

Turning
to the
Mystics



Mechtild of Magdeburg

Bonus: Bernard McGinn on Mechthild, Eckhart, and Mysticism
with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to this bonus episode of Turning to the Mystics. And Jim and I are so excited to be here today with our very special guest, Professor Bernard McGinn. So let me tell you a little bit about him. Bernard McGinn is an American Roman Catholic theologian, religious historian and scholar of spirituality. A specialist in medieval mysticism, McGinn is widely regarded as the preeminent scholar of mysticism in the Western Christian tradition. He's best known for his comprehensive nine volume series on mysticism, under the general title of, The Presence of God.

He is Naomi Shenstone Donnelly Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology, and of the history of Christianity at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and serves on the committees on medieval studies and on general studies. Today, we're so excited to tap into Bernard's profound expertise and love of Christian mysticism and gained further insights into the two Rhineland mystics Jim shared this year, Meister Eckhart and Mechthild of Magdeburg. So I'm here with Jim and our very special guest, Professor Bernard McGinn. We've been so looking forward to having you with us today. And so, welcome, Bernard.

Bernard McGinn: Yeah, thank you.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome to you, Jim.

Jim Finley: It's good to be together again like this. Yes, to be with Bernard too.

Kirsten Oates: Bernard, I wanted to start by asking you, what inspired you to embark on your deep and profound studies of the Christian mystics?

Bernard McGinn: Well, I was always interested in the mystics even when I was in school in the 1950s and 1960s and doing theology. But of course, the mystics weren't a large part of theological education in those days, so it was mostly reading on my own. But after I came to University of Chicago in 1968, I began to discover in the late '60s, and especially in the '70s, that more and more of the graduate students who were coming to do theology were interested in mysticism.

And that of course fit in very much with my own interests. So I began teaching courses on the mystics and getting a number of students who did their dissertations on mysticism and the like. And about late 1970s, close to 1980, I realized that there was no adequate theological treatment of the mystics in English. There were numerous good studies of particular figures, excellent studies. But there was no really serious theological history of Western Christian mysticism, which I thought would be very important for the students who were coming and the students that I thought were also, in a sense, in the pipeline.

So I envisaged, my history originally is about 1980, '81 as having three volumes. So kind of substantial history. But as I got into it, it grew and grew and grew. And so, eventually it reached nine volumes, which I finished off in 2021. So it was a much bigger project that I

had anticipated, but I think it's fulfilled its purpose. I know it's very widely used, even for relatively big books. It's been translated into a number of different languages.

And it's been part of not ... Something that's much, much bigger than me, and bigger than any of us. It's the turn to mysticism, which has been so crucial a part of both religious studies academically, but also of living the Christian life in the last 40 or 50 years. I can remember the 1940s and the 1950s when the mystics were what we used to call rare birds. There were a few of them, but people weren't very ... They were just put on the shelf there.

Oh yeah, there's Teresa of Ávila, there's someone. Nowadays, reading the mystics and trying to learn from them, absorb their teaching, appropriate their teaching is a part of the lives of I think many, many, many serious and devout Christians. Far more than it has been over the past century or two. So not only my work, but work like the Classics of Western Spirituality series, which I was heavily involved in and edited for 20, 25 years, has sold millions and millions of volumes. With 135 different books, beginning publication in 1978.

Those books are read widely. They're used in classrooms all over the English-speaking world. So it's part of something that I would say is the kind of movement of the spirit in contemporary society. Not just in Christianity, but also in Islam and in Judaism and other contexts. I've had many opportunities to teach with students of Jewish mysticism, lesser extent Sufi. This is an ecumenical age of mysticism, I would say.

Kirsten Oates: And you've really given shape to this tradition. That's what I so appreciate about your work. You've given a shape to what doesn't live out inside of a church or a denomination in a specific shape. So thank you. And I know so many people are grateful for the way you've done that.

Bernard McGinn: Yeah, I've always said, I mean, that was part of what I was trying to accomplish in my history, but I wouldn't have been able to do that without the input particularly of my students and my colleagues and others. I mean, I taught all these things. And the reaction I got in terms of trying to present them in class, and the comments I had both for my students who went on to write dissertations for my colleagues who also got very interested in that, that shaped the history as much as my own efforts to do that. So again, it's a collaborative exercise.

Kirsten Oates: I'm curious about how the mystics impacted you personally and your own kind of spiritual path.

Bernard McGinn: Well, I think that any serious believer is going to have to be on what I would call the mystical path. The purpose of their life is to find deeper contact with God. Now, that's why I talk about mysticism as existing on a continuum. There are the great mystics that we all read who have gone far on this journey much, much further than the rest of us. But I think anybody who's really interested in this serious religious life from many traditions, they're on that path already. And they're trying to go forward as far as they can and as far as they can also with the help of graces as a Christian speak of it.

So I try to put their message into practice in my life as far as I can. I do think it's a discipline that needs a certain commitment in terms of the way you live, in terms of the way you pray. I don't see how anybody can be a serious mystic unless they pray in some way. Not

necessarily have it in the formal ways that often have been used in the past, but that attempt to find a contact with God by turning your attention to God, which is essence of prayer. I think that's part of it. And I think that the more that I have studied the mystics, the more that I've recognized that's a kind of necessity. Because it can't be an abstract study. Other aspects perhaps of the religious life can be more or less abstract. But I don't think the study of spirituality, mysticism in the broad sense, can be ... It's self-engaging.

It has to be personally appropriated if you're really going to understand what's going on rather than just kind of look at it from the outside. At least, that's my own take on studying mysticism.

Kirsten Oates: Like a kind of heartfelt participation. It's not just learning something.

Bernard McGinn: Right, yeah. And living the mystic life is also reading the mystics. You talked, I think you said you were doing Guigo II. Well, those exercise start with Lectio.

Yeah they do.

