

**Lecture 34- Souls of Great Quiet: Mysticism and the Modern Devotion**

*My son, be not dismayed by the painful labors which thou hast undertaken for me, neither be thou utterly cast down because of any tribulations which befall thee; but let my promise strengthen and comfort thee in all events. I am able to reward thee above all measure and degree. Thou shalt not long toil here, and shalt not always be oppressed by grief. Wait a little while, and thou shalt see a speedy end of thy troubles. There will come an hour when all labor and trouble shall cease. Poor and brief is all that passeth away with time.*

*Thomas a Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, 47, 1*

*And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.*

*Genesis 28:12*

**Assigned Reading**

*The Story of Christianity*—Chapter 33, pp. 356-361

**Key Terms**

Mysticism, Johannes Eckhart, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Johannes Tauler, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Richard Rolle, Thomas a Kempis

**Objectives**

- Define mysticism
- Identify influential mystics
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of mysticism

**Class Prayer**

*“God, of Your goodness, give me Yourself, for You are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less to be worthy of You. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In You alone do I have all. Amen.”*

*Julian of Norwich*

**Souls of Great Quiet: Mysticism and the Modern Devotion****I. The Way of the Mystics****A. Love over learning**

Advice of Conscience to the Friars in *Piers Plowman*: “Give up studying logic and learn to love.”

**B. Virtue over knowledge**

1. Imitation of Christ: “What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if lacking humility you displease the Trinity? Indeed it is not learning that makes man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God.”
2. Mysticism is the consistent exaltation of experience at the expense of thought... The experience upon which it is based, or in which it consists, is said to be ineffable; yet the mystics love to talk about that experience all the same.” J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* p. 35

**II. Themes of the Mystics**

- A. Union with God
- B. Love for Christ
- C. Denial of self

### III. Important Mystics

#### A. Johannes “Meister” Eckhart (1260-1327)

1. “A flea, to the extent that it is in God, ranks above the highest angel in his own right. Thus, in God, all things are equal and are God himself.”

#### B. Walter Hilton (d. 1395)

1. “Thou art the treasure hidden within me: draw me therefore to Thee that I may find Thee and serve and possess Thee forever.”

#### C. Julian of Norwich (1342-1420)

1. “In this same time the Lord showed me a spiritual sight of His homely loving. I saw that He is to us everything that is good and comfortable for us: He is our clothing that for love wrappeth us, claspeth us, and encloseth us for tender love, that He may never leave us; being to us all-thing that is good, as to mine understanding. Also in this He shewed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made. I marvelled how it might last, for methought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for little[ness]. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasteth, and ever shall [last] for that God loveth it. And so All-thing hath the Being by the love of God. In this Little Thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loveth it, the third, that God keepeth it. But what is to me verily the Maker, the Keeper, and the Lover—I cannot tell; for till I am substantially oned to Him, I may never have full rest nor very bliss: that is to say, till I be so fastened to Him, that there is right nought that is made betwixt my God and me.” *Revelations of Divine Love*, ch. 5
2. Lines used by T. S. Eliot at the close of his poem “Little Gidding” (1942) came from Julian’s *Revelations of Divine Love*: “All shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.”
3. The missionary Amy Carmichael was greatly inspired by this description of prayer by Julian of Norwich: “I am the Ground of thy beseeching: first it is My will that thou have it; and after, I make thee to will it; and after, I make thee to beseech it, and thou beseechest it. How should it then be that thou shouldest not have thy beseeching?” (Elizabeth Eliot, *A Chance to Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael*, p. 91)

#### D. Catherine of Siena (1347-80)

1. Mystical rapture
2. Active service

#### E. Johannes Tauler (1300-61)

1. “May Jesus Christ, the King of glory, help us to make the right use of all the suffering that comes to us and to offer to him the incense of a patient and trustful heart; for his name’s sake. Amen.”
2. Luther: “Indeed, [the German Theology of Tauler] does not float on top, like foam on water, it has rather been fetched out of the rock bottom of Jordan by a true Israelite.”

#### F. Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381)

1. “The holy life is a ladder of love with seven steps, by which we may climb up into the kingdom of heaven” (*The Seven Steps of the Ladder of Spiritual Love*)
  - a. Conformity with God’s will
  - b. Voluntary poverty
  - c. Purity of soul and body
  - d. Humility
  - e. Striving after God’s honor
  - f. Union with the Trinity

## g. Annihilation in God's essence

## G. Richard Rolle (c. 1340)

1. "I counsel you this: never forget the name of Jesus, but keep it in your heart day and night, as our most special and precious treasure. Love it more than your own life, and root it in your mind. Love Jesus, for He it is who made you, and who brought you back again at so expensive a price. Give your heart to Him, for it belongs to Him."

H. Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471)—*The Imitation of Christ*

1. "I am the way and the truth and the life. Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living." (56.1)
2. Two Scottish views of Thomas a Kempis:
  - a. "A fine fellow, but hazy and weak at times." "Rabbi" John Duncan
  - b. Despite wrong notions of the sacrament, Thomas a Kempis "had a clear conception that God's grace was freely given, and not merited by what man can do." Thomas Martin Lindsay

## III. Evaluation of Mysticism

## A. Positive: emphasis on loving God

1. Jean Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris: As honey requires honeycomb, so devotion needs to be structured by a learned and orthodox mind. As honeycomb needs to be filled, so ideas of the mind must also warm the heart and lead to activity in the world." (On Mystical Theology)
2. An American Presbyterian view of Thomas a Kempis:
 

"It seems to me that in our day we take the pattern and measure of our religion too commonly from what is popular, that is from what is bustling, outward, and full of eclat. But it may appear in another world, that some of the mightiest influences have proceeded from souls of great quiet. No book it is supposed of human composition, has had greater influence than *the Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas a Kempis."

J. W. Alexander

## B. Negative

1. The problem of individualism
2. Tendancy towards self-righteousness, works-righteousness

For Further Study

Tozer, A. W. *Knowledge of the Holy*.

Kempis, Thomas a. *Imitation of Christ*.

Well worth reading for its quiet and earnest piety.

Schaeffer, Francis. *True Spirituality*.

Solid spiritual direction by a modern day mystic (in the best sense of the word)—scholar

Read John Tauler's "The Way of Prayer." Can you understand why Luther appreciated this medieval mystic? What ideas about prayer struck you from Tauler's treatment? Note his illustration about the Cologne Cathedral.

Read "Writings from Women in the Medieval Church." Many of the mystics were women. Note the differences in emphases in the four women writers represented here.

Read "On the Wonderful Effect of Divine Love" to sample a little of the *Imitation of Christ*.