. 1976) emphasized that the human person is "the shepherd of Being," but the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (d. 1984) said it best: "Being shepherds us."

The mystics treated in this volume were selected for three major reasons. First, any book that presents an overview of the tradition and a broad cross-section of mystical themes must include the titans of the tradition. Second, I wished also to introduce writers whom I consider to have been undeservedly neglected. Third, fifty years of reading mystical texts should allow me some leeway in either overestimating or underestimating some figures in the tradition. A volume of this size can offer the reader only a partial taste of the richness of the Christian mystical tradition.

I am grateful to Michael A. Fahey, S.J., and Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., both of Boston College; to Robert Doran, S.J., of Marquette University; to Herr Dr. Wilhelm Hoye, Münster, Germany; to James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., of the Catholic University of America; to Sister Mary Augustine, Little Sisters of the Poor of Somerville, MA; and to Sister Ann Laforest, O.C.D., Beacon, NY, Carmel, for reading many of the chapters.

Harvey D. Egan, S.J.
Boston College
January 3, 2010
Solemnity of the Epiphany

Introduction

The word "mysticism" rarely evokes a neutral response. Mass media often employ it to depict the "spooky," the irrational, the paranormal, and superstition at its worst. The Oxford English Dictionary incorrectly defines it as "religious belief that is characterized by vague, obscure, or confused spirituality; a belief system based on the assumption of occult forces, mysterious supernatural agencies, etc."

When I mentioned recently that I was writing a book on Christian mysticism, the person said immediately, "Oh, then you'll have something to say about *The Da Vinci Code*." Christian mysticism, however, has absolutely nothing to do with this or with the increasingly popularized "sightings" of the Virgin Mary.

The contemporary scene is replete with seekers of "experience," of "transcendence without dogma," that is, with spiritualities free from traditional religions. New Age spirituality—redolent with skewed Eastern pantheistic beliefs—further clouds the issue. What Harvey Cox has called a "spiritual consumerism" has sidetracked many a true seeker from a genuine spiritual quest.

Psychological studies on mysticism often attempt to explain it away as madness, hysteria, self-hypnosis, repressed eroticism, and escape from the duties and pressures of daily life. More recent studies frequently reduce it to regression, for example, to an experience of the earliest sensations of childhood. Mysticism is also mistakenly understood as an "altered state of consciousness" engendered, for example, by high-altitude flying or long kayak journeys. Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary—to name only two—have popularized the notion that mystical experiences can be had by ingesting psychedelic drugs.[1] Of *what* or of *whom* the mystic is conscious is rarely asked by these researchers. Moreover, the radical spiritual annihilation and personal transformation witnessed in genuine Christian mysticism far transcends what results from the "bad trips" and "good trips" of a user of psychedelic drugs.

Some Jewish scholars share the erroneous opinion of Gershom Scholem that "it would be absurd to call Moses, the man of God, a mystic, or to apply this term to the prophets, on the strength of their immediate religious experience."[2] This is paradigmatic of the false assumption that the experience of undifferentiated unity (atman is Brahman), or the fusion experience of monism, is the hallmark of all mysticism.

In her book *The Protestant Mystics*,[3] Anne Fremantle contradicts the thesis of twentieth-century Protestant dialectical theologians that there are no Protestant mystics. She asserts, however, that all Catholic mystics—unlike their Protestant counterparts—travel a well-worn, well-known, well-marked, easily identifiable three-stage journey of purgation, illumination, and union. The following chapters of this book will disabuse the reader of Fremantle's view.

The Catholic Church's attitude toward mysticism has also been somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the Church fosters the contemplative life, which often leads to mystical consciousness. Many of the saints formally recognized as such by the Church were mystics. On the other hand, Church officials have tended to stress the mystical path as suitable only for an elite and counseled the path of approved devotions and liturgical life for the general faithful.

The famous psychologist Carl Jung and many other commentators hold the view that the mystic is necessarily a heretic. Exploring the deepest realms of the psyche, mystics discovered shocking and explosive truths, which they then rendered safe to reveal by using the protective covering of Church teachings.

Better scholarship has disclosed, however, that mysticism arises out of a lived tradition that fosters and nourishes the seeking and finding of God-consciousness. As this volume will disclose, the genuine Christian mystics upheld and enriched their tradition. To be sure, their tasting of and plunging into the depths of the incomprehensible, ineffable God sometimes prompted them to stretch and to transform both language and the ways to speak the ineffable. This on occasion led to tensions with Church authorities.

The word "mysticism" is not found in the Bible. Historically, the word is associated with the Hellenistic mystery religions and cults of the pre- and early Christian era. The "mystical ones" (Greek, *hoi mystai*; occasionally *hoi mystikoi*) were those who had been initiated into the secret rites (*ta mystika*) of the mystery religions. The mystics

were required to keep secret the *rituals* into which they had been initiated. The word "mystical," therefore, originally referred to the cultic or ritual secrets revealed only to the initiated ones, the mystics. Note, however, that the mystical secret was only a secret about the purely material aspects of the rites and rituals of the Greek mystery religions.

The great Jewish religious thinker Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.–50 A.D.) welded Jewish beliefs and spirituality with Greek thought. He focused sharply on the "mystical," or allegorical, interpretation of scripture. To him, "mystical" did not refer to the secret details of a ritual but to the secret and hidden meaning of God's word. Thus, he was probably the bridge between the Jewish and Greek worlds for the transposed meaning of the word "mystical" as it was used by the early Church Fathers to refer to the inner reality of scripture and the liturgy.