And that's the foundation. That's the foundation of the spiritual and mystical life. And the Lectio that we do today is very much reading of the classic mystics in the past. So it's a development out of that medieval pattern that Guigo once announced. And I think the Lectio then is absolutely crucial. And I think that's why so many people have turned to reading these mystical texts.

Many of which were not available 40 or 50 years ago. A few of the great mystics were, but now almost ... Many, almost all of the great classic mystical texts have been translated, not just in the classic series. But things like Cistercian Publications and various other publication projects in other languages as well. But I'm thinking primarily here of English. And I think that necessity for reading, careful reading of the great classic mystical texts is foundational. But people are turning to them all the time.

Kirsten Oates: And that's at the heart of this podcast too, Jim leading our listeners in the Lectio practice. So yeah. Jim, did you have anything you'd like to chime in with here?

Jim Finley: Yes, I would. I want to expand on what you're saying is that, one of the things Merton once said in the monastery to the novices, he said he believes that there were many people in the world ... This would've been in the '60s, early '60s. Many people in the world that were being led into more mystical dimensions of God's presence in their life. But they had no one to help them understand what was happening to them and no one to offer guidance in it this way.

And so, when I left the Monastery and started leading retreats and with the podcast, I found that's really true. And so one thought I have that comes through in the mystics ... I want to pick up on what you're saying, is that we're living in incremental realizations of infinite generosity of God. So that even the least sincere stirring of God's presence in our life is the presence of God. And we're already on the same path, like a continuum that the mystics are on. And that's what I hear you saying too.

It's like an endless enrichment of this unfolding generosity, like this. And therefore, would you say then there's no ... The mystics, the classical text seems so concerned in helping us to discern the turning or the touch or how to offer guiding. But there is no decisive point at which it becomes mystical. It's a qualitative enrichment.

Bernard McGinn: And this is why it's so important not to think of the great mystic as somehow a different species of humanity.

Jim Finley: That's right. [laughs].

Bernard McGinn: We can't be like them, because we're on the same path. They lead the way. They have gone much further. They've had much deeper insights than we have, but we're still on the path. And Merton was particularly good about that in emphasizing in a book like the, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, emphasizing the necessity for communication. And for anyone who's had any contact with God, that contact is not for themselves, in any selfish, personal ... Just personal way. It's meant to be communicated. So Thomas Merton, one of the great mystics of the past century.

Jim Finley: Really, yeah.

Bernard McGinn: I just published a book this year on modern mysticism and introduction, doing 10 figures. Five men and five women, of whom Merton is one. So he, for me, is very much a mystical.

Jim Finley: Tell me if this resonates with you. It's just like, say, classical music. It's very rare for us to say that we're going to be a Beethoven or a Mozart. But we can all enjoy ... We participate in it because part of the dowry of our being, in a way. We're engaged in it. And I think these mystical teachings are like that too in a way.

Bernard McGinn: I've used that illustration in the past. Another illustration I've used is sports, basketball. Lots of people like to play basketball. Not everybody is a Michael Jordan [inaudible 00:12:40]. So there's the great basketball players people looked up to. But that doesn't mean that there aren't a lot of people who really enjoy playing basketball, even though they're never going to be world-famous. All these things need to be understood as integral and in this kind of continuum of integral search for God's presence.

Kirsten Oates: Bernard, do you have a definition of mystical awakening that you use?

Bernard McGinn: Well, I've developed, in course, of my history and in several articles and things, I've developed what I call a kind of heuristic or working description. Because it's hard to define, and there are many, many definitions. But I think of mysticism as that particular part or element of sincere belief, Christian belief, or also Islam. That concerns the preparation for the attainment and the effect of a deeper sense of God's presence in one's life.

And I use that description because, first of all, I want to emphasize that mysticism is not the whole of religion. It's a part or an element. Secondly, that it's not just a moment of mystical awareness or some particular grace. It's a life commitment that

involves preparation, some forms of [inaudible 00:14:06], but also then the effect that this has on the life of the mystic. Because somebody come along like, “Oh, I had an experience in God.”

Well, maybe you did. The only way to judge that is the effect that this has had on the person’s life, and the effect that they have had on other kinds of people. And I talk about the presence of God rather than mystical union. Because I think union ... Presence is a bigger term, bigger category than just union. Many mystics have spoken about union and it’s a key part of the mystical traditions.

But other mystics haven’t wanted to talk about union with God. They talk about following God. They talk about seeing God. They talk about hearing God. They talk about touching God. And some mystics like St. Augustine, even were very hesitant about speaking about being united with God. Because that was what the Neoplatonic philosophers had talked about. And Augustine wanted to differentiate his sense of God’s presence from what Plotinus and others have said.

So that kind of heuristic description is what I’ve worked with over the course of the years. And it’s a very generous and general, I mean, a general picture. Knowing people would say, “Well, that’s not definite enough.” The mystic tradition is too broad, I think to be narrowly circumscribed by very strict definition. So my definition is messy, but I hope it’s more inclusive.

Jim Finley: I’m thinking now seeing people in spiritual direction like sitting with people and talking to people about awakening. That would you say too, there’s something about this dawning of this awareness of presence, is they become aware that it’s already begun. And they’re trying to articulate or put words to something they don’t understand, that’s very subtle or delicate. Would you say that’s often true, like an awareness is something that’s unfolding out of their heart? It’s a oneness that’s already resonating in them, they don’t know what to make of it. Would you say that’s true? That it’s-

Bernard McGinn: I think that’s true of most people. And it is very difficult to describe. I mean, even for those who have been educated in the spiritual traditions, there’s a quality of ineffability about mystical consciousness that always remains. It’s a necessary impossibility to really talk about. It’s really impossible. But it’s necessary to be done. So you have to try to communicate what really in the long run cannot be communicated. And that’s part of what makes, I think, the mystical tradition so fascinating, is that people are up to an impossible task. But it’s a task that they feel called to by what they have felt in their hearts, and therefore what they feel that they would like to communicate to other people, to invite them onto the path.

