

Not of This World
A Treasury of Christian Mysticism

Compiled and edited by

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World Wisdom

CONTENTS

Introduction		000
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PURIFICATION

I. Severity

1. Breaking the Chains <i>Jakob Boehme</i>	000	2. The Ladder of Graces <i>Theophanis the Monk</i>	000
3. Transposition <i>Unseen Warfare</i>	000	4. Death <i>St Thomas à Kempis</i>	000
5. Pure Fire <i>Hugh of St Victor</i>	000	6. What More Must I Do? <i>The Desert Fathers</i>	000
7. The Ceremony of Substitution <i>Charles Williams</i>	000	8. My Desire Has Been Crucified <i>St Ignatios of Antioch</i>	000

II. Simplicity

9. Drawn by the Flames <i>St Thérèse of Lisieux</i>	000	10. Descending with the Breath <i>Nikiphoros the Athonite</i>	000
11. So Many Names <i>Jean-Pierre de Caussade</i>	000	12. What Dreams May Come <i>St Diadochos of Photiki</i>	000
13. I Sleep but My Heart Waketh <i>St Bernard of Clairvaux</i>	000	14. Nakedness and Sacrifice <i>Jean Borella</i>	000
15. The Tao <i>Hieromonk Damascene</i>	000	16. Go Not but Stay <i>St Francis of Sales</i>	000

III. Purity

17. The Center of the Soul	000	18. True Prayer	000
<i>William Law</i>		<i>Evagrius the Solitary</i>	
19. The Tabernacle of the Covenant	000	20. Rank upon Rank	000
<i>Richard of St Victor</i>		<i>St Clement of Alexandria</i>	
21. Ignorance Is Bliss	000	22. Opening the Tomb	000
<i>Nicholas of Cusa</i>		<i>St Maximos the Confessor</i>	
23. The Virginal Paradise	000	24. Clothed in Christ	000
<i>St Louis Marie de Montfort</i>		<i>St Symeon the New Theologian</i>	

ILLUMINATION

IV. Clarity

25. Two Ways	000	26. Dispelling Darkness	000
<i>St Thomas Aquinas</i>		<i>Boethius</i>	
27. Leading Strings	000	28. More Than Ourselves	000
<i>François Fénelon</i>		<i>Sir Thomas Browne</i>	
29. No Fixed Abode	000	30. Today	000
<i>Pico della Mirandola</i>		<i>St Patrick of Ireland</i>	
31. The Teacher	000	32. True Imagination	000
<i>St Gregory of Sinai</i>		<i>George MacDonald</i>	

V. Luminosity

33. Nothing Amiss <i>Julian of Norwich</i>	000	34. Sweet Delight in God's Beauty <i>Jonathan Edwards</i>	000
35. Thinking the Unthinkable <i>St Anselm</i>	000	36. Prayer of the Heart <i>The Way of a Pilgrim</i>	000
37. The Religion of Light <i>Jingjing</i>	000	38. In the Eyes of a Child <i>Thomas Traherne</i>	000
39. Saving Loveliness <i>St Nonnus</i>	000	40. Uncreated Light <i>St Seraphim of Sarov</i>	000

VI. Transparency

41. Filling Every Place <i>Jeremy Taylor</i>	000	42. Virtues and Powers <i>Paracelsus</i>	000
43. A Single Unified Science <i>Philip Sherrard</i>	000	44. Practicing Presence <i>Brother Lawrence</i>	000
45. Hidden and Glorified <i>Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i>	000	46. As through a Mirror <i>St Bonaventure</i>	000
47. Recognition <i>The Gospel of Thomas</i>	000	48. Two Facades <i>C. S. Lewis</i>	000

UNION

VII. Unity

49. A Higher School	000	50. Flight to Greater Things	000
<i>Henry Suso</i>		<i>St Gregory of Nyssa</i>	
51. No Other Way	000	52. God's Own Breath	000
<i>Theologia Germanica</i>		<i>John Smith</i>	
53. The Very Marrow of the Bones	000	54. Christmas in the Soul	000
<i>St Teresa of Avila</i>		<i>John Tauler</i>	
55. High Fantasy Lost Power	000	56. Motionless Circling	000
<i>Dante</i>		<i>Nikitas Stithatos</i>	

