AN INTRODUCTION to CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM
Recovering the Wildness of Spiritual Life

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Introduction

The Soul from Whom God Hides Nothing

I pray we could come to this darkness so far above light! If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge.

—Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Mystical Theology

A Quick Sketch of Mysticism

Over the past few years, when teaching Dante to college students, I’ve found it necessary to provide a quick outline of mysticism by way of background to Dante’s final canticle, Paradiso. I’ve noticed, though, that as I talk about ineffability and the Platonic tradition of a “God beyond being” and the necessity of waking up a “sense” that is above reason, my students are overcome by a sense of trepidation. On more than one occasion, noticing that my students have stiffened up and have begun to look at me suspiciously, I’ve paused to ask, “Is this stuff making you nervous?” The answer is usually yes, because it seems to them somehow vaguely “Eastern” or associated with New Age spirituality.

Take, for example, Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century German Dominican who, along with the sixth-century Byzantine
Dionysius the Areopagite (also known as Pseudo-Dionysius), is often thought of as “the mystic’s mystic.” Eckhart was a celebrity professor in his day, a sometime provost at the University of Paris, and a biblical commentator who also undertook the difficult task of preaching in the vernacular (in his case, German). Here’s what he says in one of his German-language sermons:

In created things, as I have often said before, there is no truth. But there is something which is above the created being of the soul and which is untouched by any createdness, by any nothingness. Even the angels do not have this, whose clear being is pure and deep. . . . It is like the divine nature; in itself it is one and has nothing in common with anything. And it is with regard to this that many teachers go wrong. It is a strange land, a wilderness, being more nameless than with name, more unknown than known. If you could do away with yourself for a moment, even for less than a moment, then you would possess all that this possesses in itself. But as long as you have any regard for yourself in any way or for anything, then you will not know what God is. As my mouth knows what colour is and my eye what taste is: that is how little you will know what God is.¹

These words are as frightening as they are intriguing. Eckhart says that we know as much about God as the eye knows about tasting or the tongue tells us about color, because we’ve been using the wrong faculty to experience him. God is above our reason, above our consciousness, and even above our morality. He dwells in a special “uncreated” part of the soul, and to move into that part of the soul requires “doing away with yourself.” It is like venturing into a nameless desert, an unknown wilderness, a strange land.

I’m sympathetic to the reaction of my students and the other audiences I address because I know they want to be faithful Christians and are afraid of adulterating the message of Christ. But the more I’ve read, the more I’ve been struck by the fact that, in the premodern age (that is, what is now called late antiquity and the Middle Ages—everything, you could say, before AD 1500),
“mysticism” wasn’t some bizarre, exotic, cultish, or unusual phenomenon (like it has become), stored on bookshelves dealing with paranormal occurrences; rather, it was seen as the lifeblood of prayer and adoration of God in the soul. For this reason, it’s too precious to stay silent on. Ignoring it would be like selling a precious family heirloom at an estate sale because you didn’t know what it was.

Some of my readers might be nervous about mysticism not because they associate it with Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sufism) but because it feels to them like a “Catholic” or “Orthodox” thing, assuming that it is not for them. George Eliot, though no Protestant, voiced this assumption of nineteenth-century Protestant England in her characterization of the quaint but enticing Mediterranean spirituality of Teresa of Ávila at the beginning of her novel Middlemarch. Similarly, I remember reading as a teenager the stern warning of Presbyterian theologian B. B. Warfield, whose words made me suspicious of mysticism for a decade: “The common element in all these varieties of mysticism is that they all seek . . . the knowledge of God in human feelings, which they look upon as the sole or at least the most trustworthy or the most direct source of the knowledge of God.” In light of this, Warfield adds, we should be wary of mysticism because Christianity ought to be founded on reason and external authority. Even C. S. Lewis, who corresponded with the greatest scholar of mysticism of his day, Evelyn Underhill, and whose academic background made him interested in medieval spirituality, cautioned against “indulging” in it too much. In his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” for example, after soaring to some incredible heights of theological speculation, he reins himself in and warns people about getting carried away:

What would it be to taste at the fountain-head that stream of which even these lower reaches prove so intoxicating? Yet that, I believe, is what lies before us. The whole man is to drink joy from the fountain of joy. As St. Augustine said, the rapture of the
saved soul will “flow over” into the glorified body. In the light of our present specialized and depraved appetites we cannot imagine this *torrens voluptatis*, and I warn everyone seriously not to try.⁴

