

Mysticism and the Modern Devotion

There is a drawing from the Middle Ages of a woman at prayer. We do not know who this woman is, but she is representative of many women in the church during the Middle Ages. She rather looks like a modern woman in some ways because she has three rings on her fingers on one hand. I wanted to begin with that picture because I will begin with a prayer from one of the women mystics. She is a very famous mystic and a very famous woman. She wrote the first book written by a woman in English. Her name is Julian of Norwich in England. We will be talking about her during this lesson. I would like to begin with a prayer from Julian of Norwich. It is a very short prayer as we think about souls of great, quiet mysticisms and the modern devotion. Let us pray.

“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.”

There were various ways in which people attempted to live out their Christian faith in the Middle Ages. One was the way of the scholastics. They did theology, trying to understand the faith. Another was the way of the humanist that we talked about in the last lesson. They were Christian but with emphases that were somewhat new and different. A third way was the way of the mystics. That is what I want to talk about during this lesson. The humanists put emphasis on the classics and on rhetoric, and the scholastics put emphasis on theology and learning. The mystics put emphasis on love and virtue. It is not true that the other two groups did not have any concern about love and virtue, but these are particular themes that you find constantly emphasized in the mystics. For instance, if you are going to have love and knowledge, it is good to have both, but it is better to have love. You will find that in the old English book *Piers Plowmen*, Conscience gives advice to the monks and the friars, saying, “Give up studying logic and learn to love.” That might sound like good advice to you at this point in this class or in your study at seminary this semester. It was an emphasis that the mystics went back to again and again. It is not so much what you know, but it is how you love. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, one of the great books of the mystics, put it this way, “Smite upon the thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love.” The writer is talking about God and theology. It is a thick cloud, and how are you going to get through that cloud? Do not get through it with dialectics, disputations, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, or the classics, but with the sharp dart of longing love. The emphasis on love was certainly central.

The interest and emphasis on virtue was also central. What good does it do you to know things if you do not do those things? You could find this coming out again and again in the famous book *The Imitation of Christ* that we will talk about. “What good does it do you 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.” There is concern, first and foremost, for love, conduct, good living, and virtue.

If you had to choose three points to summarize the emphases in the writings of the mystics, it would be these three: union with God, love for Christ, and denial of self. Not every mystic put equal emphasis on each of these. There are some mystics who were more into the union with God theme. Others focused more on love for Christ, but all of them talked about denial of self. I think the best way for us to understand the mystics is for me to describe some of these mystics for you and try to illustrate these points through the lives and work of some of the famous mystics of the Middle Ages.

Let us start with Johannes Meister Eckhart. He was a German, and like so many of the mystics he was a monk. Eckhart was a Dominican monk. His book is simply called *The Sermons*. I have that book in my library in my seminary office. Every time I come to this lesson I try to read one of the sermons of Eckhart, but I have never been able to understand any of them! I came across this statement once that made me feel a little better. Someone complained to Eckhart that no one could understand his sermons. He said, "To understand my preaching five things are needed. The hearer must have conquered strife, he must be contemplating his highest good, he must be satisfied to do God's bidding, he must be a beginner among beginners, and deny himself. He must be so a master of himself as to be incapable of anger." Maybe that is why I do not understand Eckhart's sermons. You see the answer there is not that you need to concentrate and figure out what I am saying. The answer is that you need to be a better person to understand my sermons. One of the statements that you will find in Eckhart's sermons, which is very characteristic of Eckhart and the mystics, is the statement in the syllabus. He says, "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." He is saying even that flea, to the extent that that flea is in God, is equal to man and the angels. And the flea, man, and the angels are God Himself. This is not uncharacteristic of how the mystics sounded. They were always pushing toward a union with God in which the individual would be lost in being absorbed into the greatness and wonder of God.

A lot of people said his union with God statements sounded like pantheism. Eckhart was charged with heresy, and he was rebuked for this teaching. Eckhart admitted that he had been extreme in some of his statements. He tried to modify his statements, but there is still a very strong emphasis in Eckhart on being absorbed into God so that there is no difference. I came across a statement very recently from Eckhart, which I did understand. It seems rather profound and important to me. It is also in the syllabus. It might seem a little shocking when you first read it, but let us read it all the way through. "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the Divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to His Son if I do not also give birth to Him in my time and culture? This then is the fullness of time, when the Son of God is begotten in us." I will keep working with Eckhart and maybe I will find more statements like this. This does seem to emphasize something very central and important for us to hear. Eckhart is usually known as the person who came very close to becoming a pantheist. The church had to rebuke him for that teaching.

