CHAPTER TWO
CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM
Chapter 2: Christian Mysticism

Introduction

Mysticism is described by Louth "as a search for, and experience of, immediacy with God. The mystic is not content to know about God, he longs for union with God. ‘Union with God’ can mean different things, from literal identity, where the mystic loses all sense of himself and is absorbed into God, to the union that is experienced as the consummation of love, in which the lover and the beloved remain intensely aware both of themselves and of the other. How the mystics interpret the way and the goal of their quest depends on what they think about God, and that itself is influenced by what they experience: it is a mistake to try to make out that all mysticism is the same. Yet the search for God, or the ultimate, for His own sake, and an unwillingness to be satisfied with anything less than Him; the search for immediacy with this object of the soul’s longing; this would seem to be the heart of mysticism.”¹

For many centuries, pagans, pantheists, gnostics, and eastern religions advocated varying heretical forms of Mysticism that mainly included an emptying of oneself into the abyss of nothingness in order to unite one’s consciousness with that of his/her surroundings in nature. Christianity proposed an alternative view of Mysticism in response to these pagan practices, mainly through foundational Church fathers’ writings, such as St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. Christian Mysticism begins with an act of love from a person to an eternal, personal God and extends beyond one’s knowledge of Him through the intellect into a more intuitive sense. Mysticism considers as the end of philosophy the direct union of the

human soul with the Divinity through contemplation and love, and attempts to determine the means of realizing this end. This contemplation, according to Mysticism, is not based on a merely analogical knowledge of the Infinite, but as a direct and immediate intuition of the Infinite.

This Chapter deals with ten key Mystics of the Christian mystical tradition and aims at analysing their different viewpoints regarding the concept of union with the Deity.

**Nature of Christian Mysticism**

Three types of mysticism are usually recognized: Nature mysticism, God mysticism, and Soul mysticism. Christian mysticism has always been God mysticism and it is the quest to come into an intimate, unitive relationship with God. Two fairly distinct phases are discernible in the development of mysticism in the West. During the first phase, which extended from the third to the tenth century, Image mysticism prevailed; during the second phase, which extended from the tenth to the seventeenth century, mysticism became more and more Christo-centric.

Image mysticism had its origin in the Biblical creation myth that God created man in His Image. This ancient Jewish idea, combined with the Neoplatonic concept of the immanence of God, gave rise to the belief that the soul in its pristine nature contained the Image of God, and that owing to the stain of sin this image cannot be seen. Through purification and contemplation the Image of God within can be recovered. Some of the early mystics identified this Image with the Word, the Logos, who incarnated itself on earth as Jesus Christ. Others, like Gregory the Great, identified it with the ‘Unencompassed Light’of God. This more impersonal and intellectual Image mysticism gave way to an intensely emotional and personal ‘bridal mysticism’ in the tenth century. The
person who brought about this paradigm shift in mystical life was St. Bernard, the celebrated abbot of the Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux in France. He made the image of the crucified Christ the object of contemplation. He looked upon Christ as the Bridegroom and the human soul as the bride. However, Bernard took the precaution of identifying Christ with the Word or Logos and the human soul with the collective soul of the Church. This precaution was ignored in subsequent centuries and most Western mystics after the tenth century made the humanity of Jesus the object of their love and quest.

Almost running parallel to the distinction between Image mysticism and Christo-centric mysticism was another important distinction between two approaches to knowledge of God; the path of affirmation and the path of negation, known respectively as via positiva and via negativa and also as cataphatic and apophatic pathways. In the cataphatic path the mystic sees the fullness of God everywhere. The best example is St. Francis of Assisi, who saw the glory of God in all beings, in the sun, in animals and plants. For such a mystic all created things serve as a rung in the ladder of ascent to God. In the via negativa or apophatic pathway all created things are rejected as insufficient or impermanent and even all thoughts and images are negated in order to realize the transcendent glory and fullness of God. Like the idea of the Image, apophatic mysticism also had its origin in Neoplatonism. It entered the Western Church through the writings of a fifth-century Syrian monk known as Pseudo-Dionysius and its influence became widespread in the twelfth century.

**The Hellenistic World**

Christian mystical theology cannot be understood without its biblical background and the historical and cultural context of the early Church.
The early Christians lived within a Hellenistic culture. The development of Christian theology, whether mystical or doctrinal, was deeply influenced by Greek thought patterns. The word ‘mysticism’ is connected to the mystery cults of the ancient Greeks, which revealed the knowledge of things divine to an inner circle of initiates, the Gnostics, who alone possessed true knowledge about the nature of reality and the human being. The very notion of the soul is Greek rather than biblical, but it has had a very deep impact on Christian experience and thinking. Plato’s philosophy and his description of the soul’s journey from appearance to reality, the highest Idea of the Good, the teachings of Neoplatonism and the mystical philosophy of Plotinus - all influenced Christian thinkers to take up the contemplative ideal, the search for the true knowledge of God. Attaining some form of direct contact with God in this life has played a central role in the history of Christian Mysticism. Many of the issues involved in union with the Supreme God were explored by Greek philosophers between 300 BCE and 300 CE. The richest development is found in Plotinus (205-70 CE) whose Enneads set forth a sophisticated doctrine of attaining in distinct union, not only with ultimate existence, or intellect, but even with the One hidden beyond the realm of all visible and invisible reality. Plotinus expresses this union in personal terms: “But there is our true love, with whom we also can be united, having a part in him and truly possessing him, not in the flesh from outside. But 'whoever has seen, knows what I am saying,' that the soul has then another life and draws near, and has already come near, and has a part in him.”

The early Jewish and Christian mystical tradition is supported by a distinct hermeneutic, itself based on exegesis of foundational Jewish

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texts. Was it possible to restore the radiant image, to return the human being to his previous glory? Most early Jews and Christians thought that piety was the key to such transformation of the soul. If the person lived his or her life in obedience to the commandments (God’s and/or Jesus’), at death or the Eschaton, the glory that Adam had lost would be restored. This they taught by way of their doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, the restoration of the whole person as a glorious angelic-like body reflecting God’s Image. But it appears that some Jews and Christians felt that the lost Image could be restored, at least provisionally, before death, that Paradise and its fruits could be had now. Many of the first Christians contemplated their own ascensions into heaven and bodily transformations, believing that Jesus’ exaltation and transformation had opened heaven’s gate for them. Paul believed that the faithful who were possessed by Christ’s spirit could start experiencing the transformation into the image of God while still on earth but that full glorification would only occur after death.

The formative period of Christian mysticism lies in the first five centuries of the Christian era. Christian experience, doctrine and mystical theology developed then, side by side, based on the life and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Christian Scriptures. The early Christians understood his message as the revelation of God the Father on earth, in his son, Jesus, and of his dwelling within us through the Holy Spirit. They wanted to know and to see God, and sought perfection in following the way of Jesus. Jesus and his earliest disciples were Jewish, and the fellowship of the early Christians was deeply shaped by their Jewish heritage and the Hebrew Bible. But Christian experience moved into a new direction by

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3 Gen 1-3; Exod 24, 33; Ezek 1,8,10, 40-48; Isa 6
4 Rom 7:24; Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21
proclaiming that God had come to earth, taken flesh and lived as a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. This soon developed into what is called the doctrine of the Incarnation, and it is this, more than anything else, that marks Christianity and Christian mysticism as distinctive and different from that of other religions.

The Biblical Background

Mysticism in the Old Testament

A wealth of scriptural passages have inspired Jewish and Christian mystics alike. Through an allegorical reading of Scripture, the mystical significance of particular texts was heightened so that biblical images and teachings nourished Christian mystics through the ages.

Christian Mysticism can be found in the solidly mystical spirituality of the Old Testament, which finds its fulfillment in Jesus' trinitarian mystical consciousness that reached its high point in his salvific death and resurrection. Belief in a single omnipotent God also evolved among the ancient Jews, as reflected in the texts that came to form the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament. The book of Genesis includes the important teaching that the human being is created in the image of God. Here, the distinction between the God "who made heaven and earth" and human beings who are part of this creation erected a barrier to language about uniting with God. God sometimes appeared to his favourite friends, although the Hebrew Bible reflects different views on whether God is ever really visible to humans. If language of uniting with God is foreign to the authors of the Old Testament, later Christian teaching on mystical union still made use of many texts from the book

\[5 \text{ Gen 1:1}\]
that stressed the desirability of direct experience of God, for example, "Taste and see that the Lord is sweet." This teaching expresses a vital truth about the relationship between God and his creatures, and also about the nature of the soul. Other important images from the Old Testament are Jacob’s vision of a ladder reaching down from heaven to earth, providing a connection between both realms; Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush on Mount Sinai; Isaiah’s awesome Temple vision of the Lord in glory; and the most fertile source of all, the *Song of Songs*, with its erotic and sexual imagery, which was mystically interpreted as symbolizing the relation between the soul and God. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and other patriarchs of the Old Testament experienced God's ultimate call, spoke to him as a personal Friend, were often afraid and speechless in his presence, and were visibly transformed by their encounters with him. Both Moses and Jacob claimed face-to-face encounters with God. Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Amos were called in a most intimate way to be God's spokesmen. Often, visions and ecstatic encounters grounded their calling. Having received God's Spirit into their hearts, they prophesied a time when all God's people would definitely receive the Holy Spirit.

We have in Ezekiel a description of the way in which the prophet attempts to express in words his belief that he has seen the glory of God. The book opens with a vision of Yahweh, one of the Names of God; moves on to anticipate the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, explains this as God's punishment, and closes with the promise of a new beginning and a new Temple. In the inaugural vision God approaches

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6 *Psalms* 33:9
7 *Gen* 32:30; *Exod* 33:11, 23
Ezekiel as the divine warrior, riding in his battle chariot. The chariot is drawn by four living creatures, each having four faces (those of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle) and four wings. Beside each living creature is a wheel within a wheel, with tall and awesome rims full of eyes all around. God commissions Ezekiel as a prophet and as a "watchman" in Israel: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites." Ezekiel's vision of God's chariot became the biblical text most important to Jewish mysticism. The story of the prophet encountering God spawned merkavah mysticism, aptly named for the merkavah or chariot on which Ezekiel rode to the heavens. Followers of this type of mysticism sought to recreate similar experiences and ascend into God's realm. One of principal subjects is the meditation on the chariot, the merkava, of Ezekiel.

Another superb vision is that of Daniel. One of the most majestically conceived scenes in the entire Old Testament is the judgment in which a figure like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven and was brought before the Ancient of days. The vision has to do with the judgment of four beasts which represent human kings, and also with the establishment of the kingdom of God. At its central point is the scene of judgment and the introduction of the Son of man. The seventh chapter of Daniel relates events which took place in the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon. During this year a dream came to Daniel, the content of which he recorded. In this dream he saw the great sea, a figure of humanity itself. From the sea there arose four beasts, each diverse from the others. These beasts did not arise simultaneously, but one after another. The first is said to have been like a lion, with the wings of an

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8 *Ezek 1:1-3:27*
9 *Ezek 2:3*
eagle. In its flight to heaven it was checked, the heart of a man was given to it and it was made to stand upon its feet as a man. The second beast was compared with a bear raised up on one side. The third resembled a leopard, and the fourth was nondescript, compared to no animal. Particular attention, however, was directed to this fourth beast, and to the ten horns which were upon its head. There arose a little horn, which uprooted three of the horns and had a mouth speaking great things. At this point the attention of the seer was directed to the establishment of a judgment court. Thrones were cast down, that is, they were placed so that the judges might sit upon them. One of these thrones was like the fiery flame and its wheels as burning fire, and upon it the Ancient of days sat. Judgment was pronounced and the fourth beast was given over to the burning of fire. One like a Son of man who came with the clouds of heaven was then escorted unto the Ancient of days, and to Him there was given an everlasting kingdom. This vision caused Daniel great perplexity, and he inquired of one of them that stood by as to its meaning. In reply he was told that the four beasts represented four kings which arose out of the earth. The saints of the most High, however, were to take the kingdom and to possess it for ever. This was the heart of the interpretation as given to Daniel.

Another extraordinary description of religious experience in the Bible is the bewildered and disorientated outburst of Isa, which phenomenon is present in the Ascension of Isaiah. At the climax of Isaiah’s vision in the seventh heaven he is given a glimpse of ‘the Great Glory’ and he saw the Great Glory while the eyes of his spirit were open, but he could not thereafter see, nor the angel who (was) with him, nor any of the angels whom he had seen worship his Lord.

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10 Isa 9:37
In this, and in parallel passages we have evidence of a prophet's conviction about the apprehension of truths beyond the normal human understanding. The knowledge of God and the divine call are said to come through an experience which is out of the ordinary in the magnitude of its impact. The apprehension of divine wisdom by means of vision or revelation which is beyond normal human perception well describes the religion of the apocalypses of Judaism and Christianity.

The Old Testament prophets were actually Mystics in action. They addressed the burning questions of their day. They experienced God as the Holy, as the tremendous and fascinating mystery. Although absolutely transcendent, wholly other, and darkness itself, he was nonetheless intimately near and the very light of their lives. His awesome presence evoked feelings of fear, dread, powerlessness, openness to annihilation, creaturely nothingness, and sinfulness. Nevertheless this totally good God also attracted, charmed, intoxicated, ravished, and fascinated those exposed to his presence. The Holy awakened feelings of gratitude, dedication, praise, trust, submission, and love. He was experienced as the object of the deepest human desires, searchings, and yearnings. To be united with this living, vital God was the end and goal of all living. It was life itself. This is the real mysticism we find in the Old Testament.

The psalms attest in a special way to Israel's mystical faith. One finds there the mystic's sense of God's infinity, his nearness, and the joys of communion with him. The incredible hunger and thirst for the God who is light, love, and life itself permeate the psalms. They attest that the believer is unconquerable because of God's steadfast love. God can be trusted and must be praised in all circumstances. He is praised not only for what he does, but especially for what he is. His beauty, goodness,
holiness, and love fill both the created universe and the depths of the human heart.

The Old Testament cries out with intense longings and contains a promise directed toward the future. As Jesus said: "...many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."\(^{11}\) Although God partially satisfied the faith-desires of his people, Israel experienced that "it did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us..."\(^{12}\) That "something better" is of course Jesus Christ, who proclaimed to the Jews: "Your Father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day."\(^{13}\)

Old Testament mysticism remains a preliminary stage to God's new covenant which would "give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."\(^{14}\) Humanity would be able to gaze at the human face of God and live. The crucified and risen Christ highlights that God is definitely and irrevocably united with his people. "The mediator of a new covenant"\(^{15}\) established, revealed, and made mysticism accessible in its purest and unsurpassable forms.\(^{16}\)

**Mysticism in the New Testament**

The goal and achievement of Christ-mysticism had been formulated in the words of the New Testament. In the Christian Scriptures of the New Testament the mystics found important sources in the writings of John and Paul. The message about God's loving concern with humanity

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\(^{11}\) Matt 13:17  
\(^{12}\) Heb 11:39 b-40 a  
\(^{13}\) John 8:56  
\(^{14}\) 2 Cor 4:6  
\(^{15}\) Heb 9:15  
\(^{16}\) Harvey Egan, *Christian Mysticism*, Eugene, 1984, p. 21
manifested through sending his only Son into the world allowed for a new form of relationship with God. “We are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”17

Jesus Christ is the foundation of all Christian Mysticism. The Logos, the Meaning, is fully revealed by the incarnation. The Word is made flesh, the invisible makes itself seen, the intangible can be touched, the timeless has a beginning, the Son of God becomes the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. Although God as Father remains transcendent (“No one has ever seen God”18), he has now become accessible in the Incarnate Word, his only begotten Son who abides in the bosom of the Father, has made him known.19 In Jesus, however, the mystery is at the same time disclosed and veiled. Because the inaccessible God reveals himself in the Crucified, he is by that very fact a hidden and incomprehensible God. The purpose of the incarnation is to establish full communion between God and humanity so that in Christ humanity may find adoption and immortality. In the incarnation humanity is the 'boundary' or 'frontier' between the visible and the invisible, the carnal and the spiritual, like a mediator between creation and the creator. Because of the permanent union of a human nature with the divine Person of the Word, Jesus Christ possessed not only a divine Knowledge, but also an immediate, direct, and unique human knowledge of the Father, of himself as the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' trinitarian consciousness can be called a mystical consciousness in the highest sense. “To see Christ is to see the Father.”20 For John, there is a mystical hunger and thirst that only Jesus, as the living bread and the

17 I John 3.2
18 Ibid., I:18a
19 Ibid.,18b
20 Ibid.,14:19
giver of living water, that is the Spirit, can quench. To know Christ is to know the Father, and this mystical knowledge of the Father and the Son is eternal life itself. Moreover, the hypostatic union of Jesus' human and divine natures is the ground and goal of the mystical life: the ability for perfect, total surrender in love to the God who wishes us to be fully united with him. Jesus promised that those who believed would become one with him and the Father, "that they may all be one, just as he and the Father were one." But it should be emphasised that the union and oneness proclaimed by Jesus are not fusion with or dissolution into God, but abiding in and indwelling with him. This is the mystery of mystical love: two or more become one, but never lose their individual identities. Bernard McGinn, has suggested that union is not the most essential characteristic of Christian mysticism, especially if such union is understood as a “union of absorption or identity in which the individual personality is lost.”