Late Second Temple Judaism, however, provided the matrix for Christian mysticism through its protomystical ascents to the vision of God found in the apocalypses, the movement to a canon of sacred texts, and the tools and techniques requisite to keep this movement alive. Neglecting the Jewish roots of Christian mysticism and viewing it as a purely Greek phenomenon seriously misconstrues the most important part of its history.

To many early Church Fathers, "mystical" signified the allegorical interpretation of scripture, especially the disclosing of Christ as the key to unlocking the secrets of the Old Testament. Scripture, Christologically interpreted, was the ground of all Christian thought, including mysticism, especially in the first centuries. Jesus was sometimes called the "mystical angel" whose entire life, death, resurrection, and glorification were understood as *the truly mystical*.

Eventually, Christians used the word "mystical" with respect to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The Fathers of the Church spoke of Christ's "mystical Pasch," the "mystical sacrifice of his Body and Blood," and the "mystical bread and wine." "Mystical waters," of course, referred to baptism. The profoundest mysteries of the faith—such as the Trinity and Christ's divinity—were likewise deemed supremely "ineffable and mystical." Especially in its formative stages, Christian mysticism was always both ecclesial, that is, realized only in and through the community, and scriptural, that is, tied to the spiritual, hidden, or mystical meaning of the sacred text.

By the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, the word "mystical" had biblical, liturgical, and sacramental connotations. It denoted the hidden presence of Christ in the scriptures, the liturgy, and the sacraments—his "spiritual" presence. Thus, Christologically interpreted and liturgically lived scripture provided the exegetical context of early Christian mysticism. The Christian mystical tradition finds its real origin here and nowhere else.

The word "mystical" definitively entered Christian vocabulary through the influential writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, a sixth-century Syrian monk. Although he too used the word "mystical" in discussing problems of the interpretation of scripture, his treatise, the *Mystica Theologia*, taught a "mystical theology" that permitted a person to know God as the "Divine Darkness" by way of unknowing. Commentators frequently overlook, however, that this "mystical theology" cannot be dissociated from the mystical exegesis and liturgy that suffused this monk's life.

The phrase "mystical theology" gradually came to mean the knowledge of God attained by direct, immediate, and ineffable contemplation. It was distinguished from both "natural theology" (knowledge of God obtained from creatures) and "dogmatic theology" (knowledge of God received from revelation). Saint John of the Cross (1542–91), for example, spoke of mystical theology as a secret wisdom infused by God into the soul through love. Therefore, the term "mystical theology" in this context refers to mystical *experience*. Contemporary usage, on the other hand, equates mystical theology with the doctrines and theories of mystical experience.

Thus, the terms "mystical" and "mystical theology" antedate by centuries the noun "mysticism." The latter term came into common parlance in the seventeenth-century dispute about the place of human effort in contemplative prayer. Mysticism denoted "infused contemplation" in contrast to "acquired contemplation." One attains the latter through "ordinary" grace, asceticism, and psychological concentration. In the former, God makes himself known to the individual through a special grace beyond all human effort.

One of the most influential, contemporary scholars of mysticism, Bernard McGinn, defines "the mystical element in Christianity [as] that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God."[4] Because Christian mysti-

cism springs from a living, dynamic, historical religion, McGinn views the contemporary quest for "transcendence without dogma," for an "unchurched mysticism," as misguided. Christian mysticism, in his view, is best understood in the light of its interaction with the other aspects of the whole of Christianity in which it came to fruition. One is always a Christian (or Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim) before one is a mystic. McGinn rejects the opinion that mysticism can be understood as the inner common denominator of all religion—as a religion in itself.

Christian mysticism, in McGinn's view, is a way of life, a process, and not a series of transient experiences. Transformation is another of Christian mysticism's salient features: God-consciousness transforms one's heart, mind, and life. The encounter with the God of love changes the sinful, broken person into someone healed, enlightened, and transformed.

"Union with God" has long been considered to be the goal of the mystical life. McGinn points out, however, that many Christian mystics avoided unitive language and wrote instead of "contemplation," "vision," "ecstasy," the "birth of God in the soul," "endless desire," "fusion," the "abyss flowing into the Abyss," and so on. For synthesizing the various terms used to express the ultimate relationship of the mystic with God, he prefers what he considers to be a "more inclusive and flexible term": the "presence of God," the way lovers are "present" to each other. Moreover, in his opinion, the attempt to explain the mystical life according to the threefold schema of purgation, illumination, and union does not do justice to the richness of the tradition.

Many in the Christian tradition wrote of their "mystical experiences." The term "experience," in McGinn's view, lends itself to misunderstanding mysticism as unusual sensations, particular forms of feelings, or sensible perceptions easily deracinated from the spiritual activities of human consciousness that form the full range of human conscious life: understanding, judging, willing, and loving. He favors explaining Christian mysticism in terms of the "consciousness of God" because the mystic is one who becomes aware—"conscious"—of new and transformative ways of knowing and loving through states of awareness in which God becomes present in inner spiritual acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming center of one's life. For this reason, McGinn finds the distinction

between mystical experience and mystical theology "simplistic" and "unhelpful" because it tends to reduce mysticism to what can be found in autobiographical accounts of experiences of God, which are actually rare in the first thousand years of Christian history.