Another mystic is a man named Walter Hilton. He was an Augustinian monk and was English. His book is called *The Ladder of Perfection*. The idea of a ladder is one that the mystics liked. So many of the books of mysticism will have the idea of a ladder: start down low and climb; as you climb you get higher and higher. Many of the books of mysticism will give you steps in which you can move from the lowest level of spirituality to the highest level of spirituality. That has some problems connected with it, which you can imagine. But in Walter Hilton's book there seems to be a lot of truth and a lot that can benefit us. He says you start on a lower level, the level of knowledge of God by study. You want to know more about God, so you study the Bible and the writings of the church fathers. Study in a seminary, we would say today, although that was not what Walter Hilton had in mind. But he says at one point in his *Ladder of Perfection*, "For one who has always been ardent of the knowledge of God and of spiritual things it can sometimes seem that he increases after a certain point relatively little in love for God." So what he is saying is that you can be very ardent for the knowledge of God but you find after a while that your love for God does not increase correspondingly. He is concerned about that, as he should be. So he moves to the next level, which is love for God. That goes through various steps. First, there is a transitory love, love that comes and goes, increases and decreases. We might think that is the way our love for God always is and always will be. But Walter Hilton wanted to advance to a subtle love for

God. It was not so transitory. It could not be shaken, but it would be there in all circumstances of life. Then he goes from knowledge of God, up through transitory love for God and subtle love for God, and finally to the top level, which is both knowledge and love. That is where he wants us to be because he did not demean knowledge. Sometimes the mystics do, but Hilton did not. Knowledge is important. But love must keep up with the knowledge. The final analysis, the perfection that we seek, is both to know God and to love God.

Let us come to Julian of Norwich. Julian was an English Benedictine. She became what was called an Anchorist. That was a person who no longer lived in community but lived alone in a cell. Julian, after a time of illness, entered a cell that was built adjoining the church in Norwich in England. There she had a window opening into the church to receive the Eucharist and administrations of the priest. And she had a window opening out into the street to receive people who would come. She was not just shutting herself off from life. She could look one way into the church and another way into the street. But she lived in that cell. The idea of an Anchorist was to be an anchor for people. She became an anchor by her prayer, her meditation, and her teaching. As I have already mentioned, this woman was the first woman to write a book in English. That book is called *The Revelations of Divine Love*. The word “revelations” is important. When she was about 30 she experienced this life-threatening illness. This was probably the occasion for her entering the cell as an Anchorist. During a short period of some days or weeks, she received 16 revelations. She said God revealed Himself and spoke to her directly in these 16 revelations. She meditated on those revelations for about 15 years. Then she wrote the book *Revelations of Divine Love*. The two words, “divine love,” are important as well. You might say the theme of all these revelations is the divine love. Julian said, “I could see no sort of anger in God however long I looked.” She is famous for that quote. There is no anger in God; there is no wrath in God. Everything I see in God is love. That was quite different from medieval theology. This is not *Cur Deus Homo*, where God’s wrath appears against sin and necessitates the coming of the God-man to appease the wrath of God. Julian says, “There is no wrath in God, there is only love.” The long quotation in the syllabus has to do with her vision of the hazelnut. This is probably the most famous of the revelations. There is picture of Julian. You can see she has in her fingers a little hazelnut. She looks at it in her meditation, and she says, “What is it?” The answer comes to her, “It is all that is made.” She said, “I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for littleness.” It is so small, insignificant, and unimportant, it seems like it would just disappear. But then she wrote, “And I was answered in my understanding. It lasts and ever shall last because God loves it.” God loves the hazelnut, so that is what makes it last. That is what gives it stability, significance, and importance. “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 loves it, the third is that God keeps it.” That is the theme of the revelation. God made everything, God loves everything, and God keeps everything. “But what is to me verily the maker, the keeper, and the lover.” He is my maker, He is my keeper, He is my lover. “I cannot tell, for till I am substantially oned to Him I may never have full rest nor very bliss.” There was a push and desire in Julian, just like in Meister Eckhart, to be substantially one with God so that she could rest in bliss knowing Him as the maker, the keeper, and the lover.

I want to highlight one other quotation from the book *Revelations of Divine Love*. This is probably the most famous quotation: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” The church in Norwich was destroyed during WWII by German bombs, but it was rebuilt with the cell of Julian. In that present cell of Julian in Norwich there is a window with Julian hearing from Christ with the words, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” You may have heard that quotation and never heard the *Revelations of Divine Love* because that appears in one of the poems of T. S. Elliot. Elliot quoted from Julian here in the words, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” The Irish missionary to India, Amy Carmichael,

read *The Revelations of Divine Love* frequently. She was greatly inspired by that book, particularly by the description of prayer given by Julian of Norwich, which I have included in the syllabus.