In the texts of John and Paul, salvation is equated with becoming united to Jesus Christ, the God-man, established as Savior of the world through his death and resurrection. The gospels depict Jesus as the eschatological prophet who brought final revelation and demanded absolute obedience, because in him the eschatological age had dawned. Believers become one with Christ in baptism, the Eucharistic meal, and every aspect of the life they share with the crucified Lord as Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me.” John’s Gospel speaks about God’s life in us and Jesus’ call to his disciples to seek holiness and perfection in order to

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21 Ibid., 17:3
22 Ibid., 17:20
24 Gal 2:19-20
become true “children of God.” The greatest passages on Christian love, on the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit, and on the mystery of the Incarnation are found in John’s Gospel where Jesus says at the Last Supper, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Here the breaking of the bread, the celebration of shared fellowship and communion, which is a joyous thanksgiving, or Eucharist, reveals a profound truth about the interpenetration of spirit and matter, where matter itself becomes a vehicle for the Spirit, a sacrament. The mystics have been nourished by this sacramental spirituality expressed in Jesus’ words: “I am that living bread which has come down from heaven: if anyone eats this bread he shall live for ever. Moreover, the bread which I will give is my own flesh; I give it for the life of the world.... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells continually in me and I dwell in him.”

The Christian sees in Jesus' death and resurrection the very cause and exemplar of the mystical life in all its purity. Jesus' saving death on the cross exemplifies the mystical letting go of everything consoling, tangible, and finite to surrender totally to the mystery of the Father's unconditional love. Jesus' cross reminds Christians that they can and must love to the end, for the Spirit is born in blood. Jesus' risen, glorified body is what mysticism is all about, the loving union and transformation of all creation with and into the God of love, that in Christ one can truly be a "new creation”.

The root of Christian conceptions of union with God is found in the writings that form the New Testament. Communion with the divine, familiar to us from the accounts of the mystical quest in later Christian mysticism, is not without its parallels in the pages of the New Testament.

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25 2 Cor 5:17
The language they use is about identification with, infusion with, or being clothed with the divine Christ. It is a divine enfolding or indwelling, in which human and divine worlds meet, and is mystical in its intensity and conviction. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a specifically Christian experience, the New Testament also speaks of the immanence of God. Paul’s great mystical experience on the road to Damascus, which changed him from an enemy into an ardent supporter of the early Christians, made him into one of the strongest witnesses to the power of the spirit of Christ. Paul himself encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and was later ecstatically taken up into the "third heaven."

I know a man in Christ fourteen years ago
Whether in the body or out of the body
I do not know, God knows
Who was snatched up to the third heaven.
I know such a man I do not know, God knows
Whether in the body or out of the body
That he was snatched up to Paradise.

Paul heard unspeakable words which is not possible for humans to utter. He states twice that he ascended into Paradise (i.e., the heavenly holy of holies) ‘whether in the body or out-side of the body, I do not know: God knows.’ From the very depths of his being, Paul experienced and surrendered to the love of God in Christ. For him the Lord was the Spirit. Pauline mysticism is emphatically Christ-directed; "to live," for Paul, "is Christ" As Paul said: "What no eye has seen, Nor ear heard,
Nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who

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26 Gal 1:12; 1Cor 9:11
27 2 Cor 12:2-3
28 Ibid., 3:17
29 Phil 1:21)
love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit.” Jesus Christ revealed God as Father. This means that the basic emphasis of the Christian revelation is the Personality of God, and a knowledge of Him as Father, mediated by the Holy Spirit to the simplest Christians. This is further amplified, "He (i.e., Jesus Christ) is before all things, and in (or by) Him all things hold together." For Paul, moreover, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Yet neither a Spirit mysticism nor a God mysticism is lacking in Paul as Christ became a "life-giving Spirit, and it is in Christ that the Father appears to us, and unites us to himself." Therefore the New Testament contains not only a God-Mysticism, but also a Christ-Mysticism. While modern mystical writers tend to speak of the Holy Spirit as immanent in the world, the New Testament speaks of Christ, or the Logos. It is the Logos of whom it is said, "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men.”

Mystics of the Christian Mystical Tradition

Origen

The foundational layer of the Christian mystical tradition began with Origen (185–254 CE), whose biblically based programme of the soul’s purification from vices through loving devotion to the Word made flesh set forth the first full exposition of Christian mysticism. Origen was a great third-century theologian of Alexandria. He wrote commentaries on various books of the Bible and tried to grasp what he called the “mystical sense” of the text, that is, the deeper meaning hidden in those texts.

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30 1 Cor 2:9-10
31 Col 1:17
32 Gal 2:20
32 1 Cor 15:45
34 John i. 4
Origen and other early scriptural exegetes, all of scripture was seen to be the word of God, written for the purpose of salvation; Christ is the ultimate meaning of the scriptures for individuals and the church. Origen expanded and elaborated the well-known two-fold sense of scripture (historical and spiritual or allegorical) into a three-fold model, viz., historical, moral and spiritual, in accordance with the anthropological understanding of body, soul and spirit of his time. Origen established the three levels of scriptural interpretation, linking them to the common stages of personal spiritual ‘ascent’. This schema is itself biblically symbolised in the three books of Solomon. *Proverbs* leads to the moral sense and illustrates the purgative way. *Ecclesiastes* gives a spiritual knowledge of the world and expresses the illuminative way. In the *Song of Songs* the highest love and desire for God teaches the unitive way. In his Commentary on the *Song*, Origen introduces his theory of the spiritual senses into Christian mysticism.

Like the early Christians Origen understood martyrdom as the apex of the Christian life and as perfect imitation of Christ. Through martyrdom one also attained total union with God and the face-to-face vision of God. Origen, in addition to understanding martyrdom in this way, emphasized it as the perfection of Christian wisdom, the loving knowledge of the unoriginated God revealed through his incarnate Word. Only when one is freed from everything corporeal does the Christian know the greatest mysteries. Thus, for Origen, martyrdom is a form of mysticism through which one is definitely purged by, illumined by, and united to God in Christ.

Contemplation, to Origen, is both knowing God and being known by God; it is union with God; a union that is never-ending - even in the beatific vision. By contemplation one becomes divinized. As the founder
of intellectual mysticism, Origen sees contemplation as the process by which the soul’s highest point, the mind, rediscovers its true nature. The view of the mystical life as successive stages of purgation, illumination, and unification is the greatest contribution of Origen to the Christian mystical tradition. Origen depicts these three stages as the seven songs sung by the soul that correspond to seven books of Scripture. The soul sings of its escape from Egypt (conversion), its crossing the Red sea (baptism), its desert wanderings (asceticism) its wars against enemies (moral struggle), the quenching of its thirst at the wells (consolations), and the like. Origen emphasizes that the soul sings and rejoices at every stage of its journey until, graced by divine love and mercy, it is ready to sing the most sublime song of all, the *Song of Songs*.

Origen championed a ‘light mysticism’, that darkness is only one stage of the mystical journey that ends in light through seeing and knowing God. This ‘light mysticism’ stands in sharp contrast to the views of some other mystics in the Christian tradition, for example Gregory of Nyssa and St John of the Cross, who stressed God’s unceasing darkness and total incomprehensibility.

Origen’s Word-centred mysticism is seen constantly in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. In it he speaks as though from personal experience of one who has been ‘burned with this faithful love for the Word of God’: "If there is anyone anywhere who has at some time burned with this faithful love of the Word of God; if there is anyone who has received the sweet wounds of him who is the chosen dart, as the prophet says; if there is anyone who has been pierced with the loveworthy spear of his knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for him by day and by night, can speak of nought but him, would hear of nought but him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except
for him alone – if such there be, that soul then says in truth: ‘I have been wounded by love.’

Origen is known as the father of allegorical interpretation. His allegorical exegesis is mystical and he contended that Scripture’s literal sense must flower into its mystical one. He considered Biblical exegesis as mystical and ineffable contemplation. Origen viewed the divine-human drama - salvation-history - as real history. Because the incarnate Word had been sought in the Old Testament, was given in the New, and is fully assimilated only in the Church’s total experience, Origen contended that scripture’s literal sense must flower into experience. Origen interprets the 

Song of Songs 2:8 as the soul set at the task of reading this Song. The soul contemplates and seeks God with a pure and spiritual love. Origen, in his Prologue to his commentary explains why the Canticle is titled the Song of Songs. The reason is that it is the most sublime song sung by the soul in her mystical ascent. When the soul arrives at the summit, possessing a pure heart and a purely spiritual love for the Bridegroom, she receives a vision of her Bridegroom. Origen perceives in this the hidden love-story of Christ and the church and the spiritual story of God and the soul.

**Commentary on the Song of Songs**

About the Song of Solomon, Origen writes, “This book seems to me an epitaphalium, that is, a wedding song, written by Solomon, in the form of a play, which he recited in the character of a bride who was being married and burned with heavenly love for her bridegroom, who is the Word or God.” Many songs were sung by the friends of the bridegroom before; but the Song of Songs was to be sung in the form of an epitaphalium to

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the bridegroom when He is about to take His bride. In it the bride does
not want the song sung to her by the friends of the bridegroom right
away, but she longs to hear the words of the bridegroom now present. She
says, “Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.” That is why it
deserves to be placed before all the other songs. Thus, as the perfect bride
of a perfect husband she received the words of the perfect teaching.
Origen has interpreted the words attributed to the Bride as expressive of
the desire for a mystical experience. We see that Origen's mysticism is
focused upon the Logos and that the Word is perceived in and through
Scripture. Scripture contains the record of the Incarnation, its prophetic
and apostolic witness and to that extent God may be contemplated in
Scripture through Christ. "For Origen, understanding Scripture is not just
an academic exercise but a mystical experience." Love is the chief
subject of this book. The soul is led by a heavenly love and desire. When
once the beauty and glory of the Word of God has been perceived, she
falls in love with His splendour. Origen does not neglect the traditional
interpretation of the Song of Songs as the intimate relationship between
Christ and the Church, nevertheless he was the first in the Christian
tradition to interpret it as the intimate relationship between the Word and
the soul. He re-created the thematic structure of the text as a song about
spiritual union and mystical love. For him, this was the book for
understanding the union of the bridal soul with the bridegroom Word, the
ultimate book about the soul’s intimate intercourse with God in Christ at
the summit of the mystical life. Origen's rendition of the allegorical
interpretation of the text minimised the carnal reading of the language of
love. He interpreted the language and imagery of love according to an
allegorical interpretation intended to generate a spiritual translation of the

37 Song of Songs 1:2
38 Andrew Louth, The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, op.cit.,p.64
Song of Songs. This was an allegory which symbolised the union of Christ and the Church and the Logos and the soul.

Origen thought this erotic poem should not be read by the young. His concern is that people do not arrive at an inappropriate reading of the Song of Songs, and therefore he attaches an exegetical warning label to deter those who are immature and unprepared for what the text offers. “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 love's language in purity and with chaste ears will twist the whole manner of his hearing away from the spirit to the flesh.  

Origen says that the premise upon which he bases his exegesis is a mystical interpretation of the sexual language of the text. He goes on to clarify that the language of the Bride is intended as a spiritual concept rather than a fleshly category. “Let no one think that she loves anything belonging to the body or pertaining to the flesh, and let no stain be thought of in connection with her love. The Bride speaks the opening words of the Song of Songs: ‘Let him kiss me with the kiss of this mouth’. Origen interprets the desire of the Bridegroom and Bride as representative of that of Christ and the Church and the Logos and the soul. Origen wholly incorporates eros into theology by his reading of the poem’s sensual symbols. ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth’ shows the mind receiving the teachings of the Word. Like Plato, Origen saw erotic love as a way of ascent to the highest reality but this becomes a transformation of desire happening in the fellowship of the Church. For

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39 Lawson, The Song of Songs and Homilies, New York, 1957, p.22
40 Ibid., p.53
him, ecstasy meant sudden and new insights into scriptural revelation, not ravishment.

**St Augustine of Hippo**

St. Augustine is considered to be the Father of Western Christian Mysticism. He emphasizes the soul’s search for God, made possible by the illumination of the mind of God. According to Augustine the mystical journey is an interior journey into one’s soul, mind and self. His *Confessions* is often regarded as the first ever spiritual autobiography.

Augustine records a mystical experience of the vision of God which he shared with Monica, his mother, while they converse in a garden. Both find that through their conversation they embark on a journey that takes them through and beyond the various aspects of the Created Order until finally they enter their own souls, where they briefly encounter God. Augustine writes “Our minds were filled up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon and stars shed light on earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food. There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being.”\(^{41}\)

In the final books of the Confessions Augustine probes where exactly God dwells in the memory. “You have honoured my memory by making it your dwelling place, but I am wondering in what region of it you dwell... What am I doing, inquiring which place in it is your place, as

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though there were really places there? Most certain it is that you do dwell in it, because I have been remembering you since I first learned to know you, and there I find you when I remember you.” He confronts the mystery of God’s presence and his own sinfulness that has led him so far from the truth. “Where then did I find you, so that I might learn to know you? You were not in my memory before I learned to know you. Where then have I found you, if not in yourself or above me. There is no place, both backward do we go and forward, and there is no place...” Though he remembers the immanent side of God as a condition that makes it possible to look for the one he has forgotten, forgetfulness becomes a window through which the transcendent side of God manifests itself as Truth. Augustine says that God transcends the distinction between the immanent and the transcendent sides of his nature and that there is no place within which he can be confined. Augustine not merely sees the light of God in his soul, but he also enters this light and sees by it. This is the moment, Augustine says, when he also finally finds himself. “So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to all that is. At that moment I saw your invisible nature understood through the things which are made.” He says, “And thus by degrees I passed from bodies to the soul, which through the bodily senses perceives; and thence to its inward faculty, to which the bodily senses represent things external, whither to reach the faculties of beasts; and thence again to the reasoning faculty, to which what is received from the senses of the body, is referred to be judged. Which finding itself also to be in me a thing variable, raised itself up to its own understanding, and drew away my thoughts from the power of habit, withdrawing itself from those troops of contradictory phantasms;

42 Ibid. xxvi. 37
44 Rom.1.20
that so it might find what that light was whereby it was bedewed, when, without all doubting, it cried out, "That the unchangeable was to be preferred to the changeable"; whence also it knew That Unchangeable, which, unless it had in some way known, it had had no sure ground to prefer it to the changeable. And thus with the flash of one trembling glance it arrived at That Which Is. And then I saw Thy invisible things understood by the things which are made. But I could not fix my gaze thereon; and my infirmity being struck back, I was thrown again on my wonted habits, carrying along with me only a loving memory thereof, and a longing for what I had, as it were, perceived the odour of, but was not yet able to feed on."45 This is the first of two occasions in Confessions where Augustine describes a moment of encounter with God; it is the most culminating moment to which all the events have been leading. However, the realization of God and of selfhood is only momentary. In later works Augustine suggests that this experience was only the starting point of his spiritual journey or self-discovery.

**On the Trinity**

In On the Trinity Augustine rejects the idea that Christ is the image of God because, he says, this will subordinate Christ to a level that is less than fully divine. Instead, he argues it is actually the soul that is the image of God.46 Christ, the word of God, is co-equal with the Father and was not therefore an image or a copy. Augustine pictures the image of God within the soul as a trinity of primary functions: to know, to love and to remember. These three functions belong respectively to three aspects of the soul: the intellect, the memory and the will - the three highest elements of the mind. Just as God the Trinity has three persons who are

45 *Confessions 7*, www.gutenberg.org
46 *Louth*, op.cit., pp. 146-7
all interrelated within one another, so the soul, who is God’s image, has three interrelated aspects. For Augustine, intellect, memory and will mirror God the Trinity both by their triune nature and through the interrelatedness of their functionality. Augustine addresses the question of human reason at some length in his *De Trinitate*. His basic argument is that if God is to be discerned within the creation, we should be able to find God at the height of that creation. The height of God’s creation, for Augustine, is human nature. He argues that the height of human nature is the capacity to reason. Therefore, he concludes that one could find traces of God, or more appropriately, the vestiges of the Trinity in the process of human reasoning.

The journey into his soul moves Augustine beyond earthly knowledge (*scientia*) to true knowledge or wisdom (*sapientia*). Here he finds Christ, the Wisdom of God, whose light it is that shines within the soul. This light transforms the soul when it participates in it, changing its perception of all that it sees. There is something eternal within the soul, a place of overlap with God. Augustine calls this point the soul’s highest pinnacle or its spark. Entry into this light is participation in God and it is the end of the mystical journey begun in the *Confessions*. Thus it is clear that his discovery of God and his discovery of self are one and the same.

