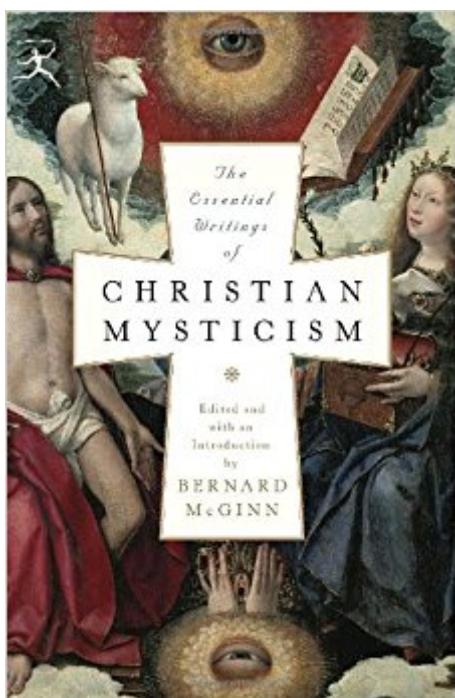


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# The Essential Writings Of Christian Mysticism (Modern Library Classics)



## Synopsis

This clear and comprehensive anthology, culled from the vast corpus of Christian mystical literature by the renowned theologian and historian Bernard McGinn, presents nearly one hundred selections, from the writings of Origen of Alexandria in the third century to the work of twentieth-century mystics such as Thomas Merton. Uniquely organized by subject rather than by author, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* explores how human life is transformed through the search for direct contact with God. Part one examines the preparation for encountering God through biblical interpretation and prayer; the second part focuses on the mystics' actual encounters with God; and part three addresses the implications of the mystical life, showing how mystics have been received over time, and how they practice their faith through private contemplation and public actions. In addition to his illuminating Introduction, Bernard McGinn provides accessible headnotes for each section, as well as numerous biographical sketches and a selected bibliography. Praise for *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*:

"No one is better equipped than Bernard McGinn to provide a thorough and balanced guide to this vast literature." -- *Anglican Theological Review*

"Bernard McGinn, a preeminent historian and interpreter of the Christian mystical tradition, has edited this fine collection of mystical writings, organizing them thematically....McGinn offers helpful introductions to each thematic section, author and entry, as well as a brief critical bibliography on mysticism. Published in the Modern Library Classic series, this is a great value." -- *Christian Century*

"No-one is better equipped than Professor McGinn to provide a thorough and balanced guide to this vast literature. A first-class selection, by a first-class scholar." -- *Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury*

"This accessible anthology by the scholarly world's leading historian of the Western Christian mystical tradition easily outstrips all others in its comprehensiveness, the aptness of its selection of texts, and in the intelligent manner of its organization." -- *Denys Turner, Horace Tracy Pitkin Professor of Historical Theology, Yale Divinity School*

"An immensely rich anthology, assembled and introduced by our foremost student of mysticism. Both the scholar and the disciple will find God plenty here." -- *Barbara Newman, Professor of English, Religion, and Classics, John Evans Professor of Latin, Northwestern University*

"An unusually clear and insightful exposition of major texts selected by one of the greatest scholars in the field of Christian mysticism, based on his vast erudition and uniquely sensitive interpretation. Like his other books, this one too is destined to become a classic." -- *Professor Moshe Idel, Hebrew University, Jerusalem*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Bernard McGinn is the Naomi Shenstone Donnelly Professor Emeritus at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. His books include *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*; *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*; *Antichrist*; and the *Presence of God* multivolume history of Western Christian mysticism. He lives in Chicago.

