

Turning  
to the  
Mystics



# Mechtild of Magdeburg

Listener Questions (Part 1)

with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

Jim: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten: Welcome everyone to season eight of Turning to the Mystics, where we've been turning to Mechthild of Magdeburg. And in this session, we're going to reflect on listener questions. And I'm here with Jim. And Jim, I just wanted to start by sharing how wonderful it is to get these questions every season and to feel the sense of community around us listening to the podcast, they're just beautiful.

Jim: It really is. I sat and read through them all, they're very heartfelt and you can tell how sincerely touched they are by listening to the mystics. So yeah, it's wonderful.

Kirsten: So you're ready to get started?

Jim: Yep, I'm ready.

Kirsten: Okay. So the first topic we're going to look at is love. And the first question comes from Brian. And he's reflecting on the concept of bound love. He says, "In session three, you reflect upon Mechthild's discussion of bound love versus unbound love. If I understand correctly, when she's discussing bound love, she's really describing a kind of love that is utterly pure, sincere, and focused. Perhaps similar to when two lovers say to one another, 'I have only eyes for you,' and truly mean it. If so, this bound love seems to me to be something paradoxically freeing. Freedom here is not the unrestricted ability to choose, but rather the lifting of the burden of craving mixed motivations, deception, et cetera. Surrendering to this bound love seems to be an entry point into the path of endless liberation. If I may borrow your phrase from the first season on Merton. Can you please talk a bit more about the paradoxical freedom that arises in surrendering to the bound love that Mechthild describes?"

Jim: Let's say first, and Brian, he picks this out between two people. Bound love, I only have eyes for you. So they're each other's fidelity to each other as the beloved, they're bound, but they're bound in the freedom of love. And if they would compromise that fidelity, they're actually becoming bound in a negative sense. They're being bound by hurtful patterns and they have to look at that and where's that coming from and so on. So bound is actually bound to the freedom of the fullness of love. So with God, bound love is knowing first of all, God freely chooses to be in bonded love with us, we are the beloved. So God's infinitely faithful to us and bound to us as the beloved. And we, however, we're bound in the sincerity of our intention. But in our wavering heart, there's ways that we're half-hearted, ways that we... Whatever.

And so by accepting our halfheartedness, because God does, and we keep surrendering it over to God, it deepens the bond. See, the word bond there, that our faith isn't and our ability to measure up and stay, it's constantly faithful. It's rather a deep faith in God's infinite fidelity to us in our wavering ways and we're bound to this peace of God's mercy on us. And so yes, Brian's right, that's it, yeah.

Kirsten: Wonderful. Thank you, Jim, that explanation really helped too. I'm going to combine the next two questions. Eileen asks, "While I resonate completely with the passage on unbound love, I question whether it is possible to fulfill the longing for bound love, which we all desire so much, without spiritual direction. I thought if I trusted the Lord, I could maybe get there, but the more I read and listen, I have doubts. What do you think, Jim?" And then I wanted to combine that with a question from Andrea who just asks, "What is spiritual direction? Is it a Catholic thing? Is it common?" Andrea hadn't heard about spiritual direction, so thought we could combine those two.

Jim: Yeah, let's do that. First of all, spiritual direction, it is in the Catholic tradition, however, there's more and more Protestant denominations that are including it. In the Protestant tradition, it would be going to the pastor for pastoral counseling. So you might see the pastor for how is God present in this situation. So in the Catholic tradition, that would be spiritual direction, usually like once a month on how can I better discern God's presence, one with me in this situation and how do I discern God's will? And if you're interested in spiritual direction, you could call the nearest Catholic retreat house and ask to speak to one of the spiritual directors there and see if they have any openings. Some people find it extremely helpful. Also, some diocese have programs where they train laypeople in the diocese to be spiritual directors and you can go to the director. And you can also, especially if they have it, let the director know you're looking for someone that gets contemplative spiritual direction, is sensitive to that, so that's what that is.

Kirsten: There's also Spiritual Directors International, and you can go to their website and they have listed a number of spiritual directors. And so also, spiritual directors can be trained by the Catholic Church, so they're not priests, it's kind of a ministry of-

Jim: A lot of lay people are spiritual directors. That's true, Spiritual Directors International. That's true, that's a good point for people. So a lot of people on this path don't have a spiritual director, but Merton told me in the monastery it's true, but you have the scriptures and you have your faiths. And you have the blessings in your life and you have fidelity to your daily quiet time. And so how I put it is deep down there's no lack of spiritual guidance, there's only a lack of awareness of the guidance being given. There's a kind of providential guidance that's given in attentiveness. And sometimes too, Bernard McGinn in his guest appearance too said, "Sometimes it's just two people, it's not where one gives spiritual direction to the other, but they take turns sharing their spiritual journey like guidance and support and spiritual friendship with each other.

