Re-enchanting reading

Craig Tichelkamp asks whether our best hope for restoring a culture of reading might lie centuries in the past.

by Lilia Ellis in the December 2024 issue
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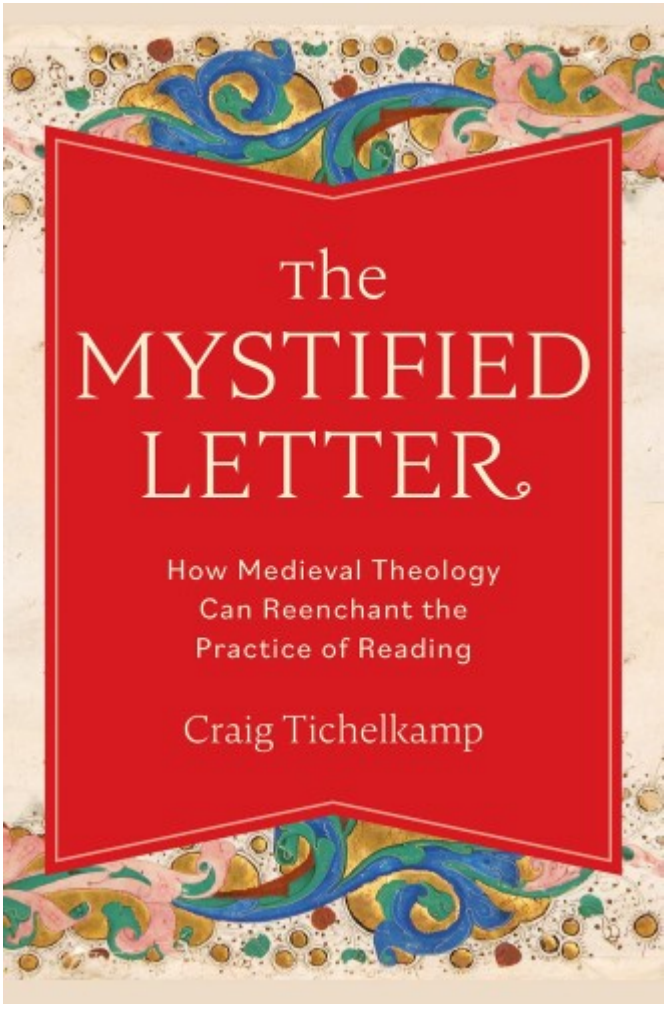
In Review



The Mystified Letter

How Medieval Theology Can Reenchant the Practice of Reading

By Craig Tichelkamp
Fortress Press
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The practice of reading is not what it once was. In this age of information, adults in the United States read fewer books with each passing year, and for many, reading has become synonymous with the dry and boring—a far cry from the wonder of childhood reading.

Might our best hope for restoring a culture of reading lie centuries in the past? That's the case theologian and medievalist Craig Tichelkamp makes in *The Mystified Letter*, a retrieval project that puts contemporary reading in conversation with historic reading practices. Tichelkamp, who teaches at Harvard Divinity School and Stonehill College, dives into the rich history of the medieval Abbey of St. Victor, where monks developed a school of mystical theology that placed a spotlight on reading as a spiritual practice. Learning from the Victorines, Tichelkamp argues, can help us to "reenchant" our own approach to reading.

Despite his turn to the past, Tichelkamp is no traditionalist. The book makes a case for a relationship with history that takes history's wisdom seriously but without being starry-eyed with nostalgia. The first chapter explains Tichelkamp's approach, which follows in the footsteps of 20th-century *ressourcement* theologians like Henri de Lubac. We ought to turn to the past not to idealize it, says Tichelkamp, but "for spiritual transformation in and beyond the present." And in the Abbey of St. Victor, he finds much that is transformative.

While St. Victor is often forgotten today, in medieval Europe it was a renowned center of learning. Central to Victorine thinking, Tichelkamp explains, is a theology of the written word that treats "the letter" as a theological concept of prime importance. The monks at St. Victor developed this theology of the letter from their reading of Paul—an unlikely source, given his famous warning that "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). The Victorines complicate the traditional interpretation of Paul, arguing that "there is no spirit or spiritual understanding without the letter." The letter without the spirit may kill, but the spirit cannot live at all without the letter. While classroom and church alike treat reading as dull and utilitarian, as if it were letter without spirit, Tichelkamp makes the centuries-old theology of reconciling letter with spirit feel exciting and new.

Tichelkamp's writing abounds with a love for mystery. The Victorines' "enchanted" approach to reading is apophatic: reading is, ironically, a way to experience a God beyond words. The letter is like a veil, preserving the mystery of God at the same time as it draws us into it. Reading and writing become "a kind of hymning," a way of praising and experiencing God. We can, in other words, experience the Word through the word. Even secular literature can lead readers to the ineffable God, so long as they revere the mystery of the letter.

Fittingly, Tichelkamp devotes much of *The Mystified Letter* to an analysis of Pseudo-Dionysius, the mystical theologian who most influenced Victorine thought. These are the most technical sections of Tichelkamp's work, with dense treatments of intricate questions in medieval theology—fascinating, to be sure, though often difficult. Thankfully, Tichelkamp offers helpful summaries throughout, and the book's approach to reading is still perfectly legible even to readers for whom the finer points of Dionysian metaphysics are not.

In his concluding chapter, Tichelkamp offers wisdom for contemporary times, drawing from the Victorines. He warns against wielding biblical texts as "divisive" weapons: once scriptures are treated as proof texts for winning arguments, they "become demystified blunt objects of harm but not tools of potential transformation." One cannot help but think of the numerous groups, from women to the LGBTQ community, who have been hurt by such blunt views of scripture. Likewise, Tichelkamp urges schools and churches to bring imagination back into reading. At St. Victor, the written word was filled with "a sense of awe and wonder, unintelligibility and ineffability." When we think of reading as a mere means of getting information, Tichelkamp warns, we lose something precious beyond words. This chapter is the book's most interesting but also its sparsest. It may leave readers enticed but wanting more. Still, there is plenty to mull over in this thorough history.

Like the medieval theology it draws inspiration from, *The Mystified Letter* is a book full of wonder. It proves the possibilities of history, pointing to new ways forward through forgotten corridors of the past. For avid readers, especially fans of medieval theology, Tichelkamp has provided a delightful testament to the power of the written word and a powerful road map for a re-enchanted way of reading.