Let us move on to Catherine of Siena. Siena is in Italy. Catherine was a member of an order. She was a Dominican tertiary, the third order of the Dominican movement. There are two things that are very striking about Catherine of Siena. She brought together mystical rapture and active service. Most of the mystics were not out there in the world, mixing up in the world and doing things. Mystics withdrew and lived quiet lives of meditation and prayer. But Catherine seemed to be able to do both. There are many stories about the mystical rapture that Catherine claimed to have experienced. She referred to these times as times of abstraction, times of prayer. She would not really know that she was in the world, not know what was going on around her. These were times of abstraction in her devotional life. The central theme of her writings is Christ crucified, especially His blood. Her writings are collected in a book called *The Dialogue*, a short excerpt of which is in the syllabus as well as an excerpt from Julian of Norwich. As you read Catherine, the focus is on Christ crucified and the blood; a rapture came as she contemplated the sufferings of Christ until she experienced these times of abstraction. Strikingly, she was also very active. She was very involved in the care of the sick and the poor. And she was preaching to sinners. She tried to convert them. On a higher level, she even became a mediator between the warring cities of Italy. She is given credit, not only for that work, but for the work of helping to persuade Pope Gregory XI to transfer the papacy from Avignon back to Rome. It seems that her influence and her persuasiveness was the crucial factor that made him make that move. As we know, that did not solve the problem of the papacy but produced the papal schism. About that time Catherine died. She was only 33 years old. Some have said that her heart was broken because her efforts to reunite the church had not succeeded. She is a very important figure. She was declared a doctor of the Catholic Church in 1970. When she was given that title, she joined about 30 other people. Not many people have been named to that high position in the Catholic Church.

Let us move on to Johannes Tauler. He is another 14th century mystic. He was also a Dominican, but a German. We have in the syllabus a writing from Tauler called *The Way of Prayer*. It is from his German theology, as it is called. It is a short prayer, "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." Of all the mystics, Tauler is my favorite. There is a lot of spiritual blessing that can come from reading the sermons and conferences of John Tauler. I started reading Tauler because Luther advised people to read Tauler. Luther brought out several additions of the German theology with his own recommendation and introduction to Tauler. Luther said, "The German theology of Tauler does not float on top like foam on water. It is rather been fetched out of the rock bottom of Jordan by a true Israelite. Next to the Bible and Saint Augustine, no book has ever come into my hands from which I have learned more of what God and Christ and man and what all things are." That is pretty high praise for this German Dominican from a fellow German Augustinian and Reformer, Martin Luther. I think what really appealed to Luther in Tauler was his humility and lowliness. He was small, nothing before God, to whom all the honor belongs. Luther, who very much disliked the proud and boastful scholastics who felt they had all the answers, returned again and again to the quiet, humble teaching of Tauler. But Tauler was not perfect. Luther, in a marginal note that he affixed to one of Tauler's sermons, struck out the word "humility" and put in the word "faith." We are not justified by being humble; we are justified by faith. It was not that Tauler did not come very close to saying that, but Luther wanted him to say it even more explicitly. Justification is indeed by faith.

Then we finally come to the most famous of the medieval mystics and the most famous of the books. We will now look at Thomas a' Kempis and *The Imitation of Christ*. *The Imitation of Christ* was the most widely read book of the Middle Ages. The writings of Thomas a' Kempis and others collected in

The Imitation of Christ is what is called the modern devotion. These are the writings of Thomas a' Kempis and others from the Brothers of the Common Life. That was a movement that began in the Netherlands and spread to various places. It was like an order, but it was a lay movement. They were laymen and women. They were not bound in the same way as the monks were by vows, but they were brothers and sisters who came together to share with each other and to practice good works. In particular, they set up schools. The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life established schools for the teaching of children in many places. One of these brothers was Thomas a' Kempis. We know very little about his life. He had an uneventful life as brother in one of the brother houses. When the plague struck down most of the members of the house, Thomas had to pitch in and do different jobs to keep things running. He became the monastery cook. Someone wrote of him, "He made the kitchen a house of prayer, for he knew that God was everywhere." I hope you will read *The Imitation of Christ* sometime.