As a final example, at the beginning of the twentieth century the incredibly influential Protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack worried about “Hellenic” interpolations into an original, pure Christianity. If Luther distrusted medieval Scholasticism, von Harnack pushed his own doubts back to an even earlier stage: the encroachment of Greek philosophy into the primitive church. According to von Harnack, we should be on our guard against all “Greek” ideas, which form the backbone of the medieval Christian articulation of mysticism.⁵

I will not be able to convince all my readers that mysticism is a fundamental part of Christianity—Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic. However, I would like to make it easier for some of my readers to be patient with it, to listen to it, to give credence to it. And so, in this book, I’ll focus on writings from before the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation. Writings subsequent to that time often feel the pressure to reject things because they’re Catholic, or to double down on things because they’re not Protestant. Although I will occasionally refer to post-Reformation figures to illustrate some particular point, I want to focus on a time when Christianity was (nominally at least) united. Even in those writings from after the Great Schism between the Eastern and Western churches (1054), we’ll be able to see that their authors were still drawing from a shared store of texts and ideas, hopes and ambitions.

It is true that, without the Greek philosophical tradition, we would not have the texts and ideas that I will discuss below. Without Plotinus, there would be no Augustinian flight of the soul (as described in *Confessions* 7, 9, and 10). Without Proclus, there would be no Dionysius the Areopagite. Without Dionysius and Augustine, there would be no Eckhart or Cusanus. The Platonic tradition in particular (see chap. 2) provided early Christians...
with the terminology, methodology, and impulse to describe and classify the experience of God systematically—in other words, it provided the skeleton of what has come to be known as *mystical theology*. And this goes straight to the heart of the paradox of Western writings in the Christian mystical tradition: although they are concerned with experiences of God that are beyond language and rationality, almost every mystical treatise is preoccupied with demarcating the steps, grading the stages, outlining the method, and describing the overall system in which such experiences play out. Medieval authors love artificial schema and visual aids to help them hold it all together: steps on a ladder, wings on a seraphim, rooms in the ark, chambers in a castle, and so on. Perhaps premodern writers on mysticism are so cautious, so concerned with classifying the steps and describing the preliminary preparation for the mystical journey, because it is easy to confuse a subjective emotional high, or a sincere desire to go deep, with the experience of depth itself. In any case, this is, I think, the biggest surprise for modern readers. If you are mainly accustomed to reading modern spiritual authors, who like to anthologize and talk about only the most sublime and rapturous moments from ancient texts, and then you turn to the old authors themselves, you’ll be surprised by how much space they devote to nonmystical matters. The paradox is that mystical writers spend a great deal of time discussing the rational intellect, or virtue, or pious practices. And if you come with the wrong expectations, you’ll be disappointed when you find that about 89 percent of these treatises have nothing to do with “the good stuff,” the sublime encounter with God. This emphasis on the rational and foundational elements in Christian mysticism is an inheritance of the Greek (and Roman) philosophical tradition.

But this does not mean that Christian mysticism is only a “Greek thing” pure and simple. If mysticism is, at its core, a desire to be someone “from whom God hides nothing” (to paraphrase Meister Eckhart)—that is, to know the fullness of God in the depths of one’s soul—then we find it anticipated, already everywhere, within the Scriptures. For example, when God calls out to
Moses from the burning bush (“Moses, Moses. . . . Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet”), Moses understandably “[hides] his face; for he was afraid to look upon God” (Exod. 3:4–6). Later, on Mount Sinai, the Lord tells Moses that “it is a terrible thing that I will do with thee” (34:10), and when the Lord descends “in the cloud,” Moses, again overcome by the awe-filled presence of God, “made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped” (34:8). Elsewhere, we read that Moses conceived the audacious desire to see the face of God uncovered, and that the Lord spoke to him “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (33:11).

We also read in the Old Testament that Isaiah saw the Lord “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.” God was surrounded by seraphim who were crying out, while the “posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke” (Isa. 6:1, 4). Isaiah, too, was terrified: “Then said I, Woe is me! For I am undone; . . . for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (6:5). Poor Ezekiel, when the word of the Lord came “expressly” unto him (Ezek. 1:3), beheld a vision of a whirlwind out of the north, “a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it,” and all kinds of phantasmagorical wheels and creatures and gems: “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face” (1:4, 28). Abraham had a “deep sleep” fall upon him: “And lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him” (Gen. 15:12). He later entertained angels (Gen. 18), while Jacob had his thigh put out of joint by an angel (Gen. 32:25) and was given a vision of a ladder with angels ascending and descending on it (28:12). When Jacob woke up from his vision of the ladder, he found himself in a cold sweat: “And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (28:16–17). In scriptural encounters with God, the human beholders are inevitably stupefied, overwhelmed, or
overawed by how much the divine beauty, power, and glory exceeds their previous expectations.