Jim Finley: Would you say too ... Another interesting thing I’m thinking now spiritual direction again, this kind of thing. Is that it’s like two people sharing this. Neither one can explain it, but you can tell when you’re in the presence of it. That is, you can tell when you yourself have been quickened by it. You can tell you’re in the presence of someone who’s in the process of being quickened.

And when they see that they’re seen, that they’re not alone. And it creates a kind of a contemplative like in medio Ecclesiae. Like in the midst of this oneness. And my second

thought I'd ask you to respond to, is somewhere in Aquinas, in the Summa, he talks about knowledge by co-naturality. That as you know what you know by ... and so, the mystical union is more knowledge by co-naturality, rather than about something.

Would you say this is true about recognizing that you see that you're seen? There's like a resonance, like creates ... And then secondly, this co-natural, the actualization of a divine potential in all of us as persons created by God in the image of God?

Bernard McGinn: Yes. No, co-naturality is a very fine term. And what Aquinas has to say about that I think is extremely, extremely useful because it's very different from what we call scientific knowledge.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's right.

Bernard McGinn: That you can circumscribe and you can define and you can put into categories and even formulas. Mystical knowledge isn't that way at all. It's a knowledge that ... co-naturality is a good, It's a knowledge that you feel, and that you learn something from. But it's not the kind of knowledge that you can put into easy categories.

That's helpful.

And in any way define it. As I said, the mystic knows more of who God is but cannot tell you more of what God is.

Kirsten Oates: That's great. I love that. That's so helpful. More of who God is, but not what God is. Yeah. Yeah. Beautiful. How do you think the mystics help us, Bernard, in living our lives in fidelity to God's will to this path?

Bernard McGinn: I would say it's hard to give a single answer to that. Both for the difference of the readers of the mystics and for the mystics themselves.

This is why reading certain mystics will have a wide appeal. And some of others may not have a very wide appeal, but may have a particular resonance with certain kinds of readers. It's often interesting, when [inaudible 00:19:45] given talks at parishes and other places like that. People will say, "Well, which mystics should I read?" And there's some mystics who are hard to read. And you need a certain amount of preparation and background. There are the mystics, and I frequent take Julian of Norwich as an example of that, who have an accessibility, a general accessibility that not everybody has.

And I've often, when parishioners or others would come out with that question, I'd say, "Well, if you've never read any mystics, try reading Julian of Norwich." She's a wonderful writer. She has an accessibility because of their life story and the fact that she's writing out of her visionary experiences. But she's writing for everybody. I Mean, she says in one place in the short text, "I'm not good because I've had the visions. Because many people who haven't had visions love God and their neighbor far better than I do."

Well, that's right on. I mean, that is the mystical litmus test if you will. Do you love God more and your neighbor more rather than have you been given special gifts? Even the mystics who were given special gifts never thought that they were the core of the essence

of mysticism. They're only the icing on the cake. And sometimes the icing is tasty, but it's not necessary. And like Eckhart are very insistent. The special experiences are not a good idea. They can be very misleading. And someone like Teresa of Ávila had lots of special experiences. She says the same thing in one place. She said if any of her nuns start climbing up to heaven she's going to pull them down by the ankles, send them to the kitchen to do a little honest work.

Jim Finley: Do you get the feeling ... Sometimes when I sit with people that are seeking this is that it's so intimately self-disclosing. That it's infinitely closer to them than they can imagine. And in the sincerity of being humbled by it and listening to it and just opening their heart, that is the way. You know what I mean?

It's an endless enrichment of an unfolding of presence. And that's what I think is disarming because we live in a society ... Like, Gabriel Marcel is a big distinction on mystery and problem. And the problematic is quantifiable and objective. The mystery is this unexplainable immediacy of the richness of being itself and life itself, and that's what's so ... I think people are so hungry for this. Because we all know it's true, because we've tasted it, but where can I find somebody in whose presence I can know that I'm not alone and be guided? And that's the benefit of these sharings that we do with people. Would you say that's true, that this is ...

Bernard McGinn: No, I would very, very much agree with that. And this is why I emphasize the reading of mystical texts. But I think it's also the human connection through spiritual direction, through spiritual friendship, great tradition of spiritual friendship where two people are not necessarily in a relationship of director and directee, but in a relationship of kind of mutual search. And their friendship enhances that searching. And of course, this is a wonderful part of the mystical tradition. Aelred of Rievaulx, the Cistercian wrote a great, very powerful and personal treatise on just how important spiritual friendship was.

Jim Finley: Yes, he did.

Bernard McGinn: So it's those human relationships and some of them are in terms of spiritual direction. Others of them are in terms of the whole spiritual friendship notion.

Jim Finley: One more thing on this too, on path on reading the mystics. Tell me what you think of this, what I tell people. Because in a way it's daunting if you just sit and start to read it, but if you read it very slowly, it's the one-liners that get to you. Something is so stunningly beautiful, and if you would sit with it as the *Lectio* itself in the meditation way, and the more you do it, the more you connect the dots, the more you're being mentored by them into how to move spaciously in a kind of oneness with them. Does that make sense in the *Lectio* reading mystics, rather than ...

Bernard McGinn: Yeah, and the whole notion of *Lectio Divina* as it's been revived, emphasizes slow reading.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Bernard McGinn: Which is exactly the opposite of course of so many people today. We're fast reading. You have to read so much, et cetera, et cetera. The spiritual traditions, mysticism based on

slow reading, meditative reading. Ruminative reading as the monks used to call it, that is just taking a bit of text and chewing it for its inherent wisdom.