Kirsten: And so Jim, just reflecting on the question about whether someone could discover this bound love without spiritual direction.

Jim: Yes. In other words, they wouldn't know what to call it, they wouldn't know what to call it, but they would know that there's been a certain kind of internal consistency of the felt sense of the nearness of God, and I call it the gift of their own awakening heart, so you decline into it and walk with it. And it would take different forms, it could be infidelity to solitude or fidelity to silence or fidelity to walk in the midst of nature or certainly God's presence in a form of service to the community. And it's an experience and this is just a way of putting words to that experience.

Kirsten: So something that draws you to give yourself fully to it, whether it's like you're saying the silence or walking in nature or something like that, yeah.

Jim: That's why I like Merton's saying that, "When we pray, we begin by knowing that we belong to God, so we're being guided by God." And he said also, "To know that in the spiritual order of things, to understand is to realize that you're infinitely understood." And in your heart it's true and you live by it and that's this bound love in your heart.

Kirsten: Yeah. One last thing on the spiritual direction piece, Jim, I was just thinking as we read through these listener questions, it's like being in spiritual direction, that what people share and how they share it, it's like the communication between you and the listeners is very much like a spiritual direction event.

Jim: It really is. And I think when they read the mystics out loud or listen to what they're saying, they talk like that. It is right at the edge of spiritual direction. And what they're really doing is they sat with many people face to face and so they already know the kind of questions seekers ask. And that's why when we read them or listen to this talk, it sounds so personal because it's coming out of a personal experience. And this is why they're questions are so good because the questions are so personal this way. And this is why I often said this too, another format we can't do it is one at a time we could take one person. And the person, as others listen, could have a dialogue and they would share, I would ask them questions and out of the dialogue, out of the spiritual direction, there could be more refinement of it on how the process works, which is like spiritual direction. The parallel is psychotherapy is like that too.

Kirsten: Yes, yeah. Spiritual direction is really just a director's trained to ask the right questions and to have the right kind of presence to draw you deeper and deeper into your own life's experience, yeah.

Jim: That's the way I put it is, the director asks a question and the question is such that in order to respond, you have to pause, listen to a moment to yourself to know what you say. Then you're becoming more present to yourself and the spiritual director's presence. And so the director is directing you to be like Lectio, like an internal listening to your own heart, how God speaks quietly within and that you can cultivate and develop that process within yourself.

Kirsten: A question from Laura, "I wanted to ask Jim how he might compare or contrast or otherwise relate the concept of the love dowry to the observation he frequently makes, that the part of us that was never born is also the part that will never die."

Jim: Today, yes, it's the hidden dowry of our being, is the way I put it. Is that the dowry is that when God creates us as the beloved, God creates us with the promise of making infinite union with the infinite mystery of God, to be the very dowry of our being, is our God-given godly destiny that's given to us in our eternal nothingness without God. And this dowry is a self that was never born because an exemplar causality, there's a poetic sense of knowing that from all eternity, God contemplated you in the word. And God contemplated you in the Word, Merton says, "Since everything in

God is God, this is the divinity of you that was never born because God has not...” So when God created you, let there be Jim, let there be Kirsten, whatever, in time and space. In time, with grace, we’re called the discover for ourself who God eternally knows us to be before the origins of the universe, which is the mystical experience, which is the deepening of faith. Really the eternity of ourself, the body dies, but we’re eternal, that the beloved never dies.

Kirsten: Beautiful, I love it. I want to share, Sharon sent us two questions and I just think this is so beautiful, that the first question, she’s longing to understand what love means and she ends the question still baffled and asking deeper questions. And then there’s a follow-up email where she says, “I went back to the first dialogue on Mechtild and found the following passage. What stands out is the very living substance of ourself is love and that is God.” And then she uses this dowry of our being, “The dowry of our being, one way to say it is that we say that God is love, that the infinite love of God is an ongoing self donating act, creating us in the image and likeness of love as our very identity, our very destiny.”

Jim: Yeah, beautiful. This is so key, because I was reading again on the true self in Merton and the New Seeds of Contemplation, I think it’s page 37, “Pray for your identity,” the ultimate identity. Here’s the way I shared it in one of the earlier sessions, I think. The way Dan Walsh put it in the medieval philosophy classes at the monastery, the way he put it and he understood it in Duns Scotus on the person. Is that before creation there was no capacity for love in God because God is the overflowing infinity of love itself. If you have a glass on the table and you’re filling with water till it overflows, there’s no capacity for water in the cup.

So God creates the capacity for the infinite mystery of God and that’s you. When God created you, God created a [foreign language 00:13:17], a capacity to receive the infinity of God. St. John of the cross says in *The Living Flame of Love*, he said, “I’m not so moved that you’re infinitely in love with me, but I move that you created in me in a dislike depth that’s capable of receiving the infinity of your love.” And that’s the mystery, that’s the true self, that’s the trans objective mystery of ourself.