In the New Testament we find the same pattern. The disciples briefly see Christ transparent in his glory: as Jesus prays, “the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening” (Luke 9:29). As you might expect, the disciples with Jesus “fell on their face, and were sore afraid” (Matt. 17:6). Meanwhile, Peter babbles nonsense. Paul, who finds himself suddenly enveloped in a bright light from heaven in his encounter with Christ, accordingly “fell to the earth” (Acts 9:4), as does John during his vision on Patmos (Rev. 1:17). And, most mysteriously of all, Paul alludes autobiographically to an ecstatic rapture into heaven: “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago . . . [who] was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Cor. 12:2–4).

These scriptural narratives are profoundly moving, almost disturbing. The God who made the world cannot be contained within it. If you try to look at God from within the world, so to speak, you’re limiting what you can see. But in select moments the screen, the veil, is ripped away, and the human beholders are left gaping, inarticulately, at what’s behind.

When early Christian and medieval authors steeped in these scriptural accounts also got access to the best of paganism, an extraordinary thing happened: they tried to frame out the wild and disorienting narratives of Scripture in the articulate and precise terms they found in their beloved pagan authors. For example, Gregory of Nyssa used his Greek learning to map out a path in which we “ordinary” Christians can presume to lead a life like that of Moses. Similarly, Augustine confesses that he longs to see God’s face, echoing a sentiment drawn from the life of Moses, but he borrows from the vocabulary of Greek writers like Plotinus. The writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite adopted the literary persona of being Paul’s disciple. Schooled in the most sophisticated Athenian Platonism of his day, he claimed that his writings were meant to explicate the vision that Paul cryptically
described in 2 Corinthians 12. The combination of these two traditions (Greek and scriptural) created a desire and a strategy to be someone “from whom God hides nothing.” In other words, it resulted in mysticism, a kind of holy presumptuousness in which I, an “ordinary” Christian, refuse to accept that great encounters with God are the exclusive privilege of biblical heroes. I begin to desire to see the Lord “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up,” as did Isaiah; to get a glimpse of the fullness of reality that lies behind the veil, as did Ezekiel and John; and to be “the Friend of God,” like Abraham was (James 2:23). The mystic believes, along with C. S. Lewis, that in the end, “there are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

What Is Mysticism?

We’re now ready to take our first shot at answering the question, What is mysticism? Maybe it’s better to start with what mysticism is not. It’s not about voices or visions. It’s not a whimsical or capricious Shakerism in which you are violently seized with a personal revelation. Rather, it’s the fruit of love and virtue and patience and diligence in prayer and discipleship. Mysticism is about God, beauty, prayer, and the depth of the soul. Through the careful development of character and the training of the mind, it aims to achieve an intellectual vision—that is, unmediated contact with God. But this intellectual vision is hard to win. Technically, you can’t “win” it at all; it’s a gift. Nevertheless, to achieve this intellectual vision, to get to the “highest point” of your soul (as Augustine puts it), you have to pass through the prior stages of purgation of the heart and purgation of the mind until the practice of charity (including intellectual charity) becomes natural. In this way, mysticism is a rational, ethical, and systematic preparation for an experience of the fullness of God.

But there’s more. Mysticism is founded on the belief that every soul is made with an infinite desire that only an infinite bliss can
Mysticism believes that this infinite fountain for which our souls thirst is God, but God cannot be contained within the creation he made, nor can he be comprehended fully within human language and rationality, by which we represent that creation in our minds. Thus, mysticism is an ascent through rationality toward the edge of language, and when we have arrived at the periphery of language, we walk over the edge and fall into the “darkness of unknowing,” as Dionysius calls it, which is not ignorance but a way of knowing that is higher and deeper than our customary rational consciousness. In other words, mysticism is made up of a “learned ignorance,” as Nicholas of Cusa calls it. This darkness of unknowing is a moment of deep connection, of union, of closeness, and of presence. It is fundamentally the Mosaic desire to see God face-to-face; or, as the Cistercian Gilbert of Hoyland thought, it is the real meaning hiding behind Psalm 42:7: “Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.” Gilbert reads “abyss calls unto abyss” as the abyss of divine love that calls out from the very depths of our own souls, so that as we turn inward we become immersed in the “measureless ocean of Divine Majesty,” the “abyss of hidden light.”

