

Book Review**Review of Ursula King's Book:
The Book of Secrets: Christian Mystics:
Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages**

Stephen P. Smith*

ABSTRACT

Technology offers the attraction for hot new inventions, and these can even seduce our nature into accepting change for changes's sake. And confronted with secular pretense and it is easy to miss the subtleness of mystical experience altogether. Ursula King's "The Christian Mystics" provides an account of this other activity that is possible to miss. The alternative activity cannot be dismissed easily seeing that King catalogues the life of numerous mystics, from early Christians (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Origen) to those contemporary mystics (e.g., Simone Weil, Thomas Merton). You can find this book at Amazon http://www.amazon.com/Christian-Mystics-Their-Legacies-throughout/dp/1587680122/ref=cm_cr-mr-title.

Key Words: Christian, mystics, GOD, experience, one, unity.

King (page 15) writes: "All mysticism is characterized by a passion for unity. To the mystic, true Being and Ultimate Reality are One. This can be experienced as both impersonal and personal, as Ground of Being, Ultimate Source, Perfect Goodness, Eternal Wisdom, Devine Love, God, or the Godhead. This Reality contains, yet transcends, everything there is. It is the One whom all is lost and all is found." Mystics share the same experiences, and as these experiences are common they provide a level of validity that is not so easily ignored.

I must comment here. God is not found separate from God's creation, God is with us. The dualism that finds God apart from our world, either coming from theists or atheists, does not find support coming from mystical experience. I need only point to King. The situation is reversed from dualistic constraints, it is mysticism that is open to scientific investigation of a kind proposed by Wallace in "The Taboo of Subjectivity".

King (page 19) writes: "Of Great importance also is the concept of God who is not simply One, Ultimate Reality or the Absolute, but a personal Being who yet transcends all notions of personhood found among human beings by forming a community of persons with the mystery of the Trinity."

King (page 80) writes of Hildegard of Bingen: "She describes her visions in terms of light, speaks of mystical rapture and prophecies, and expresses her passionate desire for God with great intensity. Her visions are marked by brilliant colors, her descriptions by apophatic negations."

King (page 109) quotes Meister Eckhart: "The union of God with the soul is so great that it is scarcely to believe. And God is in himself so far above that no form of knowledge or desire can ever reach him... Desire is deep, immeasurably so. But nothing that the intellect can grasp and nothing that desire can desire is God. Where understanding and desire end, there is darkness and there God's radiance begins."

Correspondence: Stephen P. Smith, Ph.D., Visiting Scientist, Physics Department, University Of California at Davis, CA
E-mail: hucklebird@aol.com

King (pages 152-153) writes on St. Teresa of Avila: "For Teresa, mental prayer was the beginning of the path to new ways of understanding, to the tasting of deep mysteries of faith, which included the indwelling presence of the Trinity and of Jesus Christ in his humanity and divinity, as well as insights into sin and grace, the Church and the sacraments. Her visions were both spiritual and physical, and she eventually experienced the grace of perfect union with Christ so that she became inseparable from him 'as when a little stream enters the sea'."

King (page 235) writes on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "As a child he had experienced a deep sense of oneness with nature, later followed by mystical experiences linked to 'vast open spaces' of sea and desert, to the riches of fossil life and the vibrant energy of cosmic evolution. All these made him ecstatically perceive 'that through all of nature I was immersed in God.' For him Jesus 'comes to us clothed in the glory of the world.'"

Trinity finds agreement with the Advaitic experience. King (page 241) writes: "Swami Abhishiktananda's experience included the belief that there is an Advaitic dimension, an experience of deep, underlying unity, in Christianity itself which must be recovered." On page (242): "He realized a profoundly personal synthesis of Hindu-Christian spirituality in his own life."

King (page 247) writes: "Reading the stories of past Christian mystics, it is remarkable how often mystical experiences of union and communion occur through intimate contact with nature, with the haunting beauty of its myriad forms of life. Hildegard of Bingen saw God's fiery essence in the beautiful meadows and waters, the blossoms, fruits and breeze, but also the sun, moon and stars, whereas Francis of Assisi spoke to the animals and praised Brother Sun."

King (page 248) writes on the basic message of all mystics: "Divine radiance, light and life suffuse all there is. It is for us to accept this, and just let be or, in the words of the Christian mystics, to conform our will to God's will."

References

Jesper Hoffmeyer, 2001, *The Book of Secrets: Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages*. HiddenSpring.