“Our heart is restless unless it rests in You (God)”, 47 sums up Augustine’s entire teaching on our relationship to God. In his *Confessions* he has described, in a highly sophisticated way, the interaction between God’s action at the depths of the human soul and a person’s psychological makeup. To him, the true wisdom of the Scriptures is none other than Christ crucified and the genuine ascent to God comes by imitating the

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47 *Confessions*, Book 1, Para 1, www.gutenberg.org
humble Christ. Light and desire provide the motivation for the mystical ascent. However, Augustine insists upon the ascetical foundation requisite for this ascent. Only those with a clean heart will see God with their inner eyes. For this cleansing of the heart one has to wage war against the demons, controlling passions, striving for virtue, and rooting out sins. Through introversion Augustine discovers that unchangeable Truth is found only when one ascends both creation and the soul itself.

Augustine says on one occasion that his mind arrived at ‘That Which is’ in a flash of a trembling glance and this makes some scholars perceive intellectualism in Augustine’s mysticism. But many of his texts show that he experienced God not only through the intellect but also through the will’s insatiable desire for love. He also experienced, through the soul’s mystical senses, God as Light, Song, Perfume, Food, Body, Love, Beauty, Wisdom and embracement that nourish the inner person in manifold ways. The texts also indicate that Augustine experienced mystical ecstasy, raptures that suddenly and violently draw the soul away from the senses and itself to bestow a foretaste of the joys of heaven. According to Augustine mystical ecstasy is a temporary death, because a person is removed from the senses.

**Gregory the Great (C 540-604)**

Saint Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, was born in Rome around the year 540 A.D. Leading a God-pleasing life, he yearned for monasticism with all his soul. Gregory is a proponent of light mysticism. This light purifies, illuminates, transforms, and unites the person to God; moreover, it reveals that only God can fully satisfy the person. The light mysticism involves a threefold process of getting oneself together (recollection), entering into one’s soul (introversion), and contemplation. The soul uses
itself as a ladder to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel something of the divine Wisdom. Although God is totally incomprehensible, God does become transparent through the contemplation of his divine image, the Son. Like others in the mystical tradition before him, Gregory emphasizes the need for purification, the acquisition of virtue, and the necessity of love as a prerequisite to mystical ascent. Because the self is fragmented, ‘recollection’- or gathering oneself together - is also required. Then, by ‘introversion,’ the soul contemplates itself, strives to find its true nature, and grasps itself as a ladder of ascent whereby in ascending from outward things it may pass into itself, and from itself may tend unto its Maker. For Gregory, one can be outside of oneself both through sin and through contemplation. In the former, one is lower than oneself; in the latter, one is transported above oneself. Because God’s light enlarges the soul, the whole world appears illuminated, and its littleness in comparison to God is confirmed.

For Gregory, mystical ascent is actually an apophatic process of voiding the mind of all images, and then using the soul’s naked knowledge of itself as a springboard to contemplate what is beyond itself, namely, God. Paradoxically, for Gregory, both the soul and God are ultimately incomprehensible. The mystical senses do apprehend something of God, but only for a brief time before the soul experiences itself beaten back. The experience of being beaten back, of the self as a cross to itself, and of strong temptations keeps the person humble. For St Gregory, contemplation is to pass into the Light; to inhere in it, to see it hastily and taste it scantily; it is to gaze on the very Fountain of Light. This Light is the Light of Truth which, though not yet perceived as it is, still is let into the mind as it were through a narrow slit. In contemplation the eternal or unencompassed Light is seen as is a sunbeam coming through a chink.
This is a suggestive idea, and perhaps brings out more simply than any other description his conception of the nature of contemplation. The infinite divine Light is the figure under which he conceives God's Essence: man cannot look directly on It, but may see Its ray, subdued and indistinct, as a sunbeam passing through a chink into a darkened room.

In contemplation God is apprehended by the innermost intellect, and with the inmost sweetness. Similarly, those in contemplation endeavour to behold with their mind the brightness of the Creator, and a knowledge of the divine Presence is contemplated and felt. The mind is caught up to unwonted ground when it explores the Essence of the Divinity. St Gregory habitually speaks of the soul being rapt in contemplation; of its being borne out of itself, or above itself, or above the world, or being carried beyond the confines of the flesh. But whatever progress any one may have made when placed in this life, he does not as yet see God in His real appearance, but in enigma and through a glass. Gregory, like many mystics before him, claims that no one in this life has seen God as he is. Holy men raise themselves up to lofty contemplation, and yet they cannot see God as He is. They resolutely direct the keenness of their intention, but they cannot yet behold Him nigh, the greatness of Whose brightness they are not at all able to penetrate. For the mist of our corruption darkens us from the incorruptible Light; and when the light can both be seen in a measure, and yet cannot be seen as it is, it shows how distant it is. And if the mind already saw it perfectly it would not see it as it were through fog or darkness. Every man that apprehends something of the Eternal Being by contemplation, beholds the same through His co-eternal Image. His Eternity is perceived as far as the capability of our frail nature admits, His Image is set before the eyes of the mind, in that when we really strain

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towards the Father, as far as we receive Him we see Him by His Image, i.e. by His Son.

St Gregory describes St Benedict’s great mystical experience: “While Benedict was standing at the window of the tower, beseeching Almighty God, suddenly at dead of night, looking out he saw that a light shed from above had dissipated all the darkness of the night, and was shining with such splendour that the light that had shone forth amid the darkness surpassed the day and a very wonderful thing followed in that spectacle; for as afterwards he himself narrated, the whole world, gathered as it were under one ray of the sun, was brought before his eyes. And while he fixed the steady gaze of his eyes in this splendour of the shining light, he saw the soul of Germanus, Bishop of Capua, carried to heaven by the angels in a fiery ball."  

Gregory explains that when a soul is raised up in the light of God, everything below becomes visible to it and appears small. But heaven and earth have not shrunk. Rather, the mind has expanded in God, opened up by the divine light and lifted above the world. By means of that supernatural light, the capacity of the inward soul is enlarged, and is so extended in God, that it is far above the world. The soul of one who sees in this manner, is also above itself; for being rapt up in the light of God, it is inwardly in itself enlarged above itself. When it is so exalted and looks downward, it comprehends how little all creation is. The soul, in its former baseness, could not so comprehend. This mystical experience of St Benedict, as given by Gregory the Great, is a beautiful example of his ‘light mysticism’ and this image of a Christian standing before the light-

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the light that encompasses and illuminates all things—gets to the heart of what is meant by mystical experience.

Pseudo-Dionysius or Dionysius the Areopagite

Augustine's ‘moderate mysticism,’ which laid greater emphasis on the mutability and misery of all earthly existence and the limitedness of human knowledge, has been challenged throughout the history of Western Christianity. Influences from Eastern Christianity always provided alternative approaches to mysticism. The most important of these sources were the writings of an unknown (probably Syrian) author, published around the year 500 under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite. The writings of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite hold great significance for the Orthodox Church. Four books of his have survived to the present day: *On the Celestial Hierarchy, On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, On the Names of God, On Mystical Theology*. His major work, *Mystica Theologia*, gave ‘mysticism’ an authoritative status. In addition, there are ten letters to various people. Dionysius, the Areopagite, the anonymous monk, created the term ‘mystical theology’ to refer to the knowledge that makes contact with the unknown God. The journey to God can be experienced through two paths of mysticism referred to as ‘Kataphatic’ or ‘Apophatic’ mysticism. Kataphatic mysticism, or the *via positiva*, which involves positive speaking about God, is based on the concepts of creation and on God’s love, and uses affective language in speaking of the love relationship with God. Apophatic mysticism, or the *via negativa*, posits, in contrast, that all statements must remain unsaid in deference to God’s hidden reality. The earliest representative of the Apophatic approach is the mysterious monk, Dionysius.
The importance of Dionysius lies in the fact that he was the first, and for a long time the only, Christian writer who attempted to describe frankly and accurately the workings of the mystical consciousness and the nature of its ecstatic attainment of God. He was the first to coin the phrase ‘mystical theology.’ Unlike Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius provides a mystical theology in the strict sense. His negative (apophatic) theology teaches the contemplative ascent through the realm of language by the successive reduction of words and negation of all positive propositions about God. Dionysius was also among the first to use the term ‘mystical union’ The same Dionysius furthermore sketched a programme to prepare for the mystical moment in which the soul, following the example of Moses, finds God in the darkness of the unknown.

**Dionysius’s Mystical Theology**

Dionysius is considered to be the Founding Father of the use of negative/apophatic language in Christian mystical texts. He originates the distinction between kataphatic and apophatic theology. To him Christian literature owes the paradoxical concept of the Absolute Godhead as the ‘Divine Dark’, ‘the Unconditioned, ‘the negation of all that is’ - that is, of all that the surface conscience perceives - and of the soul’s attainment of the Absolute as a ‘divine ignorance,’ a way of negation. This idea is common to Greek and Indian philosophy. With Dionysius it enters the Catholic fold. This simultaneous negation of affirmation and negation means that God's transcendence eludes our very idea of transcendence. “God transcends his own transcendence, so that he may not be lost in abstract nothingness, but may give himself.”

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49 *Divine Names*, 11.4 Dionysius the Areopagus on the divine names, http://archive.org
The soul begins its ascent not by going to the God hidden within or the memory of forms, but by moving outward to the illumination brought by the Divine names and liturgical symbols. The primary function of divine names is to prepare for union. God's light enables an accurate explication of the revealed divine names. Second, the mind must be without the passion or disturbance caused by vice, a spiritual state that is the fruit of moral discipline. Third, the mind's proper activity must ultimately cease—that is, it should stop contemplating God in his created similitudes. We ascend toward union by negations that detach the mind from its gaze upon beings, for they are not God. The active quieting of the mind's activity is its ascent by negations, which leads to a noetic silence. Union beyond mind is itself ineffable or unknowable, for one is joined to the unknowable God. Having surpassed the normal human ways of knowing God, which are not false but limited, the mind attains a more divine understanding, the paradox of knowing in unknowing. It is the equivalent of Moses in darkness. Also, the object of divine union is not the divine essence, but divine light.\(^{50}\) The image of a blinding ray for union emphasizes God's immanence, and thus the soul's real, non-pantheistic union with God. The hiddenness of God's essence emphasizes his transcendence, so that union never exhausts the Divine mystery. The soul passes beyond all intellectual operations into utter silence because it is being deified in a radical way, utterly drenched in divine light.

Dionysius develops his use of negative language in *The Mystical Theology*. The main thrust of his argument is that there are many different ways that we can talk about or name God. Firstly, we can use what he calls perceptual or symbolic names. Then there are conceptual names like ‘goodness’, ‘holiness’ or ‘beauty’. He argues that conceptual names can

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\(^{50}\) *Divine Names* t.3
be used, firstly, to affirm things that are true to God - This use of them is cataphatic theology. Secondly they can be used to express how God transcends even conceptual naming - this use of them is negative or apophatic theology. Dionysius uses this second method and sets out to show how no name adequately describes God. In his Mystical Theology, to show the inadequacy of naming God he begins with the oneness of God, naming him conceptually. Gradually he moves downwards to creation, noticing that all physical things (even the lowliest worm as mentioned in his Divine Names) can be used to talk about God. But none fully discloses God’s nature. What are the affirmations and the negations concerning God? Dionysius answers; “... ascending, we say, that It is neither soul, nor mind, nor has imagination, or opinion, or reason, or conception; neither is expressed, nor conceived; neither is number, nor order, nor greatness, nor littleness; nor equality, nor inequality; nor similarity, nor dissimilarity; neither is standing, nor moving; nor at rest; neither has power, nor is power, nor light; neither lives, nor is life; neither is essence nor eternity, nor time; neither is Its touch intelligible, neither is It science, nor truth; nor kingdom, nor wisdom; neither one, nor oneness; neither Deity, nor Goodness; nor is It Spirit according to our understanding; nor Sonship, nor Paternity; nor any other thing of those known to us, or to any other existing being; neither is It any of non-existing nor of existing things, nor do things existing know It, as It is; nor does It know existing things, qua existing; neither is there expression of It, nor name, nor knowledge; neither is It darkness, nor light; nor error, nor truth; neither is there any definition at all of It, nor any abstraction. But when making the predications and abstractions of things after It, we neither predicate, nor abstract from It; since the all-perfect and uniform Cause of all is both above every definition and the pre-eminence of Him,
Who is absolutely freed from all, and beyond the whole, is also above every abstraction.”

What Dionysius wants to show is that even these names do not provide sufficient descriptions of God. He writes that God is beyond every affirmation and every negation. He does not see negation as merely the opposite of affirmation: in saying that God is not good he is not saying God is evil. Rather he uses negation to stress that even conceptual names, like ‘goodness’, cannot hope to encapsulate the nature of God because God is greater than any human concept. In the final chapter of The Mystical Theology, he comes to the end of his journey of naming and unnaming God, where he negates the negation, arguing for example that God is neither similarity nor dissimilarity, neither light nor darkness. In this way he reaches a point where language, having proved insufficient, falls silent.

Christian mystics aspire to an intimate union of love with God, seeking God’s presence as the very “ground of the soul.” The human being is endowed with a spiritual sense that opens us inwardly, just as our physical senses open us outwardly. In the Mystical Theology, Dionysius uses Moses’s ascent of the mountain to encounter God in cloud and darkness as a model for mystics. The apophatic principle is frequently conveyed through the Biblical story of Moses going up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Moses undergoes purification in order to gain contemplation of the place where God dwells. When every purification is complete, he (Moses) hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he

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52 Exod 19
pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. But then he breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. At the heights he was lost in a cloud, and it was through the cloud that Moses saw God face to face. In the same way, the mystics say, God can be realized only through a Cloud of Unknowing, a state of mind in which it is free from all forms of cognition, thinking, imagination, conceptualization, etc. As far as worldly objects and knowledge are concerned, it is a state of total ignorance. It is described as 'darkness' only in comparison with the super-luminous light of God. Moses enters into the dark cloud in which God is concealed. In doing so he leaves the created world, going beyond the appearance of visible realities perceived not only through the senses but also through the intelligence, and penetrates into the invisible and the incomprehensible. Guided by faith alone, he approaches the radically transcendent darkness of the divine nature. This is the true entrance into the mystic life. At first the revelation of God to Moses is made in light. Then God speaks to him in the cloud. Finally, by climbing up higher, Moses contemplates God in the darkness. What we learn from this is that the passage from darkness to light is the initial separation from erroneous views about God. The awareness of hidden objects, guiding the soul by means of visible things to invisible reality, is like a cloud obscuring the whole perceptible world, leading the soul to the contemplation of what is hidden. Finally the soul, which has travelled by these ways towards the things that are above and has abandoned everything that is accessible to human nature, penetrates into the knowledge of God that is wrapped on all sides in darkness. There, as everything perceptible and intelligible has been left outside, there remains for the soul's contemplation only what cannot be grasped by the intellect.
It is there that God dwells according to the words of Scripture: 'Moses drew near to the thick darkness'.

"It is by passing beyond everything, yourself included, irresistibly and completely, that you will be exalted in pure ecstasy right up to the dark splendour of the divine Superessence, after having abandoned all, and stripped yourself of everything."

Dionysius does not teach all separate existences will ultimately be merged in the One. In more than one passage he speaks of God as a Unity comprehending, not abolishing differences. ‘God is before all things’; ‘Being is in Him, and He is not in Being.’ Thus Dionysius tries to safeguard the transcendence of God and to escape pantheism. The outflowing process is appropriated by the mind by the positive method - the downward path through finite existences; its conclusion is, ‘God is All’. The return journey is by the negative road, that of ascent to God by abstraction and analysis; its conclusion is, ‘All is not God.’

**Gregory of Nyssa**

Gregory of Nyssa was one of the four great fathers of the eastern Church. He was the first systematic theologian of negative theology. In Moses’ life he saw a paradigm of the spiritual journey to God. His threefold experience to light, in the cloud, and in darkness represents human growth from spiritual infancy to youth to full maturity. Unlike Origen he sees this journey as three overlapping stages, or three aspects of the person’s approach to God.

Contemplation must be abandoned in the way of darkness. The deeper the darkness, the more is one aware of God’s incomprehensibility. In dazzling darkness one sees God by not seeing and knows God by not

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53 *Exod* 20.21
54 Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, 1.1
Knowing. This reveals Gregory as a proponent of the negative way, of 
apophatic mysticism, which transcends all images, concepts, and ideas of 
God because the divine nature transcends all cognitive thought and 
representation and cannot be likened to anything which is known. The 
soul acts as a mirror, which projects into one’s knowledge the very nature 
of God. The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, 
nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind: 
“For no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, nor does it belong to those 
things which usually enter into the heart of man.”