At the same time, the mystic, moved within by this holy presumption, realizes that to reach this pinnacle in which the Maker of the world, unveiled, addresses a person, one must pass through a period of discipleship, discipline, and even painful darkness and lonely abnegation. I have to develop a taste for eternity, and so I have to break the addictive craving for temporal things. And then I even have to move beyond my own morality, realizing that being “good” is not good enough. I have to move beyond my expectation that I can “know” God. Because God is the maker of heaven and earth—the world of “being”—he cannot be found within it. Thus, my language and reasoning are inadequate to know him. I have to develop a deeper power of “knowing”—that is, to open the “inner eye” or “interior vision,” as the ancient pagan philosopher Plotinus puts it (see below). When I come to the pinnacle
of my soul, I have to step out into darkness, leaving even my reason behind. Because this is frightening, it takes epic ambition or, as one scholar puts it, an extraordinary treasury of “intellectual generosity.” This daring quest, this soaring ascent “up” to God, leads us into that “unnameable” part of the soul (which is, paradoxically, deeper down within me than I am to myself). And so, in the mystical tradition we have a paradoxical juxtaposition of inwardness and upwardness, a quest that leads me to the core of my personality by way of the highest point of reality.

Because the mystical quest ventures out into a space beyond language and even beyond “knowing,” there is an important poetic aspect within the mystical tradition. Indeed, medieval authors frolic in a rich field of metaphors, gathering as many likenesses as they can, all of which at best merely gesture and point to that which is ultimately unsayable. And so, already in these last few paragraphs, I’ve been speaking of the “barren desert” and retreating into the inner castle of interiority, of soaring and flying up, of deep calling to deep, and of a “cloud of unknowing.” Since God is beyond words, mystical writers feel the need to stretch their language to find elaborate and exuberant metaphors for hinting at what is above and below language. In this book we’ll hear about the “nudity” of the soul, of falling into a chasm, of plunging into an ocean, of the opening up of an abyss, and, most incredible of all, of the “hurricane” of God’s love. In short, all this bold language, which burns like fire and cuts like a sword, is based on the conviction that God is fuller, bigger, and brighter than I can imagine or have ever previously expected. And to “see” or “taste” this, we need to guard ourselves from the tendency to turn God into an idol—to think of him as something small or limited or as some kind of cosmic agent who exists in order to help us be good or get things we want. Mysticism involves setting aside all these idols of the imagination and cravings of the will; it is a resolute purpose to let God be God and a bold entry into the “cloud of unknowing.” In the end, mysticism is what happens when God hides nothing from the soul.
Before moving on to the second half of this chapter, I want to pause over a passage from Augustine in which all these themes are present. In his famous description of his ascent at Ostia (Conf. IX.10), which I will describe in more detail later, Augustine imagines first ascending the hierarchy of creatures in this world, from caterpillars to supernovas, looking for the most “Godlike” thing in the world. As it turns out, it is not any thing but rather the human mind that is the closest “image and likeness” to God. And at the very center of this likeness, there is something that points beyond, to God. Augustine conducts a thought experiment in which the whole world goes silent, and then, he says, we can hear the voice of God from beyond:

If to any man the tumult of the flesh grew silent, silent the images of the earth and sea and air: and if the heavens grew silent, and the very soul grew silent to herself and by not thinking of self mounted beyond self: if all dreams and imagined visions grew silent, and every tongue and every sign and whatsoever is transient—for indeed if any man could hear them, he should hear them saying with one voice, “We did not make ourselves, but He made us who abides forever”: but if, having uttered this and so set us to listening to Him who made them, they all grew silent, and in their silence He alone spoke to us, not by them but by Himself; so that we should hear his word, not by any tongue of flesh nor the voice of an angel nor the sound of thunder nor in the darkness of a parable, but that we should hear Himself whom in all these things we love, should hear Himself and not them. . . . This one [vision] should so ravish and absorb and wrap the beholder in inward joys that his life should eternally be such as that one moment of understanding for which we had been sighing—would this not be: Enter Thou into the joy of Thy Lord? (Augustine, Conf. IX.10, 179)
vision or a taste or perhaps fragrance of God in the depth of his fullness, and one second of such a moment of encounter is worth more than a lifetime of pious deeds and “correct” opinions: “For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Ps. 84:10).

