

## **Saint Patrick's Advent Book Study 2009**

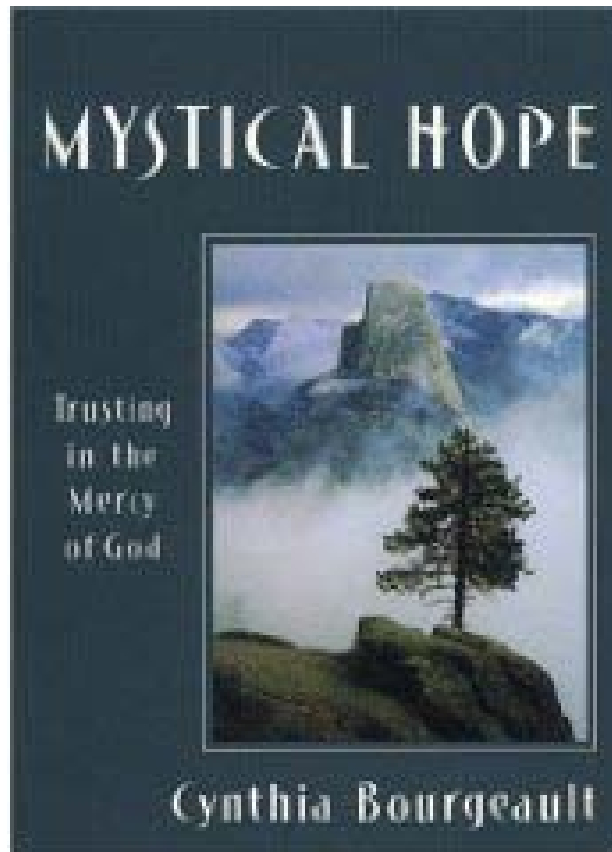
### **"Mystical Hope" by Cynthia Bourgeault**

**Wednesday Evenings, 6:00pm-8:00pm**

**6:00pm-6:30pm: Common Meal**

**6:30pm-7:00pm: Eucharist**

**7:00pm-8:00pm: Book Study**



**December 2<sup>nd</sup> -- Pages 1-31**

**December 9<sup>th</sup> -- Pages 31-68**

**December 16<sup>th</sup> -- Pages 68-99**

**Saint Patrick's Advent Book Study 2009**  
**"Mystical Hope" by Cynthia Bourgeault**  
**Booklet for Wednesday, December 02, 2009**

**Introduction**

A major theme of Advent is 'expectant hope.' But what exactly is hope? The most prevalent understanding of Christian hope is tied to optimism—what we perceive to be a good future outcome. However, there is a deeper hope to be found in scripture and our tradition. It is a spiritual state of being. It has little to do with external circumstances. This form of hope has traditionally been deemphasized in the Western Church's theology with its emphasis on sin and separation from God; however, it is quite mainstream in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Cynthia Bourgeault calls this form of hope 'mystical hope.'

So, it makes sense to study 'hope' during Advent; but where is the incarnation (Christmas) in all of this? Some strands of New Testament theology proclaim that Christ, the living water, the bread of life, is a Living Presence deep within us. This sort of focus on the incarnation of God in Christ is called *incarnational theology*. And though not explicitly named as such in the book, incarnational theology is the driving theology behind Bourgeault's 'Mystical Hope.' This study is therefore a Christmas study as well as an Advent one.

Bourgeault's presentation is a deeper understanding of both hope and the incarnation than is commonly presented in mainstream Christianity. By deeper I don't mean more intellectually complex. Complexity has nothing to do with spiritual depth. Complexity is a function of rational understanding. Spiritual depth transcends rational understanding. With this said, however, we must use rational tools of thought to communicate; and so, this book is a theological work-- but as with all theology, it is best understood as a window, or a pointer, into the opaque depths of understanding which exist beyond the confines of rational finitude.

Cynthia Bourgeault mini-bio: prolific writer, spiritual retreat leader, and Episcopal priest.