One of the paradoxes of Christian mysticism is the mystic's consciousness of God's "presence" and God's "absence." Consciousness of God's "presence" can result in a wide variety of awareness: from a painful awareness of the mystic's disorder, sinfulness, "nothingness," and great distance from God to ecstatic experiences and states of illumination and love.

The excruciating "absence" of the Beloved is a salient feature of mystical consciousness: God is sometimes most present to the mystic by his absence and most absent by his presence. Few mystics have not complained about a dark night of the spirit in which God has seemingly abandoned the lover, an immense longing that nothing finite can satisfy, and a brutal hell that is somehow heaven.

McGinn writes of another paradox of the Christian mystical life: mystical consciousness involves a complex form of "mediated immediacy." The sacraments, the liturgy, nature, various types of prayer, and ascetical practices "mediate" an awareness of God's mystical presence. However, numerous mystics have insisted on the absence of mediation at a point where the soul and God become identically one, at least on some level. Yet, even these mystics who claim to have reached identity with God—the fusion of the Beloved and the lover—usually also say that on another level some distinction between God and the creature remains. In different terms, it can be said that the mystic claims to be aware of something great enough to be God, yet intimate enough to be the mystic's own self.

Although McGinn's approach has already proven fruitful and I agree with much in his approach, I prefer to speak of "the preparation for" a mystical God-consciousness that is often not given as the ascetical dimension of Christian life. I would also distinguish more sharply than McGinn what it is that constitutes a mystic, a mystical theologian, and a mystagogue—granting that in practice the dividing line may be quite blurred. The mystic leads a mystical life, replete with the immediate consciousness of God. The mystical theologian provides the theory and understanding of such a life. The mystagogue leads others in the pursuit of this life. One and the same person may possess all three gifts, but frequently that is not the case.

The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic interest in and study of mysticism. It needs to be stressed at the start of this book, however, that love—not mysticism—is the zenith of Christian life. After a lecture I once gave, I was asked about *married* mystics. The audience became visibly upset when I said that we possess no mystical texts written by married (in the true sense) Christians. So, if there were married mystics, we simply do not know.

McGinn has convincingly argued that Western mysticism began in the fourth-century monasticism, which was fostered in large part by bishops who emphasized asceticism and virginity. Monasticism—almost alone—provided the context for the knowledge of scripture and the life of prayer and penance requisite for direct contact with God. In fact, the power of Western mysticism comes from its deliberate eroticizing of the relation between the human virgin and the divine Bridegroom, as if absorption of the erotic element into the spiritual dimension becomes more forceful the more it negates all deliberate external expression. This may explain somewhat why in the later tradition married people who obtained mystical graces chose to live as brothers and sisters, or even to abandon their spouses.

The hostility to my reply concerning no texts from married Christians also underscores a false assumption about Christian life and perfection. Saint Paul does not counsel Christians to seek the mystical path, but instructs them to follow a yet "more excellent way" (1 Cor 12:31)—the way of love. Love is patient, kind, not arrogant, not rude, never returns evil for evil, but bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. Only faith, hope, and love will abide, these three; "but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

Furthermore, as much as the Desert Fathers valued the higher states of prayer, they focused not on special states of mystical consciousness but on humility, kindness, patience, gentleness, and self-control. These are the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). The Church canonizes saints for their *heroic virtue*, not for their direct consciousness of God—which the canonized may or may not have had. To my way of thinking, mysticism is only one of many ways to deepen the life of Christian faith, hope, and love. Christ was no yogi teaching higher forms of consciousness. Make love your aim, as St. Paul says. "Love one another, as I have loved you." Love—not mysticism—is the essence of Christian perfection.

Mysticism in the Hebrew Scriptures

"Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." (Ex 33:11)

The Church Fathers and the mystics of the Christian tradition drank from the fountain of the biblical word because they knew that God's revelation is the cornerstone of orthodoxy and authentic Christian living. They sought out the spiritual or mystical sense of the Bible because of their conviction—so aptly expressed by Thomas Aquinas—that the scriptures are the heart of Christ as they reveal it.

Not a few in the Christian tradition also found in God's revealed word paradigms of mystical consciousness. It was widely held, for example, that before the sin of Adam and Eve, our "first parents" enjoyed God's intimate presence without interruption and loved all creatures in God and God in all creatures. Their graced condition endowed them with a mystical knowledge and love of God far beyond "ordinary" faith—but still short of the beatific vision.

Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and other patriarchs of the Old Testament were understood to have experienced God's intimate call, had their faith tested, wrestled with and were blessed by God, and spoke to God as to a personal friend. Often they were afraid and speechless in his presence, but visibly transformed by their encounters, drawn to him as their greatest good, and convinced that he was with his people in all they did and underwent.

The scriptures attest that Moses and Jacob met God face-to-face—with some qualifications as to how directly they gazed into his face (Gen 32:30; Ex 33:11, 23; Num 12:7; Deut 34:10). Hagar, Sarai's Egyptian maid, was perplexed after God spoke to her and asked, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (Gen 16:13). Jacob boasted that he had wrestled with God and survived—an

experience that left him with an overwhelming sense of God's awesome holiness (Gen 32:24ff.). When Job saw God ("now my eye sees thee" [Job 42:5]), his agonizing questions ceased and he repented "in dust and ashes."

