

Lost in God: What can we learn from mystics?

by [Sara Miller](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

To think that that mystics are engaged in a series of private, transcendent encounters with God betrays a superficial understanding, says Bernard McGinn. Christian mystics, in particular, are not breakaway contemplatives who find their own way to God. They are bearers and interpreters of a common tradition built upon a concrete revelation: God became human so that humans might become God. Christian mystics do not dabble in altered states. They seek radically altered lives.

McGinn is widely considered the preeminent scholar of mysticism in the Western Christian tradition and a leading authority on the theology of the 14th-century mystic Meister Eckhart. He has also written extensively on Jewish mysticism. He is the author, most recently, of The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing (Crossroad), and he has co-edited and translated two volumes of Eckhart's sermons, treatises and instructions for the Classics of Western Spirituality Series (Paulist Press). In 1991, McGinn published the first title in a projected five-volume work, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism (Crossroad), the first comprehensive history of Western mysticism in English. Three volumes have appeared to date. He has just completed work on a smaller project co-written with his wife, Patricia, a psychotherapist, titled Makers of Mysticism, an introductory guide to a dozen mystics.

I spoke with him at his office at the University of Chicago Divinity School about the nature of mysticism and about the contemporary interest in mystics and in spirituality.

In *The Presence of God*, you describe some of the great shifts that occurred in the ways people looked for God. In early Judaism, for example, God was traditionally found in the Temple, but in the Second Temple period a literature emerged in which God is sought in the unassailable heavens. And in Christianity during the Middle Ages, groups like the Beguines and the

followers of Francis showed that the spiritual life need not be confined to the monastery and the cloister but could be lived in the world. Do you think we are in a new position today in the search for God?

I think we are. The spiritual traditions of the world are in conversation with one another in a way they never were before, and that is bound to create a dramatically different situation. There's a worldwide ecumenism now, in which we try to understand other traditions because they're no longer "out there," far away.

We've also seen a return within the various traditions to an emphasis upon the spiritual and mystical. Two generations ago Jewish mysticism, especially the Kabbalah, was thought of as kind of bizarre, kooky stuff. The work of people like Gershom Scholem and others has shown increasingly that mysticism is really essential to the Jewish tradition.

When I grew up in Roman Catholicism in the 1950s, mystics were out there—Teresa and John of the Cross, for example—but you weren't supposed to read them because this was very strange, dangerous stuff. That's changed dramatically in 50 years' time. And "spirituality," which was a kind of technical Roman Catholic term then, has become not only generally used by all Christians but used by other traditions as well.

Why do you think there is this renewed interest in spirituality?

In describing religion I often use the model created by Baron von Hügel in his book *The Mystical Elements of Religion*, written in the early 20th century. He says that religion has three elements: the Petrine element, which is both authority and organization; the Pauline element, which is the intellectual side; and the mystical element, which he identified with the apostle John and which has to do with some kind of consciousness or experience of God. For von Hügel all of those elements need to be in balance if religion is going to be healthy.

One of the things that developed in the 20th century was an imbalance—authority and sometimes intellect became more important than the heart. That's why I think a lot of people are now finding tremendous resources in spiritual and mystical texts.

Mysticism is sometimes thought of as a dangerous pursuit because of the potential for self-deception or self-delusion. Is it any more risky than Christianity itself?

I don't think so. One of the things that most spiritual traditions insist upon, though, is that at some stage a spiritual guide is very important. Sometimes that guidance takes places within a communal framework or in a mentor relationship. This is true in Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

The figure of the solitary sage on the mountaintop is really the exception. Even St. Anthony, who lived in the desert for 20 years, returned to form a community. And in the desert the notion of the father teaching the younger disciple is very important. So it's rare, actually, that mystics are very isolated figures.

Reading through the *Presence* volumes, I couldn't help seeing the mystics as distinct personalities. Do you see them that way?

Very much so. Each of them is very distinct. Of course, there are a number of themes that most Christian mystics will touch upon, like the role of love, the relation of love and intellect and of action and contemplation, the role of Christ, the understanding of mystical union, the trinitarian life and ascetical practice. But how the mystics understand and relate to these themes is going to differ.

The great Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose works are deeply imbued with his knowledge of the mystics, talks about truth as symphonic, and I think that's a good way of looking at mysticism too. There's a tremendous symphony of voices.

One of the things that really was unfortunate in the previous study of mysticism in Catholicism and elsewhere was that one or two mystics were taken as paradigmatic cases. If a mystical text didn't agree with Teresa and John, it was like a theologian not agreeing with Thomas Aquinas! We've come to see in the past half century that no matter how great Thomas Aquinas was, he's one theologian among others. And no matter how great Teresa was, she's one mystic among others. It's much more creative and attractive to look at the full symphony. We have all these different kind of instruments—maybe playing together somewhere in eternity!