There is a brief selection from *The Imitation* in the syllabus, but it is well worth reading it all. It is not the kind of book you pick up and read right through. It is more like reading the book of Proverbs. You get short, pithy statements. They are often gems of expression and extraordinarily fresh with some of the power and appeal of the Proverbs and other portions of Scripture. I have quoted a few of those in the syllabus. Note the first, "Jesus says, '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." That is the kind of thing you find in *The Imitation of Christ*. I think this book, so widely read, was a book that allowed many people to understand at least something of what was in the Bible. People were not able to read the Bible for themselves. As you study *The Imitation of Christ* the title might seem to suggest that the book is going to stress imitating Christ and trying to be like Christ. In some ways that is true. There is often a real display of grace in *The Imitation of Christ*. It is not perfect; at times Thomas can lapse into sacramentalism or even a works righteousness. But taken as a whole, *The Imitation of Christ* is more Augustinian than semi-palagian. But people have differed on an analysis of *The Imitation of Christ*. Rabbi John Duncan, a Scottish theologian, said of Thomas a' Kempis, "A fine fellow, but hazy and weak at times." What he meant by that is that the Gospel does not always come through. I think that is true. Another Scottish theologian, Thomas Martin Lindsay, wrote, "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." You read *The Imitation* and decide whether Duncan or Lindsay was right.

Let me come to a summing up of mysticism. I will do an evaluation: how do we look at this medieval movement? There are some very good things about it and some problems. One of the good things is stress on loving God. That is an emphasis that should always be there. We cannot say that too much. One of the descriptions of mystical theology that comes from the Middle Ages came from the chancellor of the University of Paris. It is an illustration that I think is very good because this man, in writing on mystical theology, said, "As honey requires honeycomb, so devotion needs to be structured by our 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." That just about says it all. You need the structure; you need the honeycomb. You need the theology; you need the orthodoxy. But you also need the honey; you need something to fill it and not only to enlighten the mind, but to warm the heart. From an enlightened mind and a warm heart we can go out to activity in the world. Not all the mystics got it right. Some demeaned learning; some were not very active in the world. But this statement expresses mysticism at its best. It is a concern that we not only understand, but that we love God and that we serve Him.

Another striking characteristic of the mystics is their concern for quietness and humility. I quote the Princeton theologian, a Presbyterian minister, J. W. Alexander. He wrote this 150 years ago, but it applies to our time as well as to his. He said, "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 bustling outward and full of élat.

But it may appear in another world that some of the mightiest influences have proceeded from souls of great quiet.” Think about that—it is worth pondering.

There are two real problems with the mystics. One of the problems is individualism. This may not be true of all the mystics. It certainly was not true of Catherine of Siena, and it is not true in the quotation above from John Gerson. As the German historian, Kurt Allan, puts it this way: “To a certain extent the mystic lived in a glass jar from which the world was banished and in which there was really nothing but a private conversation between God and the soul.” You do not have a lot of development of a Christian world and life view. The mystic might say, “It is about my relationship to God; even the church is not all that important.” It was a very personalized, individual relationship to God that the mystics pursued. Not all of them did this, but mysticism in general took that direction.

There was in mysticism, as there was in humanism and even in scholasticism, a tendency toward self-righteousness and works righteousness. Richard Lovelace says, “The writings of the mystics are full of nervous instructions to believers trying to cross the gap between man and God on their own footpaths.” That is the old problem all over again. There is a way that seems right to us, and we think by doing these things we can enter into favor with God. Not all of the mystics went that way, but there was the tendency for them to do so. As I have said, there are glimpses of grace in the mystics. *The Imitation of Christ* and the German theology of Tauler give us some of these glimpses. John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace*, as a young sailor casually picked up a copy of *The Imitation of Christ*. He was not interested in being a Christian. He was actually very much opposed to it. But he carelessly read *The Imitation*. The more he read it, the more troubled he became, thinking that it might indeed be true. If it was, he was in trouble. So it was through *The Imitation of Christ* that the evangelical experience of John Newton was first developed.

I want to close this lesson with a prayer from Thomas a’ Kempis. I think it is a very appropriate one because it is a prayer for all teachers and students. We are all students, and in one sense we are all teachers here. So let me pray these words with you as we conclude: “*Grant, oh Lord, to all teachers and students to know what is worth knowing, to love what is worth loving, to praise what pleases You most, and to dislike whatsoever is evil in Your sight. Grant us with true judgment to distinguish things that differ and, above all, to search out and do what is well pleasing to You, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*”

The term “modern devotion” is an expression that is used for the piety of the Brothers of Common Life and for *The Imitation of Christ*. You could say it equals *The Imitation of Christ*.

I suggest in the syllabus that if you want to read a modern preacher who has a love for the mystics and is an evangelical, A. W. Tozer’s *Knowledge of the Holy* is good. He will quote Julian of Norwich and *Cloud of Unknowing*, Tauler. Almost all of the mystics I mentioned are quoted by Tozer. He was a Christian Missionary Alliance pastor in Toronto for many years. He was a great preacher.

The term “mystic” was used by these very people, like John Gerson, who wrote *On Mystical Theology*. They did not reject this word; they felt it was a good word and it described them.

I could see some connections in the mystics being forerunners of modern-day charasmatics, especially in terms of revelations and ecstatic experiences.