



Convents, Jails, and Other Tales: An Overview of Christian Mystics and Why They Matter (Sister BJ Brown: Walking with the Mystics)

Sr. Barbara Jean Brown AF

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While encountering a new person who came to me for spiritual direction, I discovered that the first thing that was at issue was the fact that she had been handed a book which supposedly would lead her to a much deeper level of faith. As it turned out, the book not only did no such thing, but actually made her question her faith to its very core. When I discovered that the book she was trying to read and understand was *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross, and that this woman was very new to the Church, I told her to immediately stop reading it. For those who have little or no experience of the lives and writings of the Saints and Mystics of past centuries, it can be a confusing and disastrous process. At the best of times, I would never hand the third volume of a spiritual tome, by an author of foreign language and centuries old, to anyone who had no prior knowledge of the author or the historical and spiritual demographic from which he or she came. It was from this experience that I decided to write a book that would introduce the various mystical authors of Christianity for those who had a desire to enhance their understanding and experience of the spiritual depths of the Faith. Of most importance is the initial chapter which defines the various “languages” out of which the various writings of spiritual experience have come. It is important, not only to know what spiritual language the specific mystic writer speaks, but also what spiritual language we ourselves speak. To know that a mystic lived in the 5th or 12th century, and that he or she was an image oriented person and from a particular monastic tradition, will help the reader to catch on to the meaning and spirit of the writing in question. Then, if the reader knows herself or himself to be an image oriented person, and aware of the spirit behind a given monastic tradition, that mystic may more easily resonate spiritually. If the languages of writer and reader don’t match, at least the reader can relax within themselves and not worry if she or he is missing the point or simply needs to move on without a compulsion understand everything or a need even to finish reading the book. The majority of this book is to introduce the people, the saints, the mystics who left us a record of their encounters with the Divine, their reflections on those encounters and/or their responses to the Spirit who is always calling us to be in relationship with God. The book is organized in mostly a chronological order and the chapters encompass the various “schools” of mystical thought. I have endeavored to place each person within the categories of “kataphatic” or “apophatic”, “speculative” or “affective”, spiritual languages to the best of my ability, though others who are better acquainted with particular mystics may disagree with me, and I hold out the hope to learn more as I continue to study these giants of the spiritual life myself.

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