VIII. Unicity

57. A Reply to Active Persons	000	58. Closing to a Bud Again	000
<i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i>		<i>Lilian Staveley</i>	
59. The Joyful Instant	000	60. One and the Same Mind	000
<i>St Augustine</i>		<i>Origen</i>	
61. Awareness and Return	000	62. Waylessness	000
<i>Swami Abhishiktananda</i>		<i>John of Ruysbroeck</i>	
63. Hidden Beauty	000	64. Essence Is Simple	000
<i>St Dionysios the Areopagite</i>		<i>St Nikolai Velimirovich</i>	

IX. Identity

65. The Flight of the Eagle	000	66. More God than a Soul	000
<i>John Scotus Eriugena</i>		<i>St John of the Cross</i>	
67. Unencumbered	000	68. Other Suns	000
<i>Marguerite Porete</i>		<i>St Gregory Palamas</i>	
69. No Self to Forgive	000	70. To Be Quit of God	000
<i>Bernadette Roberts</i>		<i>Meister Eckhart</i>	
71. Ascent to Tabor	000	72. Be Thyself the Book	000
<i>Hierotheos Vlachos</i>		<i>Angelus Silesius</i>	
Sources of Readings and Recommendations for Further Study			000
Index			000

You are going, not indeed in search of the *New* World, like Columbus and his adventurers, nor yet an *Other* World that is to come, but in search of the Other World that *now is*, and ever has been, though undreamt of by the many, and by the greater part even of the Few.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Introduction

“My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Guided by these words of their Master, Christian mystics have never been at home in this world. Far from being escapists, however, the best of them have always kept a firm hold on the important word *this*. God’s kingdom is certainly not of *this* world—the fallen world of corruption, competition, and death. But beneath the surface of *this*, the Gospel teaches that there is also a *that*: a world “so loved” (John 3:16) by God that He has entered it fully in order to make it one with Himself. The true mystic confirms this teaching, assuring us that we can partake of that oneness even in the midst of our present life. Somewhere on the other side of what seems—right in front of us, if we would only look—there exists something more: an “Other World that *now is*”, infused with Divine presence and power, and shimmering through our most cherished moments of beauty and love.

Beginning in the early years of the Church, the journey of those who were in search of *that* world, and who were prepared to dedicate themselves fully to this most fruitful of quests, was divided into three major stages: Purification, Illumination, and Union. This treasury of Christian mystical writings has been designed with that same basic pattern in mind.

First of all, the chains which bind us to the world of appearances must be broken. This is the goal of the first part of the journey—a goal that is reached by climbing the steps of severity, simplicity, and purity. Our selfish solicitude and fearful desire for control have resulted in a kind of imprisonment, and we are locked inside our own fantasies, indifferent to the God who exists beyond them. We must therefore be strict with ourselves, eliminating what is excessive and wasteful, and cleansing the doors of our perception. Purification is necessary because the Divine is transcendent.

Once we have begun to break free from our bonds and have achieved a certain degree of self-mastery, we shall begin to see the world as it truly is, the world as God made and is making it. This is the gift that is offered in the second stage of the search—a gift that is opened up to us gradually through an increasing clarity, luminosity, and transparency. We awaken to the truth and goodness that are around us and in us, and we begin to discern in every texture and color,

every tiny motion and seeming insignificance, the resplendent plenitude of the God who exists within them. Illumination is possible because the Divine is immanent.

Finally—by a miraculous combination of God’s grace and our efforts—we are permitted to enter the “Other World” and to begin living in it. This is the promise of the third and last stage of the path—a promise that is fully realized as we penetrate to an ever more irreducible oneness with God through the steps of unity, unicity, and identity. Union is inevitable—though not automatic, and never without repentance, perseverance, and faith—because the Divine is transcendent even in the midst of its immanence, and immanent in its very transcendence. To see God truly is to see that there is nothing but Him, and that He Himself is the seer. Comprehending “with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height”, we come to be filled, like Christ, with “all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:18, 19; Col. 1:19).