If mysticism, rightly understood, is not foreign to Christianity, and if it is, as I have suggested, the lifeblood of the premodern church, then why does it seem so strange and exotic to us? I am convinced that the reason has to do with the fact that we live in a “secular world”—that is, an age in which our fundamental blueprint for thinking about the physical world, our humanity, and our relationship to God has changed. We might be the weird ones.

How Did We Get Here? Are We the Weird Ones?

Religion has not disappeared from the modern world, of course, but our religious experience and our quest for God unfold now within what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “the immanent frame.” By that term he means the social and psychological conditions in which God no longer seems as obvious and “palpable” in our world as he did before, say, 1500:

The presence of something beyond . . . the “natural” is more palpable and immediate, one might say, physical, in an enchanted age. The sacred in the strong sense, which marks out certain people, times, places and actions, in distinction to all others as profane, is by its very nature localizable, and its place is clearly marked out in ritual and sacred geography. This is what we sense, and often regret the passing of, when we contemplate the mediaeval cathedral. God-forsakenness is an experience of those whose ancestral culture has been transformed and repressed by a relentless process of disenchantment, whose deprivations can still be keenly felt.15
The long process of secularization involved a multitude of cultural forces, as Taylor masterfully relates in painstaking detail. As a result, God and religion are less “obvious” in our cultural landscape than they used to be; to say it another way, we live in an age of “practical atheism” or “a-theism.”

“One way to put the question . . . is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” This “every-day” atheism—that is, the recession of the felt presence of the divine from daily life—is accounted for, in part, by the collapse of the “bulwarks of belief,” those premodern ideas and practices that, though not specifically theological, created a favorable environment for belief. When everyone believes in an enchanted cosmos—when the hair on your neck stands up on end when you leave the boundaries of your parish; when you really worry about how impish fairies might wish to spellbind your children; when your court physician, Marsilio Ficino, is an expert in preparing amulets that you can wear over your heart to help you imbibe the power of astral bodies—then “religion” does not just make sense, but indeed the alternative is almost unthinkable. This is the “porous” world of premodernity, whose heroes are Achilles (who is hardly surprised to find gods descending to speak to him) and Roland (who cannot destroy his sword by striking it against a rock because it has a relic embedded within it). It’s a world in which you cannot escape God; rather, like John Bunyan, you feel his watchful eye even when you choose to live in a way displeasing to him.

But in contrast to such a premodern, “enchanted” view of the cosmos—or even to the philosophical visions of Plato and Boethius, who described the cosmos as having a soul that moves the world, groaning to express something about God—the philosophers of the Scientific Revolution assiduously avoided making any assumptions about the external ends of nature. Nature must be treated as a “brute creature” and approached as a great “mechanism,” even if it is also true that the scientists of the seventeenth century—they would have called themselves “natural
philosophers”—believed in God and angels and invisible realities, on their own time. Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton were deeply pious, and they thought of themselves as “priests of nature.” Robert Boyle even left money in his will to combat atheism! And yet, as it turned out, this habit of approaching the natural world as merely a mechanism (some call it a “methodological naturalism”) was, over the slow course of the next centuries, adopted as a philosophical paradigm (“philosophical naturalism”). What had been a methodological exclusion of anything but mechanical causes eventually became the assumption that external causes (such as God or spirits) were “merely” religious and thus superfluous for explaining what is really important.20

Again, none of this means that, in our secular age, religion has disappeared; rather, it is typically confined to the interior and subjective sphere. Taylor says that whereas we once had a “feeling” that depth of meaning was “out there” somewhere in the universe, we now have transferred that sense onto our interior lives. In Taylor’s words, we “conceive of ourselves as having inner depths. We might even say that the depths which were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more readily placed within.”21 In summary, we can borrow Taylor’s term “excarnation” to describe the movement from the enchanted world to the disenchanted world: “Official Christianity had gone through what we can call an ‘excarnation,’ a transfer out of embodied ‘enfleshed’ forms of religious life, to those which are more ‘in the head.”22 The result is that we perceive the sacred to have withdrawn from the public sphere and, indeed, from the physical, visible world, so that our ordinary actions can be carried out seemingly without any connection to the sacred.