The great Old Testament prophets—Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Amos—were called intimately and personally to be God's spokesmen. They experienced God as overwhelmingly holy and as "living water," the source of all authentic life—the one they could always count upon because of his "everlasting love" (Jer 31:3). God's presence, they believed, rendered the people of God invincible in Holy War, if they obeyed his commands.

The prophets often experienced God's word burning in their hearts. It rendered them both incapable of holding it in and powerful in speaking it forth. Having "stood in the council of the LORD" (Jer 23:18), they were authenticated to speak God's word and received an invincible trust in God's steadfast love.

Having received God's Spirit into their hearts, some prophesied a time when all God's people would definitely receive the Holy Spirit. Other prophets called their people to conversion and insisted upon a mystical Sabbath rest (Is 30:15), that is, resting in the presence of God. Others prophesied about a coming "son of man" (Dan 7), and laid the foundations for a messianic mysticism, which engendered an intense desire for the "one who is to come" who would establish God's dominion and power over everything.

It is not anachronistic to view the prophets as essentially mystics in action. Their profound experience of God in the present sensitized them to what God had done both for his people in the past and to the contemporary social, political, and economic scene. By virtue of their mystical God-consciousness, they comprehended the incongruence of their times with God's will for his people. In this way they addressed the burning questions of their day. In view of how God had acted in the past when his people obeyed or disobeyed, the prophets did not hesitate to say what God would do for or to them in the future.

The patriarchs and prophets are Jewish examples of those who experienced God as the Holy, the tremendous and fascinating mystery. Although absolutely transcendent, wholly other, and darkness itself, he was intimately near and the very light of their lives. His awesome presence evoked feelings of fear, dread, powerlessness,

openness to annihilation, creaturely nothingness, and sinfulness. More than one mystic found in the book of Job language apposite for describing the dark night of the soul in which the mystic feels justifiably rejected by God.

Nevertheless, this totally good God also attracted, charmed, intoxicated, ravished, and fascinated those exposed to his presence. The holy one awakened radical and transformative feelings of gratitude, dedication, praise, trust, submission, and love. He was experienced as the object of the deepest human desires and yearnings. To be united with this living, vital God was the end and goal of all living. It was life itself. This is authentic mysticism.

The patriarchs and the prophets taught the Israelites to expect the same gift of faith as they themselves had received. Israel's faithful certainly experienced communion with God, his saving presence, his protecting hand, and his steadfast love—and some in such a radically purifying, illuminating, and unitive way that it radically transformed their lives.

The Jewish scriptures indicate a difference of intensity between the mystical experience of the patriarchs and prophets and the living faith of the average Israelite, but they say nothing about a qualitative difference. The whole context of salvation history and the general laws of God's self-communication—grace—point in fact to faith as the theological locus of mystical experience.

The psalms attest in a special way to Israel's mystical faith. One finds there the mystic's emotions vis-à-vis the sense of God's transcendence, immanence, absence, and nearness. The hunger and thirst for the God who is light, love, living water, and life itself permeate the psalms. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10) is a profound call to mystical faith. The frequency of the words "love" (*ahabah*) and "loving kindness" (*hesed*) underscores the intense intimacy that existed between God and his people. The psalms attest that because we live, move, and have our being in God, no one can escape his loving presence (Ps 139:7-18).

The felt presence and absence of God that permeated Israel's life completed itself in the blessings, praise, and complaints found throughout the psalms. They confess that the believer is unconquerable because of God's steadfast love, which can be trusted and must be praised in all circumstances. Yahweh is praised not only for what he does but especially for what he is. His beauty, goodness, holiness,

and love fill both the created universe and the depths of the human heart. So unselfish is the praise expressed in the psalms that the psalmist wishes to escape death only because in Sheol praise of God is no longer possible. To praise God, according to the psalmist, is life itself.

Augustine considered the psalms to be the prayer of the "total Christ," the Church. It was and still is the prayer of the "Body of Christ," again, the Church. For Aquinas, the psalms expressed Christ's very own emotions.

The Song of Songs probably originated from erotic poetry used to instruct young couples in the joys of connubial love. In time this book was understood to dramatize the love relationship between Yahweh and his people. Very early on, Christians saw in it the parable of the love relationship God has to the new people of God, the Christian Church. By the third century, the Song dramatized not only the loving bond between God and his people but also the erotic intercourse between God and the individual soul. The impact this book has had on the Christian mystical tradition cannot be overemphasized.

The Hebrew scriptures cry out with intense longings and contain a promise directed toward the future. As Jesus said, "many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Mt 13:17). Although God partially satisfied the desires of his people, Israel experienced that it "did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us" (Heb 11:39b-40). That "something better" is, of course, Jesus Christ, who proclaimed to the Jews: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day" (Jn 8:56).

The mysticism found in the scriptures of the Israelites remains a preliminary stage to God's new covenant, which would "give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Humanity would be able to gaze upon the human face of God and live. The crucified and risen Christ highlights that God is definitively and irreversibly united with his people. "The mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 9:15) established, revealed, and made mysticism accessible in its purest and unsurpassable forms.

Mysticism in the New Testament

"For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (2 Cor 4:6)

Jesus Christ is the foundation of all Christian mysticism. Because of the permanent union of a human nature with the Divine Person of the Word, Jesus Christ possessed not only a divine knowledge but also an immediate, direct, and unique human knowledge of the Father, of himself as the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' trinitarian consciousness can be called a mystical consciousness in at least an analogous sense. Moreover, the hypostatic union of Jesus' human and divine natures is the ground and goal of the mystical life: the ability for perfect, total surrender in love to the God who wishes us to be fully united with him.