Unlike his predecessors who had seen mystical theology as a vision of 
God leading the person out of darkness and into light for St Gregory the 
opposite is true. The spiritual life begins with light and progresses to 
deeper and deeper darkness. Indeed, St Gregory was responsible for 
making popular the idea of divine darkness in mystical theology by 
placing it in the centre of his works. The first stage in one’s quest to 
encounter God involved, for St Gregory, seeing the deceptive darkness of 
sin and ignorance in order to be illumined – hence Moses’ vision of God 
in terms of light at the burning bush. The second stage presupposed 
detachment from the realm of sense perception where God was seen to be 
utterly different from the world. The ‘cloud,’ namely, the intermingling 
of light and darkness, was the beginning of one’s awareness of a 
mysterious or ontological gap between the Creator and the created realm. 
Whereas this second stage involved a journey from light into partial 
darkness, the third and crucial theophany entailed entering the darkness 
of Sinai where God is, namely, the realization upon encountering and 
even being united with God that He is utterly incomprehensible. What

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55 1 Cor. 2:9, Isa 64:4
can be seen, therefore, in St Gregory’s vision of the mystical life is a striking reversal of symbolism.

Gregory viewed Moses in his dark encounter with God in the cloud as the ideal mystic. Free from all seeing, Moses plunged into the mysterious darkness of the cloud of unknowing. Moses’ vision of God began with the light, afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness.\textsuperscript{56} Moses first meets God in the burning bush, a theophany of light and illumination, but then he meets him again in the cloud, where he realizes that God cannot be seen by the eyes. Ascending Mount Sinai, he finally comes to the ‘divine darkness’, and realizes that God cannot be known by the mind either. It is only through not-knowing and not-seeing that God can, paradoxically, be known and seen, knowledge that can only be gained through an ascending life of holiness.

Moses is the image of every man who is thirsty for utter intimacy with God, and the three theophanies are stages on his journey to that intimacy. This ascension of man takes place in three stages. In the first God presents Himself in light – fire, so He vanishes any incorrect idea for Him. Then He appears in a cloud and then in darkness. Each time Moses made a move that included some kind of sacrifice, God appeared. Moses left the palace of Pharaoh. He left, because he wanted to participate in the suffering of his people. Leaving Egypt, he went into the desert. There, God was presented in the burning bush. Then he became the leader of people from his own nation. As a leader he led Jews to the path, to the Promised Land, the land of God’s promises. Arriving at Mount Sinai, God made his presence revealed amidst thunder, voices, lightning and

\textsuperscript{56} Exod 24.15-18
trumpets, and called Moses to go up to the mountain top. Moses went up. He met God and conversed with Him. God gave him the plates of Law. He carried the stone plates to Jews, while his lighting face was proof of God’s appearance.

Gregory is the first Christian theologian to argue for the infinity of God. Gregory argues that if God is limited he must be limited by something greater than himself. As there is nothing greater than God, He is therefore without boundaries, and thus infinite. Gregory argues that since God is infinite he cannot be comprehended. Gregory speaks of three stages of spiritual growth: initial darkness of ignorance, then spiritual illumination, and finally a darkness of the mind in contemplation of the God who in being or essence cannot be comprehended. Like earlier authors, he uses the story of Moses as an allegory for the spiritual life.

The soul’s experience of God is inexhaustible because the incomprehensible God is present. The Word awakens the mystical senses so that the soul’s core can smell, taste, touch, and feel God’s presence in darkness beyond bodily senses and intellect. A ‘passionless passion’ is enkindled and draws the soul out of itself, forcing it to enter on God in an act of total detachment. Gregory stresses that the soul learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in constantly going on with her quest and never ceasing in her ascent, seeing that every fulfillment of her desire continually generates a further desire for the God of Mystery. To Gregory knowledge then becomes love.

Gregory’s mysticism of darkness emphasizes God’s unknowability. Through the Incarnation, God made it possible to experience his immediacy and in ever-deeper levels of darkness that transcend all knowledge. God remains a dark cloud, a metaphor for the transcendence
of the divine essence. It is interesting that Gregory should describe this
darkness as a “luminous darkness.” This tripartite light-cloud-darkness
sequence is reflected upon at length in the Life of Moses but is succinctly
brought together in his Commentary on the Songs of Songs. Gregory
exposed the depth of his contemplative and mystical nature in his Life of
Moses and again in his Commentary on the Song of Songs. His fifteen
homilies on the Song of Songs, covering Song 1:1-6:8, have long been
considered, along with his Life of Moses, a classic example of early
Christian allegorical exegesis as well as the mature expression of
Gregory’s spiritual or mystical doctrine. Gregory intended these homilies
to interpret the Song of Songs not for elite ascetics but for all serious
Christians. Gregory underlined that what the poem explains is not a
record in the brain of what was perceived as a consequence of the
sensorial experience of the soul’s meeting with God, but only a
translation of that mystical oneness with Him into a language of the outer
senses.

Gregory comments on Song 3: 1 “on my bed at night I sought him whom
my soul loved” and we find the bride, like Moses, “in the darkness where
God was.” The bride’s entry into this darkness marks an apophatic
ascent in which the bride moves through the marketplace of various
levels of knowledge in order to find her Beloved by means of faith. The
bride like Moses was embraced by the divine night and seeks him hidden
in the darkness. The bride and Moses realized that the one whom they
seek are known in not knowing. The closer God came to the soul, the
more intense the darkness became. And it was then, with all other things
of this world cleared away, that true vision of God occurred: that the soul

58 Exod 20-21
59 Ibid., 6, 181, 13-14
looked up to Him and never ceased to desire Him. The soul, as Gregory supported, would be purified from the sins and then he had the reflection of God’s light: “You have drawn nearer to me by your rejection of any contact with sin. By coming closer to the inaccessible Beauty you have yourself become beautiful, and like a mirror, as it were, you have taken on my appearance.”60 True knowledge and the vision of God consisted “in seeing that He is invisible, because He whom the soul seeks transcends all knowledge, separated from every part by his incomprehensibility as by a darkness.”61

Gregory retold the story of Moses and his vision of God through the commentary of the Song of the Songs. Moses wanted to be united with God and know Him as the bride tried to be united with her bridegroom. The ultimate goal of Moses, bride and every Christian was to drive themselves to an infinite progress in the never-completed journey to God.

**William of St Thierry**

A Cistercian contemporary of Bernard’s, William also emphasized love-mysticism, but with subtle differences from Bernard in his use of Augustine. William's writings disclose a cultivated mind of unrivalled speculative power, united with a heart burning with love of God. He pushes reason to its limits knowing that eventually reason must kneel before the Trinity’s ineffable mystery to find its fulfillment in love. William emphasizes that the Trinity created us through creative grace in its own image and likeness so that we may be like God. Although sin has adversely affected this likeness, God’s illuminating grace enables the likeness to be restored through the acquisition of virtue. This grace also

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60 Song of Songs, 3, 71
61 Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, op.cit., p. 163
accompanies and brings about mystical experience, and the eventual loving knowledge or knowing love that is union with God.

Like many other mystics William saw no opposition between mysticism and the Bible. The Bible was his primary source. He emphasized that everything comes from God, subsists in God, and must return to God. He contends that asceticism exists only for the sake of the mystical contemplation that guides and crowns it. Contemplation - which only the Holy Spirit can teach - effects true spiritual union with God or deification. For him the truly spiritual person must progress from inclining to clinging to enjoying and uniting in spirit with God. The Holy Spirit not only brings this unity, but is this unity itself. The spiritual person is the perfect person, and perfection consists in becoming by grace what God is by nature, therefore willing only what God wills. The spiritual person becomes so closely united with God that only this mortal life itself prevents perfect union.

Like St. Bernard, William sees man's life on earth as a return or an ascent to God, and in his *Golden Epistle* he divides this ascent into the classical three stages: beginners, advanced and perfect. The beginner, in whom the ‘animal’ man predominates, is stimulated to a great extent by his senses and sensate appetites; for that reason he needs the guidance of laws and external authority, to which he responds by obedience, and he needs the ascetical practices of mortification, examination of conscience, spiritual reading and prayer of petition. In the advanced stage the ‘rational man’ takes the ascendancy, and in the third and final stage the perfect man is truly spiritual. William refers to the three stages of man's ascent to God as the periods or stages of faith, reasoning of faith, and experience. The beginner or ‘animal’ man, as described above, lives by faith, and since he is particularly under the rule of the senses, he is led to the Trinity by that
which is perceptible to the senses. Here William stresses the importance
of the humanity of Christ and the use of signs and symbols. The second
stage is one in which the soul begins to seek reasons for its faith either by
theologizing or meditating on Scripture. The goal of that ascent is the
Trinity. The human mind never understands the Trinity so well as when it
is understood to be incomprehensible. But the initial mystery, however,
of the God who is both three and one is never lessened. The third and
final stage of the spiritual and perfect Christian is when he passes beyond
intellectual reasoning to mystical experience of the Trinity. At this point,
says William, the Father and the Son reveal themselves through the Holy
Spirit so that the Christian is not only united with God but he shares and
experiences the very life of the Trinity. It is an anticipation of the beatific
vision, a loving knowledge or a love which is understanding.

William expressed his idea of image of God as an ascent of mind and
heart to God, whereby man, passing through an initial state of fleshly
attachment, through a stage of grappling with the intellectual ideas of
faith, progresses to a perfect state of unity of spirit with the Trinity.
Spiritual perfection is seen as contemplation of and participation in the
trinitarian life as man is drawn by affectus into God, through the
operation of the Holy Spirit. William makes a connection between image
and likeness, and the fact that humans are endowed with the unique gift
of memory: Since rational man alone participates in intelligere, he alone
is the image of God. At the creation, says William, God placed in the
highest part of man the power of memory so that he might always
remember the power and goodness of our Creator. The memory may be
vague and much obscured, but it is there, and it is there because all that
we are and all that we may be is a result of our participation in our
Maker. In memory is the latent presence of God. Through memory God
calls the soul back to himself, and the soul has a natural tendency to return to its origin. This attachment to memory is what loosely holds us to that latent presence of God and draws us back to God, back to the image, back to the likeness. By God’s creative grace the human person is created in god’s image through the triune unity of the human spirit’s memory, understanding and will. Although sin has adversely affected this image God’s illuminating grace enables the image to be restored through the acquiring of virtue. Moreover it is illuminating grace that accompanies and brings about mystical experience, and the eventual loving knowledge which is union with God.

The truly spiritual person realizes the need for asceticism, self-knowledge and purity of heart because this ineffable reality can be seen only in an ineffable way. Even brief glimpses of God’s countenance often make the person ecstatic, and transform the person into itself. Like so many others in the Christian mystical tradition, William taught the purifying, illuminating, and transforming effects of mystical contemplation.

William grappled with the problem of how love could be knowledge. For him, only the perception of enlightened love can grasp the ineffable. Because the Trinity is absolutely incomprehensible this ineffable reality can be seen only in an ineffable way. He says that when the soul reaches out in love to anything, a certain change takes place in it by which it is transmuted into the object loved. By becoming connatural with God, the person attains loving knowledge or a knowing love of God, an understanding that comes from love. However, that knowledge of God is best known in this life by unknowing; the highest knowledge that a man can have and now attain consists in knowing in what way he does not know. Nonetheless, William maintained that through contemplative
experience a person does come to know God. The soul may know best how it does not know, but for William genuine love of God is understanding, and vice versa.

The originality of William’s mystical theology resides in the way he inserts the human spirit’s knowledge and love of God into the inner Trinitarian life. Because the Holy Spirit is not only the reciprocal love of the Father and the Son, but also their mutual knowledge, and because our love and knowledge of God is the Holy Spirit itself, William contends that at the higher stages of the contemplative experience, love of God is also knowledge of God. The Holy Spirit is actually not love, but charity, the enlightening knowledge of the hidden God, the knowing love at the Trinity’s depths. Because of the Holy Spirit’s delicate and subtle role in the spiritual person’s contemplative experience, one loves in knowing and knows in loving.

Love is inextricably connected with faith, and vice versa. For William, love is a kind of violent will. His mysticism is not bridal, but possesses the simplicity, directness, and trust of love that a young child has for its mother.

William has a warm, ardent love for the human Jesus. Through the redemptive meditation of Christ humans are able even in this life to ‘taste and see that the Lord is sweet.’ For William to ‘taste’ is to understand. The contemplation of trinitarian beauty transforms the spiritual person into a person of self-emptying love. The unity of spirit espoused by William unites a person not only to God but also to one’s neighbour. Unity of spirit, deification, is spiritually fecund and demonstrates its

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62 Psalm 34:8
power in self-emptying love. The Cistercian ideal was to be poor with the poor of Christ.

William proposed that the soul, although alienated from God, is also intrinsically empowered to experience a mystical return to its divine origin during its earthly existence, a return effected in stages. Thus is man progressively liberated from his material and temporal impediments, eventually undergoing an experiential knowledge of God by a process of reminiscence, understanding, and love.

William instructs monastics to understand themselves as pilgrims who are merely encamped in this world, like soldiers in a foreign country. He says, “Let us not build for ourselves houses to settle down in but make tents we can leave at a moment’s notice, we who are liable to be called away from them in the near future to our fatherland and our own city, to the home where we shall spend eternity.”

William proceeds to a consideration of the Trinity on the basis of love. He focused on the personal relations between human beings and trinitarian existence. Where there is only one person, there is no love. Whereas love requires a plurality of persons as its condition, perfected love demands a Trinity of persons. Love consists of three levels, moving from self-love (Father) to charity, in which a second is loved (Son), to complete charity, in which a third is mutually loved by the pair (Spirit). Not only does the perfection of love demands love for another, but the consummation of mutual love demands shared love for a third. A rational analysis of the nature of love, unaided by revelation, leads to the conclusion that the fulfillment of love requires a Trinity of persons.

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63 The Golden Epistle, www.cistercianpublications.org, Book 1, Ch 3, para.151
64 Ibid.
Richard of St Victor

Richard was a 12th Century mystical theologian. He wrote convincingly about the human desire to know God in perfect love. He was known as the ‘reasonable mystic’ and the ‘learned lover’.

Richard of St. Victor was the first theologian to attempt a systematic treatment of mystical theology. His works exercised a wide influence on both contemporary and subsequent medieval writers. He was also the first medieval mystic to apply systematic psychology to the mystical experience when he describes the ascent of the mind from the contemplation of visible to invisible things and ultimately to a final transforming union. The ultimate state is one of utter self-surrender and ecstasy which, however, must make the soul return to compassionate work in the world in imitation of Christ.

Richard follows the Augustinian tradition in seeing knowledge of God as an ascent. Contrary to Augustine, Richard’s trinitarian language is lover (Father), beloved (Son) and eo-beloved (Spirit).

The human mind is active in thinking, meditation and contemplation. Whereas the activity of thinking remains largely undisciplined, however, meditation requires a sustained mental effort, and contemplation takes the mind beyond the reach of reason to a state of ecstatic ‘alienation’ outside and beyond itself. Ecstasy takes place when the soul has ascended to the point where it has left behind both imagination and reason. Richard speaks of the ‘wedding’ of the human with the divine spirit, implying a state of complete self-surrender. In the state of ecstasy the human soul is radiant with infused heavenly light and lost in wonder at the supreme beauty of God.
Richard begins with the human persons, with the personal love of one for another, and moves to an unselfish love of friendship, wherein one gives himself wholly to another. In this he catches a glimpse of a divine love of friendship. However human love is lacking, for it excludes a third from sharing this love. In God there must be charity in its most perfect form. Perfect charity is all that God is and possesses. This means that there abides in God one supreme love, and three perfect lovers, in such a fashion that one (i.e., the Father) is the source of a beloved of equal worth or dignity (i.e., the Son), and these two lovers (Father and the Son), united by love, constitute the single cause of an equal co-beloved, namely the Holy Spirit. The Trinity, thus, is understood as ontological love, which is self-diffusive and self-differentiating.

The primary aim for the human soul is to rise to see and understand the divine realities. In the ascent of the soul towards God is a tripartite movement in which the soul is purified and moves toward immediate vision. This can also be seen as the mystic’s way of describing an epistemological process which approaches conceptual abstractions from sense perception. According to Richard’s accounts, one can examine various objects in three different ways: by cogitating, meditating, or contemplating. In cogitation, the mind is touched in passing by the notions of things when the thing itself is presented as an image to the soul. Meditation, next, is diligent reconsideration of thoughts. Meditation tries to reveal complicated things and scrutinize obscurities. Lastly, contemplation is the soul’s free and clear-sighted gaze, which spreads out everywhere in perceiving things. Richard points out that contemplation pierces the objects so that they can be comprehensively grasped. Since contemplation reviews all kinds of objects, there is nothing which is worthless as an object of analysis by contemplation. Contemplation is
also a process which includes different stages. This process usually follows the uniform pattern: First, the individual explores the visible objects, using his senses and reason. Then, he turns to scrutinize the depths of his own soul, its faculties and their functioning. After this he may move to understand other invisible things, like angels, and lastly rise to understanding of specific theological truths like the Trinity. The final stages of contemplation often include elements of spiritual ecstasy. These highest experiences, like the alienation of the mind in ecstasy are rare even among the most advanced contemplatives.

