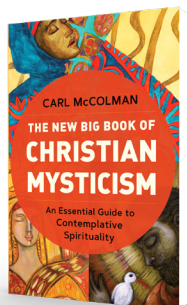


# THE NEW BIG BOOK OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

A GUIDE FOR PERSONAL AND GROUP EXPLORATION



**“To explore mystical spirituality is to place yourself into the hands of the living God. If your heart is truly open, it will change your life.”**

An adventure awaits you. *The New Big Book of Christian Mysticism* by Carl McColman invites readers to explore a hidden but vital dimension of Western spirituality—the experience of union with God that is rooted in the wisdom teachings of the Bible, of Jesus and the disciples, and then of great saints and mystics throughout history, up to and including the present day. Mysticism is a vague word that gets used in a variety of contexts and with different meanings. In the context of Christianity, however, it has a narrower sense: mystical Christianity encompasses the teachings, spiritual practices, and visionary experiences that all point to union with God, in and through Christ, as the summit of human potential and spiritual calling. Similar to the quest for ecstasy or enlightenment found in other wisdom traditions, the mystical quest for union with God promises a deeply transformed interior sense of divine presence, love, and felicity in our bodies and our lives. To be a mystic is to be one with love, joy, and peace—to be one with bliss.

But mysticism, at least within Christianity, is not just a program for personal growth or spiritual experience. At its heart, the wisdom teachings of Jesus are profoundly relational: “love your neighbor” matters as much as “love God.” So, union with God is an initiation into divine love, divine compassion, divine mercy, divine forgiveness, and divine justice. To realize union with God is to recognize a vocation to help heal and transform the world. This can take many forms: serving those in need, advocating for social change, protesting injustice, working to dismantle oppression and privilege, or even simply living a life marked by integrity, authenticity, and compassionate care for others. Mystics are like artists: called to be creative, creating new ways in which the beauty and love of God can bring healing and transformation to our lives and our world.

This guide is designed for both individual and group use. The questions that follow can be prompts for discussion or for personal reflection and journaling. Whether you are reading *The New Big Book of Christian Mysticism* for personal enrichment or as part of a group study or course, this guide can support you on your adventure. May your heart be open, and may the source of all love bring insight and new possibilities into your life!

## PREFACE

- The preface (and therefore the book as a whole) begins with this declaration: “Love is real, God is love, and God dwells in your heart.” Do you believe this? Why or why not? Why do you think the author chose to lead with this statement?
- “Mystical spirituality will invite you to rethink everything you think you know about God—but when all the old images and ideas of God fall away, you are left with a deep, unfathomable mystery that cannot be put into words.” What do you believe (or not believe) about God? What is your image of God like? How has your image of God changed over time? If you are uncomfortable with the word God, what other word(s) do you find more helpful to describe what Carl McColman calls “limitless mystery”?

## PART I: THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

- On page 9, Jesus is quoted as saying, “For God all things are possible,” and then an early Christian mystic, Irenaeus, is quoted saying, “God became human so that humans might become God.” What do you think Irenaeus means by this? Do you think this is possible? Why or why not?

### CHAPTER 1: THE TRANSFIGURING MOMENT

- Read the story of the Transfiguration in the New Testament (slightly different accounts can be found in Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28-36). What details in this story stand out to you? How do you think it must have felt to be one of Jesus’s friends in this story? Do you find it hard to believe? What do you think is the meaning or purpose of this story?
- On pages 14–15, a quotation from the autobiography of Saint Teresa of Ávila recounts her vision of an angel plunging a “flaming spear” into her heart, which she describes as both painful and sweet, and leaving her “utterly consumed with love of God.” How does this make you feel? Would you like to have a vision like this? Does the idea of being consumed with divine love sound appealing to you? Perhaps you could imagine a different way to experience this—what would that be like?
- On page 16, McColman suggests that two key elements of mysticism are “language and silence.” What is your relationship to silence? Do you spend much time in silence? How does it feel to be silent? We live in a noisy culture; why do you think people seem to value silence so little?