I mean, a good example of that in Meister Eckhart's sermons. You just sit down and read a lot of Eckhart's sermons, you'll get lost. I mean, your head is spinning if you read an Eckhart's sermon, and they're not terribly long. If you read it very slowly and meditatively and go back and read it, you'll get a tremendous amount out of it. It's meant to be read as a form Lectio Divina. And this is true of many other mystical texts as well. I mean, academics may have to read these things more rapidly to try to make categories out, but people who are reading primarily for it, the spiritual benefit, slow down. The slower you go, the better it is, I think.

Jim Finley: And one more thing to unpath, this thing about reading the mystics. It's something that struck me when I was in the monastery, chanting the Psalms. And the monks chant the Psalms over and over, like chanting. And some of ... They've been doing it for years. And you get the sense of the endlessness of it. It's a nonlinear kind of... And I often think my library here with the mystics, you can pull any of the books off the shelf, randomly open and read one paragraph out loud, and everything they say is it. You know what I mean? Everything they say bodies, and it touches, there's a kind of consistency of

Bernard McGinn: Yeah, that notion of reading out loud I think is very important too, which I didn't avert to there at first, but often reading slowly and then reading these texts out loud as a part of the Lectio Divina, Divina practice. One of Merton's best books for My Money is book ... Not as much read, Bread in the Wilderness.

Jim Finley: Yeah, beautiful.

Bernard McGinn: [inaudible 00:26:30] his meditative book on reading. I'm reading and praying the psalms. I think that's for me one of the two or three best of the Merton books.

Kirsten Oates: I'm curious to know from your perspective, Bernard, that you are saying there's been a movement towards the mystical. And I'm just wondering, what do you think that it's bringing that was lacking? What's it adding in for people?

Bernard McGinn: Well, I think it's restoring or trying to restore a better balance. I often use the model of the great writer on mysticism, Friedrich von Hugo who wrote in the early part of the 20th century. His mystical element of religion in two big volumes is difficult reading, because his style is awful. But his theory of religion is that religion consists of three elements. The institutional element, the intellectual element, and the mystical element.

He goes at this in considerable in detail, and I find that very, very helpful because I think what happened particularly in many aspects of modern religion ... I'm speaking particularly here about Catholicism. The institutional tried to overwhelm the intellectual, and also push out the mystical. And that's a very unhealthy religion. This was Van Hugo's ... And of course Van Hugo suffered for this because the time of the modernist controversy, in the first decades of the 20th century.

So I think what's been happening with this return to the mystical traditional spirituality and mysticism. The attempt to rebalance the picture, so that the institutional does not dominate

over the intellectual and the mystical. And it's very important to recognize that there are dimensions in religion that we put under the term of mysticism. Where institutional, the institutional approach does not really work. And those who concentrate only on the institutional people lose sight of the importance of that.

So I think we're trying, I say trying because it hasn't worked out perfectly. Nothing ever does. We're trying to rebalance religion. In particular, Christianity, I think it's harder to talk about the other religions. But that, von Hugo's model, was written for Christianity actually. But we're trying to rebalance the three perspectives, the three aspects. And that's a healthy way to practice religion, as against the form that would put such a dominant emphasis on the institutional. There's no real room for the intellectual, which always has to [inaudible 00:29:07] out to what the institution says. And there's no room for the mystical, or other kinds of wisdom than those that can be easily categorized and put on the shelf.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful. And the mystical being, I don't need to go into a church to find God in my experience, I can...

Bernard McGinn: I would say it's fundamentally a search for the presence of God. Doesn't mean being opposed to the institutional. That wasn't what von Hugo was trying to say. What von Hugo was saying is that you have to try to balance the three. If one says, "I don't need the other two." Or if one says, "I can dominate the other two," then you're sick. Your religion's a sick religion.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, that's helpful.

Bernard McGinn: I'm sure there are people who find God apart from institutions and the institutions today have had so many problems. I can well understand people who say, "I don't want to have anything to do with the institution." But that's where von Hugo is a kind of corrective. He says, "Well, that's because the institution has been misunderstood." And if we can understand these three elements, institutional, intellectual, and mystical in a healthier way and see how the healthy religious personality tries to integrate those three, then we'll be in a better place.

Jim Finley: Two things I'd like Bernard to expand on along those lines too. One, in the last chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton talks about these little quickening moments of awakening. Like turning to see a flock of birds descending, or knowing love in your own heart. So there's a certain quickening where you're momentarily silenced by the immediacy of presence this way. And there's another realm of presence where a person's in their *Lectio*, their meditation, their prayer, and it drops off into silence.

It goes beyond words. But then the words return enriched by that ... It's speaking out of that silence. And the other thing I'd like you to respond to, which is related to it, is that the mystical oneness is presence. It's like beyond the darkness of this world. But it actually radicalizes our presence in the world, because God so loved the world, he sent his only-begotten son.

So the mystically awakened person in the midst of the world is actually in this deepened state of the presence of God in the presence of everybody. It doesn't ... Would you say both of those are true about silence, then speaking out of it? And also about the world beyond the

world, that it radicalizes our true presence in the world? Would you say mysticism has both of those qualities to it?

Bernard McGinn: I would say so. I'd add a third which would be darkness.

Jim Finley: Oh, yeah.

Bernard McGinn: And that's very good. Because silence and darkness in that sense go together. Many of the great mystics, not just John the Cross, but many, many others have experienced and emphasized and plumbed the darkness of the absence of God as a new way of getting a better sense of God's presence when God is really present, as against the false images we have of God that we often put up ourselves.

So unless you've had the ability to get into that silence where God's in speaking, and into the darkness where God seems to be absent, you're in danger of committing idolatry. I mean, this is often the way in which the mystics put it. That is, you're creating your own picture of God, which doesn't have much to do with God's actual reality and presence.