1. Origen Commentary on the Song of Songs prologue Origen of Alexandria (circa 180–254) was the greatest exegete of the early church. His spiritual reading of the Bible continued to influence later thinkers, despite the condemnation of aspects of his teaching in the sixth century. As Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of Origen's modern interpreters, once said, "No figure is more invisibly omnipresent in the history of Christian theology." Origen can also be described as the church's first explicit mystical theologian. While the mystical element was present in Christianity from the start, it is with the Alexandrian teacher that a formal biblically based mystical theory first emerges. Origen was not the first to interpret the Song's account of the bridegroom and bride as the story of the love between Christ and the church, but he furthered this mystical reading by applying it to the relations between Christ and each loving soul. The following four excerpts from the prologue of what survives of his commentary show how he created the elements that were to elevate the Song to the mystical text par excellence in Christian history. The first section describes his overall characterization of the Song as a dramatic

account of the process of salvation. The second shows how his dual understanding of human nature (inner and outer person) allowed him to translate the sensual language of the Song into a message about the spiritual senses, the powers of inner perception lost in sin but gradually restored to the soul through the action of grace. In the third selection Origen argues that there is no essential difference between the language of passionate desire (erÃƒÂ´s in Greek; amor in Latin) and the biblical word for GodÃ¢â€žs generous love poured out upon us (agapÃƒÂ²/caritas). Finally, in the fourth selection Origen demonstrates how the three books ascribed to Solomon (a type of Christ) form the basis for a biblical paideia, or total education, by which we are brought back to God.

I. The Song of Songs as a Mystical Drama It seems to me that this little book is an epithalamium, that is to say, a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God. And deeply indeed did she love him, whether we take her as the soul made in his image, or as the church. But this same scripture also teaches us what words this august and perfect Bridegroom used in speaking to the soul, or to the church, who has been joined to him. And in this same little book that bears the title Song of Songs we recognize moreover things that the brideÃ¢â€žs companions said, the maidens that go with her, and also some things spoken by the BridegroomÃ¢â€žs friends and fellows. For the friends of the Bridegroom also, in their joy at his union with the bride, have been enabled to say some thingsÃ¢â€žat any rate those that they had heard from the Bridegroom himself. In the same way we find the bride speaking not to the Bridegroom only, but also to the maidens; likewise the BridegroomÃ¢â€žs words are addressed not to the bride alone, but also to his friends. And that is what we meant just now, when we said that the marriage-song was written in dramatic form. For we call a thing a drama, such as the enactment of a story on the stage, when different characters are introduced and the whole structure of the narrative consists in their comings and goings among themselves. And this work contains these things one by one in their own order, and also the whole body of it consists of mystical utterances. But it behoves us primarily to understand that, just as in childhood we are not affected by the passion of love, so also to those who are at the stage of infancy and childhood in their interior lifeÃ¢â€žto those, that is to say, who are being nourished with milk in Christ, not with strong meat, and are only beginning Ã¢â€žto desire the rational milk without guileÃ¢â€ž (Heb 5:12)Ã¢â€žit is not given to grasp the meaning of these sayings. For in the words of the Song of Songs there is that food, of which the Apostle says that Ã¢â€žstrong meat is for the perfectÃ¢â€ž; and that food calls for hearers Ã¢â€žwho by ability have their senses exercised to the discerning of good and evilÃ¢â€ž (Heb 5:14). And indeed, if those whom we have called

children were to come on these passages, it may be that they would derive neither profit nor much harm, either from reading the text itself, or from going through the necessary explanations. But if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach it, to such a one the reading of this scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear loveÃ¢ ¬â„¢s language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the divine scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust! II. The Inner and Outer Person and the Spiritual Senses In the beginning of the words of Moses, where the creation of the world is described, we find reference to the making of two men, the first Ã¢ ¬Å“in the image and likeness of God,Ã¢ ¬Å• and the second Ã¢ ¬Å“formed of the slime of the earthÃ¢ ¬Å• (Gen 1:26, 2:7). Paul the Apostle knew this well; and, being possessed of a very clear understanding of the matter, he wrote in his letters more plainly and with greater lucidity that there are in fact two men in every single man. He says, for instance: Ã¢ ¬Å“For if our outward man is corrupted, yet the inward man is renewed day by dayÃ¢ ¬Å•; and again: Ã¢ ¬Å“For I am delighted with the law of God according to the inward manÃ¢ ¬Å• (2 Cor 4:16; Rom 7:22). And he makes some other statements of a similar kind. I think, therefore, that no one ought any longer to doubt what Moses wrote in the beginning of Genesis about the making and fashioning of two men, since he sees Paul, who understood what Moses wrote much better than we do, saying that there are two men in every one of us. Of these two men he tells us that the one, namely, the inner man, is renewed from day to day; but the other, that is, the outer, he declares to be corrupted and weakened in all the saints and in such as he was himself. If anything in regard to this matter still seems doubtful to anyone, it will be better explained in the appropriate places. But let us now follow up what we mentioned before about the inner and the outer man. The thing we want to demonstrate about these things is that the divine scriptures make use of homonyms; that is to say, they use identical terms for describing different things. And they even go so far as to call the members of the outer man by the same names as the parts and dispositions of the inner man; and not only are the same terms employed, but the things themselves are compared with one another. For instance, a person is a child in age according to the inner man, who has in him the power to grow and to be led onward to the age of youth, and thence by successive stages of development to come to the perfect man and to be made a father. Our own intention, therefore, has been to use such terms as would be in harmony with the language of sacred scripture, and in particular with that which was written by John; for he says: Ã¢ ¬Å“I have written to you, children, because you have known the Father; I have written to you, fathers, because