### CHAPTER 2: THE MUTE MYSTERY

- On page 28 the author defines mysticism as “the spirituality of the embodiment of divine love.” What do you think this means? Why do you think McColman emphasizes embodiment? If a person truly embodied divine love, how would that make a difference in their life?
- Pages 30–32 offer a number of different definitions of mysticism, from various sources. Read through these definitions carefully. Which ones make the most sense to you? Are there any that you don’t care for? What common themes unite these different understandings?
- Pages 38–41 approach the question “What is mysticism?” through a series of metaphors and insights. Again, which ones appeal to you, and which metaphors and insights do not? Based on your understanding of mysticism, can you think of any other metaphors or ideas that help explain it?

### CHAPTER 3: TO PLAY IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES

- Read the poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. What do you think the poet means by “Christ plays in ten thousand places”? Why do you think McColman chose this allusion for the title of a chapter on Jesus’s role in mystic traditions?
- On page 45, Richard Rohr is quoted as calling Jesus “the first major nondual teacher in the West.” McColman goes on to explain nonduality using the North Pole as a metaphor. Does this concept of nonduality change your understanding of Jesus? How can nonduality help us understand mysticism?

- Central to what most Christians believe about Jesus is the doctrine of the resurrection, which holds that after being violently executed by Roman soldiers, Jesus rose from the dead. McColman suggests that for mystics, death and resurrection are not simply ideas to believe in (or not), but are a “template for the spiritual life.” Can you think of ways in which you, or others you know, have experienced spiritual “death and resurrection”? How can the concept of resurrection change the way we experience suffering or conflict in our lives?

#### **CHAPTER 4: OF PROPHETS AND PHILOSOPHERS**

- McColman writes, “It is part of any spiritual tradition to honor the wisdom of the past” (p. 51). Is honoring the wisdom of the past part of your spiritual practice? If so, what does it look like? How can we balance the wisdom of the past with the advances in knowledge and understanding that shape life today?
- Can you think of other historical or cultural sources that have shaped the mystical element of Christianity as it has evolved over the ages?
- On page 63, McColman summarizes the teachings of Jesus in seven brief statements: “Love one another. Forgive one another. Heal one another. Care even for your adversaries. Practice nonviolence. Let go of the temptation to judge. Be merciful.” How can the spirituality of mysticism and contemplation help us follow these teachings in our lives?

#### **CHAPTER 5: HERMITS, NUNS, AND POETS**

- This chapter offers a brief summary of how Christian mysticism has evolved over the past two thousand years. Why is it important to look at the ways mystical spirituality has changed? What implications do these changes have for the practice of contemplative Christianity in our time?
- On page 68, McColman writes, “The ‘knowing’ of a mystic may actually be a kind of luminous unknowing: some mystics might only be aware of God by their awareness of just how hidden God seems to them.” Do you experience God as hidden? What implications does this idea—that for some mystics, God seems hidden—have for your spiritual practice?
- This chapter ends with McColman’s speculations on what the future of mysticism might look like. As you consider his ideas, which of them do you identify with? Do you have any other speculations on how the mystical dimension of Christianity might evolve in the years (and centuries) to come?

#### **CHAPTER 6: PRAYS WELL WITH OTHERS**

- Are you personally interested in interfaith dialogue or interspirituality? If so, how do you reconcile the teachings of Jesus with the wisdom of other faith traditions? If not, what do you think is the best practice for Christians who live in a world now where members of every faith can be found in almost every community?
- On page 86, McColman suggests that tofu can be a useful analogy for explaining how mysticism varies among the different religious and spiritual traditions of the world. Is this a useful metaphor for you? Why or why not?
- McColman summarizes this chapter by describing Christian mysticism as “anchored in Christ, and open to all” (p. 89). Is this a helpful way to frame the tension between faithfulness to Jesus and the universality of mysticism? Are there other ways to describe the relationship between Christian mysticism and the other mysticisms of the world?