Kirsten: Well, I hope that resonates with listeners the way that session resonated with Sharon, it’s so beautiful to see someone searching and searching with their heart wide open writing into us and then to get the answer they’re looking for, it’s beautiful.

Jim: When I was in the monastery, we chanted the Psalms in Latin first and the Vatican concerts in English. And they face each other and they go back and forth chatting the song. And there was a Baptist minister in the choir law of listening. And so he was used to their own forms of prayer, singing and dance. And he wondered why no one was shouting out and yelling out the praise that God. And the monk giving the talk... In Kentucky, they had these fireflies, lightning bugs. I don’t you ever seen, they light up, it’s very pretty-

Kirsten: Amazing.

Jim: In Ohio, they had and they’re very pretty. And he said, “You know when we’re

chanting the Psalms, what if every time we're struck by an inspiration, by reading a text to the Psalms, 'Besides still waters, you'd leave me.'" We would light up like lightning bugs. You'd see the monks lighting up and going on and off. So these illuminations we're listening and we're struck by something. We're struck by the beauty of it, and our heart knows it's beautiful because it's true. And I think that's God, I think that's God speaking to us in these words.

Kirsten: Yeah. So thank you Jim and thank you Sharon for sharing that with us. A question from Saskia, "Sometimes I have the feeling to live in two different worlds. On the one hand, the mystics help me to be more grounded and to respond as sincerely as possible to the daily challenges of my life. On the other hand, Mechtild's words are so intimate, they awaken in me a longing and an inner warmth beyond words. Sometimes it makes me feel like a stranger in ordinary life. Then I am left wondering if I'm dreaming too much. Do you have suggestions how to deal with this?"

Jim: I'll use an example from the nuptial mystics, the marriage. In the marriage, there are moments where there's just nothing but the oneness of giving themselves to each other. But they can't live there all day long because they have to do the chores. But the point is, the warmth of the moments of the oneness with each other radiates out as an underlying sensitivity to doing the chores this way. So it's same with prayer, there's certain moments of oneness, like utter stillness in the oneness. But little by little there's a kind of atmospheric sensitivity to God's presence and wiping off the kitchen counters or sitting down to have a cup of tea, you start to see the underlying sustaining presence of God and the rhythms and flow of ordinariness. And I think that's what the path is like. So we're not dreaming too much, I think it's a gift to dream. But it's always looking to not separate the dream from realizing the dreams being lived out in the concreteness of the moment this way. And that sensitivity is habituated over time, it becomes more and more an underlying sensitivity I think.

Kirsten: So Jim, then we have a question from Jenny. "In one of the episodes about Mechtild of Magdeburg. Jim said, apologies for the paraphrase, 'Regarding God's love and presence, I don't feel it, but I don't need to because I know it never leaves me and I live by it.' This was very helpful to me as it helps me to understand even more fully the experience of The Dark Night. And for me, understanding can lead to greater acceptance. So here's my question regarding the dark night experience. How can we discern if we are being called to something else, a deeper or different embodying of God's love in the world? Or instead a deeper acceptance of the lack of felt experience of God's love? Is my experience of holy longing necessary or am I missing some invitation? As Jim often says, 'This falls into the realm of spiritual direction, but where can one find spiritual direction of this sort?' So a suggestion maybe that could be a focus of the next workshop that Jim offers."

And then Jenny offers us a poem which I'm going to read. "Here is a poem which expresses my questions, thoughts, experience. I have been standing, watching, waiting for a long time. Is this obedience or my reluctance to hear, to see. Whose turn is it, mine or yours, Divine One? Is there a step I am yet to take or is the next step yours? Are you asking me to continue to wait for some form of clarity calling or are you awaiting me asking that I bravely step forward into an unknown land exposing the desires of my heart?"

Jim: A couple of things come to mind. Later, we're going to start doing the mystical voice of poets too, and this is a good example of this kind of poetic voice. This question, see, how do I know that I'm on the verge of a deeper calling, like *The Dark Night*, I'm in this strange deprivation of the ability to experience God on my terms, and how do I know it's because I'm at the edge of this deeper place? Or how do I know I'm just not accepting my own inabilities? I'm just kind of contended to not go deeper, how do I know not this way? And two things come to me, one, we share this in the Merton sessions I think too, it applies here. He says, "In the beginning, when people first find this path, beginners have many questions." Such as these, all these questions. And so they look to get answers to their questions, as well, they should.