Now, that's why darkness and silence have been so crucial in the whole mystical tradition. And as I said, many people think only of John of the Cross, of course, who's a wonderful exponent of that. But it's all over the place. It's all over the place. And many, many of the great mystics have used it and emphasized it in different ways and in different valences. So there's a lot more darkness of God in the whole tradition than just John of the Cross. He's one of the great exponents of it.

Jim Finley: Would you say this too? I love this saying John of the Cross's "Oh night, lovelier than the dawn." You're actually blinded by all -- like that. Would you say too, there's a fascinating insight in the mystical dimensions of the mystery of death? Because death to ... Like the passing like immense darkness. But we say paradoxically it's the gate of heaven. So in a way there's a mysterious continuity between the inner death of the inner darkness is just shining forth of this light. And the physical death that's approaching all of us, that there's somehow ... Like our deathless nature shines out through this. Would you speak to that? Does that make sense what I'm saying, that there's ... You see resonances there?

Bernard McGinn: I would call it The Great Transitus, the passing over. And people refer to St. Francis of Assisi's death as a Transitus. It's a passing over, and it involves identification with Christ in Christ Transitus, which is the original passing over. So I think for most mystics, that's a crucial part. You might say one of the most crucial aspects, it's what the whole thing aims towards.

Passing over into God. But you don't do that in a full sense until you pass over through death, the way Christ had to go through death in order to achieve his resurrection. And all the mystics who speak about what I call dereliction, mystical dereliction was much more beyond mere suffering. Mystical dereliction and desolation, they always put it under the category of Christ's passion and death on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Although it's also in the Old Testament, particularly with Job. The first major western exponent of mystical desolation is actually Pope Gregory the Great around the year 600 in

his moral interpretation of the Book of Job. It's a huge thing, goes on for thousands of pages. But Gregory was very much attracted to Job because Job's suffering for him was a model, a foretaste, the prefigure of the suffering of Christ. And also, it was in Job and in Christ on the cross that Gregory sees the meaning of his own suffering. Because he was in ill health for much of his life, and apparently suffered a good deal. So there's a lot of mystical desolation in Gregory the great. A 1000 years before John of the Cross, actually.

Jim Finley: Would you say this *Transitus*, this crossing over, that in these deep realizations, we're already crossing over, but it's hidden? But when our death comes, we cross over in the light of glory. Would you say that's true like, epistemology realize eschatology. Like it's already happening, but it's obscure, hidden. But in our biological death comes a transformation, there'll be nothing hidden in it. Do you think that's true or do you think that rings true?

Bernard McGinn: No, I think it maybe hard to realize for people to wrap their mind around, that the moment of passing over in death is crucial. It's the goal, actually, of that mystical path that we've been talking about. And this is why meditating on death, *Memento Mori*, was always a big part of the mystical tradition. But it was not in that sense ... It was not meant to be a negative, fearful thing.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Bernard McGinn: It was meant to be a meditation on what will complete it, what will bring it to fulfillment. And that's why much of what the great mystics have written about death, I think can be very ... I mean, Francis of Assisi again is a marvelous model of this when you look at his life. But when you look at his sparse readings, but especially *The Canticle of the Sun*, where he hymns, Holy Sister death. And it's obvious, Francis is waiting to greet sister death as a very crucial part of that, of his transition, his *Transitus*.

Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: I am going to move us to talking about the two mystics that we covered this year in our two seasons. And that's Meister Eckhart and Mechthild of Magdeburg. And we are very much looking forward to hearing your reflections on that, Bernard. But Jim, do you want to just set the scene of how you approached Eckhart?

Jim Finley: Yes, especially back to back with Mechthild, this would also be true of Bernard too. Is that one way I put Eckhart or understand Eckhart is that, in a sense, Eckhart is speaking of an infinite generosity of God being poured out. Like a self-donating act of the presence of God given to us as the gift of our own presence and our nothingness without God.

But the point is, and therefore the path then for Eckhart is not one of attaining because nothing's missing. Because of the ground of God and our ground. But the point is, how can we be healed from what hinders us from realizing nothing's missing? So the path of detachment is really this liberation from these possessiveness of heart, into this fullness that's already there in God. And so, the first thing I want you to respond to is that if that rings true and how you could refine that or expand on it.

And the second thing then when you read Mechthild, her love language is so stark. I love Mechthild's language. She's such a succinct poet. You know what I mean? She's so, this love

of God. And also, Bernard, Kirsten and I listened to your talk on Bernard of Clairvaux, was one of the talks you gave [foreign language 00:39:29]. I love because I love. And when I was in the monastery, they had a stone statue of St. Bernard, and he's holding a scroll. And [foreign language 00:39:37]. I love because I love. So it's so interesting when you put those two together. So first, Eckhart. As nothing's missing, so detachment leading to the birth and the ground. And then you hold up Mechthild or Bernard. How do you see those two modes of presence and how do they illuminate each other? How would you respond to ... Because it was kind of striking for the students. I think to the listeners when we put them side by side.

Bernard McGinn: One analogy that I've often used to describe the mystical tradition is that it's a great symphony. It's a great symphony. That is, it's an orchestra composed of many musicians playing different instruments, but designed to come together into a magnificent hold. I developed that idea that Hans Urs von Balthasar once spoke about truth as symphonic. Which is a wonderfully pregnant phrase.

And in thinking about the mystical tradition, I've used that to say that the tradition has different instruments, and there's different writers. They play different instruments. They sound differently. They are supposed to compliment each other in the long run. And it's not just even one or two different mystics, like great mystics like Mechthild and Eckhart. But it's the whole symphony. And I do think there is a symphonic truth to the mystical tradition then. But we can pick out different people playing different instruments. And in that sense, Eckhart and Mechthild are two quite different figures. Although, Eckhart probably has some knowledge of Mechthild. And for Eckhart, I would say what has always struck me is I talk about Eckhart as a mystic of realization, acknowledgement.