The reader is invited to be a part of this journey. Taking the lead and giving their encouragement will be some of the wisest and most eloquent writers in the history of Christian spirituality, ranging from the second to the twentieth centuries and representing the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant perspectives. Students of mysticism will recognize many familiar names, including Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Symeon the New Theologian, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, and Jakob Boehme. But included as well are selections by authors who are not usually considered mystics as such, but whose writings contain nonetheless some remarkably perspicacious and moving passages concerning our path back to God, among them Ignatius of Antioch, Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Pico Della Mirandola, Thomas Browne, Louis Marie de Montfort, Jonathan Edwards, Thérèse of Lisieux, and C. S. Lewis.

As the reader will discover, variety is a keynote of this collection. Some of the selections are didactic and others anecdotal; some are complex and demanding, others simple and childlike; some come from the writings of canonized saints, others from authors who were suspected, if not actually accused and condemned, of heresy; some are concerned with describing the fruits of realization or transfiguration in God, others are more focused on the necessary means to this end. One will find practical instructions on how to enter more deeply into contemplative prayer, descriptions of the metaphysical structure of the universe, discussions of the different spiritual types of men and of their varying degrees of advancement, and esoteric interpretations of doctrines, symbols, and verses of Scripture. A few surprises have been inserted as well—

readings from somewhat unusual or out of the way sources—including an inscription from a Tang Dynasty stele and an interview with a contemporary Athonite hermit.

Readers will also be treated to a certain amount of variety in the placement of specific selections. If one wished, a collection of jewels could be distributed among a number of different boxes, strictly on the basis of color or size. As it happens, however, their full effect on the eye—when the lid of a treasure chest is first opened—comes at least in part from their medley or mixture, the red of this ruby being all the more radiant because of its proximity to the green of that emerald. The present treasury of mystical gems is intended to have a similar kaleidoscopic impact, with selections from widely different periods of time and by authors from varying denominational homes and backgrounds placed side by side for the sake of their mutual accentuation and illumination. Many of the readings are so rich in meaning and implication that they could not in any case be confined to a single part of the book, and we make no claim to have positioned them in the only way possible, preferring instead to allow for anticipations and recapitulations as one moves through the stages and steps. From the very moment we set foot on the path, submitting ourselves to the severity of purification, it is important to have a clear picture of our ultimate incorporation in God and to understand that death is but a prelude to resurrection. But it is equally important that the rigor of the early part of the quest remain in full view as we near the end of our travels, for the spiritual life is never a merely passive affair, but is based throughout its full extent upon virtuous effort and a willing extinction of the ego.

Underlying these different modes of variety, there is a common theme and a definite thrust to this book. In choosing the readings, our aim has not been to produce a comprehensive survey, or even a representative sampling, of the entire field of Christian spiritual literature, nor have we been concerned about selecting passages that are necessarily indicative of their authors' work as a whole. The plan instead is to follow a specific thread of Christian mystical teaching—one in which the accent is placed on the acquisition of *gnosis* or knowledge and in which *theosis* or deification is presented as the explicit goal of the journey. Readers who are interested in a full exhibition of the varieties of Christian religious experience, or who would like to go more deeply into the teachings of a few major mystical writers or to trace the historical connections between different schools of thought and spiritual traditions, will need to consult other anthologies. Here our purpose is much more focused and personal: to provide support to those who are themselves

searching for a direct knowledge of God and who wish to learn by what means, and how far, they may journey in this present life toward becoming “partakers of the Divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

It is widely supposed—by seekers whose contemplative journeys have taken them East, as well as by many practicing Christians—that Christianity is strictly a *bhakti-mârga*, to use the language of Hinduism: that is, a purely devotional path, in which love of the personal God is man’s primary obligation and highest goal in life. Christians are often deeply suspicious, therefore, of those who lay claim to a spiritual or metaphysical knowledge, considering them guilty of intellectual pride and confusing their teachings with the sectarian Gnosticism of the first Christian centuries. What they forget, however, is that even so diligent an early hunter of heresy as St Irenaeus of Lyons entitled his most important work: “A Refutation and Overthrow of All Knowledge *Falsely So-Called*”, and that St Clement of Alexandria is not the only respected authority to have spoken in defense of a specifically Christian *gnosis*. “This is eternal life,” says Christ, “that they *know* Thee the only true God” (John 17:3).

