

Reading List for Beginners in the Christian Mystical Tradition

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If you were to ask me on a retreat to suggest books to guide you in your journey, I would not do so without first asking you some questions about yourself to help me suggest sources most likely to meet your needs. Unable to do that here, I will share some of the sources that have guided and formed my own journey over the years. I will include sources that seem to me to be clear, accessible and true to the spirit of the mystical heritage of the Christian tradition. In subsequent newsletters I may provide suggested readings in the non-Christian contemplative traditions.

Your heart will tell you which writers are best suited to your needs. As you read, you will find yourself relaxing into insight after insight, reassurance after reassurance. It is not that everything will be clear. But as you continue on in your awakening journey, things that are not clear now will become clear later on. Reading the mystics helps us to appreciate and accept the fact that being perplexed is part of the path. For perplexity, when deeply accepted, is experiential humility in which our heart is illumined and instructed by God in matters we cannot comprehend. It is in this spirit then that I offer this list of suggested readings. I hope you find among these sources, ones that will help you. I believe that all the books listed here are available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble and other Internet sites, or can be ordered from a local bookstore or obtained directly from the publisher.

Thomas Merton's writings embody the ancient wisdom of the mystical heritage of the Christian faith expressed in a contemporary language that we can relate to and understand. Merton, therefore, is a good place for the sincere beginner to find trustworthy guidance in contemplative living. There are first his basic spiritual writings, the most accessible of which is perhaps his *Thoughts in Solitude*. His other basic spiritual writings include, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Disputed Questions*, *No Man is an Island* and *The Inner Experience*.

Some of Merton's most beautiful and insightful passages are found in his autobiographical writings, journals and letters. In this category, you might benefit from reading his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and the journal he kept in the monastery *The Sign of Jonas*. The volume of his collected letters titled *The Hidden Ground of Love* contains his letters on the subject of religious experience and social justice. *The Intimate Merton* edited by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Molnardo is a collection of journal entries that offer plenty to sit with and ponder. Another source of eloquent and insightful Merton passages can be found in *A Book of Hours* edited by Kathleen Deignan. In my book *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* I introduce and explore Merton's insights into the true self one with God beyond ego. Sounds True published an audio cd set of my Merton retreat talks titled *Merton's Path to the Palace of Nowhere* in which I explore the Merton's insights into the contemplative way of life in which the true self is realized. The website www.merton.org contains many resources in Merton as guide and teacher on the spiritual path.

Reading classical texts written by the Christian mystics can be particularly rewarding but also particularly challenging. But some of classic works are more accessible and easy to understand. A gentle way to begin is with the simple and profound classic *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. The stories about Saint Francis in the *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* breathes with a childlike wisdom. The anonymously written *The Cloud of Unknowing* is one of the great classics in Christian contemplative literature and one of the easiest to read. I happen to prefer the translation by William Johnston, published by Image Doubleday. A highly readable classic work in the mystical tradition of the Eastern, Orthodox Church is *The Way of Pilgrim and the Pilgrim continues His Way* that tells the story of a Russian pilgrim's discovery of the Jesus prayer. I happen to like the translation by R. M. French, published by Hope Publishing and by Seabury Press. Two books that stand on their own as accessible contemplative reading are Dag Hammarjold's *Markings* and *The World of Silence* by Max Picard.

A good commentary on the teachings of a mystic can be an invaluable aid in finding our way into the heart of mystic's teachings. A very accessible commentary on the teaching of Meister Eckhart is *The Way of Paradox* by Cyprian Smith. Also helpful in getting into Eckhart is Robert Forman's *Meister Eckhart: The Mystic As Theologian*. In Franciscan spirituality, *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love* and *The Humility of God*, both by Ilia Delio are quite good as is her *Simply Bonaventure*. Also in the Franciscan tradition, the novel *Saint Francis* by Nikos Kazantzakis is lovely. The commentary on Theresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* by Caroline Myss titled *Entering the Castle* is good at demonstrating a way to personally enter into the experiences Theresa is inviting us to discover, particularly with respect to the earlier mansions.

Two books written in contemplative devotional style are *They Speak by Silences* by a Carthusian and *Abandonment to Divine Providence* by Jean Pierre de Caussade. *Poverty of Spirit* by Johannes Baptist Metz is a small, precise and insightful. *The Wisdom Jesus* by Cynthia Bourgeault offers a basic insights into how the Gnostic movement of the early church and the Christian mystics understand and experience Christ.

Books on contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition can also be very helpful. Besides the one's mentioned above, I will add here two easy to read books that shed light on the teachings on prayer found *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The first is *Finding Grace at the Center*: by M. Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating which was followed by *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Keating. Retreats and related sources and activities in the Centering prayer can be found on the Contemplative Outreach website www.contemplativeoutreach.org The Benedictine monk John Mains explores contemplative prayer as practiced by the early Christian hermits. A fine book by John Mains is titled *Word into Silence*. Father Lawrence Freeman has continued the work of John Mains; one of his books is *Christian Meditation: Your Daily Practice*. The World Community of Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org) is a good source for more works by John Mains and Lawrence Freeman as well as retreats and other World Community of

Christian Meditation activities. In my book *Christian Meditation* I provide an introduction to meditation and contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition.

It can also be helpful to read books that provide a basic understanding of what mysticism is. A clear and comprehensive guide in this regard is William Johnston's *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love*. Going beyond specifically Christian sources, *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley and *Forgotten Truth* by Huston Smith are two deservedly popular studies that demonstrate the universal nature of mystical consciousness. A more recent work *Mystics* by William Harmless is a well done introduction to both Christian and non-Christian mystical sources. A related work in the field of transpersonal psychology is highly readable *The Simple Feeling of Being* by Ken Wilber.

Last January Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault and I led a retreat that focused on providing a basic introduction to the Christian mystics. The retreat, called *Following the Mystics Through The Narrow Gate*, is available for download or as an audio cd or dvd from www.cac.org, which is the website for The Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. On the website are a number of Richard Rohr's talks, a number of which focus on the Christian mystical tradition. His book *The Naked Now* is a very accessible introduction to non-dual consciousness.