**Chapter One: Journey to the Wellsprings**

*In our usual way of looking at things, hope is tied to outcome. (p. 3) She does not deny this view of hope, one that is prolific in scripture and tradition. She does, however, pinpoint a major difficulty with this view. Where is God when positive outcomes never materialize? [For example,] when the biopsy comes back malignant, when despite our fervent prayers healing does not occur? (p. 5) **Group response? How do we answer the question?***

Theology has tackled this question in a multitude of ways over the centuries. This book does not support or deny any such theologies; rather it posits an alternative paradigmatic view—one where the dilemma becomes obsolete. Bourgeault names this deeper understanding 'mystical hope.'

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### Booklet for Wednesday, December 02, 2009 (continued)

Three biblical vignettes, all spoken by persons experiencing deep and seemingly insurmountable suffering:

*I will be joyful in God my savior.....he enables me to go to the heights. -Habakkuk 3:17 & 19*

*Indeed the water I give will become in the person a spring of water welling up to eternal life. – John 4:14*

*In my flesh I will see God. Job 19:26*

Keying off these three stories, Bourgeault presents the four characteristics of mystical hope:

- 1) *Mystical hope is not tied to a good outcome, to the future. It lives a life of its own, seemingly without reference to external circumstances and conditions. (p. 9)*
- 2) *It has something to do with presence—not a future good outcome, but the immediate experience of being met, held in communion, by something intimately at hand. (p. 9)*
- 3) *It bears fruit within us at the psychological level in the sensations of strength, joy, and satisfaction: an “unbearable lightness of being.” But mysteriously, rather than deriving these gifts from outward expectations being met, it seems to produce them from within. (p. 10)*
- 4) *In some sense it is atemporal—that is, out of time..... The poet T.S. Eliot poetically talks about apprehending “the intersection of the timeless with time.” (pgs. 11-12)*

Bourgeault says such experiences of mystical hope are open to all, and not limited to biblical characters and saints. **Share any such experiences of mystical hope in your life story—moments when, as C.S. Lewis described them, you were “surprised by joy,” --moments that meet the fourfold criteria of Bourgeault’s mystical hope.**

*This journey to the wellsprings of hope is not something that will change your life in the short range, in the externals. Rather, it is something that will change your innermost way of seeing. From there, inevitably, the externals will rearrange. (p. 3)*

Holographic posters. Out of ugliness and chaos, comes beauty. Externals seemingly rearranged, but nothing actually changed. Just our perception of the reality being presented has changed.

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### Booklet for Wednesday, December 02, 2009 (continued)

*The spiritual life can only be lived in the present moment, in the now. All the great religious traditions insist upon this simple but difficult truth. (p. 12)* **Does this strike you as spiritually profound and true? Or, do you find such a claim to be impractical and therefore naïve? If you consider it true, what holds you back from living it?**

Bourgeault draws a subtle yet important distinction between traditional notions of grace and mystical hope. Traditional understandings of grace “connote something extraordinary and uncharacteristic: an infusion of divine sustenance into our lives as a special gift from God, given with God’s own timing and discretion.” (pgs. 16-17) The objective of such theology is to affirm as paramount God’s sovereignty. [However,] in overemphasizing this divine freedom it is all too easy to understate and miss that hope is not intended to be an extraordinary infusion, but an abiding state of being. (p. 17) **How does this distinction between grace and hope strike you?**

She then makes the startling claim that it is our “responsibility, as stewards of creation, to develop a conscious and permanent connection to this wellspring.....[She asks] What if our insistence on treating it as a rare and exceptional phenomenon is a way of ducking the invitation that was permanently extended at the Samaritan well that blazing midday?” (p. 17-18) **Respond to this quote.**

**Why do you think she titled this chapter ‘Journey to the Wellsprings’? What exactly does this phrase mean for Bourgeault?**

**Why do you think Bourgeault chose the following citation to open the chapter: *What you dare not hope for, that is what He gives you. –Br. Roger, Taize Community* Might it have something to do with the “unbearable lightness” of mystical hope? Why do you think the lightness is described as unbearable? Consider possible associations with the scriptural phrase ‘fear of the Lord.’**