The New Testament claims that "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt 11:27). This Testament witnesses to Jesus as having spoken of his intimate, full, personal, filial loving knowledge of his Father (Jn 7:29; 8:55). He knew that he had come from the Father (Jn 5:23) and would return to him (Jn 8:14). The oneness he enjoyed with his Father dominated his consciousness. He heard his Father's word (Jn 8:26), knew his will (Jn 5:30), and saw him working (Jn 5:19). So intimate was Jesus' relationship with his Father that the Father showed him everything he did (Jn 5:20).

In short, Jesus "knew" the Father in the fully biblical sense of the word: experiential loving knowledge. Not only did he lovingly know the Father at a level never known before but he could also enable others to share in his experience of the Father (Mt 11:27; Jn 1:18). Because he is God's Word, light, and life in the absolute sense, he

could instill wisdom, light, and life in the heart of those who loved him (Eph 3:17).

To see and hear Christ, moreover, is to see and hear the Father (Jn 14:19; Lk 10:16). To know Christ is to know the Father, and this mystical knowledge of the Father and the Son is eternal life itself (Jn 17:3). To love Christ is to be loved by the Father, a God revealed by Jesus as Love itself (Jn 14:21; 1 Jn 4:8). Jesus promised that those who believed would become one with him and the Father and that they would be one, just as he and the Father are one (Jn 17:20).

As the visibility and tangibility of the Father's unconditional love for humanity, Christ is the visible sign that contains what it signifies, or the sacrament of what mysticism is all about: total union and oneness with the God of love. The union and oneness proclaimed by Jesus are described in terms of "abiding" and "dwelling in," not in the language of fusing with or dissolving in God. This is the mystery of mystical love: two or more become one, but never lose their individual identities.

Biblical scholars have underscored Jesus' use of the word "Abba" ("beloved Father") when he spoke to God. Because of the intimacy of this word, no Jew of Jesus' day (or before him) would ever address God in this way. To pray to God with such filial affection shocked Jewish religious sensibilities.

Jesus' use of "Abba" when he turned to God was unique. Confidently, reverently, obediently, but with full intimacy and familiarity, Jesus called God his "Beloved Father." This word captures the mystery of Jesus' identity and mission: a full, filial relationship with God. Because of the depths at which he and the Father were one, Jesus experienced himself as *the* Son, as the authenticated revelation of the Father and his will. Jesus' filial consciousness is the exemplar of the perfect mystic's intimate relationship with the Father, God above us, loving transcendence.

During Jesus' time, the Jews were convinced that with the death of the last writing prophets, the Spirit had been quenched because of Israel's sins. Only in the last days would the Spirit come to satisfy definitively Israel's great longings for God's presence.

In this context, it is significant that Jesus made the unusual and explicit claim that he himself possessed the Holy Spirit. The gospels portray Jesus both as driven and empowered by the Spirit. As its definitive bearer, he would give this Spirit at his death. The gospels depict Jesus as the eschatological prophet who brought final revela-

tion and demanded absolute obedience, because in him the eschatological age had dawned.

John's gospel describes the Holy Spirit less as the impetus behind Jesus' ministry than as the "Counselor" to continue and complete it. To John, the Holy Spirit is another Jesus (Jn 14:16), or simply Jesus' Spirit, the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17). Jesus proclaimed that only in and through his redemptive death would the Holy Spirit be definitively given (Jn 7:39). Moreover, the Holy Spirit is the "living water" flowing from Jesus' pierced heart (Jn 7:38; 19:34) and was then given by the risen Christ to the disciples who could now forgive sins (Jn 20:19-23).

This Spirit would lead Christians into all truth (Jn 16:13) and enable Jesus always to be present to his people (Mt 28:20). Because the Spirit, as "another Counselor" (Jn 14:16), is also Jesus' permanent presence to his followers after the Easter appearances ceased, the Spirit would have the same relationship to Christians throughout the ages that Jesus had to the disciples during his ministry.

Jesus was intimately aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit, God in us, loving immanence. Therefore, Jesus' mystical consciousness is essentially trinitarian. He knew himself to be uniquely Son because of his relationship to his Father and to the Spirit of their love. Jesus experienced the Father ecstatically as God-above-us, the Holy Spirit *en*statically as God-within-us, and himself as the Son, or God-with-us. Because of Jesus' essentially trinitarian consciousness, all authentic Christian mysticism is at least implicitly trinitarian.

Even though there is an essential continuity in Jesus from the Old to the New Testaments, there is also discontinuity. The New Testament depicts him, his consciousness, as transcending his Jewish milieu, the wise men, religious founders, and philosophers of all ages. Jesus' certainty about his relationship to his Father and to the Holy Spirit did not come from philosophical argumentation or a retelling of the ancient traditions of his people or by meditation. A unique experience of the Father and the Holy Spirit permeated everything he did and was. What other religious founder has been raised from the dead as God's confirmation of his identity and mission, or given his followers a *new* commandment, to love others as he had loved them (Jn 15:12ff.)? It is no wonder that Jesus' disciples came to realize that they were in the presence of much more than another prophet or rabbi and adored him as "my Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28).