It is true exactly as you put it, that everything is there. But we don't know it. We haven't realized it. We haven't acknowledged that all this is true. We have forgotten what we're supposed to know. So Eckhart is preaching to wake his audience up, and to get them to acknowledge and to realize what's already going on in their lives, but they don't pay any attention to.

So he's trying to wake the audience up. This is why he often says in his preaching ridiculous and off the wall things. Because he wants the people ... I mean, most of them are asleep, which also drew a lot of audiences to preachers today. They're asleep, they're dozing there. So Eckhart will say something absolutely ridiculous, which he knows will wake them up. And then he's going to explain it. Then he's going to put it within the context and use that shock of the outrageous to try to get them...

Jim Finley: That's true, that's true.

Bernard McGinn: ... to understand the way things are, but that they don't think about. So that's why reading Eckhart, particularly in the sermons, but same is true in the more technical Latin works, is that it is meant to be a kind of wake up call. It's meant to challenge you. It's meant to say, "How can he say that? That's absolutely ridiculous." But when you put back in context, then he will try to explain why the very powerful things he just said about how the birth of the word and the soul happens in us in no way different from the way it happens in the Trinity itself.

You say, “How can that be? Isn’t that heretical?” Eckhart will say, “But it is true, and here’s what it means.” And you do have to make certain kinds of distinctions, et cetera. Eckhart talks a lot about love. And it’s actually one of the most frequent topics in his sermons if you sit down and count. So this notion that Eckhart is an intellectual mystic and Mechthild is a love mystic. I think that’s a lot of hogwash. Both Eckhart and Mechthild talk about knowing and loving, but they do them in very different ways.

Eckhart does not use the highly erotic language about love that Mechthild of Magdeburg does. That’s very, very obvious. There’s very little of that in Eckhart at all. But that doesn’t mean that love as a reality, fundamental reality in the universe isn’t important for him. But you get a very different flavor when you read Mechthild, and the way in which she uses language, particularly erotic language to describe the relationship of her soul to God.

And what’s terribly remarkable also about Mechthild is the sheer literary skill of her writings. I mean, she uses a whole variety of different genres. She uses poetry, she uses dialogues, she uses discussions, et cetera, et cetera. Mechthild was a kind of literary genius, which is really remarkable. And it doesn’t necessarily come across unless you approach her in that way that she in a certain sense has a literary genius that I think comes across through the variety of genres that she uses and the way in which she speaks so personally and powerfully. Particularly about her erotic experiences of God. The Famous 44th chapter in the first book, which is this little drama of the love between Christ and the soul.

I mean, you could put it on stage. It’s got the Christ, the divine lover, it has the soul. It has the accompaniments who are in there. It has stage settings about they go here and they go there, and then they go into the bridal chamber, et cetera. It’d be nice to make a little play out of it. And you won’t get anything like that in Eckhart. So they compliment each other in a number of different ways. And I mean, it would take a whole book to really spell out the complementarity.

Which was complementarity in very important ways, but also the differences in terms of the use of language, in terms of some of the theoretical issues that are involved. But Eckhart is, for instance, a profound theologian of the Trinity. But it’s put mostly within a very scholastic and speculative way. Mechthild brings you into the Trinity as a living conversation between the three persons of the Trinity, and it’s called the Council of the Trinity, [foreign language 00:46:13]. Where she brings you right in there. You can hear them talking to each other about what we’re going to do with the world. And how we’re going to predestine Mary. Mary is an important part of the [inaudible 00:46:22]. We’re going to predestine Mary as the mother of Christ and bringing the word in the world. So there’s a literary and a dramatic, I suppose is the word I’m looking for. Dramatic sense in Mechthild that I think is not there in Eckhart. They’re different people.

Kirsten Oates: Then, could you unpack the path of detachment? Through your lens, what does he mean by detachment?

Bernard McGinn: Getting rid of everything that’s not necessary. For Eckhart, there are three fundamental practices that are part of the mystical path. Detaching, birthing, and breaking through. And detachment is getting rid of everything that we think we need, but that we really don’t need. That are really superfluous and unnecessary.

So the worst thing about our lack of awareness about the reality of the world is that we're attached to things. We think that they belong to us. We grab them, and we want to enjoy them and hold them to ourselves. For Eckhart, that's the primary mistake. You can't do that, because that's absolutely impossible. You have to recognize that nothing belongs to you. You have to detach yourself. And you detach yourself not only from all the things that you think are so special, you have to detach yourself from yourself. And in the long run, you even detach yourself from God, at least God as you conceive of him. Because the God you conceive of him is always going to be limited. It's going to be in some sense an idol.

So detaching is absolutely crucial. Detaching is what allows you to recognize what's happening inside you. What's really happening inside you is the birth of the word and the soul. And the word is always being born in your soul, whether you realize it or not. But if you begin to realize it, then you may be able to begin to live in a different way. First of all, it'll be a way of absolute detachment. Secondly, it will be a way of service. The word became man and took on flesh in order to serve humanity. And then eventually those recognitions will lead you to what's most challenging, I suppose you could say in Eckhart's thought, breaking through, getting to the depth of reality. Breaking through even God insofar as we conceive of God. Even God insofar as he is a trinity of Father, son, and Holy Spirit, when Eckhart talks about breaking through, he is very, very radical.

And that's again, a designed I think, to get people to wake up that there's a reality to God that Eckhart often speaks of as the ground, the [foreign language 00:49:06] in which we are one with God in a way that's inconceivable to us. God's ground is the soul's ground, and the soul's ground is God's ground, as he says over and over again in his sermon on the twelve, to give you an example, but ... And how can that be? How can there be no difference between our ground and God's ground? Isn't that pantheism? Isn't that heresy? Isn't that dangerous stuff? Shouldn't we burn this guy at the stake for making statements like that? Well, Eckhart said, I'm trying to wake you up. If you can only realize that your ground is God's ground, and God's ground is your ground, then you could begin to live the way God lives.