He said, "But as they go down the road away far enough, they discover here all along here, God's the one asking the question. And do they not know the answer to God's question? They don't understand the question, and that's where we begin." And so this poem, dear Lord, then I'll be God talking. These are great questions, I'm waiting to see what you come up with because the very fact you wonder about it is already me. The sincerity of your wondering is the intimate unexpected nearness of me prompting your heart to sit like this, like empty-handed, bereft. And yet somehow it's hallowed or this matters or there's something unexplainable about this is important. And so I answer in those ways.

Kirsten: Beautiful, it's a lovely poem. I enjoyed reading it and being able to read it out loud. So thank you, Jenny. Very touching. Jim, before we finish on the topic of love, we have two voicemail questions. So Corey's going to play the first one for you.

Voicemail 1: Hi, this is a question relating to *Turning to the Mystic* and episode one and dialogue one of Mechtild of Magdeburg. My question is that you set up the idea of tasting God and having an experience of God and the desire for that set against the potential attachment to that and the attachment to want more of that, for example. And I want to know really how you balance those things, I'm someone who longs for that taste, who has prayed on many occasions to be touched by God in that incredible privileged and blessed way. But I also recognize that there can be a strong attachment to that being the ultimate thing in life. So that's my question, thank you.

Jim: This is my sense of it, so personal. So let's say one is grace with these moments and understandably one would like to be habitually established in them. And also one discovers one can't be, but one desires to be. And this is why Eckhart too points out that that's the seduction of these fleeting touches that has this piece in it like this. My sense of it is if God who's the author of these touches is really the touch of God, God's also the author of the longing to abide in the touch. When we taste something really amazing, our hearts are created in such a way to be habitually established in that which is amazing, it's normal. But my sense is the very fact we can't be habitually abiding in it is the lesson. I can't abide in it because I desire it, but what I really desire, Lord, is to do your will. And when I taste it, I taste it because you're willing that I taste it. And if I'm not tasting it, you're willing that I not taste it.

And so you're trying to help me or ask me, I ask you to help me to understand that you're just as present in not tasting it as you are in the taste. That the taste isn't more of you, it's the curtain opening to fleetingly realize that every moment is, waking up in the morning

and going to bed at night, standing up and sitting down. And I asked for the grace to come to this awareness. And that's why I think also, it's not a matter of these experiences, but I think a lot of it is calibrating our heart to an ever finer scale till we start to pick up in the breath, we start to pick up in the most incidental moment, the incomprehensible stature of simple things. So we start somewhere by getting a good taste. It's like married love again, like frantically in love with each other. And then it mellows over the years, a lot of ups and downs in it and it goes deeper unexpectedly. Reflecting along these lines about this has helped me to understand this because I also know what it's like to want to abide, and I'm no stranger to that feeling.

Kirsten: Yes. Yeah, I love that question. And then Jim, your response, I almost want to print that out and put it on my daily meditation. I probably will just, those words you just offered were so helpful, I'll need to read them over and over again to kind of really let that sink in. But thank you for that answer, that's really wonderful.

Jim: I had one more thing, I have one more thing. It's like an awareness, I'll use a simple example. When I stand up, if I could really, really, really, really, really, really see all that standing up is, I'd see God giving the infinity of herself away as the immediacy of my standing up. And I'm trying to come to an underlying conviction in my heart that I can't explain that that's true, and I try to live by it.

Kirsten: Thanks, Jim.

Voicemail 2: Hi, my name is Lorane, and I'm calling about Mechthild. And I am reading the book and I am listening to the podcast, which I completely love the podcasts, I always listened to the podcasts every season multiple times. Anyway, I guess I am asking for a little more understanding regarding the human love qualities that are being cast onto God.

Jim: First of all, I can see where she's coming from when she asks this, because if the love of God is infinite, but the love of two people in love is finite. To be comparing that infinite love to this finite love, it seems like we're going backwards instead of forward. And that's a good insight to see that. But what she's really saying is this, another way to look at it is this, this love between two people is created by God, God creates that love in all of its details. And since everything in God is God, this is the divinity of the details of their love for each other. Now it's true that they can have possessiveness of heart to be attached to the pleasures or experiences or fulfillment, they have to outgrow that really.

But the deeper they go in love, the more their love for each other, how I put it, incarnate infinity intimately realized, they realize they're less and less able to find words that could begin to do justice to the oneness that they experience. And so the mystically sensitized person who's blessed with such oneness, with kind of sense of God, the infinity of their oneness. And their oneness with each other is the incarnate presence of God. That's what the Catholic tradition means by it's a sacrament of God. And so I think looking at it that way I think helps us to understand where she's coming from. It's not really trying to take the infinity of God and reducing it to a finite. But realizing the finite is eternally established in the infinite and is the incarnate presence of the infinite if we have eyes to see it, if we're kind of born into the boundaryless quality of this gift of love.



Kirsten: Similar to what you were saying earlier about if it just isn't standing up, if I could really, really, really see myself standing. But I think the addition is it's between two people, so it's got that sense of a co-creation.