The phrase "in Christ" can be read as a summary of the mysticism of St. Paul, initiated by his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:12-18; Gal 1:12). This event transformed the Jesus and Christian-hating Saul into Paul. This Paul denounced his prestigious past as so much "rubbish," willingly sacrificed everything, and would do anything so as to "gain Christ" (Phil 3:2-11).

Not only did Paul claim that this encounter was the last of the risen Christ's appearances (1 Cor 15:8) but he also maintained that it established his claim to be a full apostle of Christ Jesus. "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor 9:1), Paul said in defense of his "apostleship in the Lord," an apostleship to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13).

Moreover, Paul preached "not man's gospel," but a gospel that "came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12). Precisely as a "man *in Christ*" Paul was ecstatically taken up into the "third heaven," uncertain of being in or out of the body, and "heard things that cannot be told" (2 Cor 12:2).

Paul clearly experienced a God-given purgation that left him "utterly, unbearably crushed" and feeling that he "had received the sentence of death" (2 Cor 1:8-9). The God-given thorn in Paul's flesh and the "messenger" of Satan's harassment caused him such acute suffering that he implored God to remove them. But only through suffering did he learn that only Christ Jesus could and had rescued him "from this body of death" (Rom 7:24).

Indeed, Paul's experience led him to boast about the insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities he suffered in Christ's service (2 Cor 11:21ff.). Although "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" (2 Cor 4:10), he experienced Christ's power working through his weakness (2 Cor 12:9-10). Thus, he wished to glory only "in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14), "to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2), and to "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). Paul's sole desire was to know Christ "and the power of his resurrection," and to "share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:11). In a text that was to have a profound influence in the mystical tradition, Paul writes, "But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17). Paul speaks of his union with Christ; the tradition will apply this to the union of the person with either God or Christ.

God mystically illuminated Paul and filled him with "all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:2-3). For Paul, *the* mystery that was made known to him "by revelation," "the mystery hidden for ages," was nothing less than "the mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:1ff.), "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3), "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). In a beautiful statement on mystical illumination, Paul wrote, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

God also mystically transformed Paul "into [Christ's] likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). "Predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29), Paul experienced that for him "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). Because Paul found himself "in Christ" as the mystical ambience in which he lived, moved, and had his being, he experienced that to be "in Christ . . . is [to be] a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:15).

Paul was so profoundly transformed into Christ that he confessed that it was no longer he who lived, but Christ living in him (Gal 2:20). Paul was therefore convinced that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). Because the Lord is the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17), "God's love has been poured into our hearts" (Rom 5:5). Jesus' Spirit taught Paul the same loving confidence and intimacy that Jesus himself enjoyed with his Father.

Paul's trinitarian mysticism prompted him to pray, "For this reason I bow my knees before the *Father*, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his *Spirit* in the inner man, and that *Christ* may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph 3:14-19, my emphasis). The Pauline texts are replete with the triad of "one God and Father of us all," the "Lord Jesus Christ," and the "Spirit."

If the phrase "in Christ" summarizes Paul's trinitarian mysticism, the words "abide in me" encapsulates Johannine mysticism. John

teaches, "If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father" (1 Jn 2:24). Of course, this is the "word of life" (1 Jn 1:1-3), the Word made flesh, "the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us." For John, not only the Father and the Son abide in the Christian but also "the anointing which you received from him abides in you" (1 Jn 2:27), that is, Jesus' own Spirit, "the Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:14-17). We know that Christ abides in us "by the Spirit which he has given us" (1 Jn 3:24).

Because Jesus and the Father are one (Jn 10:30), Johannine mysticism stresses that all Christians should be one. This is the reason Jesus prayed that "they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn 17:21).

If the love with which the Father loved Jesus is in Jesus' disciples, then Jesus himself is in them (Jn 17:26). In John's view, God is love; therefore, "he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). Only on condition that we love one another will God abide in us and bring his love to perfection in us (1 Jn 4:12).

To John, Christ will draw everything to him once he is lifted up (Jn 12:32). The Spirit could be given only when Jesus was crucified, for out of his pierced heart would flow both blood and living water (Jn 7:38-39; 19:34). Hence, only Jesus, as the living bread and the giver of living water, can quench mystical hunger and thirst. Christians abide mystically in Christ especially through baptism and the Eucharist. Only someone "born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5) can enter the kingdom of God. And only someone who eats Christ's flesh and drinks his blood can abide in Christ and Christ in him (Jn 6:56).

Authentic Christian mysticism sees in Jesus' death and resurrection its very cause and exemplar. Jesus' saving death on the cross underscores the self-abnegation requisite for one's total surrender to the mystery of the Father's unconditional love. By contemplating the cross one comprehends Jesus' new commandment: not only are we to love God with our whole being, not only are we to love our neighbor as ourselves, but we are also called to love as Christ himself loved us (Jn 13:34; 15:12).

Jesus' bodily resurrection is the ultimate revelation of the Father's acceptance and confirmation of this act of loving surrender to unconditional love. Moreover, it is the seed of the new creation, the sacramental visibility of God's definitive mystical marriage with all creation.