Louis Dupré’s account, like Taylor’s, describes the trajectory of secularization from the guarded, whispering, hesitant atheism of a few bold members of the cultural elite in, say, the eighteenth century to the strident “apologetical” atheism of the nineteenth, which in turn yielded to the “benign” atheism that shaped the cultural landscape of everyday life by the beginning of the twentieth.
Significantly, the result of these centuries of slow cultural movement is that our picture of God has changed: how we imagine him, what we feel we need him for. For this reason Dupré argues that Western nihilism actually began in a religious age (!), the age in which God was asked to find his place within our new picture of the world:

The reduction of the ground of all reality to the sum of separate beings excludes ultimate transcendence. This is exactly what occurs when we refer to God as the supreme value or the cause of all beings. This abolition of true transcendence is the true atheism of our culture, one which had been developing for centuries before it became manifest and which consists not in the loss of the actual belief in God but in the loss of the very possibility of that belief. In this respect believers even more than unbelievers have failed their God—or in Nietzsche’s terms “murdered him”—by lowering him to a scale of being where he can no longer be truly sacred. Thus the concept of God as the supreme value, inclusive of all others, inevitably leads to atheistic rebellion.53

In other words, in a world in which materialistic explanations seem sufficient, we often invite God back into the picture, but in a way in which he is imprisoned within that picture of the world. And even when he is invited back (sometimes we don’t feel we need him for much), he is expected to hide behind the natural world as its “cause” or “supreme value.” In this way, God gets “objectified” and “reified” (reduced to just another thing in the cosmos). Dupré continues:

When Eckhart refers to God as his very Being, and Ruusbroec as his essence, we are obviously far away from the first cause, the highest value, or the supreme being. For the longest period of its existence our culture remained close to its transcendent source. Only with the advent of the modern era did a fundamental change take place. It appears in such philosophical expressions as “l’auteur de la nature” by which Descartes and his followers refer to God as
a particular piece in the intricate machinery of nature, necessary only because of the need of a cause in a mechanistic universe. Everything of real interest came after the first cause. This would soon enough lead to the bloodless deism of the seventeenth century and, eventually, to the consistent atheistic materialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{24}

Changes in our “cosmic imaginary” (our world picture) and metaphysics also have implications for how we think about devotion and morality. In the modern world, God’s chief interaction with human beings is to provide a kind of spiritual uplift, a rising tide of morality, the inspiration to be honest, just, disciplined, hardworking, and so on. The scholar Murray Roston contrasts the early seventeenth-century “intensity of belief, the personal fervour,” in divines like Lancelot Andrewes and John Donne—where we find a “conviction of the almost desperate condition” of human beings—with what came at the end of that century: a “calmly reasoned advocacy of Christianity as the promoter of ordered and virtuous conduct among rational believers.” Whereas Donne plaintively cried out to God to “forgive me my crying sins and my whispering sins, sins of uncharitable hate, and sinnes of unchaste love, sinnes against Thee and Thee,” we find Cambridge theologian and mathematician (and teacher of Newton) Isaac Barrow judiciously arguing that “[Christianity is] a most rational act, arguing the person to be sagacious, considerate, and judicious; one who doth carefully inquire into things, doth seriously weigh the case, doth judge soundly about it.” John Tillotson, the archbishop of Canterbury, likewise emphasized a Christianity free from hysterics: “Let us always be calm and considerate, and have the patience to examine things thoroughly and impartially: let us be humble and willing to learn. . . . Let us do what we can to free our selves from prejudice and passion, from self-conceit and self-interest, which are often too strong a bias upon the judgments of the best men.”\textsuperscript{25} The appeal of such a toned-down approach to religion made sense after several violent centuries of religious
divisiveness. “Mysticism,” from such a perspective, was dangerous, especially if it was conflated with personal visions, strong emotions, voices from God, and personal commissions. I hardly need to point out that wars, conquests, migrations, and schisms have all been the fruits of such abuses of religion.

And so, in a world in which to be an “enthusiast” or a “zealot” was considered to be dangerously unregulated (see, e.g., David Hume), we can understand the appeal of the kind of piety limiting itself to advancing civic virtues, personal ethics, self-discipline, and tolerance. In such a cultural situation, the main purpose of religion is to promote these virtues. God then becomes a great instrument to supply inspiration and lend a helping hand.