Jim: That's right. And another way to look at it too, this interpersonal sense of God within myself as an interpersonal dimension. And so there's a moment, say again between two people in a loving union where they say to each other, we're one. And in love, they are one. And one cannot find the place where one stop and the other begins, and they're not inclined to try, they're one. But that doesn't annihilate their distinction. Rather it reveals the mystery of their distinction with each other because in love we're a one, but in being one, they don't cease to be two. Because if they would cease to be two, they couldn't be there to know that they're one. And that helps me to know that, we are in the twoness, the otherness. But the otherness is itself permeated by the oneness that utterly permeates it and itself it's reality.

Kirsten: And you can find that same sense just directly with God in the standing up and sitting down.

Jim: That's exactly right. And another example too, Brother Lawrence, we'll do later, I thinking of Carmen Bush, Brother Lawrence, say if you're gazing at a tree. If you're just looking at the tree, the tree's other than you. But if you quietly sit and contemplate the tree, what you're doing is you're becoming more present to the one with the presence of the tree. And that somehow the presence of the tree and the presence of your oneness with it merge into a unit of experience. And God's the infinity of that experience. I think that's the intuition that helps me. Turning to the Mystics. We'll continue in a moment.

Kirsten: We're going to turn now to some questions about nuptial mystics. So this is a question from Lynn. "I'm wondering if you could comment on whether the language is more than symbolic. Other mystics use similar language imagery, Teresa of Avila, Mirabai. In Hinduism, there is the idea of Kundalini energy which moves up the spine along the chakras and causes phenomena in the body. Do you think Mechtild and the others are having energetic experiences in the body?"

Jim: My sense is yes I do. And also in the Hindu tradition too, the tantric path, is also this libidinal sexual energy, the chakras and so on. I would think so. I see St. John the cross talks about this, he says, "In deep mystical union..." His poetry is so sensual. And he talks about being physiologically sexually aroused or awakened in the presence of God. And so it's really utterly transcends those sexual feelings. But at the same time, the infinite presence of God that creates and is giving to us in and as those feelings. And that's really the deep sense of yoga to do the asanas, to do the postures, it's like a liturgy of the body. So the whole body is praying. So it's like the incarnate presence of God in and as and being bodied forth in our body feeling this way. So I would think so.

But again, what Dark Night of the Soul is all about, is we get attached to constellations and stirrings, even in a broader sense of emotional sweetness. So what God does in seeing that we're attached, God takes away the ability to be consoled. And in that Dark Night, that deprivation, if we don't panic, we run away. "See O night lovelier than the dawn that transforms the lover and the beloved into each other." And so God sometimes weans us off, a more immature form of being attached to this infinite love. So by withholding it from us, we

wait for God to deepen it and radicalize it in us, it's one of the dynamics of the path.

Kirsten: Jim, you mentioned a beautiful statue of Teresa of Avila when we were doing prep with being stabbed with the love wound and having her body and kind of a rippling experience.

Jim: Yeah. Who's the artist? I mentioned the sculptor, Bernini? No-

Kirsten: Let me look. I'll look it up and then I'll say-

Jim: I'm going to Rome. I think I will, I've been invited to Rome to give this conference on science and faith. And that on the tours, it's a beautiful statue. It's one of her ecstasies she had. And it's an angel piercing her heart with an arrow, then withdrawing it, then piercing it and withdrawing it. So it's a very erotic. And even her face is like sexual ecstasy and her clothes are rippling this way. So it's like the mystical dimensions of the sacrament of sensuality in an ecstatic state. But here's an interesting thing with Teresa, she was celibate. She was celibate. And therefore there are people who are more mystically sensual than people who are having a lot of sex. Just like there are people who don't have any children that are more profoundly maternal in their being and have no children than someone who has a lot of children. And I think it's an important distinction to make about this.

Kirsten: The statue is the ecstasy of St. Teresa, and it's by Bernini, yes?

Jim: Bernini. It's a lovely-

Kirsten: We can look it up and take a look at it, yeah, it's quite stunning.

Jim: It's a beautiful piece, yeah, it's lovely.

Kirsten: Yeah. I just wanted to add too, that I feel like in western society, many of us have been cut off from our bodies or if we've done some kind of exercise, it's really a top down. We're forcing our bodies to do something. And so in deep meditation, I feel like we can get this bottom up sense of our body's own life force. And in the more sexual places of our being is where we get that real sense of life force. So part of being open to God's presence in meditation, I do think can awaken just our own bodies and our presence to our own bodies.