In the first pages of his De Trinitate, Richard argues that experience is one of the three elementary ways by which people attain knowledge, the others being reason and faith. In Richard’s thinking, experience may refer to both inner and outer experiences. Through outer experience one is able to discern visible, created objects and various natural operations. Richard’s idea is that the individual knows the invisible things of his own soul by inner experience. Experience is something that gives an individual a unique first-person perspective on reality. The experience of love interests Richard particularly; he claims that manifold experience teaches us that nothing is more pleasant in human life than love. The surest access to the theology of the Trinity is through the monastic contemplation on the dynamic of human love.

Thus, reasoning from the visible makes us conclude to the invisible, from the transitory to the eternal, from the earthly to the above-earthly, from the human to the divine. Because, "That which is invisible of God, from
the creation of the world, is revealed by the spirit through that which has been made.\footnote{Rom. 1: 20}

Instead of looking at the inner soul for his clues to the nature of God, Richard looks at human persons in relation. To penetrate into the inner life of the Trinity, he moves through human love to divine love. For in the perfection of human love, where one person transcends himself in the love of another, Richard sees a reflection of the infinite self-transcending love of the Trinitarian existence. He writes ‘... love cannot be pleasing if it is not mutual. Therefore, in that true and supreme happiness, just as pleasing love cannot be lacking, so mutual love cannot be lacking. However, in mutual love it is absolutely necessary that there be both one who gives love and one who returns love. Therefore one will be the offerer of love and the other the returner of love ... supreme happiness is nothing other than Divinity itself. Therefore, the showing of love freely given and the repayment of love that is due prove without any doubt that in true Divinity a plurality of persons cannot be lacking.’\footnote{Richard of St Victor, trans & Intro. by Grover A. Zinn, New York, 1979, p. 376} In order for charity to be true, plurality of persons cannot be lacking; in order for charity to be perfected, a Trinity of persons is required. And so sharing of love cannot exist among any less than three persons. Now, as has been said, nothing is more glorious, nothing is more magnificent, than to share in common whatever you have that is useful and pleasant.

Richard lays down three stages of attitudes of mature and perfect charity: To be able to share love is a sign of perfection; to be willing to share with joy is better; and to search for it with longing is the best of all. ‘The first is a great good; the second, a better one; but the third, the best. Therefore, let us offer to the supreme what is excellent; to the best, what is
best." 67 Hence the proof of perfected love lies in a willing sharing of the love that has been given to you. The most fervent kind of love presupposes another person who could be loved equally by the one whom you love supremely and by whom you are loved supremely. "For the one loving supremely and longing to be loved supremely, surely the most excellent joy lies in the fulfillment of his own longing, namely in the attainment of longed-for love." 68 Hence perfect love must not be short of a Trinity of persons.

Richard's interpersonal theology of the Trinity is like this: When two persons who mutually love embrace each other with supreme longing and take supreme delight in each other's love, then the supreme joy of the first is in intimate love of the second, and conversely the excellent joy of the second is in love of the first. As long as only the first is loved by the second, he alone seems to possess the delights of his excellent sweetness. Similarly, as long as the second does not have someone who shares in love for a third, he lacks the sharing of excellent joy. In order that both may be able to share delights of that kind, it is necessary for them to have someone who shares in love for a third. 69 Trinitarianly, the love of Father and Son overflows and expresses itself in the Holy Spirit, who is pure charity.

Like all Christian mystics, Richard’s understanding of mysticism is not solely centered on the soul’s enjoyment of God, but it becomes fecund in the world. Richard speaks of the divine and the human relate to each other through a mirror. There are mysteries, and among them is how two persons can become one flesh in marriage. In having children together

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67 Ibid., pp. 384-385  
68 Ibid., p. 384  
69 Ibid., 388-389)
they produce substances that share their substance. On the one side of the mirror you have three persons in one substance, which is mysterious, but something like that happens on the other side too, through marriage. This is a movement in Trinitarian theology that has a radical effect on Christian concepts of marriage, from a world in which men have most power to one in which power is shared and the marriage is about love.

Maester Eckhart

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) was a renowned German theologian and preacher and leader of the promoters of Dionysian spirituality. Medieval Eckhart’s theology is that of radical panentheism (‘all in God, God in all’), which goes far beyond mere theism which posits a transcendent as well as an immanent God and goes far beyond pantheism which says ‘all is God.’ For Eckhart, God’s supremely glorious nature can only mean that God is fully transcendent and fully immanent, the groundless Ground or Essence of all. For Eckhart, therefore, God is both the transpersonal Godhead or ‘God beyond god,’ and the personal Lord, i.e., the triune God-the Persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one nondual, indistinct Divine Nature. Furthermore, Eckhart affirms that in every soul is the Divine Spirit Itself as its true Identity. Eckhart specifically declared that there is a non-creaturely uncreated aspect of the soul, which is always already perfectly one with God.

Medieval spirituality was explicitly directed toward contemplation and mystical experience; to attain this goal, certain ascetical means were proposed: total renunciation of self, complete submission to the divine will, and rejection of all sense images (even the humanity of Christ). This, they believed, would lead to a union with God which was so intimate that nothing would intervene between the soul and God as the
bond of the union; it would consist in a divinization that for all practical purposes leaves the soul indistinguishable from God.

Eckhart emphasized very strongly the nothingness of the soul. Outside of God there is no true existence or being. Consequently, all creation, including man, considered in itself, is nothing; whatever it has of being or existence comes from God and man is impelled by the necessity of his own nothingness to return to God in whom he has his source. The point of contact or the radical capacity for union between man and God is found in the essence of the intellect, which is designated variously as a power, a spark.

**Ineffability of the soul and God**

According to Eckhart ineffability characterizes the soul as much as the Godhead. He says, “This simple one (the soul) is without manner and without properties. And therefore, if God were ever to look upon her, that must cost him all his divine names and the properties of his Persons; that he must wholly forsake, if he is ever once to look into her. But as he is simply one, without any manner and properties, he is not Father or Son or Holy Spirit, and yet he is a something that is neither this nor that.”

Eckhart stresses the sublimity and majesty of God, who is so high above us that we cannot understand him; nothing that can be said of God is adequate, because our rational minds cannot grasp the Infinite. Nevertheless, in mystical perception we may transcend our usual modes of thought, rising above our natural faculties, to apprehend God in the 'unknowing' beyond all reason. According to Eckhart, in this life, by all natural means, we see God ‘in a mirror and mystery’ for he is a hidden

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God, concealed in his Universe which mirrors his nature, revealing and yet veiling his being. Hereafter we hope to see him "face to face."\(^{71}\)

Eckhart follows the Way of Negation, the via negativa of Dionysius and Augustine. The depth of insight revealed to the mystic remains in the last analysis ineffable, it yields no idea or form by which we may express it. The ineffability of mystical experience can be seen to relate to the via negativa: the Divine is described by way of negation because we cannot say what it is, because its nature transcends reason and the limitations of language and concepts. Any attribute applied to God is misleading; human predicates are inapplicable; so too are all names, except the bare "I AM."\(^{72}\) Eckhart says, "But if God is neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one, what then is He? He is pure nothing: he is neither this nor that. If you think of anything He might be, He is not that.\(^{73}\)

An important and distinctive aspect of Eckhart's teaching concerns the distinction between God and the Godhead. The Godhead is undifferentiated Deity; God is the three Persons. The Godhead and God are, for Eckhart, 'as different as heaven and earth.' In mystical union one passes beyond the triune God to become one with the undifferentiated Godhead. The Godhead is absolutely one and indivisible, and is opposed by Eckhart to the many, the manifold world of duality and diversity, of becoming and change. This is how Eckhart envisions non-duality between God and the soul, "As truly as the Father in his simple nature gives his Son birth naturally, so truly does he give him birth in the most

\(^{71}\) 1 Cor 13:12

\(^{72}\) Exod 3:14

inward part of the spirit, and that is the inner world. Here God’s ground is 
my ground, and my ground is God’s ground.”

The mystical path according to Eckhart is not made up of stages of 
experience which can be clearly defined or demarcated. He enumerates 
certain prerequisites of the path. The soul must be withdrawn into itself, 
freed from the distractions of the senses, of worldly thoughts and images. 
We have to uproot sin, self-will, false ego-consciousness, ignorance and 
all the limitations of everyday human existence have to be overcome.
There are three main obstacles to the knowledge of the Divine: 
temporality, corporeality and multiplicity, or time, space and number. 
The mystic must abandon and empty himself or herself to the Divine 
Will, renounce all barriers. He or she must cultivate detachment, so as to 
remain steadfast and immovable whatever good or bad fortune comes 
along.

Eckhart does not speak of personal emotions, raptures and visions, nor 
does he use the symbolism of the 'Mystical Marriage.' He says, “When 
the soul receives a kiss from the Godhead, then she stands in absolute 
perfection and bliss: then she is embraced by unity. In the first touch 
with which God touched the soul and continues to touch her as uncreated 
and uncreatable, there, through God's touch, the soul is as noble as God 
Himself is. God touches the soul like Himself...the distinction in the 
Trinity comes from the unity. The unity is the distinction, and the 
distinction is the unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the unity, 
for that is distinction without distinction.”

74 Sermon 5b, in Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, op.cit., p. 183
75 Sermon 66, The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart. op.cit.,p.338
transformed into it, so that we are not merely like it but one with it without distinction, for likeness is itself born out of the Oneness which is our final goal.

The theme of the intimate relationship of human and divine is shown especially in Eckhartts teachings regarding mystical union. God became man, that man might become God. In union one becomes absolutely one with the Godhead without distinction. He says that we are lifted above our own natures and transformed, changed into God, so that our heart and his are one heart, our body and his one body, our will and his one will, and likewise for all our faculties, thoughts, etc. It is to become truly human, to find the goal and true purpose of human existence. In becoming truly human we become divine. Union with the Godhead entails not just similarity, but absolute oneness; we are made one life and one being with God, equal to him, and having power over him to the extent that we have power over (or control of) ourselves.

Once we have attained union, we are permeated by divine presence, and radiate this presence out to others; we are fired and inflamed by the divine light-ray which shines straight down from above. We perceive the essential divine nature without intermediary. We are set free from the world of multiplicity, of time and space, to find rest, perfection and peace. We now live in continual mystical consciousness, so that our life, our being and our will are one with the Divine. This is our ultimate end and goal, our only true happiness. As God is a ‘Nothing’ which is at the same time the fullness of all being, so, when the mystic seeks to know nothing, he or she comes to know all in 'unknowing', through penetrating the Ground of all knowledge which is itself not a specific item of knowledge.
St Teresa of Avila (Theistic Mysticism)

Theistic mysticism is grounded in the reality that the union between humans and God results from divine grace and God’s initiation of the mystical experience. The Psalmists often felt the presence of God. ‘Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.’

‘Presence’ of God in Christian Mysticism

McGinn defines Christian mysticism as "a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it.” The ultimate aim of Christian mysticism is to achieve union with God, although McGinn believes that “... the notion of ‘presence’ provides a more inclusive and supple term than ‘union’ for encompassing a variety of ways that mystics have expressed how God comes to transform their minds and lives.”

The term ‘presence’ is a more useful category for describing the unifying characteristic in the various expressions of Christian mysticism. McGinn accordingly writes that “the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.”

God does not present God’s self to the human consciousness in the same way that an object in the concrete world is said to be present. Mystics tend to use intensely personal language, especially in their description of their relationship with Jesus Christ. Mystics have wrestled with writing

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76 Psalm 33.9
78 Ibid., The Essencial Writings of Christian Mysticism, New York, 2006, p.xv
about the presence of God or about the transforming union in God they have experienced, precisely because of the paradox that God is found in absence and negation rather than in the more easily understood, and the more easily verbalised, presence and affirmation.

In support of McGinn’s belief in the notion of ‘presence’, we have *The Interior Castle* of St Teresa of Avila, in which mysticism involves an immediate consciousness of the presence of God. Teresa’s writings are a powerful witness to the possibility of entering into a sense of divine presence within the context of ordinary religious observances and in ordinary everyday life. For Teresa, encountering God is more like meeting a friend or a loved one. We have one of the best examples of theistic mysticism in St Teresa of Avila.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was a Spanish mystic who lived during the Counter-Reformation, a period of religious turmoil in Europe. Teresa described the soul's intense desire for God in the language of erotic passion. In this, she belongs to a long tradition of mystical experience that is known as bridal mysticism.

**Bridal Mysticism in Early Christianity**

The symbolism of bridal mysticism is found already in early gnostic forms of Christianity, where the central sacrament is called the Bridal Chamber. There the feminine soul of the gnostic unites with the masculine spirit and is in this way spiritualized, that is, liberated from the limitations of mundane existence. Related symbolism is found as well in the writings of the early Christian mystic Origen and the Neoplatonic mystic Plotinus. These three forms of mysticism are related and serve as the foundation for the history of mysticism in Christianity. Spiritual Marriage in the Old Testament
The most striking example of mystical imagery in the Old Testament is that of the divine marriage, which is the closest form of unity, and is presented in the story of Hosea (representing God) and his marriage to a prostitute (representing the nation of Israel). The *Song of Solomon* is a classic of mystical imagery considered to represent the passionate love of God for Israel. Both of these examples are sometimes interpreted as representing the passionate love of God for the soul which is believed to be feminine in essence.

**Saint Teresa’s Vision**

Many of Teresa's imaginary visions were of Christ, and she speaks of them as experiences of great beauty, beauty sometimes so intense and awesome that it is hard to bear. She often speaks of an infused radiance, a pure, softly shining Light, surrounding the figures of her visions.

Saint Teresa's love of God and her desire for spiritual union with him found expression in a vision in which an angel pierced her heart with a golden spear and sent her into a trance. “It pleased the Lord that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. They must be those who are called cherubim: they do not tell me their names but I am well aware that there is a great difference between certain angels and others, and between these and others still, of a kind that I could not possibly explain. In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and
so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one
can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less
than God. 80

The wound caused by this arrow did not cause any physical pain but it
could be felt in the soul's most intimate depths. It passed as quickly as a
flash of lightning. It could not be resisted, any more than a person thrown
into a fire can make the flames lose their heat and not burn her. She felt
herself as a person suspended aloft, unable either to come down and rest
anywhere on earth or to ascend to Heaven. Teresa says that this state
actually involves peril of physical death. The mystic who can emerge
from this trial, who can die in order to live, enters the ultimate state of
union, called by Teresa the Spiritual Marriage. The mystic now lives in
and through the Divine, having died to the lower self. Teresa says that
whereas in lower stages, periods of separation from God may still occur,
in Marriage the mystic is continually united with God in the deepest
centre of the soul.

Rapture and ecstasy are brief states where the soul is caught up,
transported, into immediate union with the Divine. Teresa says that in
rapture the Lord gathers up the soul and raises it up till it is right out of
itself and begins to reveal to it things concerning the Kingdom that he has
prepared for it. The soul is carried away like a bird set loose from its
cage, to another world, and often seems to leave the body. Teresa sees
rapture as a great gift from God; during the experience there occur great
revelations and visions of Divine secrets, which enrich and strengthen the
inner life and bring many spiritual advantages.

Four Stages of the Ascent of the Soul

Teresa’s writings focus on her mystical theology, particularly the ascent of the soul towards God. She says that the soul goes through four stages in its ascent. The first stage she called the Devotion of the Heart. In this stage the person engages in deep mental prayer and through effort and concentration begins to pray on Christ’s passion. The second stage she called the Devotion of Peace. In this stage, God gives a special grace of quiet and peace to the person, and although distractions may come, the supernatural gift of peace is present. The third stage she called the Devotion of Union and in this stage God gives the gift to the person of becoming one with Him in that their reason is completely subsumed into Him and the only thing left that the person can control is their memory and imagination. The fourth, and final stage, she called Devotion of Ecstasy. In this stage the person, through the grace of God, is totally unaware of his/her own self and body and is completely subsumed by God.

The Interior Castle of Teresa of Avila

The Interior Castle is the most interesting of Teresa's writings; it is certainly the most mystical, the work in which she speaks with greatest intensity of feeling about her own experiences. This book is an account of her stages of mystical realization as she roams from room to room, progressing from the first to the seventh mansion, in which last she is united with the King in Spiritual Marriage. The King dwells in this innermost seventh mansion, illuminating and beautifying all the other mansions by his presence. The mansions are pictured as being inside each other, like a series of concentric circles. The nearer one gets to the centre, the stronger is the Light. Outside the Castle limits all is foul, dark, and
infested with toads, vipers and other venomous creatures. Due to our ignorance as to the beauties that may be found inside the Castle, we interest ourselves exclusively in the outer wall of the building - the body and lower self. Teresa pictures the soul as a castle composed of numerous suites or apartments in the center of which Christ is enthroned as King. As the soul progresses in the practice of prayer, it passes from one apartment to another until eventually, after passing through seven apartments, it reaches the innermost room. Outside the castle there is darkness and in the moat surrounding the castle there are loathsome creatures crawling in the mud. Once the soul resolves to follow the path of prayer and detaches itself from created things, it enters the castle and begins to follow the path of prayer, which leads first through three stages of active or ascetical prayer and then through four stages of passive or mystical prayer.