you have known him who was from the beginning; I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one. (1 Jn 2:12-14). It is perfectly clear; and I think nobody should doubt that John calls these people children or lads or young men or even fathers according to the soul's age, not the body's. Paul too says somewhere: "I could not speak to you as spiritual, but as to carnal, little ones in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not meat." (1 Cor 3:1). A little one in Christ is undoubtedly so called after the age of his soul, not after that of his flesh. And finally the same Paul says further: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man I destroyed childish things." (1 Cor 13:11). And again on another occasion he says: "Until we all meet . . . unto a perfect man; unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ." (Eph 4:13). He knows that those who believe will "all meet unto a perfect man" and "unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ." So, then, just as these different ages that we have mentioned are denoted by the same words both for the outer man and for the inner, so also will you find the names of the members of the body transferred to those of the soul; or rather the faculties and powers of the soul are to be called its members. III. Amor and Caritas In these places, therefore, and in many others you will find that divine scripture avoided the word "passion" (erif's) and put "charity" or "affection" (agapē) instead. Occasionally, however, though rarely, it calls the passion of love by its own name, and invites and urges souls to it; as when it says in Proverbs about Wisdom: "Desire her greatly and she will preserve you; encompass her, and she shall exalt you; honor her, that she may embrace you." (Prov 4:6, 8). And in the book that is called the Wisdom of Solomon it is written of Wisdom herself: "I became a passionate lover of her beauty." (Wis 8:2). I think that the word for passionate love was used only where there seemed to be no occasion of falling. For who could see anything sensuous or unseemly in the passion for Wisdom, or in a man professing himself her passionate lover? Whereas had Isaac been spoken of as having a passion for Rebecca or Jacob for Rachel, some unseemly passion on the part of the saints of God might have been inferred from the words, especially by those who do not know how to rise up from the letter to the spirit. Most clearly, however, even in this our little book of which we are now treating, the appellation of "passionate love" has been changed into the word "charity" in the place where it says: "I have adjured you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my Nephew, to tell him that I have been wounded by charity." (Song 5:8). For that is as much as to say: "I have been smitten through with the dart of His passionate