Jim: These yoga traditions, the Hindu traditions are so good this way in the body on this way through the asanas and the breath. And also in Buddhism, it felt like when Zen master Dogan talks about doing zazen, doing the sitting practice. Like sitting straight, where your hands are, there's like an archetypal dimension to the posture of the body and awareness of the breath and so on. But it's also in the Christian tradition, but not nearly as much, it's not explicated. For example, in the Jesus prayer, we'll be looking at that later in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the *Philokalia* on saying the Jesus prayer, "Jesus mercy, Jesus mercy." And you pair it up with your breathing. But I do think anyone who does deep practice, it's very bodily. They don't explicate it as much in the Christian mystics, but you can just tell it's your whole being intimately divinized or being awakened to being the divinity of your body and it's nothing that's without God. It's not some abstract idea at all, it's very present.

Kirsten: A very strong life force that has a quality of feeling to it-

Jim: That's right.

Kirsten: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: And by the way, that's also the connection between mystical awakening and the corporal works of mercy and social justice. It's concretized and expressing it in the world towards oneself and the world and everything.

Kirsten: Well, speaking of the nuptial mystics, we had a few people write in and ask about this dialogue three where one of us lost control of themselves.

Jim: Yeah.

Kirsten: So I'll just give a little bit of background. One is when we were preparing for that episode, we kind of agreed that I wouldn't read through all the texts that you'd read and we'd chosen specific parts of the text and I'd practiced those. And then right before we're about to record, you said, "Hey, I read back through the text and I think we need to add in this additional section." So I hadn't prepared and read it. And for some reason as I was reading it for the first time aloud, one, I was just picturing Mechtild upright in a stiff rocking chair with a high collar and a bonnet. And I was like a five-year-old in school hearing these words for the first time. So I don't know, I got so tickled and I couldn't kind of pull it together.

Jim: You know what I think happens too, if there's a context for sexual talk, like we were just doing, for example, prayer and sexual feelings or married love. But what makes it funny is if you don't see it coming, see what makes it funny, you just don't see it coming and you're blindsided by the explicit nature of the language and I think that's laughter in a way.

Kirsten: Now you're saying that that's definitely what happened because I had prepared all this part where she's talking about the terrible body and I have to clothe myself with myself and it's so terrible. And then the part I hadn't practiced, she opened up on this other experience of her body. And so-

Jim: Yeah, it was real. The moment was real-

Kirsten: It was real.

Jim: That's why the people appreciated it was real.

Kirsten: Yeah. So anyway, thank you for joining me with me in that, Jim, that's what made it so beautiful that it wasn't made to feel embarrassed.

Jim: No, not at all.

Kirsten: So one person just sent a reflection on that, so I wanted to share it. Her name is Emily and she says, "I wanted to share my reaction listening to dialogue three. I was listening as I often do while walking my dog first thing in the morning when it is still dark and the stars are out and busy being lovely. My first response was delight, it's Kirsten's giggles and gyms, gentle teasing. I found Kirsten's reaction relatable and very charming. I've listened to the podcast for a good while and am familiar with Kirsten's wise and calm presence. The unexpectedness

of her reaction to the passage she was reading was so delightfully human, if that makes sense? And only deepened my appreciation for the three of you on the whole podcast. After a short while, my reaction shifted to tears. I'm a school librarian and teacher at a very conservative Catholic school in an ultra conservative diocese.

I've had increasing struggles involving book challenges, usually initiated by parents. I teach a fourth grade child who is deeply upset that I have a book of artwork that contains art from multiple eras and covers, among other things, human nudes. He has demanded that I take the book out of my collection and has accused classmates publicly of checking it out for impure reasons. My paraphrasing, but that is the general charge. His reaction makes me so deeply sad. The art teacher and I have tried to gently explain why artists over the course of human history have sought to study the human form, and we reinforce that our bodies are beautiful creations of God. This only serves to make him angry and tearful, and he continually insists, "This is bad, this is inappropriate."

The book I have has no sexually explicit pictures, of course, unless you equate nudity with sex. These are classic works of art. And that you see in large museums and churches. Anyway, I wanted to let you know that although it seems strange here in Kirsten dissolve into giggles and saying things like, 'It's going to say penetrate.' Was like a healing balm after the week, I've had, feeling surrounded by people who seem to see evil and sin everywhere they turn. It was a reassurance that God is playful as well as in love with us. And that you can find God's presence in every moment, sometimes most powerfully where we least expect it."

Jim: That's a good question, here's some thoughts I had about it. First of all, I would say the children aren't looking at the pictures for impure reasons, especially I understand they're not pictures, this would've to do with diocese and standards for sex education in the Catholic school, what age? So it isn't like pictures of naked man and naked woman, here's what naked woman looks like naked, it isn't like that. These are works of art, these are classical works of art. And therefore not pure reasons, it's a natural curiosity about the body, just curiosity. And so my thought would be this, the first thing is to ask the principal for the diocese and the guidelines. And say, we have art books of classic works of art, some of which... Or we're assuming that's fine, that's part of the culture. And if the children see them, the children see them and get the approval of the diocese.