**Journey of the Soul**

Coming now to trace the journey of the soul through the stages of prayer, according to *The Interior Castle*, we find that in the first ‘mansions’ or apartment the soul is in the state of a beginner, living in the state of grace but still greatly attached to the things of earth and always in danger of falling away from its good desires. The practice of prayer at this stage is purely vocal prayer.

Upon entering the second ‘mansions’, the soul begins to practise mental prayer in earnest, although there are frequent periods of dryness and difficulty which tempt the soul to give up the effort. The prayer characteristic of this stage is discursive meditation. Although discursive prayer is a reflective type of prayer, it should not consist entirely in reasoning but should terminate in love. For those who have a tendency to
use their intellects a great deal, St. Teresa recommends that they meditate on Christ and converse with him; for those who find difficulty in controlling their faculties in meditation, she suggests that they recite or read some vocal prayer slowly and think about the words.

Moving on to the third ‘mansions', the soul enters upon the last stage of natural or acquired prayer, which is called the prayer of acquired recollection. It is a consciousness of the presence of God that is so vivid that all the faculties are united in a state of recollection and attention to God. St. Teresa advises that this type of prayer can be fostered if the soul cultivates an awareness of God's presence within it, submits itself totally to the divine will, and strives habitually to live in the presence of God even when engaged in occupations other than the practice of prayer. Since this stage of prayer represents a transition from ascetical to mystical prayer, it may be experienced in various degrees of intensity.

The fourth ‘mansions' introduces the soul to the first type of mystical prayer, which is a supernatural, infused prayer, called by the generic name of prayer of quiet. It is an infused or passive recollection which consists essentially in an intimate union of the intellect with God, so that the soul enjoys a vivid awareness of God's presence. However, the perfection of prayer in the fourth mansions is the prayer of quiet properly so called. It is a type of prayer in which the will is inundated by divine love and is united to God as its highest good. However, the memory and imagination are still free or unbound and they may sometimes threaten to disturb the soul.

The goal of the divine operation on the soul is to captivate all the faculties and fix them on God. Consequently, in the fifth ‘mansions' the soul is introduced to the prayer of union, which admits of a variety of degrees of
intensity. In the prayer of simple union, all the powers of the soul are recollected in God. Then the soul realizes that God is present in such a way that when it turns in on itself, it cannot doubt that it is in God and God is in it.

As God gains more and more dominion over the soul and floods it with his light and consolations, the soul experiences the prayer of ecstatic union, which is the beginning of the sixth ‘mansions' and the introduction to the ‘mystical espousal'. As in the highest stages of ascetical prayer, so here at the heights of mystical prayer, the soul undergoes great trials and suffering, the difference being that now they are mystical or passive purgations. It is not infrequent to find that souls at this stage of prayer are favored with extraordinary mystical phenomena such as raptures, flights of the spirit, locutions, visions, and so forth. Then, entering the seventh and last ‘mansions', the soul realizes the petition of Christ to his heavenly Father: "That they may be one as we also are one; I in them and thou in me."81 This is the state of mystical marriage or the transforming union and St. Teresa states that there is such a close relationship between the mystical espousal and the mystical marriage that the sixth and seventh ‘mansions' could well be joined together. In the transforming union the three divine Persons communicate themselves in an ineffable manner, often by an intellectual vision, and it is not unusual for Christ to reveal himself to the soul in his sacred humanity. According to her own testimony, the source of her teaching is God alone.

The Seventh Mansions describes the fulfillment of what began in the First Mansions as a prayer for beginners. For a person who sets out on the spiritual journey to God, the ultimate aim is the achievement of ‘union

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81 John, 17: 22-23
with God’. It thus represents the culmination of all the work done by the supplicant in the preceding six mansions. Teresa chooses to use the symbolism of marriage, which is a significant feature in the Sixth and Seventh Mansions, in order to communicate in words something of the marvels of divine union. In the *Interior Castle*, Teresa asserts that the soul really seems to have left the body; on the other hand, it is clear that the person is not dead, though for a few moments he cannot even himself be sure if the soul is in the body or not. The betrothal is thus a meeting between two persons who desire to be united and to get the opportunity to know each other, but it does not involve any mutual engagement. In the mystical union there is a loss of consciousness and complete suspension of the external and internal senses. However, when the soul regains consciousness, it is absolutely certain that it has been in God. The difference between betrothal and spiritual marriage is that in betrothal there is only a mutual agreement and willingness between the two. But in marriage there is also a communication and union between the persons. In spiritual marriage, therefore, the person comes to the end of the journey to God, having reached his or her own centre, which is the Seventh Mansions in which God lives. It is in this mansion that the person will live in perfect union with God in this life, and it is characterised by a direct, spiritual perception of the knowledge, love and wisdom of God.

**Spiritual Marriage**

When Teresa reached the stage of spiritual marriage, she realized that there was a profound difference between just hearing and having the faith to believe in God and God’s words, and actually understanding with utmost clarity the spiritual revealed by God. Teresa is referring to her knowledge of the three persons of the Trinity that dwell in the centre of the soul. This realization marks the beginning of the spiritual marriage.
What is described here by Teresa is that the soul attains a new relationship with God and a new kind of understanding, like the two partners in a marriage where the two are united as one body in the sacrament of marriage but are yet distinct from one another within that unified activity. Teresa writes that the vision of the Trinity was so clear that she could see the distinctions between the persons, in that all three persons were represented distinctly. Having reached that point, Teresa remained permanently in the Trinity, regardless of what she was doing in her daily, exterior life. The final state of permanent union is characterised by an uninterrupted awareness of God’s presence. In other words, it is precisely the permanent quality of union that distinguishes the state of spiritual marriage from that of the spiritual betrothal, in which the presence is still marked by periods of absence. Teresa explains further that, in the spiritual marriage Christ is in the centre of the soul, and directs the heart, mind and action as if there were only one body, one mind and one spirit. When we empty ourselves of all that is creature and rid ourselves of it for the love of God, the same Lord will fill our souls with Himself. In ‘emptying oneself’ one clears away the earthly things in the soul and space is made for God. The transformation from the old self into the new self is brought to completion. This creates a state of complete acceptance and surrender to God. Through filling our souls with God, there is now a mutual and permanent abiding of God in the soul. Before the spiritual marriage the soul understood little of what was happening to it, now the scales are removed from its eyes, and in intellectual vision it sees what it before held by faith. It no longer sees through a dark and murky mirror but face to face. The soul acknowledges the gifts of God in this state and does not imagine that it is doing anything of itself, but entirely understands that this is the Lord’s work and we play next to no part in it. The mystic now experiences continual inner
tranquillity, being completely resigned to the Divine Will, and making it manifest in his or her own life. The mystic has the capacity to combine a life of contemplation with a life of action. The overall message in the Seventh Mansions is contemplation in God while serving humanity.

The Mysticism of St. Bernard of Clairvaux

A Brief Sketch of St Bernard of Clairvaux and his Works

In the history of Christian mysticism and in the development of mystical theology Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) has a place of primary importance. Being a great mystic as well as a great theologian, he was the leader of Christendom during the first half of the 12th Century in so many aspects of the life of that time. The 12th Century was filled with spiritual and cultural vitality and marked the intellectual revival of Western Europe. It has been called the Age of the Medieval Renaissance, but it was not only an intellectual, but also a religious renaissance. Bernard, who was a dominant figure of this remarkable century, developed a doctrine of mystical love. He introduced into European Christianity a new emotional warmth in devotion to the humanity of Christ and Mother Mary which remains alive to the present day. The emergence of spirituality of love was not confined to Christianity in 12th Century France but was a great century for the spirituality of love in the world religions. All throughout the world this spiritual path of love emerged simultaneously, irrespective of different traditions and diverse geographical limits. Love, as a spiritual path, was cultivated with an intensity that was unprecedented. It emerged in India, China and Japan, in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Confucianism. Bernard was the representative of a genuine version of Christian mysticism - the mysticism of love. He had such a great influence on the social and
political life of contemporary society that it would be difficult to find a parallel in any similar period. Bernard was given the title of ‘Doctor Mellifluous’ because as Evans says, “He drew the hidden meaning from the literal sense of the biblical text, just as honey is made to flow from the honeycomb or as Moses drew water from the rock.” He was one of the most prolific writers and eloquent preachers in 12th century France. Other than being the founder abbot of the Clairvaux abbey in France, he was also instrumental in setting up Cistercian monasteries all over the country. He was one of the most commanding Church leaders of his time as well as one of the greatest spiritual masters of all times.

Works of St Bernard

In spite of his varied and demanding activities Bernard was a prolific writer. Bernard’s writings fall into these categories;

1 Letters, of which five hundred have been preserved, of great interest and value for the history of the period.

2. Sermons, 330.

3. Treatises.

a. Dogmatic and polemical.

i). De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio (On Grace and Free Will), following closely the lines laid down by St Augustine.

ii) Apologia ad Guilelmum, written to William, abbot of St Thierry.

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82 G. R. Evans, Bernard of Clairvaux, Selected Works. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Paulist Press, New York, p.33
The title “Doctor of the Church” was conferred on St Bernard in 1830, almost seven centuries after his death, by Pope Pius VII; The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia, Liturgical press (1955), p.82
b. Ascetic and mystical.

i) *De Gradibus Humilitatus et Superbiae* (On the Steps of Humility and Pride). This is Bernard’s first published book. In this Bernard defines a key idea, “Humility is the virtue by which man recognizes his own unworthiness because he really knows himself.”\(^8\) The *Steps of Humility* is a meditation on the *Rule of Benedict*, to which Bernard adds corresponding steps of humility and pride that individuals are likely to encounter.

### THE STEPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIDE</th>
<th>HUMILITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Curiosity about what is not one’s concern.</td>
<td>12. Containment of one’s interests which shows itself in a humble bearing and lowered eyes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Light-mindedness: chatter and exclamations about things which do not matter.</td>
<td>11. Quiet and restrained speech.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Laughing about nothing; foolish merriment.</td>
<td>10. Reluctance to laugh.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Boasting and talking too much.</td>
<td>9. Keeping silence unless asked to speak</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Trying to be different; claiming special rights.</td>
<td>8. Regarding oneself as having no special rights in the community.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^8\) Evans Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected works*, p.103
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6. Thinking oneself holier than others.</th>
<th>7. Thinking oneself less holy than others.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Interfering presumptuously with the affairs of others.</td>
<td>6. Thinking oneself unworthy to take initiative.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Self-justification. Defending one’s sinful actions.</td>
<td>5. Confessing one’s sins.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Insincere confession.</td>
<td>4. Patience in the face of accusation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Rebellion against superiors.</td>
<td>3. Submission to superiors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Feeling free to sin.</td>
<td>2. Desiring no freedom to exercise one’s will.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Bernard teaches how to use these steps. If you desire to return to the truth you have to retrace your steps. Go up by the steps by which you came down in your pride. Thus one who is in the twelfth step of pride must climb the first step of humility. He has to continue in the same fashion till when he is in the twelfth he finds the first. “Identify the step of pride you have reached you will not need to strive to find the way of humility.”

ii) *De deligendo Deo* (On Loving God)

This work is at the heart of Bernard’s thought and contemplative life. His teaching is typical of the Christian view of man as a creature - “a fallen

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84 Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux, Selected Works*, p123.
creature, in whom the likeness of God is obscured by sin."

The beginning, end and driving force of the whole mystery of human creation and redemption is love. In this beautiful and challenging treatise Bernard presents the motives for loving God.

iii) De Consideratione (On Meditation), by which one converses with God. In Sermon 86 on the Song of Songs Bernard eloquently expounds on this vision and union and the desire for it. This was Bernard’s last work.

iv) Commentary and Sermons on the Song of Songs

Bernard has not left any mystical treatise as such. For him mysticism, or mystic union is simply the highest degree of the scale of love. The core of his doctrine can be found in ‘On Loving God’ but it is stated at its fullest in the ‘Sermons on the Song of songs.’ These two works are at the heart of Bernard’s mysticism and set forth clearly the main outlines of his contemplative concern. All of Bernard’s treatises on love conclude with an exposition of the last mystical degree of love. But the most important point to be noted is that the humanity of Christ has the central role in all these writings.

A Brief Description of the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon and the Canticle of Canticles is one of the most sensuous and beautiful love poems ever written in Western literature. It is also regarded as one of the most obscure and intriguing books in the Old Testament of the Bible. Hidden between the pronouncements of Ecclesiastes and the visions of Isaiah, the Song of Songs tells us in highly seductive images of the passionate

85 John, 4th Gospel of the New Testament
longing of young lovers. In first century Palestine the song was sung in taverns. Attributed to King Solomon, the Song was admitted to the Hebrew Canon as an allegory of God’s relationship with Israel. “- - no man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs (that he should say) that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages is not worthy the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”86 This was the remark expressed by Rabbi Akiba, one of the greatest Jewish sages, in the Council of Jamnia against those who found faults with the contents of the Song of Solomon and denied its worthiness to be incorporated in the Canon. This erotic poem had always carried with it something more than a sensual attraction. Christian mystics used its language to express their longing for God. It has been one of the most read and favorite books of all. Its mysterious language has led to centuries of commentary comprising many different modes of allegorical exegesis and secular interpretations.

St Bernard’s Mysticism and Mystical Theology

St Bernard drew his inspiration for his spiritual doctrine from the Scripture directly on meditation on the Holy Bible and indirectly by reading the biblical commentaries of his predecessors like Origen, St Jerome, St Augustine and St Gregory the Great. He was utterly faithful to the traditional spirituality he had learnt in school and monastery. These two factors, namely the Scriptural knowledge and the Patristic tradition helped him to lay the doctrinal foundation for his mysticism as well as mystical theology.

86 Mishnah, Yadayim III,5, Herbert Danby, ed.trans., The Mishnah, Hendrickson Publishers, USA, p.782
A Christo-centric Mysticism

On the basis of the biblical witness and the Patristic tradition he inherited, Bernard has conceived a thoroughly incarnational Christology. His mysticism and spirituality are fully Christ-centric. For Bernard the Bible contains no other mystery than that of Christ, because it is he who gives the Scriptures their unity and meaning. It is Christ who is the principle of that unity for he is everywhere present in the Old as well as in the New Testaments.

In fact Trinitarian mysticism is first and foremost Christ-centered. Jesus Christ is the perfect revelation of the Father. “No one has ever seen God, but Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father has made him known.” In Jesus’ words and actions we hear and see that the Father loves us unconditionally. He sent Jesus to the earth out of his immeasurable love and unbending commitment to human redemption. To know Jesus is to know God. Trinitarian mysticism, thus, does not simply refer to the doctrine of the Trinity according to the Bible which teaches that there is one God who is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but to a Christ-centered way of understanding who God is. If we want the most accurate picture of God, we don’t need look any further than Jesus Christ. In Jesus we meet God as God really is. “He who has seen me,” Jesus said “has seen the Father.” Citing all these scriptural passages, Bernard, more than any other theologians of his time argued that the incarnation was necessary for revelation; Christ, the Second person of the Holy Trinity took upon himself the human flesh in order to reveal himself to human beings. It is through the humanity of Christ that we see God. Bernard’s

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87 1 John 1:18
88 1 John 14:9
spirituality and mysticism are so profoundly Christ-centered that he says, "Write what you will, I shall not relish it unless it tells of Jesus. Talk or argue about what you will, I shall not relish if you exclude the name of Jesus. Jesus is to me honey in the mouth, music in the ear, a song in the heart."  

**Man made in the image of God**

According to traditional theology, man was made in the image and likeness of God. But that image has been tarnished and distorted, but not destroyed by sin. Based on this conviction Bernard also believed that although due to sin man has lost the likeness to God the image of god in man can never be lost. This is the central theme of Bernard’s mysticism and his mystical theology. The Old Testament presents human beings not only as the climax of God’s work of creation but also made in the divine image and manifesting God’s rule on earth:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image; after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created human beings in his own image. So God created mankind in his own image, In the image of God he created them, Male and female."  