love. It makes no difference, therefore, whether the sacred scriptures speak of love, or of charity, or of affection; except that the word "charity" is so highly exalted that even God himself is called Charity, as John says: "Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for charity is of God; and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. But he that loves not knows not God, for God is Charity" (1 Jn 4:7). IV. The Place of the Song of Songs Among the Works of Solomon (i.e., Christ) Now, therefore, calling upon God the Father, who is Charity, through that same charity that is of him, let us pass on to discuss the other matters. And let us first investigate the reason why, when the churches of God have adopted three books from Solomon's pen, the Book of Proverbs has been put first, that which is called Ecclesiastes second, while the Song of Songs is found in the third place. The following are the suggestions that occur to us here. The branches of learning by means of which men generally attain to knowledge of things are the three which the Greeks called Ethics, Physics and Eopoetics; these we may call respectively moral, natural, and inspective. Some among the Greeks, of course, add a fourth branch, logic, which we may describe as rational. Others have said that logic does not stand by itself, but is connected and intertwined throughout with the three studies that we mentioned first. For this logic is, as we say, rational, in that it deals with the meanings and proper significances and their opposites, the classes and kinds of words and expressions, and gives information as to the form of each and every saying; and this branch of learning certainly requires not so much to be separated from the others as to be mingled and woven in with them. That study is called moral, on the other hand, which inculcates a seemly manner of life and gives a grounding in habits that incline to virtue. The study called natural is that in which the nature of each single thing is considered; so that nothing in life may be done which is contrary to nature, but everything is assigned to the uses for which the Creator brought it into being. The study called inspective is that by which we go beyond things seen and contemplate something of things divine and heavenly, beholding them with the mind alone, for they are beyond the range of bodily sight. It seems to me, then, that all the sages of the Greeks borrowed these ideas from Solomon, who had learned them by the Spirit of God at an age and time long before their own, and that they then put them forward as their own inventions and, by including them in the books of their teachings, left them to be handed down also to those that came after. But, as we said, Solomon discovered and taught these things by the wisdom that he received from God before anyone; as it is written: "And God gave understanding to Solomon and wisdom exceeding great, and largeness of heart as the sand that is on the seashore. And wisdom was multiplied in him above all the sons of men that were of old, and above all the sages of Egypt" (3 Kgs 4:29). Wishing, therefore, to distinguish one from another of

those three branches of learning, which we called general just now (that is, the moral, the natural, and the inspective), and to differentiate between them, Solomon issued them in three books, arranged in their proper order. First, in Proverbs he taught the moral science, putting rules for living into the form of short and pithy maxims, as was fitting. Secondly, he covered the science known as natural in Ecclesiastes; in this, by discussing at length the things of nature, and by distinguishing the useless and vain from the profitable and essential, he counsels us to forsake vanity and cultivate things useful and upright. The inspective science likewise he has propounded in this little book that we now have in hand— that is, the Song of Songs. In this he instills into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the bride and Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the paths of charity and love. . . . This book comes last so that a person may come to it when his manner of life has been purified and he has learnt to know the difference between things corruptible and things incorruptible, so that nothing in the metaphors used to describe and represent the love of the bride for her celestial Bridegroom—that is, of the perfect soul for the Word of God—may cause him to stumble. For when the soul has completed these studies, by means of which it is cleansed in all its actions and habits and is led to discriminate between natural things, it is competent to proceed to doctrinal and mystical matters, and in this way advances to the contemplation of the Godhead with pure and spiritual love. From Origen. *The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies*, translated and annotated by R. P. Lawson (New York: Paulist Press, 1957. Ancient Christian Writers), 21—22, 24—27, 31—32, 39—41, and 44. Used with permission of Paulist Press.

McGinn presents a topically arranged selection of 17 hundred years of writing about Christian Mysticism. The broad topics start with Foundation of Mystical practice with highlights including Bernard of Clairvaux's sermon of the Song of Songs ("I feel that the King has not one bedroom only, but many", an Life of Mary of Oignies by James of Vitry ("at times she would rest sweetly with the Lord in a pleasant and blessed salience for thirty-five days, during this time taking no bodily food, and being unable to say anything but "I want the Body of Lord Jesus Christ". ". Throughout are introduced strong prayer elements as the Way of the Pilgrim ("Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner") and negative ("stripping away") dimensions as John of the Cross "Upon a Dark night. The longest section is on aspects of mystical consciousness. Some remarkable sections there include Mechthild of Magdeburg on the Trinity ("I am an overflowing spring that no one can block"), and Julian of Norwich's love ('he also showed a little thing, the size of a hazel-nut in the palm on my