The other part of it, the parents are sending the children to a Catholic school, they want to be the ones who introduce sexuality to their children, not having the school decide for them. And if they're experiencing it that way, you can see their point. But if you can get the school to back you, say, no, the diocesan holds are going to stay, just tell them that's diocesan policy, take it up with the diocese. But if the diocese is more conservative, they might say, "No, you should take them out." And see to it that they don't have access to those books until they're in high school, then they can have access to it. But in grade school, they're too young and so you should follow the guidelines of the diocese and just how people see it differently. But like you're saying, it is sad that they put it that way, it's impure, if it's explicit, it must be impure.

Kirsten: And we're going to have some questions later about how people have such a challenge with the God image and I think part of it is this kind of the way people put these things on us as little children that aren't helpful.

Jim: And the Catholic Church has a regrettable history around this too, about the body, sexuality, as a history but it's growing out of it. And then to the general society goes too far the other way, I mean just kind of a degradation of yeah, just-

Kirsten: Okay, well, thank you so much, Emily, for writing in. So we'll turn to our next topic and there's some questions about Mechtild's writings. And the first question is from Christophe, and he says about Mechtild of Magdeburg. The original text has not been preserved, we only have a German to German translation probably from, and I'm not going to be able to pronounce it, a type of low German to today's Swiss Alemannic. According to the style, it belongs to the medieval and courtly literary genre, *mini*, which was probably very modern as one would say today, hip or in at the time. And so the questions are, "Do literary or other scholarly statements about Mechtild's book take anything away from the depth and intensity of the statements, the possibility of empathetically participating and witnessing Mechtild's ecstatic *Unio Mystica* across time?" And then there's a second question, "Does the literary genre *mini* take something away from the depth of Mechtild's statements?"

Jim: Yes. That's a good question. My sense is it depends, you would assume that the scholarly person writing an explanation of the text, you would assume that they're very aware that really they're trying to clarify the themes that are present in the writing, like the theological themes, the anthropological themes, the historical theme. But they're very aware that the text itself is not reducible to the sum total of those themes. But there is this danger, and I think this person's picking this up, is that somehow that what the person is saying can be explained conceptually this way. An example we use with Meister Eckhart, Reiner Sherman shares, an example with Eckhart. He says the whole debate around Eckhart accusing him of pantheism has to do with the distinction between indicative thought and imperative thought. Indicative thought explains what is theologically. And he thought at the University of Paris and his Latin works some more theological, God is trinity, God is eternal, God is love. That has a place.

Imperative thought, the role of the preacher, the mystic teacher, their words addressed directly to the heart in the midst of a great turning. It's being overtaken by the unexplainable. That transcends anything that could be, notice the mystics aren't explaining anything, see, but they're revealing or bearing witness to deepening layers of realization of God. And so they could, but I found them to be very helpful to go back and forth to read the text. For example, in the Paulist Press series like with Mechtild, the introduction there and the preface are very helpful. And to read the text, read the introduction, the preface. And then go back and read it in the light of the introduction, I find the two combined together to be very helpful in that. So the answer is no, it's not necessarily violating it, but it can if it's understood reductionistically as if it can be explained.

Kirsten: And also, Jim, this idea about the language of the age. And I think the question is around her use of this ecstatic language was kind of trendy. So was it real and does it communicate a true resonance with God or is she more just being trendy in the-

Jim: No, I don't think so, I really don't think so. I think, again, in the interview with Bernard McGinn, you don't get any ecstatic talk in Meister Eckhart, it's really a language of detachment, from images in the midst of the world, like the divinity of the immediacy, et cetera, don't get any. But with Mechtild and Teresa and John and Bernard of Clairvaux, other

mystics will be looking at. And I think she was an ecstatic mystic, that's how God worked with her. And I think for a lot of us in different ways as we go deeper, it's not either or, but it's a balance of each or certain kind of ecstatic shimmers where it shines forth and there's a certain kind of deep, unexplainable understanding that can't be explained. And I think that balance or harmony is personal to how God works with each one of us.

Kirsten: Yes, and she was an amazing writer too. So she was able to use the combined gifts of her writing and her ability to write in the drama of the day with this real experience.

Jim: Yeah, it's literature. She was very gifted that way in how she could put words to these things.

Kirsten: Peter asked a question about her writing and he says, "How much do you think Matilda's making biblical illusions? In some ways she could be referring to individual passages and in other ways she could just be using the common language of the Bible that she's using to describe her own life experience."