God gave dignity and power over the rest of creation to Adam and humanity. But man disobeyed God and became a Fallen creature. The Incarnation should be regarded as the consequence of man’s disobedience to God. God who is Charity, out of immeasurable love and compassion

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89 Sermon 15.6  
90 Gen I : 26.27
for humanity became incarnate and came down to the earth in the form of Jesus Christ, the Savior and suffered in the flesh so that He might touch the hearts of sensible creatures by means of the touching sight of a God dead on the cross for the redemption of humanity. Bernard’s predecessors were unable to see in suffering and shame, in the cross and death the form of the divine and it was Bernard who first wrote about the contemplation of the wounds of Christ, which was one of the great themes of medieval mysticism. Bernard states that meditation on the life and sufferings of Christ gave him wisdom, perfection of righteousness, fullness of knowledge, abundance of merits, and riches of salvation. It raised him up from adversities and repressed his exuberant delight in prosperity. “In a word”, he says, “my philosophy is this, and it is the loftiest in the world, to know Jesus and Him crucified.”\textsuperscript{91} It is the personal love that provides something conceivable upon which to focus. It is very difficult for a human being to love God, a little understood divine power directly without a divine intermediary. That is why Bernard chose Jesus Christ and the Word as intermediaries between the soul and God. Bernard’s Christology is fully represented by the formula that Jesus is the sinless man and the suffering, humble, and patient Savior is the example to be followed by all human beings. Thus he strongly suggested praying with a sacred image of the God-man.

St Bernard believed in the Christian view that man was a creature—a fallen creature in whom the image of God is obscured by sin. The source of all sin was willfulness. According to his thinking the whole aim of the Christian life is to come into union with God. The only way to recover the lost likeness to God, restore the image which is in us by nature and

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Sermon} 43.4
finally bring back the soul to God, its Owner was through faith, which involved charity, humility and the opening of the soul to love.

St Bernard along with the Patristic tradition saw the redemption of mankind as a work of the whole Trinity. Humility, charity, and contemplation will be a work of the whole Trinity. All three divine persons will work in harmony, but distinctly in creating, governing, and saving humanity. Each will work in his own particular way to bring about salvation.

**The Role of Charity in Bernard’s Mysticism**

In the sacred scriptures the word ‘Charity’ (or agape, the Greek word for charity) is so highly exalted that even God Himself is called Charity, as the Apostle John says, “Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for charity is of God, and every one that loves is born of God and knows God. But he that loves not knows not God, for God is Charity.” ⁹² “This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” ⁹³ “This is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” ⁹⁴ Bernard has been greatly influenced by the First Epistle of St John, Chapter IV in his fundamental conception that “God is Charity” which is the key principle of his mysticism. Charity, for Bernard, was none other than God and the whole aim of Christian life, according to him, is to come into union with God. Charity is the end as well as the means of spiritual life. If God is Charity possession of charity is the necessary condition of any knowledge of God. St Bernard makes it clear

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⁹² 1 John IV: 7-8  
⁹³ *Ibid.* IV; 9  
⁹⁴ *Ibid.* IV, 10
that ‘likeness’ of man to God is the condition of our knowledge of God and this likeness is the work of charity. If God is Charity and if we have to know God we should have God in us, then it has to be gifted by God. So the presence of charity in the soul is the gift of God who is Charity. Here we can see the distinction between Charity which is God and the charity in us which is the gift of God. “Dear friends let us love one another for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”\textsuperscript{95} No one has ever seen God, but if charity dwells in us, then, God lives in us because charity is the gift of God. To learn to live in charity by virtue of God’s indwelling is therefore to live in God. This is the goal of Christian life.

The next important point in St Bernard’s doctrine is his identification of the gift of charity with the gift of Holy Spirit. It explains why the Holy Spirit, in the doctrine of the Cistercians, always plays the part of the bond by which the soul is united to God and the spiritual life becomes a participation in the divine life. “Hereby know we that we dwell in him and he in us because he hath given us of his spirit.”\textsuperscript{96}

Another important point to note is that the presence of charity in the soul acts as a substitute for the vision of God which is not vouchsafed for us in our life below. We have the presence of God in our soul which marks the point of perfection of charity in us. “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”\textsuperscript{97}

Next, the question is how are we to know that the charity of God is in us? The answer is that we can know it by two signs: the first is the love we

\textsuperscript{95} 1 John iv:8 
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., iv:13 
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., iv:12
bear our neighbor, which is for Bernard, indispensable for the apprenticeship of charity. “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”⁹⁸ The second sign by which we can know the presence of charity in our mind lies in the expulsion of every kind of fear. The relationship of man to God as a servant and child includes awe and fear and a yearning to please Him. There is an enormous sense of distance from and unlikeness to God. But when the practice of charity reaches a point when the whole person is in perfect conformity with God’s will, then God discovers and loves His own likeness in the human soul, which in turn is allowed to perceive and love the likeness of God, the Christ-Word within the self. Union with the Word confirms the original relationship to the Father by enhancing its depth, richness, and freedom. Where there is charity there is full confidence and no fear in the issue of the Day of Judgment. The scripture says, “There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”⁹⁹ Etienne Gilson observes that this ‘fiducia’ (confidence), which is the offspring of charity is an essential factor in Bernard’s doctrine because, “the precise point where the fear of Divine chastisement gives way to ‘fiducia’ marks the entry of the soul into ecstasy.”¹⁰⁰ Thus we find that charity¹⁰¹ is the solid rock that sustains the whole edifice of St Bernard’s mysticism.

⁹⁸ Ibid., iv : 20
⁹⁹ 1 John iv : 18
¹⁰¹ Bernard uses the term ‘charity’ not in the sense of ‘love’ which is used in normal parlance; it is more than that. We can find St Paul’s classical description of charity in the New Testament. In his letter to the Corinthians St Paul enumerates three Divine virtues, namely, faith, hope and charity, but the
All the passions (there are eleven principal passions: love, desire, joy, hate, flight, sorrow, hope, despair, daring, fear, and anger) are interrelated and united in love, which is the source, the most important, and the queen of all the passions. Thomas Merton observes that, “Passion regulated by the will, elevated by self-denial, spiritualized by grace, contributes to the ardent charity with which the soul is united to God.”

He further adds, “Charity is friendship with God---- It is the crown of all God’s gifts. It is the sharing of a divine secret, the mystery of God Himself. God opens our hearts to His love in order to give us what is most secret and most intimate and most personal in Himself. By charity God gives us what cannot be given in any other way. He reveals what cannot be revealed in any other way. And in return, we give to God what cannot be given in any other way. ----The perfection of charity is the ultimate and total surrender of our innermost self.”

Restoration of the Divine Likeness

Following St John’s Epistle St Bernard laid the foundation for his mystical theology by stating that God is Charity, God gives us charity, and thus dwells in us and makes us to dwell in Him. Now, out of this
greatest of them all, he says, is charity. Charity is defined thus: “a divinity infused habit, inclining the human will to cherish God for His own sake above all things, and man for the sake of God” (1 Cor Xiii:13). “The charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Ghost (Romans V:5). It is therefore distinct from and superior to the inborn inclination or the acquired habit of loving God in the natural order. The Encyclopedia Britanica describes charity in Christian thought as ‘the highest form of love, signifying the reciprocal love between God and man that is made manifest in unselfish love of one’s fellow men. In Christian theology and ethics charity is most eloquently shown in the life, teachings and death of Jesus Christ. St Augustine says, “I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one’s self and one’s neighbor in subordination to God.”(Augustine, On Christian Doctrine,3:10,16). He summarized charity as a true virtue, which when our affections are perfectly ordered, unites us to God, for by it we love Him. The supreme position of caritas or charity amongst the virtues is laid down in the New Testament where it is defined as the principal of the three theological virtues (1 Cor, Xiii). The text also describes agape as the unconditional, self-sacrificing volitional love of God for humans through Jesus, which they ought also to reciprocate by practising agape or love towards God and among themselves.

103 Ibid. : pp 85-86

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foundation he has to build up the whole structure. The first question is how to make man dwell in God by way of the restoration of the image of God in man to the likeness of its Exemplar. Again, the problem is how to restore the lost divine likeness to the disfigured human being? The first step towards this restoration, according to Bernard, is the apprenticeship of charity which means the overcoming of one’s immoderate love for the body which holds back the soul from God. “Whoever wants to live a life of charity is not merely to limit indulgence of the body to a sufficiency for health, good and desirable as this may be in itself, but to subject it to a rude discipline. That is the price the soul has to pay for its liberty.”

The second step towards the restoration of the likeness to god relates to the mind, a sort of psychological analysis, which forms one of the foundations of St Bernard’s mysticism. What makes union with God even a possibility? This question probes the foundations of mysticism, its philosophic basis. To find an answer to this question Bernard focused his reflections on Genesis 1:26 which says human beings are made in God’s image. He meditated upon it again and again in the Song of Songs. He made a distinction between ‘image’ and ‘likeness’. He insisted that we, human beings possess an inherent nobility, a sacred dignity which is God’s image in them. It is impossible to lose, or erase this image. For Bernard and those who belonged to the medieval theological tradition, Christ alone is the Image of God, while we are the image of the Image. While Christ is the true and original image we have been made according to the image. This means that while Christ is God, we are not. Nevertheless we bear a deep and natural affinity for God and are drawn to

104 Etienne Gilson, Op.Cit., p.69
God by a hidden force by the deep-down core of our identity as human beings.

In the beginning God made human beings to be like Himself in the moral sense, that is, righteous. Bernard observes that while other animals walk about on all fours humans walk upright. “God indeed gave human beings an upright stance of body, perhaps in order that this corporeal uprightness, exterior and of little account might prompt the inward man, made to the image of God, to cherish his spiritual uprightness, that the beauty of the body of clay might rebuke the deformity of the mind.”

Our bodies are symbols of what we should be; we walk upright, we should be upright in heart and spirit. But sin has bent our souls on upright bodies and we have wandered off to the land of unlikeness.

**Self-Knowledge**

The long-winding road back to God is about recovering our likeness to God. Bernard turns aside speculative philosophy to dive more deeply into the study of the interior life of the soul. Bernard wants to tell us that if we want to know whence we came, where we stand and whither we go we should know what we were, what we are and what we are to be. In short, it is to know ourselves. In other words it is self-knowledge, which is in St Bernard’s view, the recognition that we are the distorted images of God. The soul recognizes simultaneously the misery caused by the loss of the Divine likeness which convicts the soul of its own sin and the grandeur which opens to it the possibilities of conversion and restoration to the lost Divine likeness by God’s divine grace in Christ. According to Michel

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105 *Sermon* 24.7
Casey, “Desire for God”, for Bernard “begins with self-knowledge.”

This self-knowledge leads one to grow discontent with the ephemeral satisfactions of this life and to desire another better life.

St Bernard has derived the idea of self knowledge for his mysticism from the text, Song of Songs 1:7. “If you do not know yourself, O most beautiful among women, then go away and follow the flocks of your friends and pasture your goats near the shepherd’s tents.” Being one of the most significant Scriptural foundations for his mysticism it is the Bridegroom’s rebuke of the Bride. Bernard uses the text as the starting point for a discussion on self-knowledge. Man, if he does not know that he has received something more than all other created beings and begins to approach the flocks of irrational animals, then, he will also become one among them. Restless and wayward senses lead the soul to pursue sinful, but ultimately transitory satisfactions not fit for one made in God’s image. If the soul neglects to know itself, it will come to resemble not God, but senseless beasts who trail after their senses and fleshy desires. Thus this Scriptural verse serves as an admonition to the individual soul.

For Bernard self-knowledge is the foundation of humility and the starting point of his teaching is the apprenticeship of humility which is the fruit of self-knowledge that reveals to man his sinful condition. Jesus Christ manifested Himself as Humility itself in his Incarnation. He became incarnate in order to open a way of access to the mysteries of God which would have ever remained hidden from us. Christ has revealed in humility the mystery of mercy. By setting His own example he teaches man how to find compassion for the misery of others in the experience of his own. St Bernard points out that Jesus Himself learnt compassion for

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us in the same way, by tasting and experiencing in a human body and psychology all the temptations and weaknesses we suffer. “He went through all this so that he could learn through personal experience how to be compassionate and how to sympathize with those who suffer and are tempted in a similar way.”

Steps of Humility

In advocating humility as the first step in the search of truth St Bernard follows the doctrine of Chapter 7 of *St Benedict’s Rule* for Monks. In this chapter St Benedict has set forth twelve steps or degrees of humility and pride and exclaims, “If we wish to reach the greatest height of humility, and speedily to arrive at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made in the present life by humility, then, mounting by our actions we must erect the ladder which appeared to Jacob in his dream, by means of which angels were shown to him ascending and descending (cf Gen 28:12).”

The twelve steps as St Benedict describes them are rungs of a ladder pitched between heaven and earth. The sides of the ladder are the body and the soul. In the opposite direction there is another ladder, for pride consists of a downward path taking us away from God and the last rung of this ladder is hatred towards God. “Whoever exalts shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” On this theme Bernard builds the whole doctrine on humility and pride.

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107 On Loving God, Ch 3
The Three Steps of Truth

If we climb the ladder what awaits us at its top is the fruit or reward promised to those who ascend Benedict’s steps. It is the knowledge of the Truth or more precisely the knowledge of Christ who himself is the Truth. Christ himself reveals this truth when he says of himself, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” He follows humility, and he himself says, “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble at heart.” Humility is then the way to Truth and the knowledge of Truth is the fruit of humility. The Truth, says Bernard, is discerned by three successive steps.

The First step

A man ascends the first step when he strives to be humble. Reason leads him to this first step when he thinks about himself. When he practises humility he looks for truth within himself. He finds truth to be severe and judges himself as God judges him. He knows that he deserves punishment for the enormous crime he has committed. The punishment is already there in the form of a disfigured soul, but not yet consummated, and he also knows that only God’s grace should come to his aid if it is not to be consummated. He unites not only his judgment with God’s judgment, but also his will with God’s will.

Second Step

The first step of humility which marks the beginning of the restoration of the ruined image of man involves another. Affection leads to the second step in which man thinks about others. When a man knows himself to be guilty and miserable, deserving punishment, he turns to his neighbors,

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110 John 14: 16
111 *Sermon on the Mount* 11:29
who he knows are in the same pitiable condition. He compares his own wretchedness with theirs and instead of passing judgment he shows compassion on them. So truth is discovered to be holy in this step. As the Bible says, “All have sinned and everyone needs the glory of the Lord.”

A real understanding of others is gained only by being merciful.

**Third Step**

By the grief of repentance, the desire for righteousness and perseverance in works of mercy the humble purify their heart of ignorance, weakness and jealousy. By contemplation they come to the third step where truth is discovered to be pure in which the humble and compassionate are lifted up to see what is out of sight.

While dealing with the three steps of truth Bernard applies the Trinitarian doctrine to his mysticism. He says each of these works can be thought of as the work of one of the Persons of the undivided Trinity. In the first step the Son is seen at work, in the second the Holy Spirit, and in the third the Father. The Son leads the soul to the first heaven, the Holy Spirit the second heaven and the Father is responsible for a carrying away and catching-up needed for the third stage of ‘rapture’, that is, the mysterious state of divine transport, in which the soul is raised, even in this life to the sight of God. Evans puts it like this, “In the first they are humbled in truth and say, “In your truth you have humbled me.”” In the second, they rejoice together in the truth and sing, “How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.” Third, they are carried away

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112 Rom 3:23
113 Evans, *Humility and Pride* VIII 23, Selected Works, 1987, p.120
114 Psalms 118,75
115 Psalms, 132,1

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to the secrets of truth and they cry, “My secret is mine, my secret is mine.”\textsuperscript{116}

**The Path of Love from Humility to Ecstasy**

Humility is the starting point to the path leading back to God and love is the point of destination. Now, by what means will the soul know God? He is neither perceptible to our senses nor conceivable by our intellect, but He is sensible to the heart. “To love him as He loves Himself, to love Him as He loves us, and by the very gift of that very love with which He loves us ----is to have God in us.”\textsuperscript{117} To the question why and in what way God should be loved St Bernard gives the answer, “The cause of loving God is God Himself,” and the measure He deserves to be loved, “is without measure.”\textsuperscript{118} That we love God springs naturally from our gratitude towards God who loved us first, and bestowed on us every imaginable gift – the air we breathe, the sights we see, food we eat and the very dignity that we possess as human beings. The inborn desire to love God comes from God and ends in God. In its origin, love is a human disposition within the state of nature. It is like any other ordinary emotion such as fear, joy, and sorrow. There are four stages or degrees of love enumerated by Bernard, which are, carnal, mercenary, filial, and mystical.

**The First Degree of Love**

The first degree of love is that in which man loves himself for his own sake, which is carnal or bodily love. Carnal love is the instinctive love which a man has for himself and he loves himself for his own sake.

\textsuperscript{116} Isa 24,16
\textsuperscript{117} Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St Bernard*, p.149
\textsuperscript{118} Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux, Selected Works, On Loving God*, 1,1: 1,16
The Second Degree of Love

The second degree of love is that in which man loves God, but loves him for his own sake, not God’s. This love is mercenary and servile because man, who is a bodily animal and who does not know how to love anything other than himself, begins to love God for his own benefit. He learns from frequent experience that in God he can do everything which is good for him and without him he can do nothing. Becoming aware of his own misery, he realizes that God is the author of his existence and starts seeking his help out of need and thus begins to love God.