hand. ... it is all that is made. ... It lasts and will last for ever because God loves it". The anonymous 14th century "beat upon that thick cloud of unknowing with the dart of your loving desire". There are some remarkable manifestations of the mystic life as St. Francis's stigmata, or Benedict seeing the bishop of Capua carried to heaven in a fiery sphere on angels. Perhaps my favorite quote is Meister Eckhart "The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me." Perhaps the chapter on distress and dereliction may be the most puzzling, but consoling. The final section on implications of mysticism discusses the "dialectical relationship between the mystical and institution", between the orthodox and the edge of heresy, even Meister Eckhart was condemned. A result of contact with God, is a transformed life, and the final chapter discusses relation of contemplation and action. If your enemy is hungry. feed him Romans 12:20. The final election is Thomas Merton who in his last decade became involved in many public debates. Throughout the book, McGinn's concise writing introduces both the concepts as well as brief biographical material about the author. McGinn provides a wide selection of text, and picks the best English translation available, and if not is available, translates it himself. He does not stick to accepted Roman Catholic texts, and there are examples of Quietism, the Lutheran Johann Arndt, Hesychast tradition in the Christian East, the poet William Blake ("to see the world in a grain of sand"), and the Quaker George Fox. Although writing about mystics is difficult, what we cannot know we can grasp, this book provides a good introduction.

At last! I've been teaching college courses on philosophy & mysticism for years, and I've always been frustrated by the absence of a good anthology of Christian mysticism. So I've either had to order armfuls of primary texts or settle for mediocre anthologies. But Bernard McGinn, who knows more about Christian mysticism than anyone else, has saved me (and others!). This wonderful collection of Christian mysticism is logically arranged, judiciously selected, and expertly commented on. How wonderful! Selections are from ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary mystics, and from western as well as orthodox traditions. Fathers of the Desert, the Beguines, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, Hugh of St. Victor, Symeon, Macarius, Eckhart, John of the Cross, Bernard of Clairvaux: these and many other Christian mystics are excerpted in sections that cover topics such as Biblical Interpretation, Asceticism and Purgation, Inner and Outer Practices, Trinity, Christ, Vision, Deification, and Love and Knowledge. McGinn even concludes with a section that focuses on the social/moral relevance of Christian mysticism, which would be nicely complemented by a reading of Dorothee Soelle's *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. McGinn's book is bound to be the definitive collection for years to come. Highly, highly recommended--and highly welcome.

This 550-page tome is the definitive anthology of Christian mysticism. Author Bernard McGinn, the foremost historian of the Western Christian mystical tradition, has assembled the essential writings of Christianity's preeminent mystics in a single volume, and students of Christian mysticism will delight in the resulting product. The text is divided into three parts--Foundations of Mystical Practice, Aspects of Mystical Consciousness, and Implications of the Mystical life--and each part contains several sections, enabling a reader to quickly and easily focus on the topics that interest him. For example, Part One contains, in order, the following sections: Biblical Interpretation, Asceticism and Purgation, Prayer, Liturgy and Sacraments, Inner and Outer Practices, and Mystical Itineraries. In total, the text contains fifteen sections and nearly a hundred selections, featuring the writings of close to fifty mystics. The mystics stretch from 300 AD to the twentieth century, and not a single big name is missing. Readers will be able to sample the best writings of Origen, Augustine, Evagrius Ponticus, John of the Cross, John Cassian, Teresa of Avila, Bernard of Clarivaux, Meister Eckhart, John Ruusbroek, Nicholas of Cusa, Richard Rolle, Thomas Merton, and other mystical luminaries. The only flaw of this text is that it lacks an index. Apart from that, it is all, and more, than anyone could hope for in a Christian mysticism anthology.

This superb anthology of the best of Christian mystical writing lives up to all the praise heaped upon it. If you read a selection everyday, your life will probably improve, and you will be drawn to that place where "the alone meets the Alone," the seat of all mystical experience. This book has profoundly influenced my life. Buy it and read in it often. God is available to anyone.

If I were to recommend where to start when it comes to writings of Christian Mysticism, I would say start with this book. It is the best anthology of Christian mystical writings I know. And it's presented in a clear accessible way. Highly recommended!! -Amos Smith (author of *Healing The Divide: Recovering Christianity's Mystic Roots*)

Thorough and profound overview of great Christian mystics writings. Dr. McGuinn is bringing to the forefront the lost mystical traditions. I doubt that many churches or individuals have heard of the majority of the mystics reviewed in the book. This book should be a must in any serious Christian Theological Seminars and University Courses.

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