Meister Eckhart & Medieval Mysticism

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1. MEISTER ECKHART & THE RHINELAND MYSTICS: TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327) was a German Dominican and one of the most controversial and influential mystics of the Christian tradition. His writings, especially his vernacular sermons, join together brilliant paradoxes, striking imagery, and provocative claims with all the subtleties of medieval scholasticism. At the end of his career, his orthodoxy was challenged. He defended himself at a heresy trial held at the court of the Avignon pope, John XXII, who posthumously condemned certain of Eckhart's propositions but exonerated Eckhart himself. Eckhart's ideas would be carefully reworked and developed by his Dominican successors, Johannes Tauler (1300-1361) and Heinrich Suso (c.1295-1366).

Texts

Tauler, see Ferdinand Vetter, ed., Die Predigten Taulers, Deutsche Text des Mittelalters XI (Berlin: 1910).

Translations

Meister Eckhart, The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense, Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. Edmund Colledge & Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). As the title indicates, this has the essentials, but only the essentials. It is important to get the companion volume, Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher (see below)

Henry Suso, The Exemplar, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). Suso's Exemplar is his masterpiece, really an anthology of diverse documents including his autobiography as well as his mystical works, notably the Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and the Little Book of Truth.


Bernard McGinn, ed., Maurice O'Connell Walshe, trans., The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart (New York: Continuum, 2010), hardcover, $98. The only complete translation of Eckhart's sermons in English—and for the most part, an excellent one. Walshe's original edition (a 3-volume edition published by the "new age" publisher Element) had been out of print for some years, but McGinn helpfully convinced Continuum to bring it back.


2. MEISTER ECKHART & THE RHINELAND MYSTICS: STUDIES


Meister Eckhart and his Rhineland successors, Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Suso. There is no comparable survey of such depth and breadth in English. Essential.

Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)*, Volume 5 of *The Presence of God: A History of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad / Herder & Herder, 2012). This is the latest volume of McGinn's monumental history. While much of it is devoted to the English mystics (see below), it opens with a lengthy study of another of the great Rhineland mystics, the Dutch priest and writer Jan van Ruusbroec.


### 3. JULIAN OF NORWICH & THE ENGLISH MYSTICS: TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

The 14th century saw the rise of new currents of mysticism, especially vernacular mysticisms, rooted in local traditions of spirituality. Among the most remarkable was the emergence of mysticism in England. Five major mystics--Julian of Norwich, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* writer, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and Margery Kempe--are the best known. They were pioneers not only of English mysticism but of the English prose.

Julian of Norwich (c.1342–c.1416), a visionary whose near-death experience led to her writing two treatises, one, an early, largely descriptive account of her visionary experiences, the other, an extended meditation, using her visionary experiences as a springboard for extraordinarily eloquent meditations on questions of the origins of evil and the necessity of suffering, of providence and universal salvation.

**Texts**

Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, Brepols Medieval Women Series (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). This is simply a superb tool for students. It includes a critical edition of her Middle English texts, together with an abundance of notes on Julian's theology and on her Middle English vocabulary. The two accounts are arranged side by side so that students can carefully trace how Julian expands her reflections and modifies her views in her later text.


Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978). For a generation, this has served as the critical edition of Julian's works. Vol. 1 has Julian's *A Vision* [=Short Text], while Vol. 2 has annotated edition of *A Revelation* [=Long Text]. While still of great value, it has been displaced by more recent scholarship on Julian's texts and her broader intellectual context.


Translations

Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, trans., *Julian of Norwich, Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). This remains an excellent complete translation of Julian's two texts for those who can't read the original Middle English.

James Walsh, trans., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). The anonymous author of *The Cloud* has been called the greatest of the 14th-century English mystics. His theme: that God cannot be known by the mind, but only a love that pierces through the 'cloud of unknowing.' See other works by the *Cloud* writer published under the title: *The Pursuit of Wisdom & Other Works*,


4. JULIAN OF NORWICH & THE ENGLISH MYSTICS: STUDIES


Denys Turner, Julian of Norwich, Theologian (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). This offers a major new interpretation of Julian, reading her less as a mystic and more as a systematic theologian, wrestling with providence, Christology, and soteriology. Well-written.


### 5. OTHER MEDIEVAL MYSTICS: TEXTS

Note: A number of key figures listed in earlier bibliographies are also generally classified as “mystics”: e.g. John Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure.

Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006). A superb collection of mystical writings arranged topically. McGinn offer selections that examine issues too often ignored, such as the role of biblical interpretation in mystical literature or the role of sacraments in mysticism. While this includes authors from all eras, there is a large selection of medievals including Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, William of St.-Thierry, Guigo I, Richard of St. Victor, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Catherine of Genoa, Hadewjich of Antwerp, Richard Rolle, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa.


6. OTHER MEDIEVAL MYSTICS: STUDIES

William Harmless, *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) paperback, $19. Mystics are those who claim to have experienced God. This book introduces readers to the scholarly study of mysticism, exploring both mystics’ extraordinary lives and their no-less-extraordinary writings. The heart of the book is a set of case-studies of Christian mystics, including four medievals: Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, as well as Evagrius Ponticus and Thomas Merton. This case-study approach brings things down to earth, restoring mystics to their historical context, and helps bring them alive and let them speak with unexpected immediacy. The closing chapter offers a unique, multi-sided optic for exploring mystics, their religious communities and their writings. Geared to a broad audience.


- Volume 2: *The Growth of Mysticism (500 to 1200 A.D)*
- Volume 3: *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350*
- Volume 4: *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*
- Volume 5: *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)*

McGinn is the leading contemporary historian of Christian spirituality. The second volume includes in-depth studies of Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux; the third focuses on Francis of Assisi and Bonaventure, the fourth focuses on Eckhart and the Dominicans, while the fifth focuses on Jan van Ruusbroec, Catherine of Siena, and the English mystics (see above). There is no better comprehensive study of medieval mysticism.


7. CONCILIARISM & THE ROOTS OF THE REFORMATION

Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). This is the place to start on one of the
most important and overlooked trends in the history of Christianity, the attempt to create an alternative to the papal monarchy. Oakley is always lucid.


8. HERESY, WITCHCRAFT, & MILLENNARIANISM

Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). The so-called heretics of the Free Spirit claimed that they had achieved union with God, that they were God, and so had no need of Church or conventional morals. At least that's what their enemies (inquisitors) accused them of saying. But as Lerner shows, inquisitors’ accusations and real heresy are quite different matters. This study is fine example of how to read medieval documents with a critical eye. A fascinating look behind what made headlines in the Middle Ages.

Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992). The most comprehensive survey of medieval heresy. Lambert, whose studies on the Spiritual Franciscans are the standard, here studies not only the Spirituals, but also the Waldensians, the Cathars, the Joachimites, the Lollards, and many others.