The Third Degree of Love

The third degree of love is that in which man loves God for His own sake. Here we have reached the heart of Bernard’s entire mystical doctrine, which can be expressed in three words – ‘Love banishes Fear’. Having reached the third stage there is full confidence and no fear in the issue of the Day of Judgment. The soul no longer fears God in a servile way because love is all-embracing; love knows no fear. As man approaches God repeatedly for help, God’s self is revealed to him through his prayer, reflection, reading and obedience. In this familiarity he begins to experience God’s sweetness and passes to the third degree of filial love, which is a disinterested love of God as our Father and loving God for God’s sake.

The Fourth Degree of Love

The fourth degree of mystical love which is the highest and purest is that in which man loves himself for the sake of God. This is the highest and purest kind of love when God discovers and loves His own likeness in the human soul which in turn is allowed to perceive and love the likeness of
God, the Christ-Word within the self. This is what Bernard calls ‘deification.’ But Bernard doubts whether anyone can reach the fourth degree during his life on earth. He suggests that martyrs will have a taste of it while still having their body, and that some may experience a momentary rapture of this degree of love. Bernard suggests that at the pinnacle of spiritual ascent there is a pure self-emptying mystical love, but wonders “when this “vessel of clay” (referring to the human body) will experience this kind of love, so that the mind, drunk with divine love and forgetting itself, making itself like a broken vessel (Ps 30:13), throw itself wholly on God and, clinging to God and become one with him in spirit.”\footnote{Evans, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ibid., X,27,p.195} For Bernard, the fullness of love is permanently enjoyed in a spiritual body which one acquires in the final resurrection. He writes, “To lose yourself as though you did not exist and to have no sense of yourself, to be emptied out of yourself and almost annihilated, belongs to heavenly, not human love.”\footnote{Ibid.,X 27,p.195} Even if people are admitted to such a union they are soon called back by the distractions and cares of life and by love for their neighbor.

**Mystical Union**

What is the nature of the highest degree of love that defines mystical union? Bernard uses beautiful imagery to describe the nature of this union:

“As a drop of water seems to disappear completely in a quantity of wine, taking the wine’s flavor and color; as red hot iron becomes indistinguishable from the glow of fire and its own original form disappears; as air suffused with the light of the sun seems transformed
into the brightness of the light as if it were itself light rather than merely lit up; so, in those who are holy, it is necessary for human affection to dissolve in some ineffable way, and be poured into the will of God. How will God be all in all (I Cor 15:26) if anything of man remains in man?” 121 This passage, if taken alone, might indeed appear to be suggesting pantheistic spiritualism, but Bernard immediately goes on to say, “The substance will endure, but in another beauty, a higher power, a greater glory.” 122 Although the many familiar images enumerated suggest an annihilation of the self Bernard explicitly rejects this interpretation by saying that human feelings melt in a mysterious way and flow into the will of God; the substance of humanity though it gets transformed by the experience still remains and does not get destroyed. Love, by its very intensity, will bring about a union of wills. He asserts, “Be careful, however, not to conclude that I see something corporeal or perceptible to the senses in this union between the Word and the soul. My opinion is that of the Apostle who said that, He who is united to the Word becomes one spirit with him.” 123 Bernard explains this further by saying that, “the Father and Son cannot be said to be one person, because Father is one and the Son is one. Yet they are said to be, and they are one, because they have and are one substance. On the contrary, since God and man do not share the same nature or substance, they cannot be said to be a unity, yet they are with complete truth and accuracy, said to be one spirit, if they cohere with the bond of love.” 124 Thus St Bernard makes it very clear that Christian mysticism is not pantheistic. The Christian God is ‘Being’ and this creative Being is radically other than the being of His creature.

121 On Loving God, X 28,p.196
122 Ibid
123 Song of Songs, Ser 31.6
124 Ibid., 71.8
St Bernard’s Eschatological Mysticism

Eschatology is a set of beliefs about the end of existence, including the fate of the individual soul. There is in every human being an intricate mixture of terrible fear and unconquerable hope regarding his/her afterlife; the “hope is rooted in the conviction that God will not abandon his faithful ones in the midst of their sufferings but after the time of trial and final judgment on their evil persecutors, believers will receive the ultimate reward – resurrected existence in a new heaven and earth.”

The earliest Christian writings offer scenarios of the end of the world when strife, corruption, war, and disease will commence. Natural disasters will strike and the motion of the universe will cease. Into this chaotic condition, Antichrist, a human figure guided by evil will appear and persecute the Christians. Then Christ will appear in glory and defeat him. At this point the gates of hell will open and souls of the dead will be reunited with their bodies in a state of incorruptibility. The omnipotent Christ and the Father will judge each individual so that the good will be welcomed to enter the Paradise while the wicked will be pushed to Hell.

Since the time of Augustine (354-430 AD) Christians have been taught that there is an interim period between death and resurrection when the souls either enjoy the beatitude of heaven or suffer in hell. After the resurrection of the body the saints will get complete salvation and the wicked will face damnation. The souls of the righteous are received into the highest heavens where they behold the face of God in light and glory waiting for the full redemption of their bodies and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell waiting for the Judgment of the Great Day.

The most important idea to emerge in medieval theology about the afterlife was that the primary happiness of heaven consists in a direct experience of God, known as “Beatific Vision”. The word is derived from the Latin words, “beatus”; happy, “facio,” I make; and “visio,” sight - taken to-gether means Happy-Making-Sight. Beatific Vision contains in itself the power to banish all pain, all sorrow from the beholder, and infuse instead joy and happiness. The Biblical understanding of directly experiencing God had been visual, because in the bible God is described as a physical being – but so radiant that anyone looking at him directly would die instantly. When Moses asks God, “Show me Your Glory”, God agrees, but warns, “You cannot see my face; for no one can see my face and live.”

The Book of Revelation represents heaven as a beautiful city in the sky with God on His throne and the blessed assembled before Him singing hymns of praise. In the New Testament it is in heaven that humans can see God. Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” and Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

The Beatific vision is what makes heaven for the soul. But it is only the beginning of heavenly happiness; for, we shall not only see God, the source of all loveliness; we shall not only possess God, the source of all goodness; we shall not only love god, the source of all delight; but we shall become like to Him. Says St John, “We know that, when He appears, we shall be like to Him, for we shall see Him, just as He is.”

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126 Exod 33:18-23
127 Matt 5:8
128 1 Cor 13:12
129 1 John 3:2
Scholars like, James George Kroemer, are of the opinion that studies of Bernard have long ignored his eschatology deeming it irrelevant to his overall thought. Bernard taught that the greatest blessing imaginable was union with God. Just as lovers experience joy when they are together and long for union when separated, so also, says Bernard, the soul experiences happiness and sorrow during union and separation from Christ. This love is not capable of realization in the life below and implies the idea of a future in which a perfect and permanent union will be possible. Although each soul is subject to temptations and sin during life one can hope for eventual union by means of contemplation. But Bernard emphasized the fact that this union with God cannot be totally experienced in this life, even through contemplation. Bernard’s anthropological principles compelled him to believe that the death of a Christian, though joyful and something to be desired, would also not bring about union with God. Bernard wanted to insist that souls are at rest before the resurrection and that souls cannot be fully at rest, because they are not fully satisfied till they get their bodies back. Bernard holds that the souls of the saints are admitted to rest as soon as they leave their bodies. What they await is “full glory” which they will get only after they get back their bodies.\textsuperscript{130} After death the joyful soul waits impatiently without its body in the company of the saints and martyrs for the Last Day, when it will finally be united with a glorious body and be admitted into God’s presence. In Bernard’s words, “When you are in the body you have not strength to look up on the marvelous noon-day light wherein I dwell. You must wait till the very last for that, when I shall have made you glorious before me.”\textsuperscript{131} Maria L. Ruby Wagner remarks, “Kromer

\textsuperscript{130} On Loving God, Ch 8
\textsuperscript{131} Sermon 38
argues that although Bernard’s eschatological theory did not figure in subsequently approved Catholic doctrine it was “the culmination of his spiritual thought.” 132 and further adds that this statement refers to Bernard’s teachings about the literal resurrection of the body as required for union with God at the Last Day”.

There are two extreme tendencies in eschatology. “One tendency is to spiritualize the period of waiting for the Lord’s coming, seeing it as parallelizing the spiritual development of the soul. The other extreme, it is rather the historical character of eschatology that is stressed.” 133 Both the tendencies have been presented in Bernard’s writings.

**The Spiritualizing Eschatology**

This is vertical, subjective, and relates to the ascent of the soul into heaven, that is, soul’s final journey or individual apocalypse. Bernard’s spiritualizing eschatology was intended to arouse the monk to the contemplation of heavenly realities and see in the monastic life the foretaste of heaven. Bernard and his Cistercian friends no longer needed to scrutinize the secret of the Apocalypse for answers about Christ’s coming, as many of their contemporaries, rather they found their delight in the explanation of the *Song of Songs*.

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The Historical Eschatology

This is horizontal, objective and relates to Last Things and gives a historical character to eschatology. Based on St Augustine’s views of the Last Days, Bernard has brought forth a scheme of three epochs:

1. The epoch of the Holy Fathers and Martyrs, when the Church suffered bloody persecutions.

2. The epoch of the heretics, when attacks on Christian doctrines threatened the Church.

3. The epoch of the Last Days, when the Church will be corrupted from within and Antichrist will arise to seduce believers. Only Christ can overcome, at his return.

Bernard’s reference to Antichrist appears first in his treatise on *Humility and Pride* (3,10). Before the Last Judgment of God could take place a “warlike ruler who will defeat all Rome’s (and now God’s) enemies, vindicate the goodness of the just in a messianic time of plenty, and achieve supreme imitation of Christ by handing over world dominion to God, as Christ will do at the end of time according to Paul in *Corinthians* 15:24.”

This act is conceived as opening the way for the manifestation of Antichrist, the final enemy of God who will conquer the world, but will eventually be vanquished by Jesus in a second coming.

In promoting the Second crusade to recapture Jerusalem “Bernard had been attempting to propel the world from the third age of time (that of the Antichrist) thereby bringing himself closer to eventual full union with

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God." Bernard became pessimistic in historicizing eschatology after the disastrous failure of the Second Crusade. Around 1120 A.D Bernard did not believe in any imminent arrival of the Antichrist and consequently any approaching historical end to the material world. His eschatological approach changed after the disappointment of the Second crusade. His hopes of the general resurrection and his historical union with God did not seem to materialize. At the last stage of his life when his death was imminent Bernard was compelled to return to his core convictions and ignore speculations of Antichrist and the Last Day.

According to McGinn, “unfulfilled eschatological expectation could be interpreted in a purely spiritual sense, imagery originally meant to depict the future history of God’s kingdom could be seen as telling the story of the destiny of the soul.” For Bernard, whenever Jerusalem is referred to in the eschatological sense, the Holy city seems to apply to the soul itself. Likewise redemption of Jerusalem means the redemption of the soul. And the coming of the Redeemer is Christ’s entering into union with the individual soul. Thus, “for Bernard the Saviour lives and must be sought in spirit and truth ---- spiritual experience of the Lord here and now is to be preferred to the historical crusades to the Holy Land.”

**Summary of Bernard’s mysticism**

Bernard’s fundamental conception is that God is Charity. Because He first loved us we have to love Him in return, however in our fallen state of unlikeness we can only start from the egoistic carnal love. This can be transfigured into social carnal love and then a carnal love of Christ,

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thanks to the practice of humility, until finally into the pure and disinterested spiritual love of God in the soul’s divinization by ecstasy.

Bernard has been greatly influenced by St Paul in formulating his mystical doctrine (of Christology). The celebrated text of St Paul says that the Saint was ecstatically ‘caught up’ and not ‘led up’ into the third heaven. The text says, “I Knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I cannot tell, or out of the body, I cannot tell, God knoweth), such an one caught up to the third heaven.” St Bernard’s interpretation of the text is that the Apostle was able to ascend to the first or second heaven “led” or with help. But he had to be carried away in order to reach the third heaven. He explains this further, “The Son is said to have come down to help those who are ascending to the first (Eph 4:9) and the Holy Spirit is said to have been sent down (Jn 15:26) to lead us to the second. But although he always works together with the Son and the Holy Spirit) we never read that the Father came down from heaven or was sent to the earth.” So Bernard’s interpretation of St Paul, according to Etienne Gilson, is that, “the Son indeed leads the soul to the first degree, that is, first heaven – which is that of humility. the Holy Spirit leads it up to the second degree, the second heaven – that of mercy, but to pass from the second to the third needs something more than a leading, a carrying away and catching up is indispensable.”

St Paul is taken where he knows not and he does not know how. This is the exact sense of the word ‘rapture’ says Bernard. The soul thus ravished has no part of its own to play in the operation, which is effected in it without its co-operation. God mystically illuminated Paul and filled him

138 2 Cor 12:2
139 On Humility and Pride VIII, 22, op.cit., p.119
140 Etienne Gilson,op.cit.,p.106
with the knowledge of God’s mystery and of Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. For Paul, the mystery that was made known to him by ‘revelation’, the mystery hidden for ages was nothing less than the mystery of Christ\textsuperscript{141}. Because Paul found himself ‘in Christ’ as the mystical ambience in which he lived, moved, and had his being, he experienced that to be ‘in Christ’ is (to be) a new creation.\textsuperscript{142}

Therefore the crown of the life of charity is ecstasy which unites us to God by remodeling our soul on its exemplar, God. To attain this beatific union we have to displace fear by charity by practising humility. For this, says Bernard we have to rely on the Benedictine ascesis. By following the steps of humility, we will be finally able to love ourselves in our love for God.

Bernard’s notion that man was made in the image of God helps him to solve two problems in the theology of love. He firmly believes that although due to sin man has lost the likeness to God, his reason and free will, which are his essential attributes, remain indestructible because they belong to his very essence. This doctrine is central to his mysticism in the sense that it solves the two major difficulties. The first difficulty is in Bernard’s teaching on the union of love where there is a contradiction between the egoistic carnal love, which is the starting point and the pure and disinterested love which is the goal. With the notion of the image of God in us, carnal love is deprived of the position of being at the beginning of the history of love, and since the divine image remains in us, the lost divine likeness can be restored by grace. Secondly, to distinguish itself from pantheism, Bernard’s theory of mystical union must respect the real distinction between the Divine and human substance, between the

\textsuperscript{141} Eph 3:1
\textsuperscript{142} 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:15
will of God and the will of man. Then, how is the union possible? The image of the Divine in man again offers the answer by illuminating the true nature of the mystical union as ‘likeness.’ Bernard believes that the only way in which the Spirit can become another without ceasing to be itself, is by way of perfect resemblance to this other. This, according to Bernard, can be achieved by perseverance, humility, obedience and purity of life which in turn pave the way to charity and charity banishes fear and through divine grace enables the soul to enter into mystic union with God and have the taste even here below. “He becomes at last that very thing for which he was made – a translucent mirror in which God now sees nought but Himself, and in which the soul now sees nought but God: a created participation of His glory and of His beatitude.”

The important point to be noted in Bernard’s mysticism is that the contemplative life does not in any way hinder active life. As a monk and as a spiritual master Bernard was able to connect action and contemplation in his own life, his extremely active lifestyle did not in any way hinder his life of contemplation. Butler illustrates this point in his texts and comes to the conclusion that the willingness in the last sermon on the Song of Songs, 85, 13 to be led to the highest contemplation and most active fruition is a parable on Bernard’s balance between the two lives. Bernard clearly states that there is a healthy alternation between contemplation and necessary action and that the joy of union with God must not prevent the individual from responding to the needs of his fellow-men. “One should wisely show as a reservoir rather than a canal. A canal spreads water abroad as it receives it. But a reservoir waits until

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143 Etienne Gilson, op. cit., p.152
it is filled before overflowing and communicating without loss to itself, its superabundant water.”

The Christian concept of *unio mystica* first appeared, possibly as far back as the fourth century; its sources are, of course, in the New Testament. In the Pauline as well as in the Johannine writings life in Christ consists in a dynamic union with God, both with Christ as God’s divine self-expression and with the Father in and through Christ. God’s spirit seals the union and initiates an ever growing participation in the intimacy of the divine life. When union is achieved with God, it does not – and should not – only benefit the soul who has achieved such union, but all other beings too. In other words, the soul that is experiencing a union of love with God is in active service of its neighbours through the practice of good works in the world. This is fundamental in Christian teaching and spirituality. It is also clear that, without this stage of union with God, the person can never become as Christ-like as Teresa and other mystics, who have experienced union with God. All that can be hoped for in this life is for the person to continually strive to become increasingly more Christlike, while progressing interiorly.

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144 Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism*, New York, p.193; *Sermon* 18, 3