This is, of course, the norm now, as sociologists and journalists point out. What was once a new voice of moderation among the cultural elite has now become the unquestioned background music of our religious lives. We’ve reached something of a saturation point for this “practical atheism” (or “a-theism”), as was shown in the landmark sociological work by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, Soul Searching. Having interviewed three thousand teenagers, they concluded that the religious convictions of modern young people (and the parents who teach them) can be summed up as “moralistic therapeutic deism”—that is, a system of tacit beliefs according to which there is a God who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved. Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance. He is often described by teens as “watching over everything from above” and “the creator of everything and . . . just up there now controlling everything.” . . . For many teens, as with adults, God sometimes does get involved in people’s lives, but usually only when they call on him, mostly when they have some trouble or problem or bad feeling that they want resolved. In this sense, the Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth-century version.
by the therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs. . . . This God is not demanding. He actually can’t be, because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good.  

This quotation appears in a chapter entitled “God, Religion, Whatever.”

Other sociologists and teachers have anecdotally confirmed Smith and Denton’s findings. Kenda Creasy Dean, for example, argues that the problem is not that American teenagers are getting the wrong ideas about religion. On the contrary, they’re correctly absorbing what American Christians actually believe! She calls our general religious view of God the “triumph of the ‘cult of nice.’” Catholic theologian Ulrich Lehner has also commented on the religious horizons of his students in his book God Is Not Nice: “We have made attending church and believing in God something that nice and polite people do, mostly on Sundays.” Lehner quotes Reinhold Niebuhr, who satirically described the American religious outlook like this: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.” I, too, have had similar moments in teaching. When I explain moralistic therapeutic deism to my students, they’re always anxious because many of them recognize it as their own tacit belief system, but they can’t envision what the alternative to a “nice” God and a polite and enthusiastic religion would look like.

This book is about the alternative.

The Wildness of God: What This Book Is and Is Not

This is not a book about natural theology (an attempt to argue for the existence of God on the basis of the structure of the world); nor is it a genealogy of modernity, a history of the Scientific Revolution, or a psychology of religion. Rather, I’m interested in describing the shocking wildness of premodern conceptions of God
and the spiritual life. And so, in the following chapters I will take a series of “core samples” from the premodern mystical tradition, as well as a few modern writers who felt we needed to recover it:

- Plato (who wrote his greatest works in the 370s and 360s BC)
- Plotinus (AD 204–270)
- Gregory of Nyssa (335–395)
- Evagrius (345–399)
- Augustine (354–430)
- John Cassian (360–435)
- Dionysius the Areopagite (early 500s)
- Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)
- Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141)
- Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)
- Guigo II (abbot of Grande Chartreuse, 1174–1180)
- Francis (1181/2–1226)
- Bonaventure (1221–1274)
- Angela of Foligno (1248–1309)
- Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328)
- John Ruusbroec (1293/4–1381)
- Hugh of Balma (probably writing sometime around 1300)
- Julian of Norwich (1342–1416)
- Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464)
- Karl Rahner (1904–1984)
- Thomas Merton (1915–1968)
- Louis Dupré (1925–)

Needless to say, an introductory book cannot hope to be exhaustive. Instead, like a photographer hanging up his favorite shots for an exhibition, I will provide a series of individual, related moments that are, as yet, not completely reconciled. I prefer this method—as opposed to providing my own streamlined “theory”
of mysticism—for many reasons: in part, because I don’t really have a streamlined theory; in part, because I think surveying a select variety of mystical treatises in some detail will keep us from too quickly reaching for easy formulas. When we keep in mind the slight discordance between Gregory’s “eternal progress” and Dionysius’s “God beyond being,” or between Augustine’s teaching on how the intellect melts into love and Merton’s bleak desert, then we are forced to remember that, to a certain extent, all these “systems” and teachings are themselves metaphorical. Nothing kills the mystique of mysticism quite like finding the right formula. However, I am convinced that we moderns, who have come to feel that religion is some sort of process of self-improvement or inculturation into civic duty, need to recover the premodern vision of God in all its fierce joy and heartening wildness. That felt need, as it developed in the twentieth century, is what the first chapter is about.

Before turning to the first chapter, in which we will look at the unexpected reemergence of mysticism in the twentieth century, I’d like to conclude this introduction with a taste of the “strangeness” I’ve referred to—that is, to the alternative to our “nice” God. It comes from one of the great mystics (or visionaries) of the medieval period, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). Of all the writers I will reference throughout this book, Hildegard might be the most paradigmatic exemplar of what I have referred to as “wildness.” She is by turns uplifting, inspiring, provoking, and off-puttingly strange. Poet, abbess, composer, visionary, prophet, reformer, painter (maybe), and “holistic” physician, she claims to have had visions from the age of five, visions made up of strange, symbolic pictures, similar to the images that haunt the apocalyptic pages of John, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel. Hildegard records, describes, and comments on these visions in three hefty books that together constitute her magnum opus, Scivias.