One very important purpose of the present collection is to underscore this Dominical maxim—and to call the bluff on all anti-intellectualism masquerading as piety—by presenting readings, written in many cases by saints but also coming from other indisputably orthodox sources, in which the attainment of an intellectual or noetic certainty is an essential part of man’s reaching his destined perfection. The distinctive warmth and joy of genuine Christian love have certainly not been neglected in the pages which follow. But it is love insofar as it leads *through* devotion to a single-minded concentration on God that we have chosen to accentuate, and not that devotion itself—still less the cloying sentimentalism and lugubrious brooding which characterize much devotional and even “mystical” literature, and which are often rooted in a jealous attachment to sensible consolations and familiar styles of religious belief and behavior.

This book also differs from other similar anthologies in the stress that it places on deification. Many Christians today, especially those in the western churches, seem to be under the mistaken impression that there is an unbridgeable and eternal divide between the Divine Creator and His human creature. As a result, the only mysticism which they are prepared to accept, and then often reluctantly, is a mysticism of beholding and vision. In this life—they believe—only the rarest few are permitted a glimpse of their Lord, and even in these very exceptional cases the experience amounts to a fleeting state and not a permanent station. Even in heaven, the felicity of the faithful is said to come solely from their proximity to a God who

remains “other” and “object”. Ironically, this well-intentioned abridgement of our journey’s true length was very firmly, if implicitly, rejected by the early Church in its condemnation of the Nestorian and Monophysite heresies. Man is *not* divided from God, for human nature has been hypostatically or substantially united with Deity, while nonetheless retaining its own distinctive energies and will.

This is a difficult and subtle point, which we cannot fully explain in this context. Suffice it to say, however, that the Son of God did not become “a” man, as one too often hears. He became *man*, with the result that our human nature as such has been infused, in and through Him, with the very nature of God. The powers and privileges exhibited by the incarnate Word did not belong to Him alone, but are open to all of us, in keeping with what the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) called a *communicatio idiomatum* or “communication of properties” between the Divine and the human. Were it otherwise, we would not be invited—nor could we be commanded—to “grow up into Him in all things”, to acquire “the knowledge of the Son of God”, and to strive to reach the level of the “perfect man”, in this way attaining “unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”. This and nothing less, say the Scriptures, is the “perfecting of the saints” (Eph. 4:12, 13).

Ultimate Union must therefore include nothing less than a step of identity, and this is why we have given ample space to selections which speak about God, not only as other and object, but as the true inward subject of man’s own deepest self. From one point of view, the Christian exoterists of whom we were just speaking are right: God *is* our sovereign Creator and Lord, and such He will remain for all eternity, the unitive or “advaitic” doctrine of certain mystics notwithstanding. The individual man or woman cannot *become* God, although they can, and should, pray to be granted the everlasting joy of the beatific vision. Heavenly joy, however, is not the only promise of the Gospel. Even though outwardly we are always other than God, there exists inside of us, in the “inward man” (Rom. 7:22), something intrinsically Divine, with which—thanks to Christ’s timeless work of atonement—every person may come at last to be completely identified, down to the very cells of his physical body. There is in the soul, says Meister Eckhart, something “uncreated and uncreatable”, and for this reason, adds St Gregory Palamas, those who have reached the very end of the journey “become thereby uncreated, unoriginate, supra-temporal, and indescribable”. This is the final privilege and promise of entering the “Other World that *now is*”.