**Additional group questions/comments on this chapter?**

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## "Mystical Hope" by Cynthia Bourgeault

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### Chapter 2: Living in the Mercy

In order to understand hope as coming from a divine reservoir deep within, the traditional model for the God-human relationship must be reexamined. In traditional western Christianity, God is envisioned as entirely separate from us—out there somewhere. But this overarching emphasis upon our separateness from God does a disservice to Scripture and the overall tradition (and I would argue Trinitarian theology). This chapter seeks to swing the pendulum the other way, emphasizing God's closeness and indissoluble connection to us.

God, the source of mystical hope, in fact dwells infinitely close. The little fish in a panic exemplifies our state of mind and the metaphysical reality of Bourgeault's theology. "*Mama, mama, what's water? I gotta find water or I'll die!*" (p. 20)

Drawing from scripture, Bourgeault names this aspect of God "the Mercy." Resonating with the theology of Paul in Romans, she writes: *Mercy is the length and breadth and height and depth of what we know of God—and the light by which we know it* (p. 20)—and nothing can separate us from it.

But to understand her usage of 'mercy', we must distance ourselves from the modern English word and its connotations of power and condescension. Drawing from scripture and our historic tradition, she rightly positions biblical 'mercy' in the Hebrew word/concept 'chesed.' Chesed translates as "*a fierce, bonding love*".....*It is not about pity, but about passion.....[It is] an infallible link of love that holds the created and uncreated realms together...it is unconditional—always there, underlying everything.....the gravitational field in which we live and move and have our being.*" (pgs. 24-25) We are like the little fish-- only the sea (i.e. The Mercy) in which we swim is the unconditional, passionate, and bonding love of God. The Mercy' is none other than the Logos, the Word, the incarnate Christ—that aspect of God that ensouls the universe.

Speaking of creation "*...God is the unity—the very energy, the very intelligence, the very elegance and passion that make it all go.*" (Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 29) *The Mercy is "holy substantiality"—the innermost essence of being itself. It is that "river of God," running like the sap through the tree of life.....it is the very heartbeat of God resonant in creation; the warmth that pulses through all things as the divine Mystery flows out in created form.* (p. 30-31)

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**How does this picture of God strike you?**

**Did you find Bourgeault's consideration of contemporary physics helpful? If so, how was it helpful?**

**Consider Bourgeault's presentation of 'The Mercy' (the Logos) in the context of Jesus' 'I Am' sayings in the Gospel of John. Does this chapter help you to interpret these sayings any differently than you did before? If so, in what ways? ["I Am" sayings may be found in Appendix A.]**

**How does Bourgeault's presentation of 'The Mercy' relate to the concept of Ruach in the Old Testament? [See appendix B if unfamiliar with the biblical concept.]**

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**Chapter Two: Living in the Mercy (continued)**

Bourgeault continues by expressing that 'mystical hope' is *what happens when we touch this innermost ground and it floods forth into our being as strength and joy. (p. 34)* Mystical hope is the lived experience of contact with the incarnate Christ—The Mercy.

Our 'innermost ground' is the point in which our deepest selves make contact with God; it is the conduit through which Christ's power and joy floods into us. Drawing from the Sufi mystic tradition, Thomas Merton names this point of contact the 'point vierge'—*the "last, irreducible, secret center of the heart where God alone penetrates"; where the last veils of our createdness give way into God's all-enfolding mercy. ....access to this center is not at our command. We cannot get to it; it can only get to us by flowing from the innermost outward into our being....[and] this flow is entered only through our complete poverty—our complete nothingness. (pgs. 37-38)* On a very deep level, this is the foundational message of Christ. In order to live in Christ, we must die to self.

