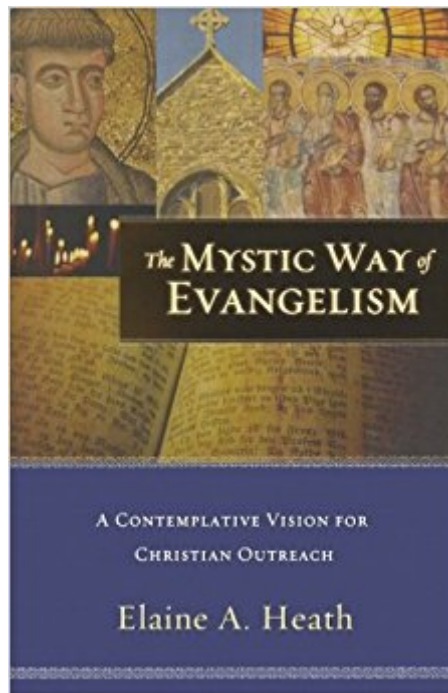




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# The Mystic Way Of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision For Christian Outreach



## Synopsis

Although each generation searches for effective ways to be salt and light, Elaine Heath argues that the church is currently in an especially difficult place a dark night of the soul. She calls the church to embrace, rather than ignore, its difficulties and find different ways of doing outreach. Heath brings a fresh perspective to the theory and practice of evangelism by approaching it through contemplative spirituality. By looking to mystics, saints, and martyrs of church history such as Ignatius of Loyola, Julian of Norwich, St. Francis, John Wesley, Mother Theresa, and Henri Nouwen she suggests we can discover ways of thinking about God that result in a life of outreach.

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## Customer Reviews

Elaine Heath argues that the church is in a dark night of the soul. It has thus lost its prophetic voice--its effectiveness in proclaiming the good news of redemption. Rather than resisting or decrying this state of affairs, the church, says Heath, ought to embrace its situation as a starting point to renew its vitality and consequently, its witness. A solution is proposed in the wisdom and contemplative spirituality of the great saints and mystics--people such as Julian of Norwich, Ignatius of Loyola, Phoebe Palmer, Henri Nouwen, and others. This book brings fresh insights to the theory and practice of evangelism by examining it through the lens of the classic threefold path of purgation, illumination, and union. Different ways of thinking about evangelism are drawn from the lives and teachings of the mystics, and different ways of practicing evangelism are then proposed via narrative theology. The result is a holistic perspective, offering a corrective to programmatic and

consumeristic forms of evangelism so prevalent today. Here is a unique contribution to the discussion on evangelism in our postmodern world."A refreshing and profound contribution. With perceptive insight, Heath identifies issues facing the contemporary church in the West. She then responds to those issues with care and creativity, skillfully recovering the richness of Christian mysticism and its themes of holiness. Not many projects ably bridge the distance that can emerge between the study of evangelism and its practice in communities of faith--Heath's does."--Lacey Warner, Duke University Divinity School"Elaine Heath is not afraid to name our demons and release our angels! She shows courage, honesty, and direction for the future in this very readable book. All Christian denominations are sharing common problems today and have a common future--a mystic future or none at all."--Richard Rohr, OFM, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico"Here's my hunch: for many readers, this will be the most important book they read this year."--Brian McLaren ([brianmclaren.net](http://brianmclaren.net)), author/activist

Elaine A. Heath (Ph.D., Duquesne University) is McCreless Associate Professor of Evangelism and director of the Center for Missional Wisdom at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas. An ordained United Methodist minister, she has served several churches and has taught at several seminaries. She is also the coauthor of *More Light on the Path*.

I chose to read this book after reading another text on evangelism in a contemplative (Celtic) Christian context. Heath's work here is extremely thoughtful and compassionate. She emphasizes the relational nature of evangelism, and she connects holiness with evangelism in a very helpful way. Heath expresses some concern that the organization of her book - into three major sections (purgation, illumination, union) commonly associated with the contemplative path - will distract the reader, but I did not find this structure to be a problem. Heath's concern is for the church, especially the church in the United States, to reclaim a holistic approach to sharing the good news with a postmodern world. If you are interested in a helpful, meaningful, and profound approach to relational evangelism - or even in contemplative Christianity - I highly recommend this book to you.