#### **CHAPTER 7: TO THE LEAST OF THESE**

- This chapter opens with a reflection on the relationship between the head and the heart, or between understanding and relationship, using the story of Mary and Martha to illustrate this common human dilemma. Read Luke 10:38-42. Are you more sympathetic to Mary or to Martha? How are these sisters archetypes for the spiritual life? If we agree with Teresa of Ávila, what can we do to foster cooperation between the “Mary” and the “Martha” in our own hearts?
- Page 97: Luke 17:21 has been translated as both “The kingdom of God is within you” and “The kingdom of God is among you.” The Greek word *entos* can be correctly translated either way. What implications are there for contemplatives to see God’s reign in both an interior and a communal way? How do we balance these two different ways of understanding *entos*?

- Read the quotations from Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams on pages 99–100. They are speaking about contemplation as a social (or even “subversive”) activity. What implications do their ideas have for you, as you seek to better understand mysticism?

## **CHAPTER 8: SINGING THE SONG OF SONGS**

- Read the Song of Songs. What do you think of it? Does it expand your sense of who God is or of what it means to be in a relationship with God? Alternatively, does it offer you insights into the spirituality of human love?
- On page 109, McColman offers a whimsical list of the “vitamins of love.” Can you think of other important elements of a loving relationship that could be added to this list?
- McColman laments how Christianity and other faiths have been marred by a dualism that regards the body (and sexuality) as inferior to the soul. On page 113, he writes, “Since the joyful eroticism of the Song of Songs can help us make sense of the sublime beauty of mystical love, the Christian mystics have offered us a new way not only to think about contemplative spirituality, but also to think about sexuality and romantic love.” How do you think Christianity, as a faith tradition, could benefit from a more positive and affirming understanding of human sexuality?

## **CHAPTER 9: THE MYSTERY’S PROMISE**

- On pages 116–117, McColman summarizes what he sees as “the promise of mysticism.” Does this description of the message of mysticism appeal to you? Why or why not? Is something missing? If so, what could be added to make this an even better summary of mystical spirituality?
- Page 120 suggests there is a nuanced distinction between union with God and communion with God. Is the ultimate goal of the mystical life to erase all perceived distinctions between the Creator and the creature, or is there always a distinction, however subtle, that makes it possible for the mystic to experience loving and being loved by God? Which of these approaches to mysticism appeals more to you: union with God, or communion with God? Or do these two approaches represent just one more dualism that ultimately is resolved in nonduality?
- Page 124 revisits an ongoing theme of this book: that mysticism is a story. Do you have a sense of your own spiritual life as being a “new chapter in that story”? What can we do to help one another celebrate our own capacity to be part of the great love story that is mystical Christianity?

## **CHAPTER 10: THE MYSTICAL PARADOXES**

- This is by far the longest chapter in this book. Why devote so much space to paradox? How do paradoxes help us understand Christianity—or mysticism?
- This chapter examines twenty-five different paradoxes that can give us insight into the depth and subtlety of mystical spirituality. Read through the paradoxes. Do any particularly speak to you? Why? What insights into your own spirituality do you glean from meditating on these paradoxes?
- Can you think of any other paradoxes within Christian mysticism (or Christianity in general) that could be added to this chapter?

## **CHAPTER 11: CHRISTIANITY’S BEST-KEPT SECRET**

- This chapter offers some speculation as to why mysticism is not more widely studied or practiced within neighborhood churches. If you are a member of a church, does it make room for exploring mysticism? If not, what steps do you think your (or any) church could take to become more mysticism-friendly?
- McColman suggests that one reason mysticism is not more widely embraced is because it upsets the status quo. Do you think this is true? How do you think mystical or contemplative spirituality could rock the boat in neighborhood churches?
- The chapter ends with a few thoughts on the distinction between mysticism and spirituality. How would you define the difference between the two?