How does God live? God lives without a why. Without a why. [foreign language 00:49:56]. That's the only way to live, without a why. That's Eckhart's ethics. The only thing you have to do is to live without a why.

Jim Finley: But why do we have to live without a why, Bernard? See, notice how the ego's addicted to searching for ... And that's what he's trying to break open, I think.

Bernard McGinn: So if our ground and God's ground are the same ground, then we have to live the way God lives, which is without a why. God has no purpose outside himself. He doesn't act because of something. He only acts because he's God.

Kirsten Oates: You already mentioned Bernard of Clairvaux, and I do want to unpack the Latin because you spoke the Latin, but you didn't translate it for us earlier. Because I think there's some kind of harmony there between that Latin phrase and this living without a why.

Bernard McGinn: Yeah, so this is Bernard of Clairvaux's 83rd sermon on the Song of Songs. "Why do I love? I love in order to Love" That is love has to be without any purpose beyond the sheer ... And this is the background, a different way of putting what Eckhart is putting. And Eckhart

is actually not the first who talks about living without a why.

Some of the earlier 13th century mystical women also use that kind of language. Beatrice of Nazareth, for example, and Beatrice of Nazareth is a Cistercian. I think she develops some of her things out of our knowledge of Bernard of Clairvaux. I mean, Bernard's greatest text is that 83rd of the sermon song of songs if you want his mysticism in a nutshell, that's what to read.

Kirsten Oates: Do you mind saying the phrase again in Latin Bernard, and then just what the words mean?

Bernard McGinn: Yeah, I love, in order to love, [foreign language 00:51:46]. I love in order to love. Love only for Loving.

Kirsten Oates: That Love comes without a why.

Bernard McGinn: Love comes without a ... True love can have no purpose beyond itself. But Bernard he says, "Well, you have the love of children. You have the love of ..." Et cetera, et cetera. But he said the only love that is completely free that we know is the love between men and women. They love only in order to love. The bride has no other purpose. She's not looking for an inheritance, at least in Bernard's view she's not looking for rewards. She's loving because she loves, and she wishes to love. And the bridegroom loves in the same way.

Kirsten Oates: I'm struck by the idea of detachment in Eckhart, and then where Mechthild says, "When we come to God, we clothe ourselves in ourselves." So it almost feels like with her, it's like I'm actually bringing ... I'm not letting go of everything. I'm bringing my whole of myself into God's presence. Could you speak to how that might be interpreted?

Bernard McGinn: Well, I think Eckhart's notion of detachment is getting rid of the false self. And you have your true self, which you can give to God, and that may well be what our friend Mechthild is ... And Thomas Merton, to go back to something we've talked, Merton is very, very powerful on this too. The necessity of getting rid of the false self, and trying to find the true self, which is the self that we can really come into contact with God if we're trying to get into contact with God with the false self, with all that kind of covering, it's not going to...

So you might say these mystics are emphasizing different things, and what Mechthild is trying to give to God is their true self. What Eckhart is saying is that you can't do that until you get rid of the false self.

Until you unload all of that baggage. And that's what Merton was saying 800 years later. Because one of the most powerful things about Merton's mysticism, that I found as I was writing up this chapter on him, was that emphasis over and over again in all of his writings about getting rid of the false self and really analyzing ourselves. Because we fool ourselves so easily about what is our true self. Merton was very, very forthright about how much of the false self remains in all of us, no matter how hard we try, but we've got to keep trying.

Jim Finley: Once I was at spiritual direction with Merton, and I asked him what he thought heaven was like. And he said, "Well, one thing for sure, there won't be much of you there." He said, "That's why we all call it heaven, that there's no egos in heaven." You know what I mean? There's the divinity of ourselves shining for [laughs 00:54:33].

Bernard McGinn: Yeah, that's a very good answer.

Jim Finley: And one more thing. I'd like to say one more thing about Merton that's so true, is that the true self is the self right at this moment. That's being actively created by God, being given away to us as the truth of ourself. That there's no separate self that has to try to find its way to God. For God to be it to give being for us to be as to receive being. Like Eckhart, there's a meeting ... A point veers, the place, that oneness, that the true self is found there

Bernard McGinn: And the one thing being looked at from two different perspectives.

Jim Finley: Exactly, yes.

Kirsten Oates: And I think what's striking about Eckhart too is that he lived in the world, and I think our listeners enjoyed hearing from a mystic who wasn't locked away in a monastery but was very active in the world. And I just wonder if you have any thoughts on that, Bernard, how that influenced his teaching?

Bernard McGinn: Well, this is true in a number of ways about the 13th century. Because there's a great shift, I think, in Christian mysticism at the beginning of the 13th century. Where the new religious orders move out into the world. The ideal is no longer the enclosed separation between monastics in the world. That was always just an ideal. It was never a reality. But the ideal of the Dominican Order, for instance, and Dominicans, and then the Beguines who were their contemporaries, is that the gospel is to be lived in the world.

In the world of people. And, of course, their vocations are to meet with people, to preach to people, to serve as an example to people of poverty, et cetera. So there's a kind of what I call a secularization that is they're moving out into the saeculum of the world world in a way that was rather different from the old model, which was a separation model. There is at the same time what I like to call a kind of democratization in the sense that the emphasis now is that it's not just religious people, special practitioners who can find God. Anybody can find God.

This is what Eckhart's preaching is basically all about. There's no special people. Everybody is invited to the banquet in that sense, and that's what he's trying to do When he preaches. And let's remember his sermons, which are extremely challenging, difficult, et cetera, even today to understand. They were preached to the ordinary people.