This fall I had the opportunity to travel to Fayetteville, AR with my wife. While there she attended a conference while I worked on school related projects. She had a tremendous week. One of the first sessions she attended featured Elaine A. Heath, who is the McCreless Assistant Professor of Evangelism at Perkins School of Theology, SMU. She was excited about what she had heard, and believed much of the presentation would resonate with me. Dr. Heath had recently published a book

which contained some of the insights she shared at the conference entitled *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*. The next week I ordered the book from .com. When someone speaks to me with enthusiasm about a book, an author, or an idea, I'm usually quick to pounce. In this case I'm glad I did. Heath's title is telling and reveals the nature of her project, which to some may appear enigmatic. What does the life of the mystic have to do with the life of the evangelist? Can the deep, inner, contemplative life yield fruit for sharing the gospel and bringing people to Christian faith? For Heath the answer is a resounding yes. After recounting her first exposure to Christian evangelism Heath astutely observes, "there is a striking absence in most contemporary discussions of evangelism of the wisdom of the great spiritual giants...to shape and lead our understanding of the theory and practice of evangelism." Heath structures her book by utilizing the threefold contemplative path: purgation, illumination, and union. First, Heath claims that the church in America is experiencing "a dark night of the soul" and proceeds to describe the "dryness and fruitlessness" experienced by many churches, the "flailing, the striving, and the...loss of desire" present in the life of some leaders, and the emergence of a deep and holy longing for God which brings with it a new day. Heath describes the current malaise present in the church of today as a time of refinement and preparation for what God might bring about tomorrow. Heath states, "the church in America is in transition, with Christendom fading into memory and the religious accretions of the world, the flesh, and the devil, increasingly apparent for what they are...We are ready for a different way to think about our vocation as the church. It is time for us to discover a contemplative vision for evangelism." In part 2 (Illumination) Heath examines five major themes of the contemplative life and exalts two major examples per theme to bring life to her argument. Heath discusses the experience of God's love (Julian of Norwich and Hans Urs von Balthasar), holiness exhibited in lives reflective of eucharist (Phoebe Palmer and Father Arseny), the discovery of home/identity in God (Thomas R. Kelly and Henri Nouwen), the church's collective need to confess her sins (Julia Foote and Mechthild of Magdeburg), and the healing of the earth (St. Bonaventure and John Woolman). Each chapter utilizes these biographical examples well, allowing the content of each individual's life inform the contemplative life of the church today. Heath also helps us remember both women and men who can be heralded as saints and followed as examples. In part 3 (Union) Heath utilizes the fictional account of Sam, a divorcee and parent of a teenage daughter, who comes in contact with a church embodying the contemplative life Heath is proposing. Heath's chapter titles, "A Hermeneutic of Love," "Giving Ourselves Away," "Homing Prayer," "New Tongues of Fire," and "Your Will Be Done on Earth" are in themselves revealing, and each chapter tells how Sam learns of God's nature, the Christian life of service, prayer, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and

what the Christian life has to do with the here and now. I enjoyed this book and would recommend it to church leaders and mature Christians interested in evangelism. Heath's approach is uncommon. She goes beyond a way of packaging and presenting the Christian faith and instead calls the church to become holy, believing that the very life of the community has the power to draw and witness to the truth of the gospel. Her argument acknowledges that the good news about Jesus does indeed have content, but couples the importance of the message with the integrity of the life the church leads. Her emphasis on holiness and purity of character as primary is what I find so refreshing and increasingly vital for the church as she seeks to find her way.

Dr. Heath is a very bright star in the new wave of theological professionals. We need the connection to our mystical roots in Christianity she affords in this study.

I found it inspiring to learn about the connection I have with persons who struggled as I have with following Christ in a world that would rather not be bothered with the struggles of others.

This book was recommended by someone who reads a lot, so I felt like this was going to be a worthy read. Maybe the expectations were too high, but instead of feeling that this book was transformational, it was just another book on evangelism. Now it was an interesting book. It was full of wonderful stories about the mystics of earlier days. Some of these lives and stories are amazing. These individuals sacrificed a lot in the name of God. Sometimes these expressions of services were odd, but you must respect the heart that desired these actions. The book focuses more on the character or ethic of Christian people than the approach. The author writes much on love and holiness as the means of attraction for unchristian people. She does this through a story about a certain man's journey into the church. Some of this story is reactionary as it seems to pit the old style churches against newer (perhaps) emergent churches. I think sometimes she goes too far in criticizing the churches of the past and exalting the churches of today. It almost seems that she feels that a conservative church cannot be loving and accepting. I am not sure this is the case as I have been in numerous conservative churches (all of Christ), and these congregations were loving. Maybe this book was not as radical for me because I have been spending much time on these issues and this approach, maybe the book was a little too emergent for me, or maybe I just expected too much. The book did have some excellent points, and some great insight, so it is worth a read, but maybe not a preeminent position on the bookshelf.

A perspective all Christians, or spiritually-minded need to read. Do you long to help heal and bring God's reign on earth to all the world? Then this is a necessary book.

We have so many ideas about the words 'mystic' and 'evangelism' mean. This work describes both, and in a way that gives hope that we can all do both today.

Excellent book. Some mystical writing is rather ethereal. This was easy to comprehend and certainly a way for the future.

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