## PART II: THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

- On page 183, a quote from *The Cloud of Unknowing* holds that “it is not what you are, nor what you have been, that God beholds with merciful eyes, but what you desire to be.” Mystically speaking, what is your desire? How would you like God to behold you? When God gazes upon you, what do you hope God sees?

### CHAPTER 12: THE EMBODIED HEART

- On page 186 McColman suggests that, spiritually speaking, the heart is a metaphor for the entire human body. Do you agree? Why does the author emphasize the importance of the body in mystical Christianity?
- One theme in this chapter is trust. Why is trust important for spiritual practice? What can we do to cultivate deeper trust in God?
- This chapter ends with a list of four ways to approach the contemplative life: as wisdom, experience, story, and relationship. Which of these ways appeals most to you? Which ones might be harder for you to relate to?

### CHAPTER 13: THE MYSTICAL BODY

- This chapter extends the discussion begun in chapter 11 of how mysticism is not always discussed (or even welcome) in neighborhood churches. Meanwhile, this chapter also insists that spiritual community (which often means church in some form) is essential to the mystical life. How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory ideas?
- If you have been traumatized by a church community, or for any other reason find involvement with a local church impossible, what steps can you take to foster a meaningful spiritual community in your life?
- This chapter also considers “the community of two”—the practice of spiritual direction or spiritual accompaniment. Do you work with a spiritual director/companion? If not, can you imagine how meeting with such a person could be helpful for your ongoing spiritual growth and development?
- Whose feet do you wash? If you don’t have anyone you can spiritually serve, what steps can you take to find an opportunity to care for others?

### CHAPTER 14: EMPTINESS AND THE DANCE

- This chapter introduces two Greek words: *theosis* (the experience of union with God) and *kenosis* (emptying, as in how Jesus emptied himself when he took on human form). Why do you think the author links these two concepts? What do they have in common, and how do they work together in the spiritual life?
- Yet another Greek word is introduced on page 218: *perichoresis*, which basically means dancing in a circle. This is a way of understanding the relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Do you find this to be a helpful or insightful image for God? Why or why not? What does this image of God teach us about God?
- Why does this chapter end with a reflection on suffering? Why is suffering an important topic for contemplative spirituality?

### CHAPTER 15: BECOMING WHO YOU ALREADY ARE

- This chapter introduces the classical understanding of the mystical life as consisting of three stages: purification, illumination, and union (in Greek: *katharsis*, *theoria*, and *theosis*). Explain in your own words the difference between these stages. Compare these stages to the education metaphor from chapter 13 (pp. 199–200). How do these stages help you understand your own spiritual practice?
- Are you comfortable with the concept of holiness? Why or why not? What can we do to reclaim holiness as a meaningful spiritual concept for our time?
- Pages 234–235 explore the ten commandments in light of the teachings of Bible scholar Brian Haggerty. How does Haggerty’s interpretation of the commandments help you see them in a new way? Do his ideas make the commandments more compelling for you? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 16: A PATHLESS PATH OF LIGHT

- This chapter considers the point of transition between the stages of purification and illumination. It considers the importance of experience in the spiritual life: it's not enough to say, "God is love"; one must experience God-as-love through spiritual practices like contemplation. Can you think of other examples in your life where theoretical knowledge of something mattered less than experiencing it firsthand? How would you explain to someone that practical experience is more important than abstract theory?
- Try to explain the paradoxical idea that the spiritual journey isn't a journey.

## CHAPTER 17: THE WORD IS VERY NEAR YOU

- This chapter begins to focus specifically on prayer. What is your experience of prayer? Is prayer meaningful for you? How often do you pray? Would you like to pray more often? What do you think could help you deepen your prayer life?
- Are you familiar with the Liturgy of the Hours (also known as the Daily Office or the Divine Office)? Is it a part of your own prayer practice?
- Likewise, are you familiar with lectio divina? Is it a practice you regularly engage in? If not, give it a try. Keep a journal to record your experience of prayer regarding lectio divina.

