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The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England

Wolfgang Riehle

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Spiritual seekers throughout history have sought illumination through solitary contemplation. In the Christian tradition, medieval England stands out for its remarkable array of hermits, recluses, and spiritual outsiders, from Cuthbert, Godric of Fichale, and Christina of Markyate to Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe. In *The Secret Within*, Wolfgang Riehle offers the first comprehensive history of English medieval mysticism in decades, one that will appeal to anyone fascinated by mysticism as a phenomenon of religious life.

In considering the origins and evolution of the English mystical tradition, Riehle begins in the twelfth century with the revival of eremitical mysticism and the early growth of the Cistercian Order in the British Isles. He then focuses in depth on the great mystics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: Richard Rolle (the first great English mystic), the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Margery Kempe, and Julian of Norwich. Riehle carefully grounds his narrative in the broader spiritual landscape of the Middle Ages, pointing out both prior influences dating back to Late Antiquity and corresponding developments in mysticism and theology on the Continent. He discusses the problem of possible differences between male and female spirituality and the movement of popularizing mysticism in the late Middle Ages. Filled with fresh insights, *The Secret Within* will be welcomed especially by teachers and students of medieval literature as well as by those engaged in historical, theological, philosophical, cultural, even anthropological and comparative studies of mysticism.

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