

Fall 9-1-1999

The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)

Elizabeth A. Dreyer
Fairfield University, edreyer@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs>

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Dreyer, Elizabeth A., "The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)" (1999). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 54.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/54>

Published Citation

Dreyer, Elizabeth A. "The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)." *Horizons* 26.2 (Fall 1999): 370-371.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Fine's lucid study provides knowledge that opens new perspectives on Jewish life. It is an important contribution especially for Christians who tend to know little about Judaism after 70 C.E. His scholarship, clarity, and insight make this a readable volume, albeit only for those with a firm foundation in first-century history. Although Fine is admirable in explaining technical terms and in crafting narrative flow, it is likely that only advanced students would draw upon *This Holy Place*. It is a valuable addition for libraries and for all who teach Christian origins or Jewish studies.

Union Theological Seminary, NY

MARY C. BOYS, S.N.J.M.

The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350). By Bernard McGinn. *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 3. New York: Crossroad, 1998. xiv + 526 pages. \$60.00.

This is the third volume in Bernard McGinn's projected five-volume work entitled *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. Volume 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (1991), traces the origins of Christian mysticism from its Jewish and Hellenistic foundations to the fifth century. Volume 2, *The Growth of Mysticism* (1994), begins with Gregory the Great and ends with the twelfth century. This third volume treats select aspects of what McGinn is calling the "new mysticism" that emerged after 1200. The two major foci are the Franciscan tradition (chaps. 2 and 3) and various groups of women mystics (chaps. 4-6). The speculative aspects of the "new mysticism"—works of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler and John Ruusbroec, as well as Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich and later Franciscan mystics—will appear in Volume 4, *Continuity and Change in Western Mysticism*. To ground his analysis of the mystical phenomenon throughout, McGinn uses a broad notion of mysticism—"consciousness of God's presence in a deeper and more immediate way" (xi) that transforms the life of the recipient (27).

This volume has chapters on the origins of the new mysticism; early Franciscan mysticism and Bonaventure's synthesis; men and women in the Franciscan tradition; *mulieres religiosae*/female mysticism; three great beguine mystics—Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete; and women mystics of the religious orders.

Acknowledging that twelfth-century authors paved the way, McGinn sees new forms of mysticism emerging in Europe after 1200. The social contexts for this development include more organized political, economic, and judicial structures; urbanization due to demographic expansion and the rise of a profit economy; methods of advanced education and use of the vernacular; and growing literacy among the laity. Most importantly, the early medieval opposition to change was under fire, replaced by a bold thrust toward innovation. The new mysticism was fueled by a grassroots desire to return to the *vita apostolica*—a turn from an inward to an outward encounter with the world, visible in the values of poverty, penance, and preaching, and by pastoral renewal that gave birth to a flood of pastoral guides for the clergy.

McGinn suggests that the new mysticism was reflected in broadening horizons that included groups of laity; in an outward movement to the world which was valued positively; and in a view of everyday life as a locus for a contemplative existence. Women assume an important role—"it is fair to say that the great age of women's theology begins in 1200" (15). Women have available to them a growing diversity of forms of religious life, and accounts of their mystical experience and ascetic practices cover a wide range from the traditional to the bizarre. Other aspects of the "new mysticism" include greater emphasis on visions; reports of extended (rather than fleeting) ecstatic states; the primacy of affectivity; predominance of erotic, courtly language, based in part on the Song of Songs; strong pictorial imagination; a christology focused on the passion; and new, more daring expressions of unmediated union with God.

Through well-chosen examples, McGinn invites the reader to consider how the "new mysticism" was both innovative and related to the older monastic, mystical traditions of Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and the Victorines. Of the many topics treated, I found particularly engaging McGinn's analysis of the wide influence of Thomas Gallus on Franciscan mysticism; his treatment of less well-known figures such as the Franciscan David of Augsburg (d. 1272) and the sisters in German Dominican cloisters in the first half of the fourteenth century whose mystical experiences are recounted in the *Sister Books*. McGinn highlights the crucial role that conversation and mutual instruction between men and women (and occasionally between women) had in the development of mysticism during this period. While they are not thematized, the biblical strains woven into this literature are also central to the presentation.

The volumes in this series are recommended to anyone interested in the development of mystical prayer in the Christian west. As in the previous two volumes, there are extensive endnotes (143 pages) and bibliography (40 pages). Individual chapters might be used as companion material to the reading of primary sources in upper division undergraduate and graduate courses.

Fairfield University

ELIZABETH A. DREYER

Pastors and the Care of Souls in Medieval England. Edited by John Shinnars and William J. Dohar. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1998. xx + 331 pages. \$40.00 (paper \$25.00).

Many Catholics have derived an image of the medieval church drawn by nineteenth-century Protestant historians for whom "medieval" was a pejorative term and to whom the parish priest was a stock figure of ignorance, lust, and cupidity. Whatever basis in truth underlay this image, more recent scholarship has revealed it for the caricature that it is. Using primary sources in translation drawn from late medieval England, Shinnars and Dohar seek to create a more nuanced and complex picture that acknowledges the undoubted failings while recognizing the surprising strengths of the pastoral clergy and