## CHAPTER 18: THE HEAVENLY CONVERSATION

- Page 262 offers a few examples of popular and beloved prayers. Do you know of other prayers that you find meaningful? (One famous example is Thomas Merton's "I have no idea where I am going" prayer.) Consider creating a notebook of your favorite prayers (for inspiration, consult *Evelyn Underhill's Prayer Book*, which is a publication of the prayer notebook of the great twentieth-century British mystic). Try using one or more of your favorite prayers every day.
- In addition to prayers from saints and mystics you admire, try writing your own prayers, which you can also record in your notebook and use in your daily devotions.
- Review the tips for starting or strengthening a daily prayer practice (pp. 270–272). What steps do you feel you can take to deepen your prayer practice? Do you have any ideas for growing in prayer beyond what is discussed in this chapter?

## CHAPTER 19: ETERNITY WITHIN

- Read the definition of contemplation from the Catholic Catechism, found on page 285. Have you had any experience praying in this way? What was it like? If not, consider praying for the gift of contemplation.
- McColman calls contemplation a "silly prayer." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Review the guidelines of Centering Prayer found at the top of page 294. If you are not familiar with Centering Prayer, try it (to learn more, consult the writings of Thomas Keating or Cynthia Bourgeault). Consider joining a Centering Prayer group (consult with Contemplative Outreach, an international organization that sponsors such groups). Write in your journal about your experience with Centering Prayer, and consider sharing it with your spiritual director/companion or your prayer group.

## CHAPTER 20: THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

- This chapter begins by considering the tension between word and silence, and between light and darkness, as ordinary dimensions of the spiritual life: "Every day is followed by night" (p. 305). How do you experience light and dark in your prayer life? Reflect on how you experience language and silence. How does the practice of contemplative prayer prepare us for both the radiance of illumination and the dark night of the soul, for the language of love and the mystery of silence?
- Are you familiar with the concept of spiritual bypassing (p. 308)? Can you think of some examples of how spiritual bypassing can occur during ordinary life?
- Why do you think Saint Benedict emphasizes work (labor) as an important element of the spiritual life? Do you think of your work as a spiritual practice? If not, what can you do to have a more intentionally spiritual experience of work?

## CHAPTER 21: THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY

- Why do you think Evelyn Underhill considered artists to be “those who come closest to being natural mystics” (p. 324)? How is creativity a dimension of spirituality? Do you have a creative outlet in your life (it doesn’t have to be a fine-art practice like painting or music)? As with work (see chapter 20), what can we do to experience our creativity as a spiritual practice?
- Humility is a recurring theme in contemplative spirituality, and it shows up again, even now as we approach the end of our journey (see p. 329). Thomas Aquinas said humility is the queen of all virtues. Why is it so important for the spiritual life? What are some ways humility is misunderstood? What can we do to promote a healthy and holistic understanding of humility?
- On page 330 we see this quotation: “The mystic is not a special kind of person; each person is a special kind of mystic.” What special kind of mystic are you? What is unique about your spiritual practice and your journeyless journey into God?

## CHAPTER 22: LIVING A MYSTICAL LIFE

- Review the twenty essential mystical practices listed in this chapter. Which ones are already part of your devotional practice? Are there any that aren’t currently part of your spiritual life?
- Can you think of other spiritual practices, besides the twenty listed here, that are meaningful for you? Make a list of any practices you might think of.
- Consider adopting one of these practices to begin (or deepen) in your life over the next few months. Don’t try to do too much all at once! Spirituality is a long-term process, so just pick one for now. In the future you can return to this list and pick something else to cultivate. Whatever you choose to do, journal about your process, and consider sharing your experience with a spiritual companion or members of your prayer group.

## APPENDICES

- Review the list of great mystics on page 349. Are there any who are unfamiliar to you? Consider learning more about one or more of these mystics, and possibly reading some of their writings.
- Likewise, consider reading one of the books listed in the Contemplative Reading List (pp. 353–368). Again, there’s no need to rush: it’s better to just pick one or, at the most, two books at a time and read them slowly to savor their wisdom before you move on to something else.