I mean, he did some preaching to religious women and other kinds of things, but most of his sermons were given from the pulpit to a whole audience that we would think of as, oh, ignorant, medieval people. Many of them couldn't read and write. But they listened to Eckhart. They may not have always understood him, but he was a very popular preacher. So I think that he's a challenge in that sense to a lot of the preaching today, which is so theologically poor. Whereas Eckhart preached the most difficult forms of deep truth. Spiritual, mystical kinds of truth to a general audience, and felt that he at least had to do that and to try to invite these people to try to get some knowledge of what he was doing.

One of Eckhart sermons starts with a famous illustration where he said, "I'm coming today to preach from the pulpit. I have to give you this message." He said, "I would have to preach to the collection box even if none of you were here." He felt called to give this message. And for Eckhart, preacher doesn't preach himself. The preacher is only the voice of God. In that

sense, a kind of trumpet announcing God's message, and being compelled by God to give this message even there's nobody there or nobody's going to understand it. You can give it to the collection box. Very [inaudible 00:58:27] boxes in the medieval.

Kirsten Oates: That's brilliant and Mechthild had the same kind of thing, the way she starts her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, saying that God's actually writing the book, she's not writing the book.

Bernard McGinn: No, Mechthild is tremendously daring because she's putting her book on level with the gospels. She was one of the four female evangelists of the 13th century. I got in trouble from some scripture scholars for calling these women evangelists, but I'm standing my ground. They are evangelists and Mechthild, at the opening of *The Flowing Light* says that, "I'm talking to God," and then she has this vision of God where God is holding her book in his hand because somebody, "Well, you're going to get in trouble for writing this." So God appears to her, holding her book in his hand and says, "If they don't like this book, let them try to snatch it out of my hand."

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, she's amazing. She was so convinced, obviously. Yeah. The other thing that's amazing about her, Bernard, is that she ... Towards the end of her life when she was still writing the book, she lost her sense of God's presence.

Bernard McGinn: She went through many ... I mean, she has some very powerful experiences of mystical dereliction and being under Lucifer's tail, as she once calls it in a very powerful image that, "Where are you now? I'm under Lucifer's tail." Not a very pleasant place to be, obviously. But that's what her experience of desolation ... And God had separated himself. She talks about in [foreign language 01:00:11] that God has somehow thrown her out, that she's been discarded.

That was part of her mystical path. This is comparable. Again, we talk about John of the Cross and various others, but it's powerful throughout the whole range of medieval mystics. It's not as much of it in Eckhart, but Eckhart's follower, John Tauler, another Dominican, has some of the strongest expressions of divine dereliction and being left by ... It's one of the reasons that Martin Luther loved Tauler so much was experience of the angst before God. He'd said, "Oh, Tauler knew what this was all about."

Kirsten Oates: To me, in a way, it gives credibility to this mystical path because they've touched something so deep that even when they can't experience it directly through the senses, they stay true to it.

Bernard McGinn: Yes. Well, I mean, I think it's not that it's any less painful. When you read the mystics, it's tremendously painful. But they have the wisdom or given the wisdom to recognize it's a crucial element of what God's plan for them is. And also for many, many others. And Theresa, obviously, Theresa has some powerful visions of hell.

She's being consigned to hell in one famous chapter in the life where she feels that she's been sent to hell and she's being put in a little box in hell there to rot for all eternity. So she felt it too. Although it's not essential a theme in her writings as it is in John of the Cross, but it's certainly recognized. And don't forget, it was Theresa who made the famous statement about God. She asked to God why he was sending her this suffering, and she said, "Now I can

understand you, why you have so few friends. This is what you do to your friends.”

Kirsten Oates: So it's almost like forced path of detachment.

Bernard McGinn: Well, yeah. That's part of it. I think that's part of the process. And this is why Eckhart never talks about what we would call aesthetical practice. Again, it is just so different from what so many of his contemporaries were. I think Eckhart's idea, and it comes across in some of his vernacular, treatises, that you're going to have enough suffering in the course of your life. You don't have to seek out more suffering. That's only an attachment, actually. You're attached to your own suffering. So isn't it wonderful that I can suffer so much?

No, for Eckhart, suffering is going to come your way no matter what. So you don't seek out other forms of suffering. You learn to accept what suffering comes your way in the same spirit that Jesus accepted the cross. Quite powerful, Eckhart's famous Book of Consolation. This is the essence of The Book of Consolation. “Don't seek suffering, but learn how to deal with suffering that you have to encounter no matter what you do, nobody's going to avoid it.”

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful, yeah. Accepting reality as it is. Yeah. As it comes your way. Yeah, beautiful. Well, we're unfortunately coming to the end of our time, so this has been a real joy to be with you, Bernard. Jim, do you have any closing thoughts, statements, or questions?

Jim Finley: Yeah, just two things. One, sometimes when I read the sermons of Eckhart or imagine him talking to the people in church, I get the feeling that if someone's sitting there listening to them and they've just fallen in love, or they just had a child, or their mother just died, whatever, they'd get a feeling he was trying to put words to the depths of what was stirring in them. It touched some deep play, the vitality of it went there and invited them to find God there and so on. Like life, and the second thing I just want to share in closing is I'm so grateful to you, Bernard, for your years of commitment and how many people that you've helped as contemplative ministry. Touching the world in this way in a very kind of pastoral scholastic clarity. And also, what a blessing this has been to our podcast. Seriously, it's been like a high watermark. I think, seriously, for the listeners, I'm so grateful that you came.

Bernard McGinn: Thank you, Jim. I appreciate this. And I'm always anxious and happy to talk about the mystics.

Jim Finley: Yeah, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, and I'll say thank you to you also, Bernard McGinn, as someone who felt called to this mystical path. I couldn't put my hands around it. And reading your book, your books has helped given a shape to something that is very hard to come to, like a deep understanding. So I'm just so grateful, and I'm sure many, many of our listeners will be holding out gratitude for you.

Bernard McGinn: Thank you both Jim and Kristen, and as I said, I appreciate the opportunity and wish you and the podcast all success.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We'll see you again soon.