Jesus' risen, glorified body is what mysticism is all about: the loving union and transformation of all creation with and into the God of love, that in Christ one can truly be a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). Karl Rahner wrote, "Because Jesus Christ redeemed all creation in his love, along with mankind, Christian mysticism is neither a denial of the world nor a meeting with the infinite All, but a taking of the world with one to a loving encounter with the personal God."[1]

Origen

(ca. 185–254)

"Let us enter the contest to win perfectly not only outward martyrdom, but also the martyrdom that is in secret, so that we too may utter the apostolic cry: 'For it is our boast, the martyrdom of our conscience that we have behaved in the world . . . with holiness and godly sincerity.'"[1]

The oldest of seven children of fervent Christian parents, Origen, "man of steel," was probably born in Alexandria, Egypt, at the height of the Roman persecutions. Leonides, his father, educated him and was martyred for the faith by the Roman emperor Severus in 202, when Origen was in his teens. Only his mother's ingenuity in hiding his clothing prevented Origen from impulsively following his father to martyrdom. Origen expressed his constant desire for martyrdom in a letter to his father, which became the first draft of one of his treatises, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*. As he writes, "I pray that when you are at the gates of death, or rather, freedom, especially if tortures are brought (for it is impossible to hope that you will not suffer this from the will of the opposing powers), you will use such words as these, 'It is clear to the Lord in His holy knowledge that though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring sufferings in my body, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear Him' (2 Macc. 6:30)."[2]

Spared his father's fate, he proceeded to satisfy his own unquenchable thirst for martyrdom by a life of extreme penances. For example, he took literally the biblical text concerning "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12), and castrated himself, thus providing much fodder for his future enemies.

After their possessions were confiscated, Origen supported himself and his family by starting a school for grammar. Soon thereafter,

the persecutions ended temporarily, and peace between church and state was restored for a time. Undoubtedly, his exceptional brilliance and heroic witness, as well as the scarcity of skilled catechists, prompted Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria to place the eighteen-year-old Origen in charge of a large school for catechumens.

His reputation for learning and holiness attracted the attention of Church leaders in many countries, though not always favorably. Thus, while in Palestine in 230, Origen was ordained. However, an Alexandrian synod under Bishop Demetrius, who obviously had second thoughts about his onetime protégé, declared his ordination illicit, proclaimed him unfit for catechetical work, and banished him. Hence, he went to Caesarea to continue his life of Christian intellectualism. Under Emperor Decius, in 249–50, he was imprisoned, tortured, and cruelly kept alive in an attempt to make him apostatize. But he never succumbed. Released from prison when the emperor died, Origen lived only a few more years in broken health.

Within two centuries of his death, many Church officials and theologians denounced him—both for the daring of some of his ideas and because of the excesses of some of his disciples. The Second Council of Constantinople in 553 formally condemned several of his views—two of which are the preexistence of the human soul and *apocatastasis*, that in the end, everyone will be saved. For many Eastern Christians, this condemnation earned him the epithet "heretic of the heretics."

Origen's Christian genius was recognized during the Renaissance, and interest in his theological genius revived in the twentieth century. He is widely recognized now as the first Christian exegetical giant, the first "systematic" theologian, and the first ascetical-mystical theologian.

Too much emphasis has been placed upon the intellectual achievements of this deeply spiritual man. Origen was a Christian humanist who blended great intellectual ability and a universal openness to all currents of thought with a passionate search for total truth that, for him, was to be found only in Christ crucified, the heart and key to scripture. For Christ, Origen was ready to "despoil the Egyptians," that is, to bring all the resources of his secular culture to bear on unlocking the mysteries of the Sacred Page.

Origen directed his ravenous intellectualism and passionate temperament to answering the objections of learned pagans to Christianity.

To do so, he mastered the secular sciences of his day, especially philology and philosophy. He excelled as a Master of the Sacred Page, that is, one who focused his universal intellectual interests upon the scholarly contemplation of scripture. He bequeathed critical texts, scientific commentaries, learned homilies, and scholia (short, exegetical notes) as his patrimony to the Christian tradition.

Origen is known as the father of "allegorical" interpretation. But his allegorical exegesis is mystical because he sought out—with all the tools at his disposal—the deepest meaning of scripture. He considered biblical exegesis as "mystical and ineffable contemplation" that must combine both scholarly erudition and experiential knowledge of God. Always a Church teacher, Origen understood and experienced exegesis as a process in which religious experience—especially mystical experience—is realized in the act of making the biblical language at its deepest and incommunicable level into the soul's language. For him, ecstasy meant sudden and new insights into scriptural revelation, not ravishment.

Origen viewed the divine-human drama—salvation history—not as the Platonic shadows of unchanging spiritual realities but as real history. Because the incarnate Word had been sought in the Old Testament, was given in the New, and is fully assimilated only in the Church's total experience, Origen contended that scripture's literal sense must flower into its mystical one.

The early Christians understood martyrdom as the apex of the Christian life and as perfect imitation of Christ. Through martyrdom, one also attained the full flowering of one's baptism into Christ crucified, total union with God, and the face-to-face vision of God. In addition to understanding martyrdom in this way, Origen emphasized it as the perfection of Christian wisdom, the loving-knowledge of the Unoriginated God revealed through his incarnate Word—a knowledge developed in contemplation that transforms one's entire life at the price of a crucifying asceticism. Only when one is freed from everything corporeal, follows Christ into the depths, ascends with him to the heavens, and attains God through Christ does the Christian know the greatest mysteries.

These mysteries are attainable only by "friends of the Father and Teacher in heaven" and in "face-to-face" vision of God. He speaks of his patron Ambrose in these terms. "Therefore, one of those already martyred and who possessed something more than many of the

martyrs in their Christian love of learning will ascend quite swiftly to those heights."[3] Thus, for Origen, martyrdom is a form of mysticism through which one is definitively purged by, illuminated by, and united to God in Christ. Later mystics would speak of contemplative ecstasy as an imitation of martyrdom.