**Chapter Three: Meditation and Hope**

But at this deeper level, exactly what does it mean to 'die to self'? In sum, it means to transcend our 'egoic consciousness' (or 'ordinary awareness')—to cultivate a level of awareness which runs deeper than our egoic operating system. This deeper level of awareness Bourgeault calls 'spiritual awareness.' *The simplest way of describing this other kind of awareness is that while the self-reflexive ego thinks by means of noting differences and drawing distinctions, spiritual awareness "thinks" by an innate perception of kinship, of belonging to the whole. (p. 48)* And though we could spend hours in metaphysical and epistemological deliberations, this coupled with an inquiry into contemporary quantum physics, *the catch is that....as long as you are in egoic consciousness, you will not get it. (p. 46)* To be grasped, spiritual awareness must be experienced.

**Does this sound like a cop out? Or, do you believe that there is a deeper level of perception that transcends empirical observation? Using the ancient Christian patristic vocabulary, do you buy this idea of the 'spiritual senses'?**

**Table discussion: Read the middle paragraph of p. 49—the sailing metaphor for spiritual awareness. From your own life experience, can you relate to this metaphor in any way? Have you heard others tell stories that might relate to this metaphor?**

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*The only thing blocking the emergence of this whole and wondrous other way of knowing is your over-reliance on your ordinary thinking. If you can just turn that off for a while, then the other will begin to shape in you, become a reality you can actually experience. And as it does, you will know, in a way you cannot presently know, your absolute belonging and place in the heart of God, and that you are a part of this heart forever and cannot possibly fall out of it, no matter what may happen. (p. 52)* This is mystical hope. It is a mode of being where optimism becomes obsolete.

So, how does one turn off the egoic consciousness? How does one begin to die to our egoic self? We follow the path of kenosis—self emptying—the way of Jesus per St. Paul. Of course, we're not Jesus, so this does not come so easily; but meditation, a time honored tool across all religious traditions, offers an instrument to cultivate a habit of kenosis. In essence, and slowly over time of enduring and committed practice, meditation helps *practitioners break out of their compulsive attachment to thinking and entrust themselves to the deeper stillness of God.* (p. 43) ...And, I would add, to the spiritual senses.

#### **What have been your experiences, if any, of meditative prayer practices?**

Bourgeault makes clear her own preference for a meditation practice. It is one I share, and for the same reasons. *Congruent with both the theology and underlying temperament of Christianity.....in centering prayer the whole emphasis is on consent—or surrender—“to the presence and action of God.”* (p. 54) It is the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemani—“Father, not my will but yours be done.”

If interested, please see Centering Prayer/Meditation resources in Appendix C.

#### **Questions/comments on Chapter Three?**

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### Chapter Four: Dying Before You Die

*This deeper way of thinking has been called in our tradition the "unitive".....Unitive thinking is more like poetry than systematic theology.....Here at this level lie the ideas that can really help us to get a handle on the "width and length and height and depth" of mystical hope, and why it can never ultimately fail us. (59-60)*

Apocatastasis: the theological principle that *all our times are contained in something bigger: a space that is none other than the Mercy itself. The fullness (or "end") of time becomes this space: a vast, gentle wideness in which all possible outcomes—all our little histories, past, present, and future; all our hopes and dreams—are already contained and, mysteriously, already fulfilled.....[they all] flow out of and back into that great white light of the simple loving presence of God. Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. And in that Mercy all our history—our possible pasts and possible futures, our lost loved ones and children never born—is contained and fulfilled in a wholeness of love from which nothing can ever possibly be lost. It is not a vision we can stand too long in the presence of. (p. 64-64)*

As a possible help to understanding this, consider the Yin/Yang symbol and the significance of the outer ring of light containing all the intermingling of light and darkness. All is assumed into the totality of God. Sermon illustration from a few weeks ago of the little boy who "finished" on the baseball field.