But the mystics are also playing within a tradition. We can look at these figures as individuals, but we will discover more about them if we look at them as part of a tradition in Christianity dating back to Origen in the third century, at least, and building upon scripture and enriching itself for almost 2,000 years.

When you get to the 13th century in *The Flowering of Mysticism*, the mystical encounter seems to take on a decidedly charismatic expression in

which the individual is somehow visibly touched by the divine—Francis being perhaps the prime example of the believer who so puts on Christ that he bears Christ’s wounds. What is the difference between the mystical encounter and what we think of today as charismatic experiences—if in fact they are distinct? Is one an inward experience, the other an outward sign?

Well, I think that would be one way to put it, but charisms as described by Paul in First Corinthians, which is really the foundational text, can involve a whole range of things, from speaking in tongues, to prophesying, to being given gifts of wisdom, and so on. So it’s a very diffuse term. Sometimes the experience can be accompanied by a kind of inner, transformative consciousness of God, but not necessarily.

Some people use the terms visionary and mystical interchangeably, so that every kind of vision is a mystical vision, and I really don’t think that is the case. A good example would be Birgitte of Sweden in the 14th century, who has all sorts of connections with God but whose message—99.9 percent of the time—is a reformist and prophetic message, not a mystical message. I see her as a prophet of reform rather than a mystic.

The special kinds of experiences that we would call ecstatic experiences and visions and the like can be mystical, but they need not be. For long periods in Christian history, particularly in the Patristic period and the early Middle Ages, there was a kind of suspicion of these special charisms. With what I call the “new mysticism” that begins around the year 1200 there’s a return to these experiences in a wide variety of figures, and often the experiences do involve what I would call mysticism—that is, the charism is transformative of the individual and puts them in the status of spiritual teacher.

It’s interesting that Francis never talks about his own experiences, not even the stigmata. But Francis’s hagiographers talk about him as an ecstatic, as a visionary. And of course a lot of the women in the 13th and 14th centuries also speak at great length about what we would call charismatic experiences, but so do some male mystics.

You’ve edited and translated a number of collections and editions of Meister Eckhart’s sermons and theological writings over the years, and you’ve just written a full-length study of him. Why is he important to you

and perhaps to anyone seeking a deeper spirituality today?

He certainly is very important for me. He's fascinating historically because he was a very prominent scholastic and Dominican administrator who was charged with heresy and condemned posthumously. So he has this whiff of danger about him. Of course, I think the condemnation was incorrect in every possible way. Even the Dominican order has petitioned the pope to revoke this judgment.

We think of the medieval people as very simple—many of them were illiterate and so on. But Eckhart preached very difficult sermons to general audiences, not just to clergy. And even today, despite the complex nature of his preaching, he has a powerful impact on people. In fact, the Eckhart Society, which began in England in the 1980s, was founded by an Anglican man and Catholic woman who previously had been very attracted to Buddhism. Their spiritual director, a famous Buddhist scholar, told them not to become Buddhists but to go read Eckhart! And so they remained Anglican and Catholic and were able to find in Eckhart what they had been missing in some forms of Christianity.

That arresting subtitle, *The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing*, suggests that Eckhart had an elevated kind of insight or status.

That phrase is actually from a contemporary description of Eckhart, and one of the reasons I used it is that it's profoundly ironic and paradoxical. It seems to single him out, but if you put it in Eckhart's framework of thinking about God, it shows his commonality, because God hides his nothingness from all of us. We're all essentially in the same boat. And of course the mystical life, the mystical search, is the search for the God who is nothing. It's the realization that God is a hidden god.

You say in *The Presence of God* that mysticism is an original, essential element of Christianity—is this because of the "hiddenness" of God?

I think the fact that God is a hidden God puts mysticism at the center of Christianity, but what I emphasize is that mysticism is one element of religion. I'm profoundly dissatisfied with the notion that mysticism is a kind of true religion, or the hidden core of the true religion, while institutions and teachings occupy some kind of periphery. I think it's much better to see religion as a complex of beliefs and practices in which mysticism plays an essential role. Mysticism doesn't float free of religion—with the exception of the past hundred years, when the dissatisfaction with organized religion has led some people to turn to mysticism as a kind of private

religion.

The idea that mysticism floats free is something that Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other religions would react against because their mystical teachings are a part of the complex of being a Christian, Jew or Muslim, and they coexist with practices, beliefs, institutions and so forth. Even Eckhart's notion of inwardness and detachment didn't lead him outside the framework of medieval Christianity. That's why he's so terribly upset when he's accused of being a heretic. I cannot be a heretic, he says, because being a heretic is a matter of the will, of wanting to persist in an incorrect view. I can be mistaken intellectually—show me where I've made a mistake and I'll retract it.

Despite Eckhart's emphasis on detachment from the self and the will, his account of the soul's pursuit of God makes the soul seem decidedly willful and forceful—it's the soul that compels God, that calls the shots, that conquers. Eckhart even says of God, "He cannot shut me out."