Of course, the fact that God has opened Himself to us so fully and that our ultimate destination is so high and exalted does not at all mean that we have arrived there already, or that we are absolved of responsibility for the struggle and striving required of those who mean to become what they are. Christian *gnosis* is no excuse for presumption or pride. As we have said, Union is inevitable, but it is not automatic—which is precisely why this greatest of quests is one upon which everyone must eventually *choose* to embark. “If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.”

We have explained that this book has three basic Parts because the spiritual journey is traditionally divided into three distinct Stages. Christians of earlier centuries would have seen other meanings in the numerical arrangement of the readings which follow, and it may be of interest, before turning to the selections themselves, to state these meanings explicitly for the modern reader, whose sense of symbolic patterns is much less precise and keen than that of his ancestors.

There are three major Parts to this treasury because it is a journey of three Days from the Good Friday of our death to *this* world to the Easter of our resurrection in God. Each Part is in turn divided into three smaller Sections because the journey would not be possible without the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Each Person is present in our every advancement, but each is also responsible for His own proper work, for we are purified *through* the Son, illumined *by* the Holy Spirit, and unified *in* the Father. The icons which are found on the first page of each Part reflect this same symbolism. In the Crucifixion, at the beginning of Part One, there is a single Figure, in whom Purification is embodied. Part Two is entered through the Virgin of the Sign, which contains two Figures of Illumination. And Part Three begins with the three Figures of the Holy Trinity, in and through whom is Union.

There are nine different Sections in the collection, corresponding to the nine total Steps of the Stages, because there are nine distinct Ranks among the Celestial Hierarchies or “Trinal Triplicities”—Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Archangels, Angels—and without their continual care and guidance, we could not but lose our way as we undertake to enter *that* world in which these Blessed Spirits dwell. As St Dionysios the Areopagite says, “It is by the mediation of hierarchically superior Beings that inferior beings are uplifted toward the Divine.”

Each of the nine Sections contains eight different Readings because the mystical week of our movement toward God consists of eight Days, the Eighth Day of the Resurrection transcending linear time as we know it, and because as we travel our aim is to become worthy of the eight Blessings promised by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-10). According to the medieval theologian Gernot of Rechersberg, “Eight, as the first perfect cube ($2 \times 2 \times 2$), imprints us in body and soul with the security of Eternal Beatitude.”

There are thus twenty-four Readings in each of the three Parts of the book, and this reminds us that the Four and Twenty Elders, who correspond in their turn to the Twelve Patriarchs of the Old Covenant and the Twelve Apostles of the New, sit together “clothed in white raiment” and with “crowns of gold” on their heads (Rev. 4:4), in token of their participation in the God before whose Throne they rejoice.

Finally, there are seventy-two Readings in the book as a whole because there are seventy-two Hours in the three Days of our journey; because seventy-two is the number of precious Jewels—four rows of three that “shall be square” and then “doubled” ($4 \times 3^2 \times 2$)—which are to be placed on our breastplate as we prepare to enter the Temple (Ex. 28:16); and because, in the original Hebrew of Exodus 14:19-21, there are seventy-two Letters in each of the three Verses, which together mystically describe our liberation from the world of seeming and our illumination and incorporation in God:

“And the Angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them, and the Pillar of Cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them.”

“And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, and it was a Cloud and a Darkness to them, but it gave Light by night to the other, so that the one came not near the other all the night.”

“And Moses stretched out his hand over the Sea, and the Lord caused the Sea to go back by a strong East Wind all that night, and made the sea dry Land, and the Waters were divided.”

A few further words about our manner of presentation are perhaps in order. For the sake of consistency and intelligibility, a number of the readings have been slightly modified: contemporary usage has been our chief guide in capitalization and spelling and in the use of punctuation—though an effort has been made as well to preserve at least something of the stylistic tone of the original materials—and we have allowed ourselves the occasional silent ellipsis when the sense of a passage might be otherwise obscured or complicated by a tangent to

its primary meaning or by the introduction of foreign or technical terms already defined in the text. The Sources of Readings at the end of the book provide all the necessary bibliographical information for those who are interested in studying the selections in their originally published form and context.

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