Scivias is made up of a series of chapters, each of which begins with a description of some phantasmagorical image and then moves on to provide a moral interpretation of the image. In the
original edition, which was lost during World War II, these written descriptions were accompanied by paintings created (or at least overseen) by Hildegard herself. The first image—as wild as anything concocted by Picasso or Chagall—is of a mountain of iron, with one seated upon it who is so bright that Hildegard says she was blinded when she looked upon this figure with the eye of her heart. From this bright one a river of sparks flows forth and then pours out onto a figure covered in eyes who stands next to a child wearing simple garments. After describing this vision, Hildegard explains: the mountain represents “the strength and stability of the eternal Kingdom of God, which no fluctuation of mutability can destroy”; the bright one is the one who “rules the whole world with celestial divinity in the brilliance of unfading serenity, but is incomprehensible to human minds”; and the figure covered in eyes represents “the fear of the Lord,” which “stands in God’s presence with humility and gazes on the Kingdom of God, surrounded by the clarity of a good and just intention, exercising her zeal and stability among humans. . . . For by the acute sight of her contemplation she counters all forgetfulness of God’s justice, which people often feel in their mental tedium.”

Scivias, then, is a work about being “awake” to the essence of reality, to the secrets behind the veil: “And as the power of God is everywhere and encompasses all things, and no obstacles can stand against it, so too the human intellect has great power to resound in living voices, and arouse sluggish souls to vigilance.”

And what is at the heart of reality? The life of God. At times Hildegard likens it to a “living light,” at other times to an eternal symphony. In fact, over the course of her work, Hildegard’s vision is simultaneously audible and visible, a painted song and a sung illumination (see Scivias 3.13). But this burning, “living light” is at the heart of all her visions, the secret that explains the “inmost contents of the Scriptures”:

And behold! In the forty-third year of my earthly course, as I was gazing with great fear and trembling attention at a heavenly vision,
I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me, “O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth! Say and write what you see and hear. . . .” Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures.33

Then the voice addresses her personally:

I am the Living Light, Who illuminates the darkness. The person whom I have chosen and whom I have miraculously stricken as I willed, I have placed among great wonders, beyond the measure of the ancient people who saw in Me many secrets, but I have laid her low on the earth, that she might not set herself up in arrogance of mind. The world has had in her no joy or lewdness or use in worldly things, for I have withdrawn her from impudent boldness, and she feels fear and is timid in her works.34

At the heart of the world, we find the secret meaning of the universe: the life of God. All other things—political power, ambitious human projects, artistic achievements—are just dry leaves in the wind by comparison: “And I, a person not glowing with the strength of strong lions or taught by their inspiration, but a tender and fragile rib imbued with a mystical breath, saw a blazing fire, incomprehensible, inextinguishable, wholly living and wholly Life.”35 This sickly, timid woman, this broken vessel chosen because of its fragility, dared to raise her voice to instruct the powerful men of her era: emperor, abbots, bishops, and pope. Like other female mystics considered in this book (Julian of Norwich and Angela of Foligno), Hildegard, on the periphery of society, a “mere woman” and inheritor of the “curse of Eve,” was chosen precisely because of her fragility: “Burst forth into a fountain of abundance and overflow with mystical knowledge, until they who now think you contemptible because of Eve’s transgression are
stirred up by the flood of your irrigation. For you have received your profound insight not from humans, but from the lofty and tremendous Judge on high, where this calmness will shine strongly with glorious light among the shining ones.”

When we keep in mind Hildegard’s vision of the inextinguishable fire, we can understand why a much earlier mystic, Gregory the Great (540–604), in his commentary on Job could say that the ascent to God was one of mingled joy and terror. Commenting on part of Eliphaz’s speech to Job (“Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof. In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake,” Job 4:12–14), Gregory says this:

The dread of a nocturnal vision is the trembling caused by hidden contemplation. The more elevated the human mind becomes by the consideration of eternity, the more intense is its fear and trembling over its earthly deeds. . . . It so happens that enlightenment causes it to fear the more, because it sees much better how far it falls short from the rule of truth.

It is this vision of God that the mystics I discuss below felt they were called to keep safe—a searing, wild vision of a God who cannot be imprisoned within the order he created. I now turn to exploring how, in the wasteland of the twentieth century, there was a renewed desire to bring it back.