Eckhart does talk about compelling God, but you compel God by your emptiness and by getting rid of all your selfishness and by total detachment. Eckhart and his followers often use what we would call a gravitational model—that is, water has to flow downhill, but it can only flow into what's empty. So it's in the process of emptying yourself of your self-will that you compel God, because God can't come in if there's something else there, meaning yourself.

And the self here means the selfish self. Eckhart and his disciples are always preaching to get rid of the self that's concerned with its own desires, wishes, characteristics, success, fulfillment—everything that centers on us. That's what they're talking about when they talk of detachment, which is the cutting off, or of a "releasement." Eckhart uses both those terms.

Other mystics talk about reaching God through purification, or an attitude of humility. Are detachment and releasement just different terms for these traditional notions or are they new concepts?

Here's the way I would summarize Eckhart and his followers' preaching: People think they know what humility is—acting humble. People think they know what purity is—avoiding this, avoiding that. But those are practices, whereas detachment and releasement is something much, much deeper. It is ultimate humility and total purification. It involves a much deeper annihilation of the self. And then, paradoxically, if you can do that, the self returns to you, but it's no longer the selfish

self. It's the purely spontaneous good self.

This is the notion of Eckhart and some other 13th-century mystics of living “without a why.” “Living without a why” means that you don't ask, What's in it for me? or Why am I doing this? You just do the good spontaneously, the way that God acts. God doesn't act because of the why or for any interest of his own.

Many of the mystics start with small practices, like prayer, or ascetic habits, or meditation on a passage of scripture, and gradually work their way up to a transcendent state or a God-consciousness. With Eckhart it appears to go the other way. Is that correct?

There are not a lot of concrete things that you do in Eckhart's form of mysticism. What Eckhart is most concerned with is this change of attitude, which he says can happen instantaneously if you can just get into the frame of mind in which you give up the self. Eckhart is in some ways pretty impractical, and that's evident in his constant speech about how if you're using ways to find God you're finding ways and not God.

To some people, of course, this sounds extremely challenging—and it is, in a way. But Eckhart was not a radical. He lived as a group monk, prayed his office and practiced penance, and did all the things he was supposed to do. But his point would be that these things in themselves mean absolutely nothing. They have meaning only if the attitude in which you do them is the attitude of detachment.

In his treatment of the Martha and Mary text (Luke 10:38-42), Eckhart defends Martha's focus on the tasks of hospitality. Is that a striking departure from the traditional understanding?

Yes, Eckhart is the first commentator to elevate Martha above Mary. The earlier commentators tried to show that both Martha and Mary were necessary, though Mary's approach is higher. Eckhart says that Mary is the one who's still learning, whereas Martha is the one who has learned perfectly because she combines contemplation and action—though Eckhart doesn't use those words—in an unselfish, detached way. She can now operate as the soul “without a why” and be effective spontaneously without losing that contact with God. Mary's just on the way to that. She needs to learn life.

I get the feeling that living spontaneously in God, or living without a why, is a lot like living the Christian life generally. At some point it becomes second nature, and goodness and holiness seem effortless. But getting to that point is the hard part.

Eckhart's radical formulations are sometimes found to be impossible. But he very deliberately tried to wake people up out of a kind of moral and dogmatic slumber, to wake them up to the possibilities of recognizing that the union with God already exists in the soul—and recognizing it in order to live it out. When you reach that realization, the things that seemed impossible, paradoxical and outrageous somehow take on a new light. I think Eckhart felt that the kind of shock therapy of his preaching was the only way to wake people up to that message, because it was so easy to get lost in the ordinary round of pious activity and to think that through this activity we are pleasing God. That's why we get those famous phrases of his like, "Well, if you think you're finding God better in the church than in the stable, you're wrapping God in a towel and stuffing him under a bench!" The point is not that God isn't in church, but that he's also out in the stable—if you learn to live in the proper way.

Eckhart's preaching style seems to have a lot in common with that of Jesus in the New Testament, who appears contradictory and paradoxical.

Who challenges, yes. Eckhart's preaching is deeply scriptural in that sense, and in fact he says at the end of his *Commentary on John* that you have to speak excessively when you preach or talk about scripture because scripture speaks excessively—that's the nature of speaking about God. God is always beyond anything that we can understand or say, so excessive speech both in scripture and in the scriptural preacher should be the norm. Of course, the mystery is hidden underneath this tremendous rhetorical flourish.

How do you answer the charge that Eckhart's theology of mystical union, in which the soul achieves "indistinction" and becomes one with God, is really a form of self-deification?

I think that's looking through the wrong end of the telescope. I would put it the other way and say that God deifies himself in us when we become perfectly detached, and that's the nature of God's creation of humanity as the image and likeness of God—*imago Dei*. I think Eckhart would say no, we don't deify ourselves, but if we totally negate ourselves, then God deifies himself in us.