Origen spoke not only of an "outward martyrdom" but also of a "martyrdom that is in secret." Christian faith itself is a martyrdom because of the combat one must do against the world, the flesh, and the devil. This theme runs through the entire corpus of his writings and provides the proper context for understanding his moral-ascetical doctrine that would play an important role in the monastic tradition.

Origen conceived the mystical life as the full flowering of and the explicit realization of Christ's union with the soul effected through baptism. It is the full flowering of Christian life, the life of one baptized in the Church and nourished by the Church's sacramental Word and bread. But he understood martyrdom in this way, too. Both martyrdom and contemplation transform the soul into something "better than a soul," that is, into what it originally was, a mind (*nous*) made in God's image and likeness.

Without neglecting the traditional interpretation of the Song of Songs as the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church, Origen was nevertheless the first in the Christian tradition to interpret it as the intimate relationship between the Word and the soul. For him, this was *the* book for understanding the union of the bridal soul with the bridegroom Word, the ultimate book about the soul's intimate intercourse with God in Christ at the summit of the mystical life. He stresses the theme of Song of Songs as "love or loving affection" and calls God "loving Affection." Another first—he spoke of the soul as the "virgin-mother," a theme that was to have a long history in the Christian mystical tradition.

One sees in Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs his greatest contribution to the Christian mystical tradition: the view of the mystical life as successive stages of purgation, illumination, and unification. He compares these stages to the contents of three books of scripture. The book of Proverbs teaches morals, or virtue, and prepares the way for the assimilation of Ecclesiastes. That book teaches natural contemplation by which the correct attitude toward this world—a world both transient and yet holding together in

Christ—is attained. Only then can one deal with the "enoptics," or contemplation, found in the Song of Songs.

Contemplation, to Origen, is both knowing God and being known by God; it is union with God, a union that is never ending—even in the beatific vision. It is also the vision by which the image of God, that we are, is reformed. By contemplation, one becomes divinized—a favorite theme of the Greek fathers. Origen understands contemplation as the process by which the soul's highest point, the mind (*nous*), rediscovers its true nature by way of its noetic-erotic dynamism energized by God. Hence, in his view, ecstasy plays no role in contemplation, for it is the nature of *nous* to be united with God.

Origen also understood contemplation as the discovery of the deepest meaning of scripture. Only by sudden awakenings, inspirations, and illuminations received from the Word—thus, ecstasy in some sense—does the Sacred Page reveal its secrets to the Christian exegete. Origen's Christ-mysticism and Word-mysticism are inextricably bound to his scripture-mysticism, and vice versa.

He depicts the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages as the seven songs sung by the soul that correspond to seven books of scripture. The soul sings of its escape from Egypt (conversion), its crossing the Red Sea (baptism), its desert wanderings (asceticism, aridity), its wars against its enemies (moral struggle), the quenching of its thirst at the wells of living water (consolations), and the like. Origen, the optimist, emphasizes that the soul sings and rejoices at every stage of its journey until, graced by divine love and mercy, it is ready to sing the most sublime song of all, the Song of Songs.

Origen also greatly influenced the Christian mystical tradition through his teaching on the "mystical senses." Because of the Fall, not all Christians have the mystical senses. Some have only one or two. Still, they can be regained as a person passes through the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of mystical ascent. Under grace, the soul becomes spiritually sensitive and discerning. The mystical senses also represent, to Origen, the richness and variety of the soul's experiences in contemplation of the Spirit, the incarnate Word, and the Father. Christ and the triune God can be spiritually seen, heard, tasted, touched, and smelled, as attested to in scripture. When the mystical senses become Christ, the scriptures reveal their hidden meaning.

Origen was also the first in the Christian mystical tradition to use the gospel Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42) as prototypes of the con-

templative and active life. His book *On Prayer* blended both piety and speculation and gave the Christian tradition its first "systematic" treatment of private prayer. To him, the entire life of a saint is prayer.

He championed a "light mysticism," that darkness is only one stage of the mystical journey that ends in light through seeing and knowing God who is "loving Affection." This light mysticism stands in sharp contrast to the views of some other mystics in this Christian tradition, for example, Gregory of Nyssa and St. John of the Cross, who stressed God's unceasing darkness and total incomprehensibility.

Origen's Christian Platonism teaches that before one ascends with Christ, one must first descend by imitating and participating in his entire history. One is never more alive than when one hears the words, "what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul?" Like Christ, the soul must progressively uproot itself from the world by detachment and stripping. Like Christ, it must also do battle against the demons. In this way the soul participates in Christ's "double-cross," that is, both the royal throne from which Christ exercised his universal kingship and the instrument by which the principalities and powers of this world were crucified and defeated. And as Christ ascended to the Father, so also must the Christian. Paradoxically, to take up one's cross to follow Christ is to be already in heaven.

Origen held the theological view that there is one God because there is one Father, the Unoriginated God. The Word is the Father's image who unceasingly contemplates the Father. The Word contains the intelligible world that was created through and for the Word. One ascends to the Father through the Son in the Spirit.

Mystical exegete, mystical theologian, and mystagogue—Origen combines all three in himself. It is little wonder that his pupils spoke of his words as sparks that fell on their souls, enkindling in them the fire of trinitarian love.