



## Christian Mysticism

First of all, it must be said that if the historical Jesus was a mystic, then much of what he purportedly said is consistent with that Universal point of view. His teachings stressed compassion and love towards all, and the common image that we have of Jesus is as a Bodhisattva (in terms of the Mahayana Buddhist traditions). Jesus taught that we should not be judgmental, should love one's enemies as oneself. He taught that we should be compassionate towards all, and that as one treats the lowliest person, one is treating Christ. Perennial philosophy teaches that God is looking out through all eyes, and the spark of the Divine is within every heart. "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). Were Jesus a mystic, he was likely an initiate of Essenes, the Jewish mystics of his time. Much of the New Testament can be interpreted Kabalistic terms. This point of view reveals a deeper understanding of these scriptures that is consistent with other of the word's perennial philosophic traditions.

The earliest Christian mystics were called Gnostics, from the root meaning "knowing (of the heart)". For Gnostics, it's a matter of knowing, not just believing. It's a matter of realization and direct experience. With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Scrolls, further evidence of Jesus as an Essene mystic was revealed. Consider these quotes from the Gospel of Thomas (paraphrased):

- 91: When asked to explain who he was, so that they could believe in him, Jesus responded, "Your minds wander all over heaven and earth, but you don't understand who is in your presence, and you don't know how to truly see this very moment."
  
- 113: When asked when the Kingdom will come, Jesus answered, "It won't come by watching for it. It won't be said 'Look, it's here!' or 'Look, it's over there!'. Rather, the Kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, but people just don't see it."

There have been a great many Christian mystics throughout history, and some have even

been officially been declared saints by the Catholic church. The great Christian mystic, Saint Francis of Assisi, was popularized through the movie *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. While taking a course on Christian Mysticism as an undergraduate, I read Saint Theresa of Avilla's autobiography. In it, she described in detail her ecstatic mystical experiences, while being very careful to not contradict any of the church dogma of that time. She was thus true to her experience, while avoiding the unpleasantness of the Inquisition! One of her friends, Saint John of the Cross, also a mystic, wasn't so lucky (he was tortured), but did manage to escape. He is now considered one of Spain's greatest poets; his mystic vision shines out from the lines of his poetry and his other writings.

The Rosicrucians are a sect of Christian mystics with close connections to the Western mystery traditions, including Qaballa and Alchemy. Today there are various groups carrying on these traditions (see the link below). This tradition is closely related to the Masonic Order, although most current members may be oblivious to the deeper meanings involved in their rituals. Many of the founding fathers of the United States of America were active Masons, and Rosicrucian teachings helped to guide the framers of our constitution.

A more recent mystic in the Catholic tradition was the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. He initiated many inter-faith dialogues with a decidedly perennial philosophic perspective, and his books have had a tremendous influence among Catholics and non-Catholics alike (see the link below). Indeed, while studying Zen at Mount Baldi Zen Center, I was surprised to learn that our own Zen master Roshi Sasaki gave yearly intensive meditation retreats to a group of Trappist monks, who found that Zen meditation helped them to deepen their own contemplative practice.

Over a decade ago I was privileged to attend an Easter Catholic/Zen retreat led by a Jesuit Priest who happened to also be a Zen master, Father Robert Kennedy. Father Kennedy advocates Zen meditation as a means to become a better Christian, and has initiated many Zen meditation groups that regularly meditate in Catholic Churches (wonderful places to meditate!).

Eastern Orthodox Christianity has an old form of meditation practice called hesychastic practice, that has been practiced by Christian ascetics and Desert Fathers from the earliest days of the church. Based on Christ's injunction to "go into your closet to pray", hesychasm (which translates as "stillness, rest, quiet, silence") involves the process of retiring inward, withdrawing from the senses, so as to achieve a direct experiential knowledge of God. These practices even involve physical postures and breathing exercises, reminiscent of Hindu yogic practices.

There has been much intolerance in the history of Christianity (and more generally in the history of all the Abrahamic traditions), and frequently this intolerance has been brutally applied even to fellow Christians. And yet throughout history have arisen Christian mystics espousing perennial philosophy. Many Christians today are seeking a deeper understanding of their own religion, and also seeking the Unity that is the basis of all true

spirituality. And that deeper understanding is indeed attainable, for those with eyes to see. May they all become intoxicated with Divine Love!

### **Further reading on mystic Christianity**

[Wikipedia's entry on Christian Mysticism](#)

[The Gnostic Society Library - Gospel of Mary Magdalene](#)

[National Geographic - The Gospel of Judas](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Saint Francis of Assisi](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Saint Theresa of Avila](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Saint John of the Cross](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Thomas Merton](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Esoteric Christianity](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Rosicrucianism](#)

Father Kennedy's (a Jesuit priest and Zen teacher) Zen Center: [Morning Star Zendo](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Christian Meditation](#)

[Wikipedia's entry on Hesychasm](#)

[Christian Mysticism](#)

### **Videos relating to Christian Mysticism**

[Early Christian Mysticism: The Jesus Prayer](#)

[Father Peter on Christian Mysticism](#)

Secret Quest: The Path of the Christian Gnostics

[Part 1](#)   [Part 2](#)   [Part 3](#)

[Hesychasm – On Collecting Yourself](#)

Elaine Pagels (a famous scholar of early Christianity)

[The Origins of Satan](#)

[The Book of Revelation](#)

[The Gospel of Judas](#)