**Questions-comments-reflections on apocatastasis?**

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**Chapter Four: Dying Before You Die**

*Unitive thinking can really help us to get a handle on the “width and length and height and depth” of mystical hope, and why it can never ultimately fail us. (59-60)*

Central to unitive thinking is apocatastasis. Apocatastasis is the theological principle that *all our times are contained in something bigger: a space that is none other than the Mercy itself. The fullness (or “end”) of time becomes this space: a vast, gentle wideness in which all possible outcomes—all our little histories, past, present, and future; all our hopes and dreams—are already contained and, mysteriously, already fulfilled.....[they all] flow out of and back into that great white light of the simple loving presence of God. Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. And in that Mercy all our history—our possible pasts and possible futures, our lost loved ones and children never born—is contained and fulfilled in a wholeness of love from which nothing can ever possibly be lost. It is not a vision we can stand too long in the presence of. (p. 64-64)*

As a possible help to understanding this, consider the Yin/Yang symbol and the significance of the outer ring of light which contains all of the intermingling light and darkness. All is assumed into the totality of God. Sermon illustration from a few weeks ago of the little boy who “finished” on the baseball field.

**Questions-comments-reflections on apocatastasis?**

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### Chapter Five: Hope and the Future

In chapter five, Bourgeault presents two final aspects of Mystical Hope: it has a future orientation and is necessarily communal.

Mystical hope has a future orientation: *Hope is divine energy and intelligence moving toward the accomplishment of its purposes.....carrying both itself and us toward deeper and more authentic manifestation....The body of Christ is not just a timeless, eternal reality, but moves through time in order to bring all things to their fulfillment in love. (pgs. 79- 80)*

**How does this image of God strike you? A God of perfection, yet One who necessarily evolves with us due to His incarnational relationship with creation?**

For a scientific inquiry into the 'providential' nature of the universe's evolution, research Complexity Theory. An accessible and entertaining resource is the book "Complexity" by M. Mitchell Waldrop.

Mystical hope is necessarily communal: if our deepest self identity can only be found in the context of communion with God—then it necessarily can also only be found in context with one another and all creation—for God ensouls all. Biological analogy: the identity and vitality of a living cell only exists in relationship to all the other cells in the body.

[If time, contrast dualism of west with monism of east and situate Bourgeault's metaphysic within the context of qualified monism.]

Bourgeault: *As we converge toward the point vierge, our illusion of separate selfhood dissolves in something greater and shared. The higher up the ladder of spiritual progress we go, the more we know indisputably that we are a cell in the lifeblood of something infinitely greater. (p. 83)*

**On p. 82-83, Bourgeault references a pivotal moment in the life of Thomas Merton, an experience that opened his spiritual eyes to the deepest reality of our relatedness. Have you ever had a similar experience, or known someone else who has? If so, share the nature of the experience.**

Tying these two aspects together (the futuristic orientation and the communal) Bourgeault comments on our role in this schema. *Insofar as we are able to remain simply and warmly within "the righteousness of God," we are able to move out into the world as agents of transformation, as creative channels of God's own existential set toward the future. (p. 90) ('Righteousness' here is synonymous with 'the Mercy'—the body of Christ.)*

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In order for our outward actions to be truly moral, they must be driven by 'righteous' internal energies. They must be inspired and driven by the wellspring of Christ within. *The energy accompanying an action is objectively real; it powerfully affects the field in which the action plays out....and it will ultimately carry the day....A right action done with a wrong energy will ultimately become a wrong action. And because of the discrepancy between means and ends, the action will ultimately self-cancel, following the precept Jesus laid down in the gospel: "A house divided against itself will fall" (Luke 11:17). (pgs. 91- 92)*

**Table Discussion:** In reference to the above, respond to the following two excerpts.

***If I say I am working for peace but am myself angry and self-righteous then the energy I am putting into the atmosphere is anger and self-righteousness. If I come preaching the gospel of Christian love but am myself rigid and judgmental, I am putting into the atmosphere rigidity and judgment. (p. 91)***

***We preach the Good Samaritan and lock our church doors. We preach the lilies of the field and allocate large amounts of our monthly paychecks to pension and insurance plans. We preach forgiveness and trust and do routine background checks on prospective priests and church workers. Whatever we may think we are up to in terms of furthering the reign of Christ, what we are actually putting into the atmosphere are fear, greed, stress, power, and control issues. (pgs. 93-94)(Though a critique on the Church, this can, of course, be a commentary as well on our corporate and familial institutions.)***

**Table Discussion:** Speaking of agents who exude both outward kindness and righteous energy, have you ever met anyone akin to Brother Roger of the Taizé Community? See Bourgeault's reflection of Br. Roger on pages 96-97.