Jim: This is my sense of this, when you really look at it, what these mystics are doing, they take a passage or a set of passages revealed in scripture. And under the impulse of grace embody the mystical dimensions of that. And to the extent the person is explicitly using text of scripture or they're in this contemplative ethos of scripture itself as a revelation of God's word, it varies a lot. For example, what Meister Eckhart, he always begins with the text, it's a homily and ends with a prayer. St. John of the cross, he said, his soul guide is scripture, but it's not apologetics, it's not like proof text. It's the mystical dimensions of the scripture.

And again, an example that I use, if you take the collected works of John of the Cross and underlying all the Bible passages in red and the commentary on scripture in yellow, it's a scripture commentary. Other people, they don't follow it that closely, but it's all in the spirit of scripture, of the revealed word of God revealed through Jesus, through the prophets and the Psalms. And so I think hers is a more of a general internalization of scripture understood in the mystical dimensions of God's oneness with us.

Kirsten: Yeah, that's really helpful. So I guess Jim, with all these Christian mystics, for them to be a classical Christian mystic, they would deeply into scripture-

Jim: Yeah. I'll put it another way too. Later, when we look at other mystics and other traditions like Jewish, mystics, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. What you find is there's a mystical dimension in all the world's religions. So in Judaism, it's the Kabbalah, the uncreated in the sparks of God and hidden in things. In Islam, it's the way of the Sufi, it's Rumi and Hafiz. In Hinduism, namaste, I am that, Brahman and Atman are one. The Bhagavad Gita and the Buddha.

So what you always find is the lineage, but also with new age spirituality, one way of understanding new age, it's the mystically awakened person outside all the lineages. You can be deeply awakened and not identify with any, this is why I'm going to say that's some poets, clearly mystic, we're going to look at... Some artists are visual mystics, music mystic. And so you can have it. And what was often lacking in new age, it's that lacks the depth of death, it lacks dying to everything, less than the infant to which they've been awakened, this incarnate in their body and their breathing. A lot of the new age doesn't take that step. But for the Christians, they see themselves as disciples of Jesus and the spirit of the scriptures.

- Kirsten: Beautiful. This is a question from Heather. “At the end of Mechtild’s life, when she refers to her soul talking to her body, could this not be the voice of the Holy Spirit? Jesus tells us that He left us with the advocate, the comforter, one that speaks to us. I find it difficult to understand why God would stop speaking to her and she would interpret the voice as her souls if possible could you help me understand this?”
- Jim: Yeah. I don’t think she means it in that way, that God stopped speaking with her, so now the voices are so... I think it’s this literary moving back and forth, I would think it’d be more this way. It would be the deep awareness of God’s infinite communion with and being given as the mystery of her soul. And it’s nothingness without God. So it’s not that God stops speaking to her, so it’s her soul. But rather in a sense her soul is the incarnate presence of God and her soul is nothingness without God, I think it’s more that way. That’s why I like that quote from Romano Guardini, this thing about, “That I am not God, but I’m not other than God either.” I’m not any of you, but I’m not other than any of you either. I’m not the earth, but I’m not other than the earth either. He says, “I think this is the turning point of this unit of language that the mystics freely move through and share with us.”
- Kirsten: Where would you place the Holy Spirit, Jim, in that dialogue?
- Jim: I’ll put it in two ways. First of all, in the subjective union of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the love that’s arising from the infinite union of the Father and the Son and the contemplation of each other. Secondly, the Holy Spirit is the indwelling presence of God. And next, the Holy Spirit is the awakener of our hearts. So when we hear in scripture, God loves us for the power of the spirit who dwells in our hearts, Paul speaks about with an honorable groanings, the spirit within us yearns that we would realize God does love us. But it through the gift of the spirit within us, that we know the truth of the love, not just as a fact on the page. And so I think the spirit is understood in those ways.
- Kirsten: So in that dialogue, the spirit would be kind of the way she’s even able to have this dialogue with the soul and God, it’s within that realization.
- Jim: Yeah, I get the feeling with Mechtild, all these messages. You get the feeling she’s in the flow, you don’t get the feeling she’s making this up or whatever. She’s channeling God’s voice and she is so surrendered over to it, it’s just flowing, that’s who these mystic teachers are I think. You can tell when you read them, there’s nothing contrived or forced. It’s not coming from them either, but through them. And you can tell they’re kind of surrendering to it, like freely choosing to allow the channeling of that. And that’s why it gets to us the way it does, I think.
- Kirsten: Wonderful. So in the language where you’re talking about the Holy Spirits, it’s just full participation in the Trinity. It’s not-
- Jim: Yeah, exactly. That’s exactly right. And that’s why we’re in the presence of the teacher’s voice, we’re in the presence of God because it’s in the presence of God and as the incarnate surrender of the teacher being God’s voice, addressing and touching our hearts unexplainably. And yeah, the Logos.
- Kirsten: Lovely. So thank you, Jim for taking us through part one of listener questions. And Corey, thank you again for everything you do for us. 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.