Chapter conclusion: *In plumbing deeply the hidden rootedness of the whole, where all things are held together in the Mercy, we are released from the grip of personal fear and set free to minister with skillful means and true compassion to a world desperately in need of reconnection. (p. 98)*

### **Mystical Hope: Wrap Up Conversation**

**Any and all comments/reflections/questions about the book?**

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### Appendix A: "I Am" sayings

1. I AM the bread of life.
  - John 6:35: Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."
  - John 6:48: I am the bread of life.
2. I AM the light of the world.
  - John 8:12: When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."
  - John 9:5: While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."
3. I AM the door.
  - John 10:7: Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep."
4. I AM the good shepherd.
  - John 10:14: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...."
5. I AM the resurrection and the life.
  - John 11:25: Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."
6. I AM the way, the truth and the life.
  - John 14:6: Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
7. I AM the true vine.
  - John 15:1, 5: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."
  -

### Appendix B: Ruach

In the *Tanakh*, the word *ruach* generally means wind, breath, mind, spirit. In a living creature (*nephesh chayah*), the *ruach* is the breath, whether of animals (Gen 7:15; Psa 104:25, 29) or mankind (Isa 42:5; Ezek 37:5). God is the creator of *ruach*: "The ruach of God (from God) is in my nostrils" (Job 27:3). In God's hand is the *ruach* of all mankind (Job 12:10; Isa 42:5). In mankind, *ruach* further denotes the principle of life that possesses reason, will, and conscience. The *ruach* imparts the divine image to man, and constitutes the animating dynamic which results in man's *nephesh* as the subject of personal life.

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When applied to God, the word *Ruach* indicates creative activity (Gen 1:2) and active power (Isa 40:13). The Spirit of God also works in providence (Job 33:4; Psa 104:30), in redemption (Ezek 11:19; Ezek 36:26-27), in upholding and guiding his chosen ones (Neh 9:20; Psa 143:10; Hag 2:5), and in the empowering of the Messiah (Isa 11:2; Isa 42:1; Isa 61:1).

In short, as the *ruach* is to the created *nephesh*, so the *Ruach Elohim* is to God Himself, part of God and identified with God. *Ruach* may be understood as the Author of the animating dynamic of the created order, the underlying Principle of creation, and the One that imparts the *nephesh* to the entire universe.

\*Source: <http://www.hebrew4christians.net/index.html>

### **Appendix C: Centering/Meditation Prayer Resources**

- “Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening” by Cynthia Bourgeault
- “Open Mind, Open Heart” by Thomas Keating
- Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop at Christ Church in Charlotte on January 16<sup>th</sup> from 9am-3pm. See Cynthia Kratt or Mark Forbes for details.
- Centering Prayer @ Saint Patrick’s—Tuesday evenings at 6pm
- Meditation is not all about sitting and engaging mental (or heart) techniques—it can also be active. For a great resource which includes meditation forms surrounding the arts and active pursuits, see “Living in the Presence” by Tilden Edwards.

### **Appendix D: Soapbox Commentary**

Two ‘soapbox’ asides for the record:

1) Bourgeault erroneously states that *as far as we know, we are the only species so gifted [with self reflexive consciousness]*. (p. 44) All the other great ape species, and some other primate species are known to have self reflexive consciousnesses. Many non-primate mammals also have the ability to ‘self reflect,’ though not at the academically nuanced level to which Bourgeault is referencing.

2) Chapter four headlines with a quote by Albert Camus, a secular humanist (atheist). Of interesting note is the religious nature of secular humanism—a philosophy which upholds the dual power (or latent potential) of love and hope as a fundamental organizing principle of the human experience. From the perspective of Mystical Hope, do you see any correlation? Secular humanism is really a form of religion--just absent any dogmatic, anthropomorphic conceptualizations of God.